

State Society and Governance in Melanesia

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THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF FIJIAN POWER

Fiji's army-backed interim regime is an organisation of indigenous Fijian power that paradoxically has been forged against supposed threats to the military and the multi-ethnic nation from Fijian ethnic extremism. It starkly highlights the importance of distinguishing between potentially accommodative institutional expressions of Fijian power and excluding Fijian nationalism. This difference is a feature of Fiji's political development that can be traced back over many decades to the times of Apolosi Nawai and Ratu Lala Sukuna. This paper examines episodes in the trajectory of Fijian power from those times to the present. Fiji's problem in political development has been in large part the dilemma of how to institutionalise Fijian political pre-eminence in a way that neutralises the aggressive nationalist potential. Could a constitutional provision for a role for the army in the political system achieve this objective where other approaches have failed without entailing a deepening entrenchment of vested interests that typically accompanies prolonged military interventions?

INTRODUCTION

A dialectical process has driven transformations in indigenous Fijian political leadership from late colonial times to the present - a process centring on the assertion and containment of Fijian nationalism, and the significance of institutional forms of Fijian power for this containment. Several paramount Fijian chiefs constrained and exploited this potential in building their collective political leadership in the lead-up to Fiji's independence. It is Fijian nationalism, the militant demand of "Fiji for the Fijians", that has, since 1987, brought the army into the political arena, just as it was primarily this nationalism that gradually undermined the political leadership of the high chiefs. One body of indigenous Fijian power has replaced another, both founded in late colonial institutions that established indigenous Fijian power in the state: the chiefly bureaucratic and political elite shaped in the Fijian Administration, and the officers of the Royal Fiji Military Forces (some of them chiefs).

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For all Commodore Bainimarama's rhetoric about his vision of a "non-racial" Fiji, the most significant fact about his army-based regime is its being the strongest expression of indigenous Fijian power. Commentators have remarked on the striking irony in this: the marriage, initially, of the major institutional construction of Fijian power, with leaders of the group, the Fiji Labour Party, that had been viewed by most Fijians as embodying the long-feared threat of Indo-Fijian political domination. The supreme apparatus of Fijian power proposing to fulfil a vision of Fiji that had long been diametrically opposed to the dominant Fijian political leadership and ideology.

The army which had once overthrown the progressive Labour Party/NFP coalition government, and its ideology, came eventually to adopt that ideology in alliance with the Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry and two of his lieutenants. The Labour Party men have since left the regime. But their universalist ideology rejecting political communalism and indigenous paramountcy remains the regime mantra, including particularly a determination to introduce the common franchise, the prospect of which Fijians had once been encouraged by their leaders to fear as the greatest threat to their security.

Fiji's modern political history is replete with ironies, particularly since the first coups - beginning with the Labour Party leaders' support for Rabuka's successful bid for the office of prime minister (against a Fijian rival) in the first elections under the 1990 constitution (Rabuka had promised concessions that he later resisted fulfilling). The Labour Party had been the spearhead of the coalition that Rabuka overthrew at gunpoint after its victory in the 1987 elections. Twelve years later, the Labour Party won government with the support of Fijian nationalist groups that opposed Rabuka's agreement to liberal constitutional reform which they viewed as a betrayal of his coup objectives. Rabuka had hoped for a return to power in alliance with Jai Ram Reddy, another of the Indian leaders he had ousted in 1987, but who ten years later worked closely with him for constitutional reform. Ratu Mara, whose rule had been overturned by Mahendra Chaudhry and colleagues in the election of 1987, was now pleased, as President, to anoint Chaudhry as prime minister following his 1999 electoral victory over Rabuka. Such paradoxical twists testify to the intriguing

flexibilities that mark Fiji's political life despite the starkly contrasting visions of the nation that have divided the main political parties.

There have been three paradigms for nation making in Fiji:

1. The ethno-nationalist: An aggressive assertion of the indigenous Fijian claim of their right to political power, allowing little representation to non-Fijians;
2. Accommodative entrenchment of Fijian political paramountcy, allowing substantial representation to others;
3. The liberal-democratic: a common franchise and full equality of the citizens; emphasis on economic and other shared interests cutting across the ethnic divide - affirming the importance of class rather than race or ethnicity.

Rabuka's two coups championed the first of these visions in opposition to the third Bainimarama's coup-based interim regime champions the third against the first, albeit within the context of supreme institutional Fijian power. The key to this paradox is the threat that Fijian nationalism came to pose to the integrity and political independence of the military institution itself, and personally to its commander.

The current army-backed regime highlights the importance of distinguishing between potentially accommodative institutional expressions of Fijian power and antagonistic excluding Fijian nationalism. This difference is a feature of Fiji's political development that can be traced back over many decades to the times of millenarian Fijian leader Apolosi Nawai and comprador colonial high chief Ratu Lala Sukuna.

After Sukuna and fellow chiefs encouraged the colonial governor to keep the "disaffected native" Apolosi in exile on the island of Rotuma, Sukuna eventually became the founder of the chiefly bureaucratic-political elite whose successors were to dominate the national political stage from the late 1960s until the first coup d'état in 1987. In this paper I want to retrace the development of this chiefly political elite, its attempt to achieve a multi-ethnic vote base, its fateful conflict with militant Fijian nationalism, how the chiefs' electoral defeat and the nationalist response became the crucible for the army's political interventions, and the warriors' replacement of the chiefs (albeit with some high chiefly support) as the Fijian substance of the state.

Since late colonial times it has been widely believed by indigenous Fijians that state power should above all protect them, that the ending of colonial rule should return sovereignty to them, and that this right is enshrined in the relationship with the British Crown established by the Deed of Cession by which leading chiefs gave their islands to Britain in 1874. It was a conviction that, although partly encouraged by them, began to greatly trouble senior British officials in Fiji in the last few years of their rule. The Secretary for Fijian Affairs remarked in a confidential despatch to London in 1962: "There is still a feeling among the Fijians that the Governor belongs to them, and that he personally, or through his British officers, looks after them first and foremost, and that they are not interested in what happens to the others"¹. Governor Jakeway later reinforced the assessment: "There is an element of racial arrogance in the Fijian makeup which must be reckoned with. He really does regard this country as belonging to him...The Fiji Intelligence Committee has placed first amongst possible internal security threats, the withdrawal of loyalty by the Fijians in consequence of doubts as to whether the British Government is adequately looking after their interests..."².

