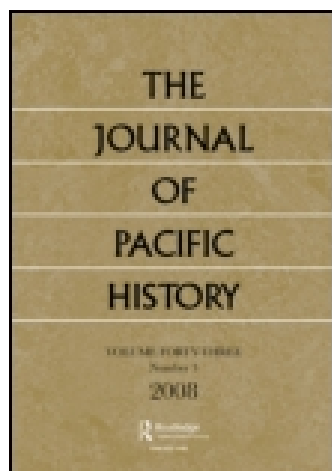




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In Frank Bainimarama's Shadow: Fiji, Elections and the Future

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PACIFIC CURRENTS

In Frank Bainimarama's Shadow: Fiji, Elections and the Future

BRIJ V. LAL

ABSTRACT

Fiji's much anticipated election was held in September 2014, returning Frank Bainimarama's Fiji First Party to power under a proportional representation open list system sanctioned by the decreed 2013 constitution. It marks an important step on a long and fraught journey back to parliamentary democracy. A new start has been made, but a lot will depend on how deeply Bainimarama's publicly declared multiracial vision is shared by his own supporters, including the military, overwhelming Indigenous Fijian, which has a proven history of being a friend neither of multiracialism nor of democracy. Whether this turns out to be a pyrrhic victory for one man or a turning point in Fiji's modern history remains to be seen.

Key words: Fiji, elections, parliamentary democracy, military coup, Frank Bainimarama

Fiji went to the polls for the eleventh time since independence in 1970 and eight years after the military coup of 2006.¹ Commodore Frank Bainimarama's newly formed party, Fiji First, won 32 of the 50 seats in parliament, easily beating its chief rival, the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), which won 15 seats. The National Federation Party won the remaining three seats. Other political parties failed to reach the 5% threshold prescribed by the constitution, including the once dominant Fiji Labour Party. The next elections are due in 2018. The elections, postponed in 2009 and so fostering widespread international condemnation and scepticism about whether they would be held at all in 2014, is an important and potentially historic development in Fijian politics. To his supporters and admirers, Bainimarama is poised to open a new era in modern Fijian history, finally putting to rest the fears and phobias of the past. To his critics, his real test will come in the next four years

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¹ My thanks to Jon Fraenkel and Patrick Vakaoti for advice and comments. This reflective piece can be read as a sequel to my 'The strange career of Commodore Frank Bainimarama's 2006 coup', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*, Discussion Paper 8 (2013).

as he steers the country towards a new future. However viewed, the elections mark the first essential step in a long journey back to parliamentary democracy. A robust opposition in parliament will test the mettle of the new government. From 2006 to 2014, there was no accountability and transparency in the conduct of the government's affairs. The country was ruled by a barrage of decrees, many of which could not be challenged in a court of law. The media were censored or bribed with advertisement revenue, and critics were silenced or sidelined. Questions were constantly asked about the neutrality of the judiciary whose members served on short-term contracts or at the pleasure of the attorney general.² All that could potentially come to an end with the opening of the new parliament.

The international community accepted the result of the elections as free, fair and credible.³ Fiji was on the way to being re-admitted to the membership of regional and international fora such as the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum. The conditions under which Fiji returns are not certain, though it is abundantly clear that it would seek a larger and more independent role as the leader of the smaller Pacific Island states.⁴ 'In our new democracy', Bainimarama told the United Nations General Assembly on 28 September 2014, 'we are all Fijians, not members of separate ethnic or religious groups. And having established a common and equal citizenry, along with a secular state, we intend to move forward together finally to fulfil our promise as a nation, to fulfil our destiny'.⁵

Bainimarama's euphoria is understandable, given the magnitude of his electoral victory, but his judgement is open to contest. The structure of the new cabinet suggests that power remains concentrated in very few hands. The most powerful person in government is Bainimarama ally and second-in-command Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who is minister of finance and communication, attorney general, minister of public enterprises and minister for the public service. In this capacity, he will set the state's fiscal policy framework, control statutory institutions (such as the national airline, the ports, utility companies), make strategic appointments in the public service, oversee economic development plans and projects, control the flow of information, and exercise strict oversight of the country's media.

