

Book Review

Title: Fiji before the Storm - Elections and the Politics of Development

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Published by: Asia Pacific Press at the Australian National University, Canberra, 2000.

ISBN: 0-7315-3650-9

(205 pages)

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Professor B.V Lal, Professor of History and the Director for the Contemporary Pacific at the Australian National University is not new to Fiji or it's history and he is a leading Australian-based commentator on Fiji. In this volume Professor Lal manages to portray a picture of Fiji before the coup de tat of 2000.

Fiji before the Storm is a compilation of papers by authors of diverse backgrounds. Amongst them is a paper by Col. Sitiveni Rabuka (as he then was), the leading man in the first coup in Fiji's history. Other papers are by academics from the Australian National University, Macquarie University, Victoria University of Wellington and the University of the South Pacific.

It is to be noted that the authors are not commenting on events in Fiji from a legal perspective. Rather the papers are historical, economic, social and of course political in nature. For persons in the legal field the book provides an insight into the events that cause instability in a country. In particular, some of the articles reveal the uncertainty that could occur when there is no constitutional government. Certain chapters in the book describe and analyse the legal framework of the situation In Fiji post -2000 coup.

The book has eleven chapters. The first two chapters focus on how Fiji developed after the coup of 1987 up to the time of the 1999 general elections. The next four chapters deals with issues concerning the election of 1999 and the outcome of the general elections. The chapters that follow are on the political, social and economic issues facing Fiji in the 1990s and especially after the 1999 general elections. These include issues such as expiring land leases, the Lome Convention, the fisheries industry, and the place of women in Fiji politics. The final chapter in the book discusses the coup de tat of 2000 in detail, and the legal uncertainties that arose from it and the manner in which resolutions were sought.

Most of the Chapters in the book make the point that the decade of the 1990s was a period of great uncertainty for Fiji and the events so far of the first decade in the 21st century (beginning with the coup of 2000) can complicate the situation even more.

The first chapter, by Professor Lal, is titled 'The future of our past', and provides a background to the more recent events that are discussed in the following chapters. In this Chapter Professor Lal focuses on the situation in Fiji after the coup de tat of 1987. In particular he discusses the cross-ethnic friendships, which were tested to their extremes by the events of 1987.

The next chapter, by Col. Rabuka, draws on his personal reflections about the events of 1987. In this chapter he gives his personal assessment of the period from 1987 to 1999 when he was in power. Also, Rabuka tells of his childhood and how he was nurtured. He asserts that had he not acted as he did by staging the coup, the history of Fiji would have been different. Uncontrollable criminal violence and the violent removal of the government would have taken place. Rabuka then continues to state about the drafting and adoption of the 1997 Constitution, which he considers as one of the achievements of his leadership.

Chapter 3, is a reflection on the elections of 1999. In this chapter Professor Lal looks into the various political parties and their respective agendas. He also describes and seeks to explain the outcome of the 1999 election.

Chapter 4, by Robert Norton, expands further the discussions about the election of 1999. Norton describes the new system of voting that was introduced in the 1999 election and discusses how this had affected the outcome of the election. He discusses the different ways of sharing preference votes and its resultant effects on the election. His assessment of open seats however, is not entirely sound in relation to the two factors on which he based his analysis. First, the ethnic proportion of the different races who voted for the open seats is not known, and secondly the number of invalid votes does not form any part of his analysis. The analysis loses some weight, because it fails to properly consider the situation that prevailed during the 1999 election. A better analysis would be one that would show the exact number of voters of each ethnicity whose votes were declared invalid in cross-ethnic voting. Also, Robert Norton's analysis fails to acknowledge the fact that some voters may have deliberately cast invalid votes.

Chapter 5, by Alumita Durutalo from University of the South Pacific in Fiji discusses what has happened to unity amongst indigenous Fijians during the post-Rabuka Government period leading to the 1999 elections. She states that the 1999 general elections reveal the disunity among the indigenous community of Fiji.

