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Fiji Twenty Years On

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Social Consequences of coups in Fiji

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Introduction

Fiji society has been severely affected by military coup de'tats during the last twenty years. In the immediate aftermath of each coup, the main preoccupation of commentators has been with the economic down turn as the adverse consequences could readily be seen. After each coup, the ramifications of political instability for investor confidence preoccupied those who usurped power (see Mara, 1990). This is understandable as each post-coup economic down turn had been accompanied by people losing jobs, devaluation of the Fiji dollar by decree or through loss of its purchasing power and the government's inability to deliver basic public goods including maintaining roads, electricity connections and water supply. The objective of this paper is to draw attention to a much less written dimension of coups in Fiji - their social consequences. Some of these consequences have been right on 'our face' but have not been the subject of much discussion in academic and policy circles, and indeed in the wider public arena.

The social consequences of Fiji's military coups have been profound and irreversible. The nature of society has changed with a significant shift in its ethnic composition as a result of the massive brain drain from the country. Moreover, armed take over of state power by Fiji's racially exclusive military and the imposition of mainly racist regimes have contributed to a deepening of the ethnic divide and a rising level of lawlessness. Many institutions of the state and indeed, wider society have been weakened as qualified and experienced personnel have migrated, and political and ideological considerations have superseded merit based recruitment and promotion.

It is argued that Fiji has become entrapped in a vicious cycle of ethnic polarization, political instability, economic stagnation, inequality and poverty which feed back into ethnic divisions and political destabilization. The presence of a politicized ethnic military with a track record of

extra-legal interventionism will continue to compound Fiji's difficulty. The proportionate decline in Indo-Fijian numbers may be conducive to a reduction in communal orientation and representation. But this depends very much on the choices made by ethnic Fijian leaders.

Demographic Shift

A common colonial discourse was of indigenous Fijians becoming 'strangers in their own homeland' because of almost uncontrolled increases in the 'Indian' population. Needless to say, this discourse was often led by colonial whites who portrayed themselves as protectors of indigenous interests whilst preserving their own very privileged position in the racist colonial order.¹ On the eve of Fiji's independence in 1970, Indo-Fijians constituted 51% of the country's population, ethnic Fijians 44% and European Fijians, Chinese Fijians, Mixed Race and Pacific Islander Fijians constituted the remaining 5%. However, by the mid 1980s it was anticipated that rising *I Taukei* birth rates, declining Indo-Fijian fecundity and emigration would lead to more of the former in the population well before the 1996 census. The 1987 coups significantly increased the level of emigration of non-ethnic Fijians, especially of Indo-Fijians. The level of out-migration doubled from around 2,400 each year to over 5,000 (Naidu, 1988). This level of emigration was reinforced by the atrocious events of 2000 which included 56 days of the government side being held hostage, looting and arson, mob violence and mayhem, terrorizing of rural farming families, prevarication by chiefs and the eventual overthrow of Mahendra Pal Chaudhry's Labour-led government and the country's President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

An exclusively ethnic Fijian government of bureaucrats and technocrats with a banker at its helm was installed into power by Fiji's military. During the initial instability two deaths occurred in each of the two camps engaged in open conflict – the rebel group and the security forces. Another police officer was shot dead in the search for rebels on the run in Naitasiri. A mutiny in the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, the headquarters of the Republic (formerly Royal) Fiji Military Forces headquarters, occurred later that year which resulted in the deaths of 8 soldiers. The military commander managed to narrowly escape from being killed by the mutineers. The high chief of Naitasiri who was allied to one faction of the chiefly claimants to the Presidency and state power was subsequently convicted of aiding and abetting the mutiny.

¹ For a discussion of the fertility issue, see Srivastava (2005).

The 'events' of 2000 once again revealed the vulnerability of law abiding citizens of the country, especially Indo-Fijians, who were dependent for their security on security forces (that comprised mostly ethnic Fijians) with a track record of violating their fundamental human rights. Feelings of insecurity persisted and Indo-Fijian numbers continued to decline. The Fiji Bureau of Statistics estimates point to their proportion falling to 44% and then heading to below 40%. The 2007 Census place Indo-Fijians at 38% and ethnic Fijians at 54% of the population. It is evident that a good proportion of students in tertiary institutions are taking courses and programmes of study that will facilitate emigration possibilities. Accounting, finance and IT studies and areas of skills provided in technical and vocational training, feature prominently in this regard. Larger numbers of ethnic Fijians are also emigrating. Most Indo-Fijian migrants were and are in the reproductive age cohorts and, therefore, there is a likelihood of continued decline of their population in the future.