² See Justice Marshall's petition to Commodore Frank Bainimarama, 16 July 2010, <https://sites.google.com/site/justicewilliammarshall/petition> (accessed 5 Nov. 2014), complaining about 'progressive inroads into the independence of the judiciary'. See Radio New Zealand International, 18 Sept. 2012.

³ Local NGOs were restricted from monitoring the elections.

⁴ Among the preconditions set by Fiji for return to the forum is a much reduced role for Australian and New Zealand in that body, if not their actual withdrawal altogether. And according to *Post-Courier* (Port Moresby), 6 Oct. 2014, Bainimarama threatened to protest Dame Meg Taylor's appointment as the secretary general of the Forum Secretariat, saying that PNG 'used its financial might to secure the appointment'. And PNG was one of Bainimarama's strong supporters in the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

⁵ 'Hon. Prime Minister's Statement at the 69th United Nations General Assembly', 28 Sept. 2014, <http://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/PRIME-MINISTER-S-STATEMENT-AT-THE-69TH-UNITED-NATI.aspx> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

Interestingly, there will be only one junior minister to assist him in his various portfolios.⁶ Khaiyum's unswerving (or, perhaps more accurately, self-serving) loyalty to Bainimarama has been repaid in abundant measure, but whether such concentration of power in the hands of one ambitious individual is healthy for parliamentary democracy is another matter. There have been murmurs of protest from within government circles, but in the current circumstances, a public expression of dissent is unthinkable. Then, there are questions about the extent to which Bainimarama's publicly proclaimed multiracial vision is shared by those who support him. Indeed, some have suggested that he is a late-coming convert to it himself. It was not the reason he gave for the coup in 2006, which was supposedly carried out in the name of eradicating corruption from the country. It is doubtful whether it is shared by the Fijian military which is almost wholly Indigenous Fijian and which has a record neither as a defender of multiracialism nor of democracy itself. And the army under the 2013 constitution is the ultimate guardian of the constitution, not an elected parliament. The cabinet has several former military officers in it, along with known architects of previous coups and champions of Fijian ethno-nationalism, such as Foreign Minister Inoke Kububola. One hopes, for the sake of Fiji, that Bainimarama is right and a genuine democracy will emerge in Fiji after many long decades of turbulence, but there is also the very distinct possibility that the people of Fiji may have to learn to live with an illusion rather than with the substance of democracy.

The 2014 elections were held under the electoral provisions of a new constitution that the interim regime decreed in 2013. In several important respects, they differed markedly from their previous counterparts. The first was the adoption of the open list proportional representation system, replacing the alternative vote system of the 1997 constitution.⁷ In the new system, 50 seats would be chosen from a single nationwide constituency, thus dispensing with constituency boundaries. Voters would vote for an individual candidate (with no visible indication of their party affiliation on the ballot paper) though in fact the vote for the candidate would automatically be counted as a vote for his or her party. Seats in parliament would be allocated in proportion to the votes that a party wins using the d'Hondt formula, but with the proviso that parties and independent candidates would have to meet a 5% threshold for victory. The seats won by the party would be allocated among candidates according to the number of votes they receive. The system theoretically gives the voters, not the party, the power to choose whom they wish to vote for, but Fiji First encouraged voters to cast their votes for one person, the party leader Frank Bainimarama, to obtain the largest number of votes for the party. That is what in fact happened. Bainimarama alone accounted for nearly 70% of the Fiji

⁶ Originally, Khaiyum was allocated finance, communication, public enterprises, public service, trade and tourism, and Faiyaz Koya was appointed attorney general. A week later, he relinquished his AG position to Khaiyum and accepted trade and tourism portfolios. Bainimarama justified this by saying that the AG's portfolio was 'too light' for Koya; many thought the exact reverse. Khaiyum will ensure that all the decrees he authorised will remain untouched.

⁷ See Jon Fraenkel, 'Fiji's electoral system changes', *Pacific Islands Report*, Jan. 2013, <http://archives.pireport.org/archive/2013/October/10-29-cm.htm> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

First votes. His long coat-tail pulled in candidates who won a fraction of his votes. Candidates in other parties with more votes than some of Fiji First's successful candidates missed out because their party did not meet the required threshold. In the new system, name recognition and a national profile play a critical role. Bainimarama's great advantage was his name recognition; for eight years before the elections, when political activity was banned in the country and freedom of speech severely restricted, his was the only name in the public domain, the only face people saw on television and in the newspapers: his and that of his attorney general.