Anthropologist Andrew Strathern once suggested to me that perhaps we might think of the chiefs as being, or having been, in Fijian understanding, consubstantial with the state. If this is so, no institutional arrangement could more strongly reinforce such a conviction than the Fijian Administration as it was established in 1944 near the end of the Pacific war, and as it shaped the chiefly political elite that led Fijians through decolonisation and long after. Much of the story is well-known to students of Fiji history. But there are some less familiar aspects that are illuminating on the relation of this institutional arrangement of Fijian power to Fijian nationalism.

EXILE AND EMPOWERMENT- CONTROLLING THE EARLY NATIONALISTS

Ratu Sukuna and Apolosi Nawai are the two most outstanding indigenous Fijian leaders of the colonial era, both of them powerful intellects and personalities. We know much about Sukuna, thanks especially to Deryck Scarr's work³, but the record

on Apolosi remains largely confined to confidential files in the Fiji national archives, a book-length biography in Japanese by anthropologist Naoki Kasuga, and papers by Ratu Sukuna, Timothy MacNaught, and Charles Weekes⁴. Throughout the colonial era and even for some years after, there was a tight restriction on research access to the Apolosi files. This fact, and his several forced exiles under a "disaffected natives" law, are compelling evidence of the colonial government's and the leading Fijian chiefs' apprehensions about him. Apolosi continued to trouble the colonial officials and the leading chiefs through his emissaries, and he inspired radical Fijian groups long after his death in 1946⁵.

Apolosi had tried to promote indigenous Fijian participation in the business economy by organising the *Viti Kabani* (Fiji Company) to supervise the harvesting and marketing of copra and bananas, independently of non-Fijian traders. He sold shares to thousands of village people throughout the colony, and began to challenge the colonial authorities and to encourage Fijians to look forward to the coming of a "new era" when they would prosper and rule their own land. The *Viti Kabani* was a nascent nationalist movement.

During Apolosi's second exile (1929-1939), Ratu Sukuna, then emerging as by far the most able and forceful of the chiefs in his dealings with the colonial officials, helped them to establish a central authority to manage the leasing out of Fijian clan land to Indian sugar cane farmers; (the Australian CSR Co. controlling the sugar industry, and Mahatma Gandhi's emissary C.F. Andrews, had pressured the governor to do this, to resolve the problem of insecurity of tenure and Fijian bribery⁶). Sukuna's achievement in persuading the Fijian provincial councils and the Council of Chiefs to agree to the reform was acclaimed by the British officials as "perhaps the greatest act of trust and statesmanship in colonial history"⁷. Apolosi, through his emissaries, criticised "the haughty chief" for compromising Fijian land interests.⁸

Yet within two years, on the eve of World War II, British officials began to fear that Sukuna himself might become a "disaffected native". He had nursed a grievance over white racialism since the British army rejected on colour grounds his attempt in 1914, while a student at Oxford, to recruit for the European

war. He then joined the French Foreign Legion, fought with outstanding courage in France, and returned a hero to Fiji, to resume a career in administration.

European race discrimination prevailed in many contexts of social relations and employment in Fiji well into the 1950s. Anthropologist William Geddes, who served with the New Zealand army in Fiji during the Pacific war, wrote that at least before the war “there was an effective colour bar and fraternizing was regarded askance by the white people”⁹; discrimination was also practised in many public contexts including hospitals and cinemas, public facilities such as toilets and swimming baths, and de facto residential zoning. Challengers of white racism were almost exclusively Indian leaders until the introduction in 1938 of a white/coloured divide in the pay and conditions of the civil servants. The architect of this policy was a new colonial secretary transferred from Africa, Juxon Barton, a man with pronounced racist attitudes who was opposed to even the leading Fijian chiefs fraternising with Europeans in Suva clubs. Legend tells that Sukuna, one of the rare non-Europeans admitted to the clubs, once overheard Barton refer to him there as a “nigger”¹⁰.

For two years Sukuna and his several fellow chiefs in the colonial parliament united with the Indian politicians to oppose a range of government policies, but most especially the Public Service Reorganisation Act. The solidarity of the non-European leaders culminated in a petition to the Colonial Office, presented to the Governor Sir Harry Luke in February 1940, decrying the discrimination, calling for representation of Fijians and Indians in the Executive Council, and ending with a provocative implied suggestion of the risk, if the legislation was not repealed, of weakened loyalty of non-Europeans “at this critical juncture when the whole Empire is engaged in a life and death struggle”¹¹. The governor, and his superiors in London, were angered by the implication and disturbed about the possibility that the Fijians in the Legislative Council, led by Sukuna, might continue to unite with Indian leaders as part of a “a permanent opposition block”, rather than restrict themselves to specifically Fijian issues as the officials expected them to do.

Sukuna’s anger was compounded by the proposal in the Reorganisation Act to absorb the administration of Native Affairs into the District Administration under the

direct authority of British officials. This would complete a decline in the status and authority of Fijian chiefs in colonial government that had been ongoing for many years. In the Legislative Council, Sukuna spoke resentfully of the Fijian leaders’ feeling of “unrest and anxiety”. He declared that he wanted “to sound a note of warning, and to utter a reminder, that in the past we have had men here who laid down a Native policy that has produced a loyal Native race, and I would very much regret any policy that may, in the years to come, create difficulties between the Government and the Europeans, and the Indians and the Fijians”¹². Consideration was given to dealing with the problem of Sukuna’s disaffection by appointing him to the Executive Council, but he was initially opposed to this idea lest his position as Fijian leader be compromised, and in any case he was apparently disinclined to work with the most senior officials of the time (Luke and Barton)¹³.