Accompanying this demographic change has been a haemorrhage of much of the country's human capital. Accountants, architects, doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, managers, senior public servants as well as electricians, plumbers, builders, drivers and other skilled people have left the country permanently (Bedford, 1989; Gani and Ward, 1995; Mohanty, 2002; Reddy et al., 2004). Together with their families, these people number between 130,000 to 150,000, or a good 10-12% of the country's population in 2000. Approximately a third of Fiji's pre-1987 Indo-Fijian population has emigrated. They have largely been 'pushed out' by their experience of political instability, institutionalized racism and very real and perceived sense of personal and group insecurity.

The extent of the economic impact of their movement abroad is difficult to ascertain. It is estimated that Fiji has been losing FJD 40 million annually since 1987. This is considered to be a conservative estimate. These people have taken their skills, their earning and tax paying capacities, their life savings and their purchasing power to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States (Reddy et al., 2004). Many business people have also moved their savings abroad as it is deemed risky to keep funds in Fiji; they now have 'one foot in Fiji and the other abroad'.

The emigration of this highly skilled and professional category of people has meant that many sectors no longer have effective management and efficient services. Many state services have declined including those provided by law and order institutions such as the police and courts. Both the education and health sectors have deteriorated in the quality of services they provide.

In many parts of the country such as Ba and Macuata provinces, part

of the 'cane belt' where Indo-Fijian settlements abounded, there are now deserted farms, desolate homesteads and empty class rooms. Sugar cane farming communities have severely shrunk and in some cases no longer exist. This constitutes a major socio-cultural rupture as Fiji's Indo-Fijian folk culture(s) derived from such communities. Moreover, there is a decline in rural economy of places that formerly had been more productive and vibrant. It is said that over the last 20 years the largest town in Vanua Levu has lost its dynamism and is heading to becoming a 'ghost town' (Prasad, 2002).

Over the last 20 years, ethnic Fijian mobility has been significant. Two thirds of indigenous Fijians over the age of 6 years had moved from their province of birth by the late 1980s (Naidu, 1988). They have replaced Indo-Fijians as the largest ethnic category in the capital city, Suva. Former predominantly Indo-Fijian suburbs such as Toorak, Samabula and Flagstaff are now largely ethnic Fijian. The mushrooming squatter settlements have about equal numbers of *I Taukei* and Indo-Fijian residents. This demographic change is reflected in the composition of many of Suva's primary and secondary schools, including those established for Indo-Fijian education.

'Race'-based affirmative action policies have also nurtured an upwardly mobile aspirant class of ethnic Fijians. Soft loans, relatively large salaries and income from shares in Fijian Holdings Limited have all facilitated this new propertied class. Many Indo-Fijian home owners panicked during the 1987 coups and sold their houses at rock bottom prices to indigenous Fijians and people of other ethnicities in their desperate bid to sell out and leave. Many ethnic Fijians now reside in Suva's up market suburbs in the Domain and Tamavua as well as in the former areas designated for 'Indian settlement' such as Samabula and Vatuwaqa. Upper and middle class mixed suburbs are a positive outcome of the coups as previously, private property ownership in these areas was largely in the hands of European, Chinese Fijians, Mixed Race and Indo-Fijian families.

With the significant and continuing decline in the Indo-Fijian population there is some expectation that ethnic Fijian leaders will move away from their firm support for communal representation and embrace the principle of one person, one vote. However, communal representation has been the bedrock of indigenous political activism. With heightened identity politics in post-coup Fiji, it is unlikely that there will be changes to the status quo through normal 'democratic' processes.

Ethnic Divisions Aggravated

Nearly a 100 years of British colonial policy of divide and rule has been accompanied by another four decades of post-colonial divisiveness by the country's racially imbued state, communal electoral system and politicians who mastered playing the racial card in Fiji's politics. For ethnic Fijian leaders, chiefs and non-chiefs, racial politics provided a guarantee for post-civil service careers and access to many benefits derived from state-power. For Europeans and other general elector politicians, racial politics secured them in the privileged company of this ethnic Fijian establishment and allowed them to enjoy the perks of political office. Because of their disproportionate share of seats in parliament they held the balance of power between the two 'major races'. For Indo-Fijian politicians, racial politics meant being the opposition in perpetuity but assured of the votes of aggrieved Indo-Fijians.

