



# Anticipation and Apprehension in Fiji's 2022 General Election

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In Fiji's politically charged context, national elections are historically a risky period. Since the 2022 campaign period was declared open on 26 April, the intensity has been increasing. With three governments toppled by coups after the 1987, 1999 and 2006 elections, concerns about a smooth transfer of power in 2022 are part of the national discourse.

## Fiji's major parties

The frontrunners in the election, which must be called by January 2023 but is likely to be held later this year, are two former military strongmen, both with a coup or two to their names — Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

Rabuka took power through the 1987 coups in the name of Indigenous self-determination. He became the elected prime minister in 1992 but lost power in 1999 after forming a coalition with a largely Indo-Fijian party. Bainimarama staged his 2006 coup in the name of good governance, multiracialism and eradicating corruption before restoring electoral democracy and winning elections under the FijiFirst (FF) party banner in 2014 and 2018. FF was formed by the leaders and supporters of the 2006 coup, with the post-coup interim government promulgating the 2013 constitution, which represented substantial changes in Fiji's electoral system (Nakagawa 2020). These changes include a single multi-member constituency and a single national roll. For the first time, ethnic-based voting was eliminated, which won the Bainimarama government some praise (Lal 2021). Bainimarama garnered 69 per cent of FF's total votes in 2014 and 73.81 per cent in 2018, demonstrating the extent to which his party's fortunes rest on his personal popularity.

Following his split with the major Indigenous Fijian party, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Rabuka formed and now heads the People's Alliance Party (PAP). The split came after Rabuka lost a leadership tussle with SODELPA stalwart Viliame Gavoka. Rabuka's departure is seen as a setback for SODELPA, given that he attracted 77,040, or 42.55 per cent, of the total SODELPA votes in 2018. Data

on ethnic voting patterns is not available, but in 2014, SODELPA won 28.18 per cent of the total national vote, improving to 39.85 per cent in 2018. The formation of PAP could divide the Indigenous Fijian voting bloc, the largest in the country. If Rabuka maintains his popularity, the Indigenous Fijian votes could go to PAP at SODELPA's expense. Ratuva (2016) estimated that about half of Indigenous voters supported FF in 2014.

In all, there are eight opposition parties vying for 55 seats in this election compared to 51 in the last election. Under the electoral system, pre-election coalitions are of little, if any, consequence, as they are not considered in the allocation of seats. All parties must meet the five per cent election threshold individually to make it into parliament. Any bickering in the opposition ranks also advantages the sitting party, such as the war of words between National Federation Party (NFP) leader Biman Prasad and his Fiji Labour Party counterpart, former prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, as well as between Rabuka and the Unity Party's Savenaca Narube. In his Grubsheet blog on Facebook, Fiji-born Australia-based journalist Graham Davies described the ruckus as the "Balkanisation" of opposition politics' and called it a 'tragedy'.

## Key campaign issues

The key election issue is the economy, including cost of living and the national debt. COVID-19 brought a sudden halt to tourism, which constituted 39 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and threw 115,000 people out of work. According to the Ministry of Economy (2022), heavy borrowing saw the:

debt-to-GDP ratio increase to over 80 per cent of GDP at the end of March 2022 compared to around 48 per cent of GDP pre-pandemic ... [It] is projected to increase to 88.6 per cent of GDP at the end of July 2022.

The government stated that it borrowed to prevent economic collapse (Ministry of Economy 2022), while the opposition accused it of reckless spending. The World Bank put the poverty level in Fiji at 24.1 per cent in April 2022, but NFP's Prasad estimates it at over 50 per cent due to unemployment and pay cuts.

Amid the criticism, [Bainimarama cut](#) a confident figure in April, proclaiming: 'I will win this election. There are no two ways about this'. His government is touting nine years of consecutive [economic growth](#) on the back of strong investment in infrastructure development and a successful vaccination campaign that allowed the revival of tourism, with arrivals forecast to exceed 440,000 in 2022.

However, inflation reached 4.7 per cent in April (up from 1.9 per cent in February), and while the government blames price increases in wheat, fuel and other staples on the war in Ukraine, the opposition attributes it to poor economic fundamentals. In its campaign, the opposition is also highlighting problems in the health sector due to shortages in drugs, staffing and dilapidated equipment in addition to accusing the government of corruption and suppressing human rights and media freedom.

## Apprehension

Against the background of pressing economic and social issues loom concerns about a smooth transfer of power should FF lose. Besides Fiji's coup culture, such anxieties are fueled by a constitutional provision seen to give the military carte blanche to intervene in national politics. Section 131(2) of the 2013 Fijian constitution states: 'It shall be the overall responsibility of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to ensure at all times the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians' (Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013).

Last December, NFP President Pio Tikoduadua called for a [national dialogue](#) on Section 131(2) to clarify perceptions that the constitution legitimised the military to 'intervene freely in the governance of the State'. All of these dynamics play into what is expected to be the most intense of the three elections held under the 2013 constitution, especially given FF's razor-thin 50.02 per cent win in 2018 compared to its 59.14 per cent win in 2014.

Though the opposition thinks it has a chance to win, it feels disadvantaged by certain electoral provisions, including the [Electoral Act 116\(4C\)](#), which requires political party representatives making campaign promises to provide written explanations on how the revenues will be raised and used, with a FJ\$50,000 fine and/or maximum 10 years imprisonment for non-compliance.

It is thought that another proposed [working arrangement](#) between Labour, Unity Fiji and Sri Lankan-born Jagath Karunaratne's Freedom Alliance party will have a minimum impact due to their small voter base. That said, as the former governor of the Reserve Bank, Unity leader Narube's commentary on economic matters has catapulted him into the national debate, although he and his party trail both Bainimarama and Rabuka.

While the pre-election partnership between PAP and NFP could be a viable multiethnic alternative to FF, it is not without risks in the country's complex

political milieu. In the 1999 election, the coalition between Rabuka's Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei Party and NFP failed when Rabuka's 1987 coup history was highlighted during campaigning. This saw NFP's Fijian supporters of Indian descent desert the party. Whether history will repeat itself is one of the intriguing questions in this election. According to some estimates, FF received 71 per cent of Indo-Fijian votes in 2014 (Nakagawa 2020), and capturing this support base is crucial for the opposition's chances. For its supporters, FF represents stability, continuity and progress; whether they are willing to risk the status quo by voting for the opposition in large enough numbers remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

Director of the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute Jonathan Pryke expects a '[hotly contested](#)' election:

I think there will be a lot of personality politics thrown into the middle, but I hope that there is a lot of focus as well on these big policy issues that are going to define Fiji's economic and development trajectory for the next decade.

Though the election may be intensely contested, the hope is for a smooth transfer of power should opposition efforts prevail, or else risk the potential derailment of Fiji's social and economic trajectory.

## Author notes

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