The Public Service Reorganisation legislation was repealed immediately after the war on instruction from London, the decision having been declared in the early 1940s. But the episode had highlighted a simmering discontent, especially Sukuna’s independence and readiness to oppose the colonial authorities. By 1940 Sukuna was viewed as both the most important Fijian leader working with the colonial government, and a potential threat to it. Sir Arthur Richards, the Governor with whom, several years before, Sukuna had worked on the land reform, had resolved to assiduously cultivate his friendship, partly from an intuition that he could make “a very dangerous malcontent”¹⁴. Richards was long gone from Fiji, and soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour his successor, Sir Harry Luke, for whom Sukuna had little respect, was replaced by an ex-military officer Sir Phillip Mitchell following complaints from the American and NZ army commanders based in Fiji that Luke was incompetent to collaborate effectively with them¹⁵.

Mitchell came to Fiji direct from service in east Africa where he had governed Tanganyika and Uganda with a fervent opposition to the racism prevalent among white settlers and officials, and a determination to promote African leaders into positions of authority to prepare them for eventual self government¹⁶. His well-known capacity for “sympathetic native administration” influenced the decision to appoint him to Fiji. Soon after settling in

Suva, he wrote to a Colonial Office friend that he perceived “a rather nasty touch of racialism about the place” and believed that Fijians and Indians “were beginning to think that they should make common cause against the Europeans”¹⁷.

Mitchell’s desire to give indigenous leaders authority and responsibility would counter this trend. The war crisis provided compelling opportunities for such appointments, and Sukuna, in particular, was a leader of great ability and ambition. Mitchell’s relationship with the aggrieved chief, quite improbable but for the Pacific war, produced a powerful synergy of like minds: Sukuna was exactly the kind of native leader Mitchell wanted to empower and Mitchell was just the colonial governor Sukuna wished for.

Mitchell’s primary task was to support the American and New Zealand forces and to prepare the colony against the threat of invasion. For this the cooperation of the chiefs was essential. Sukuna was appointed to the War Council and delegated the responsibility of mobilising a Fijian labour corps and recruiting Fijians for commando training and the foundation of the modern Fijian army. He had quickly become a close adviser to Mitchell and during the war crisis the two planned a reconstruction of the system of Fijian village and province administration, originally established by Fiji’s first governor. As mentioned, subsequent governors had been downgrading it, passing local authority from Fijian chiefs to British district commissioners and officers, often much younger than the chiefs. Mitchell’s enthusiasm, at this moment when the chiefs’ loyalty was so critical, was all for empowering the indigenous leaders. This the new Fijian Administration achieved. Modelled partly on Mitchell’s reforms in Tanganyika, it was established in 1945, strengthening official chiefly authority in the villages and taking paternalistic control over the thousands of ex-servicemen and labourers now restless with new ideas and aspirations gained from their wartime friendships with Americans and New Zealanders.

It might seem to be going too far to suggest that on the eve of the Pacific war there was an emerging potential for an anti-colonial nationalism in Fijian political leadership. Yet Mitchell himself apparently saw such a potential, for in justifying his proposal in a lengthy despatch to London in 1943, he argued (*inter alia*): “In Fiji, as

at present organised, Fijians have strong political representation in the Legislative Council, and an advisory Council of Chiefs. But no direct responsibility or authority at all. This is lop-sided, and if it does not produce irresponsible nationalism or racialism, it will be surprising”¹⁸. The very success of the new structures in establishing indigenous Fijian control in many spheres of life, and in nurturing an exceptionally strong and self-possessed political leadership during the last two decades of colonial rule, perhaps blinkers our view of the nature of that historical moment in the late 1930s and early 1940s, its conflicting tendencies and possibilities.

Sukuna’s Fijian Administration was to become infamous in much academic literature, in many official reports, and in political rhetoric, as a reactionary obstacle to attempts by colonial officials in the 1950s and 1960s to encourage much-needed changes. In Sukuna’s view, the Fijian “remained very much a subsistence village cultivator at heart enjoying the peace and leisure of the *koro*”¹⁹ and he wished to keep things that way as far as possible. Yet Mitchell had regarded the reform as only a necessary transitional phase, and not “a policy of segregation”. He viewed it as likely to help build Fijian confidence and ability in preparation for participation in the wider economy; he expected “all race differentiation to disappear in a place like Fiji in a generation or two”²⁰.

The Mitchell-Sukuna reform gave greater authority to the high-ranking chiefs than they had ever enjoyed before in the colonial order, within a framework of tightly related official bodies. It was a complete reversal of the trend in “Native” administration before the war. The Council of Chiefs selected the six Fijian members of the colonial parliament, who then (*ex officio*) formed the core of the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB) which oversaw rule-making and many of the appointments in the local administration. The FAB was, in effect an, “executive committee” of the Council of Chiefs²¹. The Secretary for Fijian Affairs, initially Sukuna, chaired the FAB and was a member of the Executive Council (the governor’s cabinet); thus Sukuna became the first non-European appointed to the supreme governing body. The FAB members also predominated on the Native Lands Trust Board²².

As this nexus of authoritarian institutional Fijian power was consolidated in the 1950s, the Royal Fiji Military Forces, too, was growing

in strength and importance as a mainly Fijian body, from its beginnings in the Pacific war. There were links with the political and administrative elite: Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau, and Ratu Sukuna himself had all been army men. Many other men appointed to the new administration over the next 20 years had also seen military service, either in the Pacific war or in the Malayan campaign ten years later.

The bureaucratic-political formation of the Fijian Administration, conceived by Mitchell partly as a means to avert the possibility of “a dangerous racialism or nationalism”, encouraged a strengthening confidence in Fijian leaders of their status and power, their conviction of entitlement to privileged position in the colonial state. Indeed the Fijian bureaucracy in the period 1945-1960 took on the shape almost of “a state within a state”²³. Contributing to the conviction of entitlement to power was a heightening of ethnic tension after the war as Indians became a majority of the population, strengthened their positions in the economy, and called increasingly for more lease access to Fijian-owned land.