Such politics eventually succumbed to ethnic out bidders such as the Fijian nationalists who undermined ethnic Fijian solidarity and chiefly leadership, and to rapidly changing socio-economic conditions that reinforced class divisions. The latter trend gave rise to a labour movement that largely overcame ethnic divisions and formed the Fiji Labour Party which challenged the whole edifice of racism in the country (Robertson and Tamanisau, 1988; Sutherland, 1992; Bain and Baba, 1990).

To prevent further deterioration in the political fortunes of the chiefly elite and its allies, the Fiji military conducted its first coup in May 1987. Two other coups followed largely to maintain ethnic Fijian paramountcy. Each of these coups portrayed Indo-Fijians as the enemy and in all three coups human rights violations were committed against them by the security forces and/or civilian elements. There appeared to be some hope for a more positive future for all Fiji citizens with the enactment of the 1997 Constitution. However, this was not to be with the hostage taking and the military coup of 2000, Fiji's third coup d'état.

Six years on the military has acted yet again to depose a constitutionally elected and constituted government. This time, however, it overthrew the dominant indigenous Fijian political party, the *Soqosoqo Duavata Lewanivanua* (SDL) led by Laisenia Qarase, the banker that it had previously appointed. By 2006, the same Qarase was seen as acting against the national interest. The December 2006 coup was described as a 'clean up' campaign to rid government institutions of corruption, abuse of office and racism. Several senior administrators, especially indigenous Fijians lost their jobs in the public service and statutory bodies. The Council of Chiefs has been suspended over its failure to endorse the regime's nomi-

nee for Vice Presidency. The Methodist Church, another pillar of ethnic Fijian hegemony, has been subjected to criticism and threats by the military. The ethnic Fijian establishment long assured of the loyalty of the indigenous military and reliant on it to underwrite its power, has been rattled and confused by this most unpredictable turn of events.

Besides the military commander, some of the more prominent faces in the interim regime are Mahendra Chaudhry as Minister of Finance and Aiyaz Saiyed Khaiyum as Attorney-General. It is apparent that a sizeable proportion of Fiji's minorities are supporting the clean up and the interim regime, whereas a significant proportion of indigenous Fijians are opposed. This means that ethnic divisions have been reinforced by recent political changes. Allegations of the 2006 being an 'Indian coup', or alternatively, a 'Muslim coup', have been bandied about by ethnic Fijian opponents of the coup, including Qarase himself. Significant sections of civil society and the judiciary are also divided (Naidu, 2007).

While there are several similarities between the coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006, which include the use of force to overthrow elected governments and the violation of human rights, there are also crucial differences. This coup is not about perpetuating ethnic Fijian domination of the political apparatus of the state. There is an emphasis on Fiji's future being based on inclusive policies toward all its citizens irrespective of ethnicity and affirmative actions based on genuine disadvantage rather than race. Unlike on previous occasions, this coup has involved unprecedented human rights violations against several indigenous Fijians which have included 3 deaths in security force custody.

At the core of the 2006 coup were the interests of senior military officers and chiefly lineages that were being marginalized by Qarase's government. For reasons unexplained to date Qarase chose to support the people behind the 2000 political destabilization, hostage taking and the mutiny. It appears that his electoral victory over the New Alliance Party and the Fiji Labour Party, efforts to push through bills designed to consolidate indigenous Fijian support, and his attempt to have the military commander arrested, contributed to the coup that he had been amply forewarned about.

Ironically, the most hardline and vociferous supporters of the earlier coups - many chiefs, Methodist Church clergy, indigenous nationalists and senior bureaucrats, and some indigenous business people - are now opponents of the military imposed government, expressing their strong support for constitutionality, the rule of law and democracy. These very people had been behind the racist policies that SVT and SDL pursued and implemented, that contributed to the worsening of the ethnic divide.

Institutionalised Racism

The 1968 'Uppsala Report' of the World Council of Churches defined racism as

ethnocentric pride in one's own racial group and preference for the distinctive characteristics of that group; belief that these characteristics are fundamentally biological in nature and are thus transmitted to succeeding generations; strong negative group feelings towards other groups who do not share these characteristics coupled with the determination to discriminate against and exclude the out-group from full participation in the life of the community' (cited in Yabaki, 1988: 64).