Another significant aspect of the 2013 constitution affecting the outcome of the elections was the lowering of the voting age to 18 years. A significant proportion of the first-time voters, around 30%, were casting their votes for the first time. They had come of age in an era of coup-inspired upheaval in Fiji. Many had no memory at all of Fiji's pre-coup elections, no recollection of the way in which the nation's fledgling democratic spirit was kept alive. Bainimarama blamed Fiji's old politicians for Fiji's problems, and many believed him, even though there were many 'bad' old politicians in his own party. Historical memory in Fiji is shallow, and a reading culture is virtually non-existent. People had no way of verifying the veracity of what they were told or what they heard. But what they did hear from the commodore was music to their ears: equal citizenship, equal opportunity, end of racial discrimination, the end of the age of entitlement for the wealthy and the well connected. The country, from now on, would run on merit, not inheritance. SODELPA's emphasis on the preservation of custom and tradition had less resonance with a cohort born and bred in urban Fiji. They were marching to a different beat.⁸

The third significant feature of the 2013 constitution was the abolition of communal seats. Throughout the 20th century, in fact from the very inception of electoral politics in 1904, racial representation in the legislature had been the order of the day.⁹ Fijians and Europeans were adamant that racial representation was the only viable option for Fiji's multiethnic society to ensure that all ethnic groups were equally represented in the colonial legislature. This was in opposition to the Indo-Fijian leaders' agitation for a common, non-racial voting system. A racial voting system was entrenched in the 1970 constitution, and reinforced in the post-coup 1990 constitution, which dispensed even with nominal multiracial constituencies. The 1997 constitution retained racial representation for the majority of seats in parliament at the insistence of most Indigenous Fijian leaders, including some such as Inoke Kubuabola, who managed to find a place at the table of Commodore Bainimarama's cabinet. Racial voting encouraged racially compartmentalised thinking. Every issue of public policy had to be seen through the prism of race even though race as a category was losing salience in contemporary Fiji. In the 2014 elections, voters could vote for any candidate of their choice unhindered by racial designation.

⁸ For this I am grateful to conversation with graduate researcher Romitesh Kant of the University of the South Pacific.

⁹ See Ahmed Ali, *Fiji and the Franchise: a history of political representation, 1900–1937* (Lincoln, NE 2007).

Bainimarama, espousing the rhetoric of non-racialism, benefitted from a de-racialised electoral system.

Bainimarama's Fiji First by most estimates received over 80% of the Indo-Fijian votes and around 40% of the Indigenous Fijian votes.¹⁰ This was a change of fundamental importance, and it needs to be asked how and why it came about. Part of the credit has to go to Fiji First for its stated political platform of inclusiveness and equality. A cowed and pliant media played its part in spreading Bainimarama's message to the electorate.¹¹ Seldom were his platforms and assertions put to searching scrutiny. No one, for example, dared to ask whether his and his attorney general's salaries were in excess of a million dollars each and paid through a private accounting firm run by the attorney general's aunt.¹² Nor was there any enquiry about the expenses of an American public relations company, Qorvis, which was hired by the regime to refurbish its image.¹³ Even a hint of independent thinking was brutally quashed. A journalist with Fiji TV, Anish Chand, was sacked reportedly on the instructions of the attorney general, because he suggested that non-official sources might at least be consulted in the interests of balanced journalism. And Bainimarama was always questioned with embarrassing deference (while leaders of opposing parties were harangued with crude belligerence). No one asked him, for instance, why he had reneged on his promise not to stand for elections when he executed his coup in 2006. Why had the auditor general's report not been released for several years, or what happened to the inquiry into the brutal bashing of escaped prisoners. The media's timidity was in part due to the justifiable fear of retribution from a regime ultra-sensitive to even the mildest of criticisms. But an important part of the reason for Bainimarama's victory also lay with the inherent misjudgements and miscalculations of rival political parties and the changing nature of the demographic and economic scene in Fiji. To these we now turn.