By the late 1950s, British officials in Fiji were troubled not just by the Council of Chiefs’ resistance to accepting a responsibility to facilitate progressive change in respect to land utilisation and the introduction of adult Fijian franchise, but by an increasing tendency to “separatism even isolationism” on the part of the Fijian bureaucratic-political elite²⁴. Governor Maddocks informed London in 1961 of how “the fortress mentality of the Fijians” was impeding progress in his talks with them about the need for constitutional reform²⁵.

Sir Alan Burns, an outsider, vividly summed up the situation as he saw it in his briefing of the Colonial Office heads late in 1959, soon after returning from his commissioned study of population and land problems. Just over a year since Sukuna’s death, Burns confided his view that “Fiji has not been governed in the last 10 years, except by Lala Sukuna, and has got completely out of hand”. The senior British officials in Fiji, he claimed, dared not interfere in Fijian affairs. Indeed, some had become “more Fijian than the Fijians”, while the appointed Fijian political leaders “controlled the whole situation [of Fijian affairs]”²⁶.

The reactionary solidarity of the Fijian political leaders was reinforced by the critical review produced by Burns, the even more critical report by the geographer Oscar Spate a year before, and by the British officials’ announcement in 1961 of their plan to prepare Fiji for self-government²⁷. Fiji is perhaps the only place in the annals of colonial rule in modern times where the dominant indigenous leaders initially desired to cling defensively to colonial protection as the colonial rulers prepared to leave.

The Fijian anti-colonial nationalist potential, embryonic in 1940, was given a constrained and regulated expression in the new Fijian Administration which fulfilled the chiefs’ frustrated aspirations for official status and authority. Their much strengthened position, now very much a part of the state, depended on colonial institutions. But, more importantly, they believed that the ending of British rule would bring the threat of Indian political domination, especially if the electoral system was changed from communal to common franchise.

The British soon abandoned their initial hope to move Fiji to a common electoral franchise, fearing that an attempt to impose this radical change from communal rolls would alienate the Fijian leaders, who might draw on the support of the many indigenous Fijians in the army and police, thereby creating “the prospect of a very dangerous security situation in which we might not be able to protect the Indians and Europeans”²⁸.

It was in this context of looming and, in their view, potentially threatening constitutional change that Fijians were at last given the full adult franchise; (until 1963 their representatives in the Legislative Council were chosen by the Council of Chiefs). The chiefly bureaucratic-political elite had now to move its support base from the Council of Chiefs and the bureaucracy to popular electoral politics - from being paternalistic overseers of village life increasingly viewed by ordinary Fijians as impediments to personal freedom, to ethnic champions and protectors as Sukuna’s restrictive system was liberalised in the late 1960s with the guidance of Fijian anthropologist Rusiate Nayacakalou.²⁹

FIJIAN NATIONALIST ASPIRATIONS AND INTER-ETHNIC ALLIANCE

The watershed of the early to mid 1960s was the most significant moment of nascent Fijian nationalism since the era of Apolosi Nawai. There was a suspicious, defensive and sometimes hostile solidarity in the chiefly establishment, led by Sukuna's political heirs: Ratu Mara, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau, and Ratu Penaia Ganilau - the "big four", as the Fiji press liked to refer to them. They were joined on the political stage by several young men, some not of chiefly rank, just home from tertiary studies in the UK where they had met African students who enthused over their countries' achievement of independence. These men had returned home with the mantra "Fiji for the Fijians" strongly in mind: If the British were to leave Fiji, they must do so only with the Fijians firmly in control.

The Fijian Association, a small body then confined mainly to Suva, was made the vehicle for new political organisation and mass voter mobilisation³⁰. The chiefly establishment and the budding young nationalists argued at committee meetings about political strategy. Racist ideas and sentiments were often voiced at public rallies chaired by paramount chiefs, including Ratu Mara who was soon made the Association's president. In public these chiefs joined the chorus for Fijian political paramountcy, but most (especially Mara) were soon counselling their young colleagues on the need to have non-Fijian support if they were to achieve control of government; the chiefs were themselves being advised about this necessity by the then Secretary for Fijian Affairs, Archie Reid, and other British officials. Subduing the militant nationalist mood was made easier for Mara by the death in 1964 of the charismatic political leader, Ravuama Vunivalu, a civil servant of modest traditional rank who had influenced the thinking of Mara's younger Association colleagues.

Mara began to hone his skills in managing and accommodating under his leadership, two conflicting political pressures: the emerging nationalist mood and the imperative to secure inter-ethnic alliance to counter the then major political body, the almost exclusively Indian Federation Party³¹. By 1966 he was leading the Alliance Party, a coalition that included several Indian groups as well as

Europeans, Part-Europeans, Chinese, and Rotumans, but depended mainly on the Fijian Association with its village branches proliferating throughout Fiji. "The Alliance is for all, and all are for the Alliance!" its leaders assured their multi-ethnic audiences in the towns. The party, they promised, would secure peace, stability, and prosperity by insisting on the preservation of the communal system of political representation in recognition of Fijian fear that a common franchise would bring Indian political domination³².

At the Fijian village gatherings, however, the rhetoric was emphatically and defensively nationalist. The central message was that through the Alliance Party, led by the "big four" paramount chiefs, Fijians would be assured of holding state power when the British left. Should the common franchise come to Fiji, as demanded by the Federation Party, that party would surely win government and change the laws protecting Fijian lands and culture. The Alliance Party would prevent this from happening.

The principal Association campaigner, an urbane young former civil servant, explained to me at that time that "we must tell the Fijians what we believe they want to hear": "We must tread very carefully for we are not yet confident that the Alliance Party concept will be accepted". In recounting to Fijian village audiences the history of the Association, he explained that it had been feared that the Indians might one day "attack" the Fijians: "[With the Fijian Association] we would be ready to fight them, defeat them, and throw them into the sea"³³. He was careful in his village oratory to distinguish between the Federation Party Indians who allegedly posed the threat, and the few Indians who supported the Alliance Party. After such campaign meetings he would return home to Suva where he regularly socialised in the Union Club with Indian friends.