The last part of this excerpt implies unequal power relationships between groups. Stereotypes, both positive and negative, exist about all groups. These affect inter-group relationships. The ability to act on one's prejudice and actively discriminate against those of other groups depends on unequal power between the groups. Most ordinary citizens of Fiji are prepared to live and let live, putting aside their prejudices in their daily interactions. Indeed given the extent of political instability and ethnic polarization as well as the racism and bigotry of opinion leaders, it is truly remarkable that the goodwill among ordinary people continues to persist (Ratuva, 2003). The extent of overt inter-personal racism is not as widespread as one would be led to believe from the hate speeches made by some deposed government MPs and Senators (Thomas, 2003).

Nevertheless, there are several forms of inequality in power relations among ethnic groups and categories which allow for racist individuals to act out their prejudices. Dominating the private sector are large foreign-owned corporations, usually with white men holding executive positions. At least one large Australian-owned bank after Fiji's first coup began to follow government's example in recruiting employees. There are also large and medium sized local companies owned by *non-I-Taukei*, as are most small businesses. Many owners of houses and flats in urban and peri-urban areas are likewise non-ethnic Fijians. Owners, managers and supervisors of these assets and businesses can and sometimes do discriminate against ethnic Fijians. Such discrimination these days is camouflaged in the case of landlords and home owners seeking 'Hindi' speaking tenants, flat mates or house girls.

However, the primary form of institutionalized racism occurs in the differential treatment of non-ethnic Fijian citizens by the state. Over the 20 year period, the state in Fiji has become even more captive to the ethnic Fijian establishment. Institutionalised racism became wide spread in

the public sector and in the provision of services provided by public owned bodies. Attempts at constitutionally reserving senior most positions in the state on the basis of 'race' was accompanied by recruitment and promotion of ethnic Fijians with no regard to ethnic parity or proportionality and indeed, merit. Virtually all top public service positions have been held by indigenous Fijians and they hold nearly 70% of the remainder. The military, which is the final arbiter of state power, has remained 99% ethnic Fijian. The nursing profession became largely ethnicised. Exclusive racial trade unions were encouraged after the 1987 coups and the Viti Civil Servants Association was formed and publicly welcomed by the Fiji Public Service Commission (Slatter, 1988).

With a range of very loudly acclaimed and crudely justified affirmative action programmes (*The Blue Print* and *50/50 by 2020*), the post-2000 Qarase governments felt very secure in their exercise of power. In this they had the support of many chiefs and the Methodist church, a long adherent and advocate of racist politics and policies. Methodist MPs and Senators readily made hate speeches in parliament without fear of being reproached by their political or religious leadership. Their political standpoint promoted indigenous supremacist ideology which apart from ensuring that state resources could flow to serve their interests, kept non-*I Taukei* (often referred to as *vulagis* or visitors), especially the Indo-Fijians, as second class citizens. An indigenous petty bourgeois class emerged with the affirmative action programmes during the post-colonial period with its position being strengthened in the aftermath of each coup. Outright grants and soft loans were part of the package of rewards offered to supporters of coup makers.

Communal capitalism (see Ratuva, 2000) with its easy access to soft loans and outright grant (Fijian Holdings limited and its \$20 million soft loan that was converted to outright grant) has propped up an emergent middle class. Elements of this class acquired their economic base in state-owned enterprises, as very senior bureaucrats, share holders and board members of private corporations and as large land owners with only a small proportion emerging from SMEs.

Very blatant forms of racial discrimination were practiced under some of the affirmative action programmes. Race-based affirmative action policies in education allowed many well-to-do indigenous Fijians who could afford to pay for their children's education, access to scholarships for tertiary institutions. Such scholarships were extended to all indigenous Form 7 students. There has never been any means testing for funding support for ethnic Fijians but it is an integral requirement for non-indigenous Fijians.

With respect to soft loans, there was abuse by certain influential individuals who took out several loans with little intention of repaying. The failure to ensure that there was adequate security and contractual agreement on numerous such loans resulted in the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji, costing Fiji tax payers over \$250m (Grynberg, et.al, 2002).

