



# INDIA'S LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST POLICY

**TRACKING THE  
OPPORTUNITIES AND  
CHALLENGES IN  
THE INDO-PACIFIC**

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## Coups, Constitutions and Struggle for Power: Contours of Racial Politics in Fiji

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Fiji, the Pacific Island country, with 37 percent ethnic Indian population, went to polls on 17 September 2014, ending the eight year wait after the coup in 2006. This is a notable step forward for a fragile democracy fraught with racial politics and prone to coups and changing constitutions.<sup>1</sup> The elections were held on the basis of 2013 constitution which introduced radical changes in the political system of Fiji by bringing the ethnic Indians almost at par with the ethnic Fijians. However, the bigger challenge is how well the transition is managed and the democracy progresses and above all, to what extent Bainimarama, the ex-coup leader who swapped his position to become democratically elected prime minister is able to act as the bulwark between Indo-Fijians and a Fijian nationalist (already irked by the changes introduced by his government) backlash. The chapter seeks to situate the ethnic Indians in the deep rooted racial politics of Fiji inherited from its colonial past and analyse how Indians were made a convenient scapegoat in the power struggle of the Fijian society. The chapter would also try to assess the Constitutional changes introduced in Fiji over the years and its impact on the ethnic Indians who have been emigrating in large numbers from Fiji.

## Race Relations in Fiji: A Historical Sketch

The race problem in Fiji has its roots in its colonial past when the first British Governor Gordon (1875-80) of the colony established a regime under the policy of 'Paramountcy of Fijian Interests', to protect the Fijian people, society and culture from encroachments by Europeans. Strict restrictions were imposed on the recruitment of ethnic Fijians in the plantations and the ownership of almost 83 per cent of the country's land was confirmed to ethnic Fijians. Gordon also, 'standardised the Fijian social structure by the innovation of 'Council of Chiefs' which became the basis of Fijian administration and an instrument of chiefly domination.<sup>2</sup> The rights to control the bureaucratic management of the traditional land further strengthened the position of the Chiefs 'condemning the Fijians to the tutelage of their own Chiefs'.<sup>3</sup>

Fiji's colonial economy was based primarily on the sugar industry for which a constant supply of labour was needed. As a result, indentured recruitment for Fiji was started in 1879 and by the time it ended in 1916, there were around 61,000 Indian indentured labour on the Fijian soil. The British followed a policy of complete segregation between Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians. Most of the Indo-Fijians were employed in sugarcane plantations concentrated in western Fiji while most of the indigenous Fijians were confined to their traditional occupations in their villages. The British also evolved separate local administrations for the two ethnic communities. In the words of Stephanie Hegan "Gordon introduced a form of indirect rule by way of a separate native administration which was to keep Fijians in an economic backwater and in a relative isolation from the mainstream of colonial politics. Indeed, it can be argued that these effects are largely responsible for many of the economic problems that the Fijians continue to experience but which are frequently blamed on the Fiji Indian community which has become a convenient scapegoat."<sup>4</sup>

As the Indians completed their indentured terms (5+5 years) majority of them decided to stay back, took land on lease, made it cultivable, and started sugarcane cultivation for big sugar producing Australian multinationals which were running Fiji's sugar industry. Over the years, Indians succeeded, prospered and as John Davis says, "largely managed to transcend them, creating through their sweat, blood and enterprise the modern economy of Fiji while continuously improving themselves through education, application and discipline."<sup>5</sup> With economic prosperity came entrepreneurship which brought them into direct competition with European traders. Other than indentured



labourers there were also 'free migrants' from India, mainly Gujarati business people and traders who too were making their impact on Fijian economy. It was the fight for economic survival and progress that brought the political awareness and pushed the Indians in the political mainstream of Fiji.<sup>6</sup> Their century old presence in the island country has largely been a success story, which has remained the major source of resentment against them. The Indians also had multiplied and outnumbered Fijians by 1946 in the population, which made it easier for the British to inspire the belief that if they were given equal political rights, they would take over the country which legitimately belonged to the Fijians.

### **Democracy versus Race versus Traditionalism**

Thus from the very beginning, the general debate over democracy and equality in Fiji got entangled with the issues of race and traditionalism. The ethnic Indians who had a long history of labour and peasant movement behind them pitched for equal political rights, franchise rights, one man, one vote system, common electorate and a common identification for all the citizens of Fiji. On the other hand, this idea was unacceptable to the British; as well as most of the Fijians on the ground that it might dilute their political identity. Hence, the democratic ideas professed by the ethnic Indians came to be regarded as being against Fijian interests. Democracy was seen a 'Foreign flower'<sup>7</sup> which by putting ethnic Indians on equal footing was directly confronting with ethnic Fijian traditional order represented by systems of chieftaincy. The idea of 'Paramountcy of Fijian interests' conveniently shifted its focus from Europeans to Indians as the main threat to the Fijian society. So much so that independence was opposed by the Fijians not willing to come out of the protective cover of the Europeans.