Thus Mara, Sukuna's protégé, played a dangerous political double game: courting support for his Alliance Party from a variety of non-Fijian leaders and organisations (including Indian businessmen, professionals, and farmers' leaders), drawing partly from the experience and contacts of his several years as a district officer in predominantly Indian areas, and simultaneously encouraging and exploiting the fears of indigenous Fijians in both villages and towns by the ethnocentric campaign rhetoric of his Fijian Association lieutenants.

Yet it would be mistaken to understand this behaviour simply as a cynical manipulation of popular sentiment. Although Mara was the least conservative of the paramount chiefs, he was certainly ready to allow rein to Fijian nationalist emotions when it suited him. But the force of Fijian ethnocentrism and suspicion about constitutional change was very real, and Mara had to contend with colleagues in leadership who were far more personally identified with this mood than he was. The first Fijian Association submission to the Colonial Office on constitutional change called for a guarantee of Fijian political dominance. This was the demand that Mara's younger colleagues, particularly, had been aggressively voicing and one which would return to challenge him soon after Fiji achieved Independence. Mara arranged for the Colonial Office visitors to hear the submission in the absence of himself and the other senior chiefs, so that the young men would feel freer to express their views.

Nationalist sentiments were kept simmering by Fijian Association campaigners. Just two years before independence they almost flared into violent ethnic conflict following Mara's Alliance Party defeat in by-elections held for the Indian communal seats after a prolonged Federation Party boycott of the Legislative Council. An angry Mara removed to his remote Lau islands while the protests raged in anti-Indian street marches and rallies led by Fijian Association principals including the most ethnocentric of the "big four" chiefs, Ratu George Cakobau. After two weeks of this highly volatile intimidation campaign, Mara returned to Suva and, with Ratu George, restored the calm³⁴.

Mara's stature in the eyes of the British officials grew from his ability to both control and exploit Fijian nationalist sentiment, as well as his willingness to encourage Fijian leaders to make concessions to the interests of Indians and others, particularly regarding land³⁵. The paramount chiefs' status in major official institutions, together with the strong cultural and structural social bonds with the majority of Fijians, gave them a political security that allowed them latitude to make compromises in inter-ethnic dialogue and negotiation - though not without considerable tensions in Council of Chiefs meetings. Fiji achieved its Independence in 1970 largely on the basis of agreements reached with Indian leaders in such dialogue³⁶. But ethno-nationalist pressure had sometimes threatened to overcome Mara's control, and

it was to intensify soon after independence, inhibiting his efforts to strengthen Indian support for his government.

POST-COLONIAL FIJIAN NATIONALISM

There was an echo of Apolosi's movement in the first eruption of nationalist challenge to Ratu Mara's leadership just four years after Independence. The Fijian Nationalist Party (FNP) was formed by one of Mara's cabinet colleagues: a commoner, Sakeasi Butadroka. Butadroka had broken with the Alliance to campaign for an opposing candidate in a by-election. Initially, his main grievance was Mara's refusal to use his power as prime minister to promote Fijian ventures in business, in particular a provincial council bus company that Butadroka, as the council chairman, had helped establish. Mara was anxious to maintain the political allegiance of Indian bus proprietors who might resent new competition on major commuter routes. Butadroka denounced Mara and his political colleagues for failing the Fijians in the matter of their greatest need: economic development. But worse, they had agreed to a constitution for independent Fiji that did not guarantee that Fijians would always control government³⁷. In his campaigning to build the Fijian Nationalist Party, Butadroka drew on the grass-roots organisation of the Methodist Church, as well as certain predominantly Fijian workers' unions. His rhetoric became increasingly anti-Indian and he gave his support to Fijian village clans aggrieved over rent issues, encouraging and sometimes personally helping them to intimidate Indian farmer or business tenants in arrears.

Ratu Mara's fear of Butadroka's power to erode support for the Fijian Association compelled him to turn away from his commitment to strengthen Indian support for the Alliance Party, which had grown to 24% of Indian voters in 1972, but fell to just 14% in 1977 and after. Indeed it was largely Butadroka's popularity that caused Mara's electoral defeat in the first 1977 elections; (the Alliance was quickly restored to power by the Governor General, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, when National Federation Party leaders procrastinated over forming a government)

Mara's vulnerability to the FNP contributed to his electoral defeat again in 1987, as evidenced in the sustained loss of Indian supporters disillusioned with the Alliance government over its perceived failures on land and other issues, including Mara's reluctance to publicly condemn Butadroka, and in the defection of some Fijian voters to the new Labour Party (nearly 10% of Fijian communal votes) as well as to the FNP (though by then reduced to only 5% of the communal votes).

The defeat of the Alliance Party highlighted the failure, after 20 years, of the chiefly political elite's attempt to build their national leadership by wedding their Fijian power to a multi-ethnic support base. The *Taukei* Movement that mobilised street marches and rallies after the elections resembled the protests provoked by the failure of Mara's campaign to strengthen his Indian support in the by-elections campaign twenty years before. Prominent in the leadership of both movements were Mara's lieutenants in the Fijian Association.

THE ARMY COUPS OF 1987: SUPPORTING AND CONSTRAINING MILITANT ETHNO-NATIONALISM³⁸

Events in the year following Sitiveni Rabuka's overthrow of the new Labour Party- National Federation Party coalition government were marked by a sometimes conflicting interplay of several forces, centring on the issue of entrenching indigenous power: the army; the sometimes violent *Taukei* Movement whose leaders were mostly commoners but included several people of high chiefly rank; and chiefly authority in the form of the Great Council of Chiefs and the paramount chiefs (defeated prime minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and governor-general Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau) who, with Great Council of Chiefs support, had long held leadership of the state.