Unemployment, Labour Migration and Remittances

Only a small group of indigenous Fijians have benefited from the coups and affirmative action policies. The economic consequences of the coups with the loss of investor and consumer confidences, have meant that Fiji's labour market has been stagnant for much of the last two decades. During the same period the number of school leavers has increased to 17,000 annually. Only 2000 of these are able to find employment in the formal sector. Fiji's informal sector has grown significantly as people have tried to make ends meet using their wit and skills. The expanding informal sector beyond agriculture is linked to squatter settlements that have mushroomed in the last decade. Opportunities for vocational and technical training of school leavers so that they have skills that are in demand as well as to enhance their ability and earning power as self employed persons have stagnated in post-coup Fiji. The prospects of young people in Fiji have been blighted by the coups (see Griffen, 1997). Unemployment in Fiji has compelled some 3000 young people, mostly indigenous Fijians to join the British army with its concomitant career paths as well as dangers. A further 3000 citizens, again largely ethnic Fijian, have opted for extremely risky jobs in security and transportation work in Iraq and Kuwait. Nurses and care givers have also left Fiji in large numbers, sometimes becoming 'overstayers' in Pacific rim countries.

Long queues in front of labour recruiting offices and foreign embassies, the rapid depletion of new supplies of Fiji passports in the Immigration Department, the presence of recruiting agents from abroad, the exponential increase in money transfer companies and outlets, and the advertisements in the local dailies for marriage partners from abroad or by overseas based Fiji citizens seeking partners from Fiji indicate the extent to which international migration has become so pervasive.

Post-coup Fiji has become a remittance dependent country in the last decade or so with this source of revenue becoming the second largest foreign exchange earner, bringing \$350 million to \$400 million. While most of the remittance is being sent by short term labour migrants, support from longer term migrants has also been forthcoming. Migration of Fiji's people has become persistent and ubiquitous. With Fiji citizens de-

parting abroad, foreigners are immigrating to fill the gaps left behind by them. These immigrants make positive contributions in many areas including in health services. However, the police established an Asian Crime Unit to combat a range of new transnational crimes that have accompanied gangs that have come to Fiji. Transshipment of drugs and contraband, money laundering, people smuggling and prostitution have been investigated in recent years.

With so many close family members and relatives abroad together with the flow of remittances, people movement and regular communication among them, Fiji has become a transnational society. Fiji's diasporas provide a ready market for various Fiji products including kava (Naidu et al., 2007).

'The Law and Order Problem'

Unemployment has also driven a category of Fiji's youth, predominantly ethnic Fijians to anti-social and criminal activities. Substance abuse, sexual crimes, burglaries, home invasions, muggings and robbery with violence which sometimes take grand 'wild-west' scale, crimes of passion including murder and petty opportunistic thefts have become common place. Since the May 1987 coup when balaclava clad Royal Fiji Military Forces soldiers burst into parliament, this model of covering one's face in the execution of home and business invasions has become common. A majority of the perpetrators of these crimes are ethnic Fijian males between 16-35 years of age. There are also hardened criminal gangs that are especially violent and bold in home and business related robberies. Many of the blue collar and street crimes are committed by indigenous Fijians who are Methodists.

While it is accepted that unemployment looms large in their involvement in crime, what requires explanation is that there are proportionately large numbers of unemployed youths of other ethnicities and religious persuasions who are not represented in crime statistics. Why is it that young male ethnic Fijians choose crime as an option?

What is also revealing is that many crimes committed by them are directed against Indo-Fijians, Chinese Fijians, Europeans and other non-ethnic Fijian groups. There are twice as many Indo-Fijian victims of crime as they are ethnic Fijian victims (Barr, 2003b). For crimes against property Indo-Fijians are the most numerous victims. A partial explanation is that the latter are well represented as home owners and proprietors of business constituting the wealthier elements of Fiji society. But then as pointed out earlier there is a relatively well-to-do ethnic Fijian middle

class which does not seem to be as vulnerable to crime. One wonders if there is a culture of racism in Fiji which justifies crimes against those seen as out groups.

An effect of the sense of insecurity brought by increasing crime and the perception of police incompetence and ineffectiveness has been the growth in the security industry. The number of private security firms has increased in all urban centres and some established companies have expanded considerably. Hardware companies have done well from the business of selling iron and steel, and fencing materials to property owners. 'People have become prisoners in their own homes', it is often said, living behind windows and doors with burglar bars. Insurance companies will not ensure household goods and belongings without 'burglar proofing' and electronic security linked to a private security firm. Most property owners also keep guard dogs and those who can afford it are opting for larger and fiercer breeds such as German Sheppard, Doberman, Rhodesian Ridgeback, Rottweiler and various mixtures of these.