In chapter 6 Teresia Teaiwa discusses the impact of the 1999 general elections on the community of the Rabi Islands . This chapter, based on surveys carried out by the author on Rabi Island, shows the role of political parties and politicians in creating awareness of the new system of voting. The results from the survey are alarming, but, as the writer points out, it is not a definite indicator of awareness of the voting system in the voting population of Fiji as a whole, but merely a representation of the political consciousness of the people of Rabi. This survey does not necessarily reflect the situation that pertains in the other communities of Fiji. This is so due to the fact that the awareness programs carried out by the Elections Office concentrated on the two main islands of Fiji, and secondly, because the number of people interviewed by the Surveyor were very few and they were all from the same village.

Chapter 7 discusses the sugar industry and its place in the Fijian economy. The impact of the expiry of land leases and of Fiji losing preferential status under the Lome Convention are also considered. These issues are the focus of Padma Lal's analysis. Bearing in mind that sugar accounts for 43% of Fiji's agricultural production and 40% of its export earnings this analysis is an important part of the book. This chapter may not seem to be in the correct place since it moves from political issues to economic ones. However the issues discussed in this chapter are crucial since these were the issues that should have been addressed by the Government that was elected in the 1999 elections. From a socio-legal perspective it can be said that the chapter deals with the the various issues that a society may have to confront when there is uncertainty in the law.

Chapter 8 is on fisheries and is titled 'Inshore Fisheries Development in Fiji'. The author, Joeli Veitayaki analyses the role that the Government and the people have played in the development of the fisheries industry. His conclusion shows that the industry unfortunately has not performed to expectation and the development has been unsatisfactory. Based on the number of failures, in this sector of Fiji's economy he

calls for a new approach. One could add that the statistics in this sector do indicate that a new approach is warranted. Veitayaki recommends that the new approach should have policies which would carefully monitor the development of the fisheries industry, and there should be training of personnel before funds are allocated.

In chapter 9 Chandra Reddy discusses the role women have played in the politics of Fiji. She examines the pre-independence era and then comments on the post independence period. She finds that in the 1999 general elections 10% of the candidates were women. Moreover, after the elections when Parliament was convened nearly 20% of the Parliament were comprised of women,. This indicates that women are emerging as a "force" in the politics of Fiji . She rightfully compliments Mahendra Chaudhry's government for having one of the best representation of women in politics.

Chapter 10 looks into the economic challenges of Fiji before the most recent coup (of May 2000). Biman Prasad, highlights the drawbacks of the Chaudhry government by focusing on the 2000 budget and comparing it with the previous governments in power, in particular Rabuka's government of 1993 to 1999. He concludes that, although the election manifesto of Chaudhry's government had been "socialist", at the end of the day when it came into power it was a capitalist government dressed in a socialist garb.

The final chapter is by the editor and is appropriately titled 'Madness in May: George Speight and the unmaking of modern Fiji'. This is the chapter which focuses on the events of May 2000 and thereafter. It takes one to the heart of the crisis and shows how people in positions of power or control failed the test of leadership. Lost revenues, unemployment, closure of factories, and chaos were the outcome of the coup which ostensibly had an agenda to protect indigenous rights, but there were other hidden agendas operating as well. The author tries to paint a picture of what may have been the motive of the coup, with the racial issue being just one piece of the puzzle. He also identifies the "hidden faces" that supported the coup. In this chapter, Professor Lal takes the reader step by step through the crisis, an unpleasant but truly significant piece of history for the Fiji Islands. However, the analysis seems to be running on surface waters, and not in depth because it does not identify the perpetrators, but merely provides conjectures without supporting evidence.

One of the drawbacks of the book is that the analysis and judgments of a few writers were slightly "weighted" due to their political associations with the respective political parties, which failed to make it to the Chaudhury Government. Chaudhury's government fell due to Speight's brief "takeover" of 19 May (2000) which was indeed an ill-fated event in the modern history of Fiji.

Some of the chapters lack appropriate references and it is difficult to follow, them whereas others are well-referenced. It is frustrating for a reader when the sources of the authors' arguments are not appropriately referenced or documented

This book is highly recommended for those interested in governance, and the political crises concerning Fiji. Students of history, politics, economics, sociology and law can all benefit by learning about the events that a country can go through in times of a coup, and also the events which could lead a developing country vulnerable to a military takeover. It is essential reading for those who wish to have an insight into aspects of Fiji's nation-making.

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