Let us begin with what we may generally term Indo-Fijian parties: Fiji Labour Party, Peoples' Democratic Party and the National Federation Party. The Fiji Labour Party was, unsurprisingly, the biggest loser in the election, thanks largely to self-inflicted wounds. Founded in 1985, under Dr Timoci Bavadra it won the 1987 general elections in coalition with the National Federation Party only to be overthrown in a military coup a month later. After Dr Bavadra's death in 1989, Mahendra

¹⁰ I owe this figure to Professor Wadan Narsey's analyses in the *Fiji Times*, 23 Sept. 2014. More generally, see his web page at 'Wadan Narsey on Fiji –for fairness and freedom', <http://narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

¹¹ Both Fiji Broadcasting Commission radio and television stations were run by the attorney general's younger brother, and their journalists more often than not acted as cheerleaders for the regime.

¹² This was formally raised in the Fiji Labour Party's submission on 15 October 2012 to the Constitution Commission chaired by Professor Yash Ghai, and also by Ratu Tevita Mara in his speech to the Fiji Democracy and Freedom Movement, Melbourne, 25 Jun. 2012. See <http://www.truthforfiji.com/>. See also Jon Fraenkel, 'Fiji: issues and events 2011', *Contemporary Pacific*, 24:2 (2012), 377–89.

¹³ QORVIS has a reputation for working for dictatorial regimes to improve their image.

Chaudhry became the leader after a short stint at the top by Bavadra's widow, Adi Kuini. Throughout the 1990s, Chaudhry was the party's unchallenged leader, leading the party to victory in the 1999 general elections and being elected the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister, and then being deposed in a quasi-coup in 2000. In 2006, members of the Fiji Labour Party joined the multi-party cabinet headed by Laisenia Qarase, with Chaudhry himself opting to stay out.¹⁴ Unable to control his ministers from outside, he embarked on a path to wreck the government. In that effort, he largely succeeded. In early 2007, to general dismay, he joined the military cabinet as finance minister, only to be dismissed 18 months later. He once again sought to reassert his authority on a fractious party, but ended up splitting it irrevocably. His final coup de grace was his conviction for breaching the country's Foreign Exchange Act,¹⁵ which disqualified him from contesting the elections. Chaudhry was a defeated man, publicly humiliated for his misjudgements and misdemeanours. Throughout the 1990s, he had vowed to 'finish NFP off'.¹⁶ Sadly, he ended up by finishing his own public career in a spectacularly ignominious manner. Predictably, Labour's campaign lacked energy and focus. The stand-in leader Rohit Kishor was unimpressive and ineffectual, with no national political experience whatsoever. Labour is destined to languish in the political wilderness for a long time to come.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) was formed in 2013 by the Fiji Trade Union Congress composed mostly of former Fiji Labour Party members who had left over Mahendra Chaudhry's allegedly dictatorial style, accusing him of preparing his son Rajen to be his successor. Its policies were essentially similar to Labour's: underpinned by the principles of social justice, freedom of association and speech, and dedicated to restoring the rights of trade unions savagely curtailed by the military regime. Early leadership squabbles saw a prime mover behind the scenes, Nirmal Singh, defecting to SODELPA even while proclaiming undying loyalty to the values of the PDP. He polled only 99 votes in the election. Trade Unionist Felix Anthony was elected leader, but he lacked wide public appeal beyond his narrow constituency. Nonetheless, PDP was able to field a credible multiracial slate of candidates for the elections, including such potential future leaders as Lynda Tubuya. It came as a huge shock to its leaders that most trade union members backed not the PDP, but Bainimarama's Fiji First. The future of the trade union movement looks bleak, and the new government is not likely to make life any easier for it. Anthony stepped down from the leadership of the party after the elections and was succeeded by Adi Sivia Qoro. But this change is not likely to make a material difference to the party's fortunes in the immediate future. What genuinely disappointed most candidates with a trade union leadership

¹⁴ See Michael Green, *Persona Non Grata: breaking the bond: Fiji and New Zealand 2004–2007* (Auckland 2013) for details. Also Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V Lal (eds), *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: a coup to end all coups?* (Canberra 2009).