Rabuka became manager and mediator of these forces. The Great Council of Chiefs and the paramount chiefs were crucial political and cultural resources with which he endeavoured to control the extremists within and outside the army. To secure legitimacy for his coup and restore stability, he endeavoured to bind *Taukei* Movement objectives to chiefly

leadership. In fact, what was most significant about the popular response to the crisis was the way in which the old institutions and symbols of ethnic Fijian leadership helped to both articulate and control it, taking from Rabuka, for the most part with his encouragement, the function of asserting the ethnic claim and so limiting the independent power of the aggressive nationalists.

Rabuka's first Council of Ministers, set up within days of the coup in the face of Ganilau's opposition, was headed by Mara, and included many *Taukei* Movement leaders (some of them Mara's Alliance Party colleagues). Rabuka next convened a meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs, which approved the coup and endorsed the *Taukei* Movement goal of changing the constitution to entrench Fijian control of government.

After the chiefs' meeting, Ganilau capitulated and agreed to lead a new council including Mara and Rabuka, but fewer *Taukei* Movement activists than the first. Later came meetings of the two paramount chiefs with Labour Party leader Timoci Bavadra, the overthrown Fijian prime minister. They eventually proposed a caretaker government, to be recruited equally from the Alliance Party and Bavadra's Labour Party/ National Federation Party Coalition, and headed by Ganilau. A Constitution Review Committee's majority report to Ganilau had just endorsed the Great Council of Chiefs call for Fijian dominance. Yet the agreement reached in the bi-party talks for a new review of the constitution promised only to take "full account of Fijian aspirations for the betterment of their interests". It made no reference to establishing Fijian political supremacy, but emphasised the need "to provide a framework for a multiracial society in which the rights and interests of all the communities are safeguarded"³⁹.

Rabuka remained firm in his commitment to securing Fijian domination and yielded to demands from the militant *Taukeists* who were denouncing the bi-party agreement and threatening violence. The *Taukei* Movement, encouraged by sympathetic military officers, was by then playing a prominent part in the expansion of army recruitment, thereby strengthening its pressure on the coup maker. In a second coup, in late September, Rabuka again arrested Bavadra, pushed the two high chiefs aside, and appointed a new Council of Ministers, this time dominated by *Taukei* Movement leaders and army officers.

But pressure on Rabuka to turn back to the chiefs grew as his council foundered on a combination of impetuous personal ambitions, inexperience, and agendas for radical changes. Within three months he dismissed his ministers and persuaded Ganilau to accept appointment as President of the newly declared Republic of Fiji. Ganilau gave the office of prime minister to Mara who excluded most *Taukei* Movement leaders from yet another council and brought back some old Alliance Party colleagues. This interim government, including only three army men, endured with Mara's leadership until parliament elections in 1992 under a new constitution securing Fijian political dominance and approved by the Great Council of Chiefs whose powers it greatly enhanced.

What most stood out in the turbulent events of 1987 was Rabuka's endeavouring to control and mediate the different political forces. He initially relied on the Great Council of Chiefs and the two paramount chiefs for legitimacy and stability, later excluded them under pressure from the extremists, but eventually turned back to the chiefs when the *Taukei* Movement pressure threatened to overwhelm him.

The *Taukei* Movement had potential to grow as an independent force, reconstructing Fijian political leadership, for some of its leaders did want to marginalise the principal chiefs. But the militants were not able to sustain an aggressive ethnic movement independently of the ideology that affirmed the legitimacy of chiefly leadership. Chiefs and their councils continued to hold the cultural and political high ground throughout the crisis. The ethnocentric government and constitution that resulted from Rabuka's coups are thus more accurately understood as a constrained expression of a potential for a more oppressive ethno-nationalism, than as the unbridled triumph of that potential.

Mara and Ganilau prevailed over Rabuka for several years, in the face of his intermittent public opposition to their actions in government and his occasional warnings of the possibility of yet another coup. He was encouraged in his criticisms of the two principal chiefs by several *Taukei* Movement leaders whom Mara had excluded in selecting his cabinet. At one point Rabuka and several fellow officers urged Mara and Ganilau to shelve their plans for returning

Fiji to democratic government and instead to hand over authority to a military-based government for an indefinite period for the purpose of projects to advance indigenous Fijian economic development. The army men proposed to suppress political opposition and the trade union movement. It would have been an unbridled victory for the *Taukei* Movement. But Mara and Ganilau rejected the scheme and Rabuka accepted their refusal rather than risk again the dangerous volatility of nationalist adventurism⁴⁰.

After continuing conflict with him over his support of Methodist Church militancy and workers' and farmers' industrial demands, Mara and Ganilau told Rabuka that he must either resign from cabinet, or give up his army command in return for office as a co-deputy prime minister. Rabuka eventually chose the second option, and Ganilau appointed a new army commander, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, his own son and Mara's son-in-law. In staging his coup, Rabuka had usurped the previous commander, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, also a son-in-law of Mara and son of Ratu Edward Cakobau, another of the "big four" chiefs who had led Fiji to Independence. Ratu Epeli Ganilau's appointment signified a return of the paramount chiefs' direct influence in the army. Rabuka had relinquished his principal power base, and the *Taukei* Movement leaders no longer had an easy entry there, for apart from Ganilau's appointment, a key *Taukei* Movement supporter, Colonel Pio Wong, had been pressured to leave the army.

While Rabuka began to build his political career through the Great Council of Chiefs-authorized SVT Party and popular elections - eventually as an inter-ethnic bridge builder - Ratu Epeli Ganilau embarked on a project of transforming the army by encouraging a professional ethos opposed to Fijian nationalist influence and a commitment to institutional interests. Some tension grew within the army under Ganilau's leadership and that of his favoured successor Voreqe Bainimarama. This tension, compounded by the resentment of some officers at being passed over in the succession appointment, made the ethnic extremism of the 2000 crisis a threat to the army as an institution, and to the personal security of its new commander. For several months there was a danger of catastrophic internal power struggle, culminating in the very violent attempted mutiny and its suppression in November.