Land was another contentious issue which remained at the helm of the racial politics in Fiji. The land rights were entrusted to ethnic Fijians but as the main commercial cultivators of sugarcane, Indians held most of it as tenant farmers on lease. All native land leases are managed by the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) controlled by Council of Chiefs with no representation of Indians. Despite the fact that the land was legally made inalienable by the constitution of 1970, and all the later constitutions, the fear of losing it had always been there among the Fijians. It is important to note here that the Indians actually never challenged the customary rights of the Fijian people over land but their major concern was about adequate agricultural leases and

ensured security of tenure for Indo-Fijian farmers, something that was also in the interest of the Fijian economy. However, the ever present "bogey of Indian land grab" became a political gizmo to maintain Fijian support base by the ruling feudal elite. In the 1990s, when large number of leases expired due to racial tensions, thousands of Indo-Fijians lost their occupation and moved to cities crowding in squatter settlements.

## **Constitutional Development and Race Relations**

Against this backdrop when constitutional reforms started in Fiji, the above concerns/fears/interests had to be accommodated under the outward façade of democracy. The process of constitutional development and the establishment of democracy got completely entangled with the race politics and the political aspirations of the feudal elements in the Fijian society. The phrase 'Paramountcy of Fijian interests' was invoked over and over again to stake special claims and to influence the direction of constitutional change.

When Fiji got its first constitution, after independence in 1970, it adopted communal representation and one of the most complex legislative systems in the world with each voter having a total of four votes, one in the communal electorate and three in the national electorate.<sup>8</sup> In the lower house, a symmetrical parity of ethnic representation was maintained but in the upper house special representation given to the Council of Chiefs with a veto power over any legislative attempt to interfere with core Fijian interests and way of life. The constitution also guaranteed to the indigenous Fijians, the traditional rights over 80 per cent of the country's land. In other words, "The outwardly symmetrical parity of ethnic representation was more than outweighed by defence of Fijian interests, through the composition and powers of the nominated Senate".<sup>9</sup>

For the first 17 years Alliance party dominated the Parliament and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara—a powerful feudal chief—remained the Prime Minister. Although, during the second general elections in 1977 National Federation Party (NFP, the Indian dominated party) managed to secure majority—which clearly indicates voting crosscutting racial lines—but it failed to form government. However, in 1985 Fiji Labour Party was formed under Dr. Timoci Bavadra and Mahendra Chaudhary. The new party had its base in the cross section of the society i.e. urban Fijians (who had moved away from the villages due to industrialisation and urbanisation weakening the traditional hold of the feudal system), western Fijians (who despite having the bulk of



the sugar industry were deprived of adequate development and political power) and the Indo-Fijians. As a result, FLP and NFP in coalition won the 1987 elections and Dr Timocv Bavadra, who belonged to the middle class and was from western part of the country, became the Prime Minister. However, only after few months a coup was staged by Lt.-Col. Sitiveni Rabuka in the month of May, followed by another coup in September.

The coup reinstalled the Fijian elite led regime which espoused the traditional order and the 'Fijian way.' Thus, interpreting the two coups by Rabuka in 1987 merely from the race perspective would be naïve. It was a counter reaction by the traditionalists, aimed to preserve their own privileged position and dominance over Fijian society and economy which they enjoyed during the long rule of the Alliance Party. As Anthony J. Payne explains it, "The problem was that these old men had come to believe that the government of Fiji was their natural fiefdom. Led for many years by Ratu Mara the Fijian ruling elite was simply unable to tolerate the existence of FLP and the coalition as a government".<sup>10</sup> According to Prof. Brij V. Lal stated that "both Bavadra's class and regional origin posed the danger for traditional scheme of things in Fijian society."<sup>11</sup> In the words of J. Sandy "The coup of 1987 overthrew a newly elected multiracial government and reinstalled the former Fijian elite led regime which espoused the traditional order and the 'Fijian way' yet also aimed to preserve its own privileged position in both Fijian society and modern economy".<sup>12</sup>

Despite protests by Indo-Fijians a highly discriminatory constitution was promulgated in 1990 by the Rabuka Government in which parity in the lower house was done away with by reducing the Indian seats.<sup>13</sup> In the Upper House, the powers of the 'Great Council of Chiefs' were further increased. In effect, the new constitution further relegated the Indians to a position from where they could not attempt to ever become politically powerful.<sup>14</sup> The post-coup period was one of trauma and turmoil for the ethnic Indians. The professionals, the businessmen and those who could obtain emigrant visas left Fiji for other countries thereby bringing in demographic change, which ended their predominant position.