¹⁵ He was charged on three counts of failure to surrender foreign currency without the consent of the governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji; dealing in foreign currency otherwise than with an authorised dealer without permission; and failure to pay interest on the \$1.5 million investment to Fiji without the permission of the governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

¹⁶ See Brij V Lal, *In the Eye of the Storm: Jai Ram Reddy and the politics of post-colonial Fiji* (Canberra 2010).

background was how few votes they got, even from their own members: this after decades of dedicated service in often difficult and dangerous times.

The National Federation Party was the surprise performer in the campaign, emerging with three seats in the parliament after a long dry spell of a decade and a half absence from it. Once the dominant voice of the Indo-Fijian community, it was challenged for that role by the Fiji Labour Party in the 1990s. Its leader, Jai Ram Reddy, was the leading Indo-Fijian leader at that time, but his party's machinery was rusted and disconnected from its constituency. Its appeal for a broader, more inclusive vision of multiethnic cooperation was thwarted by Labour's promise to address the immediate needs of the Indo-Fijian community. Despite its failures, the party persisted though with little hope of electoral success. Many had written it off. For the 2014 elections, the party was led by former academic economist Biman Prasad, who, although a new comer to national politics, managed to project a moderate untainted image, focused on the pressing issues of the day. He was not an ideologue with a long list of grievances from the past. It helped that the party president was an Indigenous Fijian, lawyer Tupou Draunidalo, Adi Kuini's daughter. For the first time in its long history, the party fielded an impressive slate of Indigenous Fijian candidates that included academics, lawyers and other professionals.¹⁷ A decade ago, this would have been unthinkable, risking reproach and even ostracism for what would have been considered treacherous behaviour. Such was the logic of politics in an ethnically compartmentalised society. If the pattern holds and the NFP is able to extend its multi-racial appeal, it has a future in Fijian politics. The days of race-based parties are over. If it ever hopes to be successful at the ballot box, this is one of the lessons that SODELPA needs to learn from the 2014 campaign. Comforting rhetoric about ethnic identity and culture, about a fortress mentality at a time of profound change, will simply not do.

The emergence, on the surface at least, of multiracial parties was a refreshing development. Notwithstanding this, these political parties failed to make an impression on the Indo-Fijian electorate. Estimates suggest that the overwhelming majority of Indo-Fijians voted for Bainimarama's Fiji First Party. Several reasons can be advanced to account for this. One, undoubtedly, was security and, in the closing stages of the campaign, Bainimarama told his rallies that, as long as he was in charge, there would be no more of the mayhem and violence that Suva had seen in 2000, when George Speight staged his putsch and shops were burnt down and looted. Memories of those events were fresh in most minds, and Indo-Fijians were acutely aware of how vulnerable they really were. They knew well that it was Bainimarama who stood between them and wrath of the Indigenous extremists, who held Indo-Fijian support responsible for the success of the coup and for the undermining of Fijian institutions. And they had reason to be grateful to him too. In many urban areas, burglaries and random violence had declined, and many watched with quiet satisfaction the news of escaped criminals brutalised by the police and the military and captured on videos circulated worldwide on the internet. It was rough, raw 'justice' with no regard for protocols, but the need for such provisions did not register

¹⁷ The NFP was formally established in 1964 as the Federation Party. National was added to the name in 1969.

with most. What mattered was that Bainimarama gave them security (as well as an illusion of security) and they rallied behind him.

Many of the interim regime's policies also found favour with the Indo-Fijian voters. Lifting of school fees for primary and secondary students, free school bus fares, promise of free milk for pupils in early grades, building of roads and bridges and promises of more focused rural development carried much weight with a people who had borne the brunt of declining opportunities during the previous decades. Now nearly half of Fiji's population lives below the poverty line, and many mushrooming squatter settlements fringing urban areas are full of Indo-Fijians whose cane leases were not renewed.¹⁸ Bainimarama understood their desperation and sought to address their needs, including exploring the possibility of longer agricultural leases and opening up more Native land to agriculture. 'Bread and butter' issues dominated the campaign. 'The record shows that I have delivered better services in the North, better services for every Fijian and will continue to do so if you put your trust in me to continue the reforms that have made these achievements possible', Bainimarama argued.¹⁹ People responded to his plea for support.