As many of the crimes against property can end up with violence against home owners, farmers and business persons, Indo-Fijians and Chinese Fijians feel especially vulnerable. In the last decade several burglaries and home invasions have 'gone wrong' resulting in deaths of the victims of such crimes. The perpetrators of such violent crimes have been very bold on account of their ability to evade police.

Agricultural Leaseholds and Institutionalised Racism

Institutionalised racism has been a factor in the non-renewal of agricultural land leases. The exclusively ethnic Fijian Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) has always been integral to the ethnic Fijian establishment, and when Rabuka's SVT party was defeated at the polls in 1999, senior officials advised landowners not to renew agricultural leases that were expiring.

Although it was widely known that leases under ALTA were going to expire from 1997, there was no action taken to address the matter. Previously, there was a political settlement of the land lease issue. Nothing was done to prepare sugar cane and rice farmers, who are mostly Indo-Fijian, for resettlement or change in livelihood, until it was too late. The reason for the delay in state action was that inter-ethnic political bargaining took precedence over resolving land lease issues—indeed the impending expiry of leases became a political chip. Following the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution and the victory of the Fiji Labour Party and its partners, senior Native Land Trust Board officials and others made an is-

sue out of ALTA and NLTA, and persuaded land owners not to renew leases under ALTA.

The Labour Party led government's initiative of providing \$28,000 cash resettlement grants for farmers whose leases had not been renewed and \$10,000 to land owners who sought to takeover the existing farms, was regarded as racially discriminatory. It was widely condemned by Mahendra Chaudhry's critics, particularly ethnic Fijian politicians.

Some Indo-Fijian farming families were severely traumatized by their forceful eviction by landowning groups. A number of farmers did not cope well with the loss of their livelihood and committed suicide. Many others together with their families moved to urban and peri-urban areas where they have contributed to the massive increase in informal housing or squatter settlements. Only a relatively small number have been resettled by the state.

In post-coup Fiji, Indo-Fijians have considerable problems accessing other natural resources as they hardly own or control any. Their access to beaches, water falls, rivers, forests and coastal seas are circumscribed. Without transparent rules they avoid going to such places altogether or do so when they have permission from the owners of these. It is likely that similar constraints are faced by indigenous Fijians who no longer reside in their provinces of origins.

Religious Bigotry and Desecration of Places of Worship

Over the last 20 years, beginning with the May 1987 coup and the attempt to make Christianity, particularly a rampantly intolerant version of Methodism, as the religion of the ethnicised state, there have been fairly frequent incidents of desecration of Hindu places of worship. Writing a year after the first coup, Reverend Akuila Yabaki observed:

Rabuka makes an appeal to all Christian leaders to concentrate on evangelizing and converting Hindus and Muslims to become Christians because 'if we all believe in the one true God, the Lord Jesus Christ, I believe we can all live here (1988: 64).

Since early 2006, the Methodists combined with other evangelical Christian denominations to form the Assembly of Christian Churches for the sole purpose of ensuring that Qarase and his SDL party were returned to power. This political engagement of Christian denominations was to bring about unity amongst indigenous Fijian political leaders and parties because there had been so much disunity following each one of the coups. Intra-ethnic divisions exist in both the largest ethnic categories. Amongst Indo-Fijians, for instance, after the 1987 coup, intra-ethnic tensions

emerged between Hindus and Muslims as the leaders of the Fiji Muslim League were perceived to be supporting Rabuka. Among ethnic Fijians, this coup intensified provincialism as provinces became the primary constituencies for representation. Without the controlling and guiding hands of highly respected 'paramount chiefs', numerous individuals and groups sought to be elected. The 1999 general election result provided a bitter lesson to indigenous Fijians who hold 'Fijian paramountcy' close to their hearts. Methodist Church leaders and evangelical Christian denomination pastors belong to this category of nationalists.

Leaders of the Methodist Church and evangelical Christian denominations have in recent years eschewed the Fiji Council of Churches and have kept away from programmes organized by Inter-faith Search, an NGO that has sought to promote greater inter-religious understanding.

Instead these denominations have preached against other religions, especially Hindus, labelling them as pagans and idol worshippers. Given the political polarization along racial lines and the stand of these churches in the political arena, there is little wonder that elements belonging to these denominations have sought to burn, loot and vandalise non-Christian places of worship. Religious intolerance appears to have taken root in the country in the aftermath of the coups. There have been three incidents of Christian Churches being desecrated – two targeting Catholics (the Suva Catholic Cathedral and Samabula Church) and one against a Methodist Church (in Nasinu). By and large however, it is Hindu places of worship that have been the subject of sacrilege. From 19 June 1996 to 8 September 2002 twenty five temples and mosques were sacrilegiously violated or desecrated. Fires were lit in buildings, statues of gods were smashed, money stolen, holy books burnt and human excrement deposited on the floor and walls. Often nobody has been charged for these crimes. Some Hindu and Muslim schools have also been set alight since May 2000 (Barr, 2003b).