FIJIAN MILITARY POWER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ?

The course of political events after 2000 can, to a large extent, be understood in terms of the insecurity and traumas experienced within the army during the prolonged crisis of 2000. This crisis was the crucible for the evolution of the army as an independent political actor, just as the crisis created by the *Taukei* Movement in 1987 had been the springboard for the army's first political intervention, then as an instrument for *Taukeist* objectives. It is yet another ironic twist in Fiji's political development that Ratu Epeli Ganilau's project to move the military away from the political arena, eventually clashed with Fijian nationalist initiatives in a way that encouraged his chosen successor to make the army into an even more strongly politically interventionist force than Rabuka had made it.

The army's rhetoric in opposition to Laisenia Qarase's government and in justification of the December 2006 coup has been about the protection and development of multi-ethnic Fiji. The army claims to have professional ability and a constitutional authority and responsibility to assume the role of guardian and guide for the nation against damaging and corrupt political leaders. But the deeper imperative for the army's actions has been less a direct concern for the well-being of the nation, and more a drive for self-preservation - a determination to defend and strengthen the military itself as an autonomous corporate institution, and to preserve its present leadership, against the perceived continuing threat to its integrity from Fijian nationalist groups. The army quickly equated its self-preservation project with an agenda for national security and development, and made its claim to be "guardian of the nation" the rationale for its assertion of its institutional autonomy. The army's resolve in these actions has been based in large part on its three decades experience in UN peacekeeping, and the material resources and specialised expertise which that work has helped to create⁴¹.

Since the 1960s the central problem for indigenous Fijian leadership has been that of reconciling the Fijian claim to a privileged right to state power - i.e. Fijian nationalist aspirations - with pressures for inter-ethnic cooperation in political parties and

government. This was Ratu Mara's deepening dilemma in his ultimately failed attempt to build broad-based national leadership from the 1960s to the 1980s, and became Rabuka's fateful problem during the 1990s as he endeavoured with Jai Ram Reddy to lead progressive constitutional change in the face of continued Fijian nationalism that he had encouraged. Attempts by Indian leaders to build broad-based political parties by appealing to economic and social interests cutting across the ethnic divide have also been unsuccessful, partly because their main commitment remained to attend to specifically Indian concerns. Rabuka's electoral defeat by a mainly Indian-based coalition in 1999 was soon followed by a resurgence of a cynically manipulated Fijian nationalism and attempts by the army to contain and eventually to suppress it.

Over the last two decades, the consolidation of Fijian power in the state has shifted from the chiefs to the warriors, via crises of political and social disorder precipitated by militant nationalists. The Fijian experiment in national leadership had begun in the 1960s with the move by the leading chiefs from authoritarian paternalism in a bureaucratic organisation of ethnic power, to inter-ethnic electoral campaigning, a strategy for power that was soon under threat from nationalist rivals. Forty years later, Fijian nationalism and its associated intra-Fijian political rivalries provoked a reversion to authoritarian paternalism, again in a bureaucratic organisation of ethnic Fijian power, now physically coercive but claiming a mission of guardianship for the multi-ethnic nation. Fijians have long seen the army, to which so many have personal or family links, as the ultimate guarantor of their security and their power in the state. Ironically, in taking control of the state even more resolutely than in 1987, the army has suppressed the major institutions of popular Fijian identity and strength: Laisenia Qarase's SDL party, the Great Council of Chiefs, and, most recently, the Methodist Church.

Yet, it is conceivable that, as an institution that can secure indigenous Fijian power against electoral uncertainties, the military might potentially have a function in helping to free the arenas of electoral politics and parliamentary government for inter-ethnic collaborations to an extent hitherto not possible. It is, in any event, improbable that the army leaders will agree to a new constitution that does not entrench some

form of prerogative authority for them in the political system. It is perhaps also unlikely that the army, now with strengthening institutional, sectional, and personal interests in preserving power, would exercise such authority impartially. But hopefully it would at least, under changing leadership, maintain the opposition against ethnic chauvinism in political competition and government that Commodore Bainimarama has initiated.

AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

Note: References designated "CO..." are to Colonial Office files studied at the PRO at Kew, or on AJCP microfilms)

- 1 A.C.Reid (Secretary for Fijian Affairs) to Ivison, 28 April 1962, CO1036/775.
- 2 Jakeway to Secretary of State, 7 May 1964, CO1036/1282.
- 3 Scarr 1980.
- 4 Sukuna 1917, Macnaught 1978, Weekes 1995. Another nascent Fijian nationalist movement of this period, the *Viti Cauravu* (Young Fijian Society), was tamed by Sukuna taking its leader, school teacher Joeli Ravai, under his wing and cultivating his alliance. Under Sukuna's patronage, Ravai became the first commoner appointed as a provincial governor in the post-war Fijian Administration, and to the colonial parliament.
- 5 The most significant of such movements near the end of British rule was the Fijian Chamber of Commerce, a project (assisted by the Indians' National Federation Party) which aimed, through its mass rallies and fund collecting, to establish Fijians in commercial enterprise. Its leader, Viliame Savu, was widely believed to be a reincarnation of Apolosi. The chiefs-led Alliance Party feared its potential to erode the party's largely Fijian base (Norton 1977, pp. 122-123).
- 6 Andrews to Government of Fiji, May 1936, CO83/215/85038/36 (AJCP microfilm).
- 7 Norton 1999, p. 34.
- 8 Norton 1999, p. 35.
- 9 Geddes 1945, p. 7.
- 10 Snow 1997, p. 66.
- 11 In CO83/234/85416 "Racial Discrimination"; see also CO83/234/85401 "Legisla-