The overarching narrative of the Bainimarama campaign was the creation of a 'new Fiji', freed at last from the legacies of its failed past. There would be no discrimination based on race. Racial affirmative action policies were a thing of the past. There would be equal citizenship for all. And every citizen of Fiji will, from now on, be able to call themselves 'Fijian'. He said that he had to destroy the notion that some people were more equal than others, that those born to privilege had special status over the rest by virtue of birth.

We had to restore hope for every Fijian – irrespective of their socio-economic background – that better days lie ahead. And that everyone has a place in our national life. We were determined to create a level playing field for every Fijian and we have. We are determined to create the first genuine democracy in our history.²⁰

Indigenous rights, the nationalist rallying cry of the 1990s, would, under a Bainimarama government, exist only within the broad ambit of human rights. Fiji would be a secular state, not a Christian state and one backed by the Methodist Church, as demanded by SODELPA. In short, Bainimarama repudiated all the fundamental tenets underpinning the narrative of the Fijian establishment. The promise of equality and opportunity appealed to a people long on the outer. They believed Bainimarama's words to the United Nations General Assembly, repudiating the coups of the past:

Tens of thousands of Fijians suffered and many made the decision to leave their homes, to leave Fiji. This is one of the most shameful episodes of our history and I determined that this must never,

¹⁸ See Wadan Narsey, 'The facts on poverty and social justice', *Fiji Times*, 26 Jul. 2014.

¹⁹ See *Fiji Times*, 13 Jul. 2014. North here refers to Vanua Levu, but Bainimarama's message was the same in other parts of Fiji as well.

²⁰ Address to the Certified Practising Accountants Conference, Nadi, 11 Sept. 2013.

never happen again. We must never allow a fellow citizen to be second class, to be less than an equal of his neighbour.²¹

No other indigenous Fijian leader in post-colonial Fiji had ever spoken words like these, caught as they were in the mindset of ethnic politics.

In spreading his message, Bainimarama received substantial assistance from many quarters. Many leading Indo-Fijian businessmen backed him with financial support. Among the most notable of them were CJ Patel, the Tappoos, Vinod Gokal, Div Damodar, Diwan Maharaj, to name only a few: all in return for various concessions from government. The academic community was largely in the regime's corner. The two vice chancellors, Rajesh Chandra of the University of the South Pacific and Ganesh Chand of Fiji National University, were among the leading behind-the-scenes supporters. Mahendra Reddy of the Fiji National University became the chair of the Commerce Commission and, after being elected for Fiji First, is now the minister of education. The regime's media czar was an academic minor from the University of the South Pacific. Academics critical of the regime, most prominently the economist Wadan Narsey, were sacked or otherwise silenced. Moral leaders of the community, the heads of religious organisations (Sanatan Dharam, Arya Samaj, Muslim League) supported the regime. And many Indo-Fijian expatriates from Australia and New Zealand, now in their twilight years, joined the Bainimarama bandwagon. The media were muzzled. The *Fiji Sun* newspaper became an unabashed cheerleader for the regime. The Fiji Broadcasting Commission radio and television stations were run by the attorney general's younger brother and staffed with politically obliging, regime-friendly journalists. A combative and coercive Media Independent Development Authority was anything but independent or fair. Its chief executive officer, Mataisi Akuola, stood for the Fiji First Party, as did FBC's Veena Bhatnagar who, during the campaign, had relentlessly interrogated opposition candidates in national debates without declaring her own political affiliation. The lines could not have been more blurred. The regime achieved its goal. The vast majority of the electorate read and heard what the regime wanted them to read and hear.

The main Indigenous Fijian political party was SODELPA, a reincarnation under the new dispensation of the former SDL party (Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua). It was led by Ro Teimumu Kepa, the head of the Burebasaga confederacy and one of the three highest chiefs of Fiji. She was appointed leader after a brief hiatus in the party leadership caused by the court ruling the former SDL leader Laisenia Qarase ineligible to stand for election because of a conviction. Sitiveni Rabuka expressed interest, but was reportedly rejected for his changeable behaviour, his somewhat erratic pronouncements on national issues and for his coup-tainted past, rather ironically, as many in the party were themselves coup supporters. And there was some apprehension about being led by a military officer, given the painful experience since 2006. Kepa brought dignity and calm to the leadership, but lacked the political

²¹ 'Fiji statement at 68th session of the United Nations General Assembly', 25 Sept. 2013, <http://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/STATEMENT-BY-COMMODORE-JOSAIA-VOREQE-BAINIMARAMA-P.aspx> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

sharpness and debating skills required to combat temperamentally volatile and intellectually obtuse opponents in an intense political campaign, when the media for the most part were cheerleaders for the regime's party. If there were muted murmurs of dissent about her leadership qualities, these were never publicly aired.