However, the new regime as well as the 1990 constitution badly affected Fiji's position in the international and regional order and had serious consequences on its economy. As a result, Rabuka, introduced a new constitution in 1997 amongst great deal of opposition from ultra-nationalists. The new Constitution continued with communal representation in the Lower

House its giving more seats to ethnic Fijians but made 25 seats were open to all. In the Upper House the dominant position of 'Council of Chiefs' and the land ownership rights of the ethnic Fijians were retained as before.<sup>15</sup> Yet several other privileges denied to Indians were restored. The 1997 constitution was called a 'unique experiment', an amalgam of ideas which attempted to establish an interesting balance to bring diverse people together.<sup>16</sup>

Following the adoption of the new Constitution, Fiji was back on the path of reconciliation and co-existence. Fiji conducted general election on the basis of the new constitution in May 1999 in which the FLP led People's Coalition came to power and Mahendra Chaudhary became the Prime Minister. Chaudhary treaded cautiously attempting to build "a secure multiracial foundation."<sup>17</sup> Not only did he include his alliance partners but also Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's daughter and her Christian Democratic Alliance into his government. He allocated portfolios central to Fijian interests—Agriculture, Fisheries & Forests, and Tourism etc—to ethnic Fijians. However, the land remained the most contentious issue throughout Chaudhary's rule. The issues involved this time were not only about denying political rights to the Indo-Fijians but also to strike at their economic backbone by taking away the land they farmed on for generations. Every move of the government to find a solution and get the expiring land leases renewed was blocked by the opposition groups and ultranationalist under the Taukei banner.<sup>18</sup>

Exactly a year after the assumption of power, Chaudhary government was overthrown in a civilian coup led by George Speight. What is notable here is that twelve out of 18 members of the sacked cabinet and 14 of the 31 members among Speight's hostages were ethnic Fijians.<sup>19</sup> In the aftermath of the coup an interim government was formed under Laisenia Qarase who later floated a political party and formed government after elections in 2001 and 2006. However, frictions with the military continued which resulted in a coup in 2006 by Commodore Frank Bainimarama. The coup of 2006 is a clear representation of the internal power play of the Fijian society as the Fijian dominated military toppled the Fijian dominated regime.

Bainimarama blamed Fiji's 'communal voting' system for ethnic tensions and a 'lack of a strong feeling of shared national identity and citizenship' for the state of affairs in Fiji. He argued that the 'intervention was needed to end widespread corruption and root out entrenched discrimination against ethnic Indians' and that 'the army was the only institution disciplined enough to usher in real reform'. The new Constitution which he brought in September



2013 is a landmark and a bold departure from the past in several ways. It replaced the racially weighted formula by 'one person, one vote, one value principle' and opened the use of the term 'Fijians' to identify all its citizens as against the previous race based identification. It dismantled the unelected upper chamber, the Great Council of Chiefs, and brought the youth into political fold by reducing the voting age.<sup>20</sup>

These changes were welcomed by many including ethnic Indians who got equal rights with indigenous Fijians. There were signs of improvement with cheap education for all and better infrastructure especially in villages. Life got better, for nearly half of Fiji's population living below the poverty line in growing squatter settlements (dominated by ethnic Indians) and helped lift Bainimarama's support base. Fiji's economy grew at 3.8 percent in 2014, exceeding its historical average. After much delay elections were held on 18 October 2014 in which seven parties took part: with 248 candidates. A multinational observer group comprising about 90 officials from more than a dozen countries including India, was set up to monitor the election and ensure it is free and fair. The results show big support for Bainimarama among ethnic Indians reducing Fiji Labour Party and National Federation Party—traditionally Indian dominated parties—into minor players.

Nevertheless, the constitution also came under sharp criticism for curb on freedoms. Amnesty International accused Bainimarama regime for creating 'climate of fear'. There have been concerns about media gagging and the role of the government media watchdog. The independence of the judiciary was constantly under question, with little transparency in the conduct of government. Most of the changes introduced by the government were all decreed with no consultation whatsoever with principal stakeholders. Fairness of Fiji elections also was a big concern. Ban on trade unionists and public servants being candidates or having disqualified several respected candidates at the eleventh hour for trivial issue (like 12 year old traffic offence) has all remained questionable.

## Conclusion

Racial segregation/discrimination has existed in Fijian politics in an institutionalised manner since the colonial times. However, interpreting Fijian politics merely from the race point of view would give only an incomplete picture. The winning of Indian dominated party (NFP, FLP) in the general elections, thrice (i.e. 1977, 1987 and 1999) in the history of Fiji is clear enough



evidence to show that people have voted across racial lines and that there are more important issues than race for the people of Fiji. As a matter of fact, modernisation, education and migrations among the ethnic Fijians, has led to a constant change in the character of Fijian society and brought both Indian and Fijians on a common ground. Race has been a crucial factor in the analysis of the politics of Fiji, but the problem is aggravated as the race card was used as a tool by the vested interests in the power struggle at various levels in the Fijian politics.

Bainimarama has taken bold strides, such as trying to break the racial divide at the institutional level. However, only time will tell, how well the democratic transition in Fiji is preserved and how well Bainimarama government is able to build bridges between the two communities and control the power struggle within the Fijian society. Although things appear to be moving in the right direction (in terms of economic conditions) as of now there is a long way to go towards giving fair representation to ethnic Indians in civil services, judiciary, police, army and educational institutions which are heavily tilted towards ethnic Fijians and above all rehabilitate the ethnic Indians who had emigrated following the regressive policies of the previous regimes.

## END NOTES

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