In post-coup Fiji there appears to have been some conversion of Hindus to Christianity. It is not clear whether such conversions have occurred to reduce insecurity, or are outcomes of the 'fear factor', or result from aggressive proselytisation, or brought about by a genuine change in conviction relating to Christianity.

Hindus and Muslims have also turned to their religions for succour in the times of anxiety and distress following the coups. Hindu temples and *mandalis* have become hives of activity and Friday prayers are very well attended by Muslims.

Increasing Inequality and Poverty

Inequality and poverty are not new social phenomena in the country. They have existed since colonial times but what is new is the extent of inequality and impoverishment in the post-coup era. Manifestations of poverty can be seen in the large number of beggars in urban streets, street children and homeless people, and the mushrooming of squatter settlements. The number of destitutes who receive government welfare assistance has increased three times in the last 20 years but the recipients are the poorest of the poor and constitute a very small proportion of those who fall below the poverty line.

Social and economic trends and government policy have contributed to this situation. Although virtually all governments have paid lip service to equitable development and poverty reduction, the reality is that the benefits of development are not equally shared. Coups (devaluation, wage cuts and tax free zones), neo-liberal market led development (labour market reforms, fiscal reforms including reduced tariff rates and VAT), the inability of the state to keep up with the demand for physical infrastructure and social services (water supply, housing and social welfare), the lack of economic growth, the decline of the rural economy and the fraying of traditional safety nets have all contributed to increasing poverty. More and more people have fallen below the poverty line in post-coup Fiji with current official figure at 34% in absolute poverty. Unofficially those in poverty constitute half of Fiji's people.

High levels of anaemia amongst pregnant women (over 50%), and nearly 40% of primary school children suffering from malnutrition, attest to the harmful consequences of poverty (*FT*, 01 Aug 2005). School drop outs can be especially high amongst those who live in squatter settlements because families do not have the means to meet school related expenditure (Save the Children Fund Fiji, 2003).

No significant real long term economic growth and the presence of large numbers of unemployed have ensured that employment prospects have been low and those who are in jobs do not have the ability to negotiate higher wages and improved terms and conditions. With \$3 an hour regarded as 'good pay' it is no wonder that nearly 70% of those who are poor are 'working poor' (Narsey, 2007). Unionised workers have reduced capacity to engage in negotiating better terms and conditions when there is near perpetual economic depression and in the much larger informal sector, workers are completely disorganized. Union bashing has frequently followed coups. However, even before the advent of the 'coup culture', Fiji's labour aristocracy appeared to be unable and incapable of

expanding unionism among some of the most poorly paid workers such as cane cutters, farm labourers, domestic workers and copra cutters.

Bigger capitalists and highly skilled workers have advantage over everyone else. Various post-coup governments, in bids to attract investments after each coup, have instituted and extended various incentives for businesses. Although those in business take the largest share of the national wealth, the state does not take kindly to workers seeking better pay and improved conditions.

The non-renewal of agricultural leases, the closure (and subsequent ownership change) of the Vatukoula gold mine in 2007, the loss of preferential access to markets and aided prices of exports such as sugar in the European Community market, the increasing closure and relocation of garment and foot wear factories, the general loss of investor confidence, and failures of state policies, have worsened the situation for a great number of people.

The three Qarase-led governments' affirmative action policies were predicated on two rather false assumptions: first that only indigenous Fijians and Rotumans were poor, and second, that those living in Fiji's squatter settlements were not really poor but lived in substandard housing and unhealthy surroundings out of choice (Barr, 2003a). Qarase's policies were designed almost as if he wanted more Indo-Fijians to succumb to impoverishment. Subsequent studies by independent and credible bodies, such as the Asian Development Bank (2004), and the analysis of the 2003 HIES, clearly showed that the most desperately poor are Indo-Fijian households. It could be that the negative attitude of government towards those living in squatter settlements may have been founded on their animosity to Indo-Fijians including those whose leases had not been renewed. The reality is that in most of these settlements ethnic Fijians as well as other ethnicities (such as the Solomoni community, Kiribati and Banaban families and mixed race groups) are represented. Women of all ethnicities have increasingly become the face of poverty in Fiji.