The party initially professed multiracialism, espousing unexceptionable policies to foster and protect equality and opportunity for all citizens, to 'unite the citizens of Fiji and to represent them and their interests with integrity', to 'uphold Christian values and principles and to respect the beliefs and values of other religious faiths', to use the language of its own manifesto.²² But realising that for it to be successful, it would have to garner the Fijian votes, it became a vehicle for the expression of Indigenous nationalist causes. Of its 50 candidates, only three were Indo-Fijians, including former SDL minister George Shiu Raj, and they all polled miserably. SODELPA's strategy was to tap into what it thought would be a deep well of resentment against the iTaukei policies of the Bainimarama regime, with ire firmly focused on a vocal and often belligerent attorney general, portrayed as the very nemesis of the Fijian people, the evil genius behind the Bainimarama throne. The Great Council of Chiefs would be brought back, though in precisely what form and for what purpose remained vague. The name 'Fijian' would be reserved for the Indigenous community alone. Rights to land would be secured. Special assistance for Indigenous education would be reinstituted. The paramouncy of Indigenous Fijian interests would once again be recognised, it was implied. Indigenous Fijians, as the first settlers of the land, would be first among equals. Christian principles would have a primacy of place in the cultural and religious order of things, and there was talk of seeking to turn Fiji into a Christian State. The 2013 constitution would be revisited to restore Fijian rights. There would be reconciliation with the military. SODELPA was not against any community, the party argued; it was simply for the protection and enhancement of the interests of the Indigenous community. Nonetheless, its public image was of a conservative Indigenous Fijian party of a besieged people, talking of culture and tradition and other valuable things of the past, without a clear agenda for the future.

The iTaukei response to SODELPA's election campaign was divided, at times confusing. Estimates suggest that around 60% of them voted for the party and 40% for Fiji First. The Indo-Fijian vote was understandably miniscule. It would seem that most of SODELPA's Indigenous votes came from the rural areas where issues of culture and identity, of loyalty to traditional protocols and values, and respect for chiefs are still important and matter in social life. Thus, the idea of bringing back the Great Council of Chiefs would be widely supported, along with the retention of Fijian as the name for the Indigenous community. Whispers about the dilution of landownership rights in the new constitution, though not strictly true, would have found a sympathetic hearing. But SODELPA did not have a free run entirely, even in the rural areas. Many Fijians were confused by the presence of chiefs, some previous champions of Indigenous rights and instigators of previous coups (Inoke Kubuabola, for example) in the Fiji First Party. The president, a high chief in his own right, assented to the damaging decrees authorised by the regime.

²² SODELPA, *Reclaiming Fiji* (Suva 2014), 6.

And his wife was the daughter of the former prime minister and president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Their clearly opportunistic support for the Fiji First muddled the waters for SODELPA's message. In other words, many Fijians simply refused to believe that Fiji First was as against the Indigenous Fijians as SODELPA was portraying it to be. Bainimarama's visit to previously neglected areas in the interior of Viti Levu and to the maritime provinces converted many wavering Fijians to his cause. As the saying goes in Fiji, they knew which side of the bread was buttered. But their support was contingent, not unconditional. If Bainimarama fails to deliver, they will look elsewhere, including in the direction of SODELPA.

