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Concluding note: The election to end all coups?

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Predicting political futures is no easy task, even when there are clear patterns of historical behaviour to act as indicators of likely developments. But in Fiji, the multiplicity of internal and external factors that have shaped the country's social, economic, political and cultural life always has the potential to direct events along an unexpected trajectory. The lessons of the past should keep us alert to the possible widespread resurgence of indigenous nationalism, something that could very well occur in adverse economic circumstances. Another possibility is a split within FijiFirst. If Bainimarama were to vacate the leadership, for one reason or another, is the party likely to retain the coherence it has achieved to date? Bainimarama's departure from the political scene seems unlikely, barring serious illness or worse, but if the stability of a system depends largely on the personality of one individual, as the present system seems to, it does not bode well for the longer term. Then there is the role of the military—one can scarcely rule out the possibility of another coup, although, again, this would be a longer term rather than an immediate prospect. It seems, then, that there can be no certainty about Fiji's political future, especially when it comes to the prospects for the consolidation

of democratic constitutionalism. The best we can do is to venture some generalisations based on how we interpret the past and present and how these may be projected into the future.

Between 1987 and 2014 there have been seven elections and four coups. This amounts to a ratio of one coup to every two elections, which has inspired terms such as Fiji's 'coup culture' and 'coup cycle', as well as the epithet 'coup-coup land'. These terms make a point about the ever-present possibility of extra-parliamentary means of regime change in Fiji. This has been evident elsewhere, especially in Latin America, Asia and Africa, although the pattern of coups and military rule has generally withered away as local and international political circumstances have changed; Thailand being a notable exception at the present time. The question for Fiji and its political future is: Have the forces that have fostered coups abated?

The aftermath of the 2014 elections has seen a continuation of indigenous nationalist demands, expressed in different forms. These include an attempt to form a Taukei Christian state in Ra and Nadroga provinces and continuous demands for greater Taukei and land rights by community groups and parliamentary representatives. Then there is the fast-changing arena of industrial, tourism, infrastructural and economic development generally, which, while delivering many benefits, has also widened the socioeconomic gap further, with implications for those who feel left behind in the surge of development. These forces must be handled carefully, not only by the state but by political parties, religious organisations, civil society groups and the community at large, all of which have a role to play in ensuring that stability is maintained in a peaceful and legal manner. The return of parliamentary government can only enhance the ability of all these groups to contribute.

A number of inter-related practical approaches may be useful in addressing the issues outlined above, including expanding the space for continuous dialogue between different political parties and groups, enhancing the ability of the state to respond positively to people's concerns, especially in combating poverty and inequality by ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and making development more people-centred. If the fostering of neoliberal economic policies comes at the cost of social dislocation and the further marginalisation of poorer communities, this would be recipe for long-term instability in

a country that is still going through a transition from semi-subsistence to participation in a globalised capitalist economy. This is especially the case among rural and peri-urban Taukei. A related issue is the growing movement of people between rural and urban areas, which invariably gives rise to new patterns of social interaction, not all of which may be positive. Those at the periphery are at risk of being left out in the South East Asian-style state-driven developmental approach discussed in Chapter One.

There is also the ever-increasing use of the social media through mobile phones and the Internet, alongside traditional media such as radio, newspapers and television, which instantaneously overcome geographical boundaries and enhance active campaigning and mobilisation by political groups and individuals, all making the transmission and sharing of political grievances easier. At the same time, the state's surveillance system has become much more sophisticated, based on lessons learnt internationally as well as the experience since the 2006 coup.

Another issue of concern is that, since coming to power, FijiFirst's strategy of maintaining its hegemony has overshadowed attempts at dialogue or inter-party cooperation. Democratic politics may be adversarial, but consensus and cooperation are still required at various levels, especially in a country traumatised by repeated military intervention. Instead of going through a national reconciliation process to bring the different groups together and mend the fractures, Bainimarama's method of suppression, mainly by deploying legalistic means, is a strategy that is more likely to allow wounds from the coups to continue to fester rather than heal. A subtle but influential strand in Fiji's coup politics is the strong element of victimhood and the way in which the psychology of vengeance and counter-vengeance has motivated coup players. When Chaudhry was prime minister, he saw himself as a victim of the 1987 coup who had managed to survive and turn the table on his former adversaries. He attempted to reintroduce some original Labour Party policies in relation to land development. But this simply intensified indigenous nationalist passion and he was swept from power in 2000 by the Speight coup.

Then there was the attempted mutiny in 2000 by members of the Fijian special forces against Bainimarama, to avenge what they saw as Bainimarama's betrayal of the Speight coup. There can be little

doubt that the traumatic effect of the attempt on his life during the mutiny became a deeply embedded psychological force, which helps to explain Bainimarama's unrelentingly vengeful attitude towards those involved in the 2000 coup and, beyond that, towards those who oppose him politically. On the other hand, the Social Democratic Liberal Party's attitude towards FijiFirst and Bainimarama has to some extent been shaped by the personal experiences of some party leaders and members who were victims of Bainimarama's repressive policies after the 2006 coup.

The cycle of vengeance and counter-vengeance has the potential to nurture and amplify discord and to threaten national security in the long run. In politics, time does not necessarily heal the pain. Rather, time may provide a reservoir of memories where grievances and the desire for vengeance are stored until circumstances appear ripe for their resurrection. We have seen this in Fiji time and again. This is also the key reason transpolitical dialogue is so important at the present time to provide a democratic space for political players to engage in serious discourse about both the past as well as the future of Fiji's security and stability.