Coups and Gender Relations

As a largely patriarchal society, times of crisis and violence affects gender relations, usually in ways that reinforce male dominance (Alexander, 2006). The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has reported the escalation of domestic violence after each coup. Men appear to take out their frustrations on women and children. Alcohol, kava and other substance consumption contribute to worsen relationships within families. Lack of savings and lower wages also lead to family disputes and violence.

Police department statistics show that domestic violence cases increased by 149% over the five year period 1992 to 1996, at an average rate of 30% per annum. Police statistics also show that Offences against Public Morality, which include rape, attempted rape and indecent assault, increased by 52% from 1987 to 1996. The most significant increase over this ten year period is recorded for 'Indecent Assault', which increased by 78%. Police statistics from 1992 to 1995 also show that, out of a total of 35 murders in a domestic violence situation, 26 victims were females. Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) statistics show that 2799 women accessed FWCC services in 1997 alone; this included 950 new clients, 1040 repeat clients and 809 calls for telephone (<http://www.fijiwomen.com/index.php?id=1305>). These trends have continued into the current period.

Maintenance payments to women have been known to be reduced and made irregularly in the aftermath of coups as men find themselves with less income and/or take advantage of the general disorder. There has been a feminization of poverty as female headed households tend to have much less income compared to those headed by men.

With less money around and without prospects of employment, young girls and women have been compelled to take up prostitution. The sex industry has grown significantly in post-coup Fiji. Poor children have become vulnerable to paedophiles; a number of paedophile rings operating in the country have been exposed in recent years. Old men, especially from Australia, have taken advantage of poor families to 'adopt' their children and/or marry young girls.

The general atmosphere of tension appears to provoke violent behaviour. Often women and children bear the brunt of the stresses and tensions of political upheaval as their husbands, fathers and brothers are affected by reduced pay, unemployment and loss of livelihood. They may also live in fear of 'something' happening to the men. Working women themselves are affected by lowered income or loss of employment.

It has also been reported that crimes of violence against women are likely to increase in the aftermath of a coup. Beatings, domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape and murder increased after the 1987 coups (Bain, 1988). In the last 20 years violence against women and children has been an on-going concern. The use of violence is closely associated with the maintenance of male dominance which coups tend to promote.

The Plight of Physically/Mentally Impaired Persons and the Elderly

The situation of physically and mentally challenged persons had not been satisfactory even in pre-coup times. There have been several posi-

tive efforts to set up schools and support services for such persons. Blind persons needs have also been responded to in a somewhat limited way. However all these facilities and services have been under resourced at the best of times and in this era of coups, the level of support from government and wider community is not sufficient to meet minimum standards.

Families under financial stress have difficulties supporting dependent and often sick elderly parents. 'Old people's homes' have numerous applications from prospective occupants but as with the facilities for the disabled, these are limited and generally poorly resourced.

As with other categories of marginalized people, the situation of physically and mentally challenged persons and the senior citizens generally has either stagnated or worsened as a result of the coups.

Conclusion: Little Scope for Optimism

Fiji has experienced four military coups, and has alternated at having elected governments and governments installed by the barrel of the gun (Firth and Fraenkel, 2007). While Fiji's multi-ethnic citizenry has shown considerable resilience and emigration has been a safety-valve, the net effect of military coups has been to aggravate ethnic divisions in society, generating inter-group and intra-group animosities. Poor economic growth and lack of equitable development have increased social inequality and poverty. The situation of women, children and other vulnerable groups has been adversely affected. According to the UNDP's Human Development Reports, Fiji's position has declined in terms of the country's social indicators over the last 20 years. With more than a third of its people in poverty, it is highly unlikely that Fiji will be able to achieve the first MDG of reducing extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.

Racial polarization and poverty, together with social exclusion and injustice do not augur well for the country's long term development. The presence of an ethnic army in a multiethnic and impoverished society can be a recipe for disaster.

The coups have compounded the country's social problems, worsened ethnic relations and reduced prospects for economic growth. With the loss of so many of its citizens through emigration - people who could have been invaluable in turning Fiji's fortunes around, there is little scope for optimism unless there are significant shifts in the role of Fiji's military and the structures and processes of national decision making becoming more inclusive.