SODELPA's attraction in urban and peri-urban areas was considerably less. There, Fiji First's populist policies held sway. Free education and free school bus fares with promises of more good things to come were at the top of most people's concerns. And voters responded warmly to promises of increased electricity subsidy for low-income families, control of the price of basic food items, providing free medication under price control, developing state land for squatter settlement, extending the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme. The advantage of incumbency was on full display. There was not much mourning for the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs, for instance, despite the muted and obligatory murmurs of regret. Bainimarama presented himself as a man of the people who understood their needs and concerns and was dedicated to addressing them. His rhetoric of equality empowered them. Long in the shadow of powerful chiefly families, they now had a place of their own in the sun. Attachment to race and racial politics had been gradually declining over the years, thanks in part to the declining numbers of Indo-Fijians. Fijian parents in increasing numbers were sending their children to what were once seen as 'Indian' schools. People lived in mixed neighbourhoods and appreciated the truth that poverty and disadvantage blighted the lives of all communities rather than any one particular group. And a rising Fijian middle class saw possibilities in the reforms initiated by the regime. SODELPA's misfortune was focused on issues of the past, which had diminishing resonance in the lives of younger and urban Fijians. And if the present trends continue, the rate of urbanisation will only increase with time. SODELPA has a future in Fijian politics only if it reinvents itself as a genuinely multiracial party.

Frank Bainimarama's victory was the result of the mixed performance of the other parties, the splitting of the votes among themselves when a united front might have improved their chances, but it was also due to the strength of his own performance, however that is measured. Some things have already been mentioned, such as a timid and obliging media. Bainimarama had a free run in talk-back shows, answering suspiciously pre-planted questions. His style was combative and contemptuous of his opponents. Reporters jumped on his bandwagon. There is no doubt about the raiding of the public purse for political purposes (handing out free rubbish bins in Nasinu days before the elections, donating free sewing machines in rural areas, paying for school lunches).²³ The regime remained in power throughout the campaign and freely engaged in what can only be called a 'vote buying' exercise. The secretary general

²³ Fiji First is not the first party to indulge in such practices. Qarase's SDL government, during its time in office, was engaged in a massively fraudulent agriculture scheme, giving out free implements

of the Fiji First Party, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, also appointed himself minister for elections, implausibly denying any conflict of interest, while passing decrees even on the eve of the elections designed to hobble opposition candidates. Predictably, the courts ruled in his favour. But these things did not seem to register with the voters. It was as if people were grateful that an election was being called at all and turned a blind eye to arbitrary use of power for blatant political purposes.

The 2014 general election was one small step on a long journey back to parliamentary democracy. The euphoria about the arrival of a new era in Fijian history has to be balanced against the realities on the ground. There was a peaceful transfer to a democratically elected government for one reason and one reason only: Bainimarama won the elections. Had he not succeeded, or had he to share power with another coalition partner, he might have very probably refused to recognise the verdict of the ballot box. He had declared during the campaign that Fiji could ill afford to lose him; nor would he allow that to happen. He was indispensable to its destiny. He might have ventured that the people had made a wrong choice, his mission was not complete, and he would stay the course for as long as it took to complete what he had begun in 2006. Indeed, at one point in the campaign, he said that if he had known that SODELPA would embark on a 'racist' campaign, he would have cancelled the elections. If another party or a coalition of parties committed to reviewing aspects of the constitution had won, the military, citing its constitutional role as the guardian of the constitution, would have intervened and asked Bainimarama to continue. Military commander Mosese Tikoitoga denied any plans to intervene, but his statement was not given much credence. Similar denials had been issued in the past.

This is not idle speculation. The reality is that the new political order in Fiji depends on the goodwill or whims of two men, Frank Bainimarama and his second in command Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. They have ruled Fiji with complete impunity since 2006, and they will continue on that path in the future. Their election promise was 'more of the same'. Progressive social and economic reform will be welcome, but that will come at a cost. Media will continue to be closely monitored to ensure that the government's view prevails. A counter narrative will face an uphill battle. All the freedom-denying decrees will remain on the books. The use and abuse of public funds over the past eight years will be forgotten or forgiven so that the country 'can move on'. Historical amnesia will thus be justified in the name of effecting a peaceful transition to the future. The military will be the unseen elephant in the room, and beyond the purview of normal public scrutiny. Fiji will have a fragile democracy, and its people may have to live with an illusion rather than the substance of democracy for the foreseeable future. That, in the circumstances, is the best that can be hoped for. The words of Livy are apt: 'What the evening may bring forth is uncertain'.

to rural communities. The Alliance Party, in its day, was accused of mismanaging hurricane relief funds for electoral purposes.