Although there is now a government installed through a democratic process, creating a democratic political culture involves more than just an election. A distinction needs to be made here between formal democracy and people's democracy. The former refers to adherence to legal and constitutional rules, while the latter involves human relationships and interaction in a participatory and mutually consensual way. While formal democracy provides the basis for the rule of law, people's democracy ensures that citizens participate or are engaged both directly and indirectly in a meaningful way in the political process without stifling restrictions imposed by authorities. The future growth of democratic political culture in Fiji will depend on the interplay between the two aspects of democracy. This also highlights the importance of the role of civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, media, youth, women and other citizen groups in providing avenues for meaningful participation for ordinary people. These diverse voices need to be incorporated into an inclusive framework of national engagement. Constant dialogue, transparency, communication, listening, acceptance of diversity, inclusiveness and sensitivity to different views have the potential to put an end to vengeful behaviour.

One of Fiji's great assets is the resilience of its people and their ability to overcome constant disruptions to democratic governance. While it is true that many people left the country following coups, the population by and large has confronted the challenges and adapted to changing circumstances. While scholars have largely focused on issues of ethnic or racial tension and political fragmentation, there is little recognition of the reservoir of goodwill and resilience which has kept the country free of civil war or serious violence, as has occurred in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville and in other regions such as the Balkans or parts of Africa in recent years.

Civil wars generally erupt on the basis of deeply embedded fractures within society that give rise to a desire by competing groups to completely subjugate or even 'cleanse' the country of the other group by violent means. This has not been the case in Fiji, where tension has been limited largely to competing ethnic elites and has not necessarily been replicated between communities on the ground. While there were isolated cases of intimidation and violence during and following the coups, there has been no large-scale, organised or spontaneous inter-group violence. There are several reasons for this. First, there is the absence of military-style organisation within the communities, due at least in part to lack of arms. Virtually all arms in Fiji are in the hands of well-disciplined security forces and this, ironically, has been a key stabilising factor. A second factor is the restraining capacity of the Taukei cultural system itself. While indigenous nationalists have used 'culture' as leverage against other ethnic groups to serve their political interests, this has been balanced by the Taukei sense of social accommodation and peace-building. Arguably, this has acted as a powerful restraining force. Having said that, other groups have also adhered strongly to non-violence, including the Indo-Fijian community, which has been the main target of indigenous nationalist groups but which has always exercised considerable restraint.

An important historical factor underlying restraint in all communities is the post-independence multiracial experiment under Ratu Mara's Alliance Party, which, despite its problems, contributed to an atmosphere in which mutual coexistence was recognised as the only viable way forward for Fiji's society as a whole after independence. This followed a peaceful transition to independence in which all political groups cooperated to ensure that the process was smooth and without rancour. Thus, although Fiji's history shows there are issues

that have the potential to inflame passions, there are other factors that have the capacity to minimise and absorb conflict and to encourage peaceable coexistence and interaction. Fiji's future stability depends on nurturing the latter rather than simply suppressing discontent.

It is important to note that the threshold for violent conflict or extra-parliamentary intervention can be dangerously lowered when tension is protracted and unchecked. Judging by the deep-seated tension between political parties and political leaders in the new parliament, it will take a considerable effort to move towards a political culture in which such tensions are ameliorated and democratic constitutionalism can be consolidated. This means, above all, a system under which those who win office through free and fair elections are recognised as the legitimate government, regardless of its ethnic composition.

By the same token, opposition parties also have a legitimate and important role to play in offering criticism and alternative views. Indeed, democratic constitutionalism depends on the legitimacy of both government *and* opposition. But democracy in Fiji will no doubt fare much better when the dividing line between government and opposition is not demarcated largely by ethnicity. As the 2014 elections results indicate, the dichotomous pattern of Taukei vs Indo-Fijian parties of the past is no longer the dominant pattern. Instead, FijiFirst has become the centripetal political force, attracting by far the most cross-ethnic support. Under the new electoral system, ethnically based parties cannot win elections purely on the basis of their traditional support. Having said that, communal identity and loyalty will remain major factors in Fiji's social and political life.

We have noted previously, however, that politics in Fiji has never been 'all about race' and other factors such as socioeconomic disparity, commercial interests, power plays within communities, and so forth, have been and will remain important elements in Fiji's complex political dynamics. Then there is the paradoxical role of the military, the most powerful institution in the country. Bainimarama claimed an impressive victory in September 2014 on a platform that was explicitly anti-communal. Yet the very institution that underpinned his rise to power and subsequent victory, and which has greatly enhanced status under the current Constitution, remains almost 100 per cent Taukei, with no indication that this will change in the foreseeable future.

The greatest challenge facing the future of democracy in Fiji remains the legitimisation of the parliamentary system to the extent that it becomes integral to a democratic political culture and accepted as such by all participants in the political process, including the military. Fiji has learnt the hard way that extra-parliamentary means are painful and destructive. For all the criticisms that can be made of Fiji's 2014 general elections, it has at least seen the return of electoral democracy and parliamentary politics, which in turn provides the key forum for the expression of diverse views, interests and agendas. The various authors of this book have themselves put forward diverse views, but there is no doubt that each has sought to seriously explore the conditions under which democratic stability can be achieved and, with it, a coup-free future for Fiji.

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