- tive Council – Voting of Fijian members” (on AJCP microfilm).
- 12 Legislative Council Debates December 1940 p. 401-403.
- 13 See, for example, CSR Co Chairman Irving to CSR Co Sydney Chairman Goldfinch 29 Feb 1940, CSR Company records, Noel Butlin Archive Z303 80 R20 Folders 1-3 (held in Pacific Archives, Menzies Library, Australian National University). Excerpt: “My opinion is that Sukuna would follow Sir Arthur Richards in anything, but in the trend of mind he is in now he will endeavour to oppose the Government, and it would not surprise me if he joins forces with the Indians when they are pressing their claim for equality of treatment with the Europeans and makes a similar claim on behalf of the Fijians. I notice he is very friendly with the Indian Members [of the Legislative Council] lately”. (For several years Irving was a Government-nominated member of the Legislative Council, a *de facto* representative of the CSR Company).
- One of Sukuna’s best friends at the time was the immigrant Gujarati lawyer S.B. Patel who had worked closely with Gandhi and was one of the leading figures who brought the spirit of Indian anti-colonialism to Fiji in the late 1920s. Sukuna was made a Commander of the British Empire in October 1940, a few months after his opposing the government in the Legislative Council. He was appointed by Mitchell to the Executive Council in 1943. By 1946 he apparently had little interest in the Indian leaders’ continued push for equality with Europeans, once commenting lightly on what he viewed as their racial “characteristic”: “The Indian wants equality; he wants us to be equal, to attend the same schools, to eat in the same houses, to swim in the same swimming baths. Further, he is continuously on the look-out for racial discrimination. He thinks that everybody in this world was born on an equal footing and....we should all be able to sit down as brothers and eat and sleep and drink together”. *Fiji Legislative Council Debates* 20 Nov 1946 p. 539.
- 14 Peel (undated), p. 55.
- 15 CO 967/136,137,138.
- 16 Frost 1992, Chapters 11 and 12.
- 17 Mitchell to Secretary of State 7 Aug 1942, CO83 283/12; Mitchell to Gater 14 Aug 1942 CO83 237/13.
- 18 Mitchell to Secretary of State 4 Oct 1943 CO83 236/85231 (on AJCP microfilm).
- 19 Fiji Legislative Council, Council Paper 18 of 1948.
- 20 Mitchell to Secretary of State 13 Oct 1943, CO83 236/15.
- 21 Roth 1951.
- 22 Roth 1951 and 1953, Belshaw 1964, West 1961 and 1966, Nayacakalou 1975.
- 23 Maddocks to Secretary of State 30 Dec 1960 CO1036/812. Governor Maddocks remarked on the tendency for the Fijian Administration heads to imagine themselves as an “*imperium in imperio*”.
- 24 *Ibid*; Several years earlier, Governor Garvey had confided to his superiors in London, “the difficulties and embarrassments which the continuation of the present policy is bringing about”. He was referring to Sukuna’s and the Council of Chiefs’ resistance to land use reform in the interests of meeting the needs especially of the growing Indian population, but also to prepare Fijians for economic competition with Indians. Responding to pressure from London, Garvey expressed his fear that an attempt to strengthen government control over land use might threaten the relationship of trust with the Fijian leaders (Garvey to Secretary of State 19 Aug 1953 Fiji Archives F50/118).
- 25 Maddocks to Secretary of State 28 Feb 1961 CO1036/774.
- 26 Burns at meeting with officials in Colonial Office 19 Nov 1959, and Burns to Hall 19 Sept 1959, CO 1036/439.
- 27 Spate 1959, Burns 1960, Norton 2002.
- 28 Norton 2002 and 2004.
- 29 Nayacakalou 1975.
- 30 On the Fijian Association in the 1960s see Alley 1972 and 1986, and Norton 1990.
- 31 The Federation Party was renamed National Federation Party in 1968 following its coalition with an indigenous Fijian party (National Democratic Party) led by industrial unionists Apisai Tora and Isikeli Nadalo.
- 32 Norton 1990, p. 85-88.

- 33 I recorded the speech at meetings in Kalabu village near Suva, and at Lami Parish Hall on the outskirts of Suva. Toganivalu held similar campaign meetings in villages and towns throughout the colony in the lead-up to the 1966 Legislative Council elections. For more detail on this campaign see Norton 1990, Ch 5; (English translations of some of the campaign speeches are on PMB microfilm No. 1228, and recordings of some of the original speeches are on PMB Audio 47-62).
- 34 Norton 1990, pp. 100-102; Norton 2004, pp. 169-170; Lal 1992, pp. 204-205.
- 35 Norton 2002 and 2004. The British officials began in the 1960s to view Mara rather as Governor Richards viewed Sukuna in the 1930s: the most important Fijian leader for their purposes but one who could make “a very dangerous malcontent” if thwarted. Particularly after his failure in the 1968 by-elections for the Indian communal seats, the officials feared that a disillusioned Mara might abandon his project of building a multi-racial political party and align with Fijian extremists.
- 36 “Constitutional Talks: Notes of meetings between the Alliance and National Federation working parties” (1970). Verbatim transcript of the confidential discussions held in Suva to prepare for the 1970 Constitutional Conference which led to Fiji’s independence. Printed in Suva for the participants; copies held in Macquarie University library and at Fiji National Archives.
- 37 Norton 1990, pp. 111-118; Nation 1978, pp. 131-146; Premdas 1980; Lal 1992, pp. 235-238.
- 38 This section draws mainly from Norton 1990: Chapter 7. For detailed discussions of the 1987 coup and its aftermath, from various perspectives, see Dean and Ritova 1988, Howard 1991, Lal 1988 & 1992, Lawson 1991, Robertson and Tamanisau 1988, Scarr 1988, Sutherland 1992
- 39 Howard 1991, p. 310.
- 40 Rowan Callick “Fijian Army at the Ready to Seize Control” *Australian Financial Review* 25 Sept 1989, pp. 1 & 10. A copy of the original confidential proposal is in the archives of the Fiji Independent News Service (held in the Pacific Archives, Menzies Library, Australian National University, Canberra).
- 41 The major academic source on the current military-backed regime in Fiji is Fraenkel, Firth, & Lal 2009.

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