

Brij V. Lal, ed., *Politics in Fiji: Studies in Contemporary History*. Laie, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, Brigham Young University-Hawaii; distributed by University of Hawaii Press, 1986. Pp. xi, 161. \$18.95

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This collection of essays is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of politics in Fiji, a singularly timely and thorough work that provides the broader historical and social context in terms of which the tragic 14 May 1987 coup becomes more comprehensible. The subtitle, indeed, is perhaps even more appropriate than Brij Lal might have expected, as the themes and patterns considered in the volume clearly delineate critical underlying aspects of the April 1987 general election, the May coup, and subsequent events in Fiji.

The book is composed of five major chapters by various scholars and a

brief introduction and an exceptionally helpful and provocative post-script, both by Lal. The book is quite coherent; the essays speak to each other--though not always in agreement--quite effectively, a relatively rare accomplishment in edited volumes. Contributors represent three different disciplines; several are Fiji citizens, while others are foreign scholars.

The first chapter is by Ahmed Ali, a historian and former cabinet minister. Ah's essay, drawn from his 1980 history of Fiji politics, focuses on the period 1874-1960. It is quite comprehensive; I found the detailed discussion of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna and the development of the Fijian administration particularly interesting.

Roderic Alley, a political scientist, focuses on the development of party politics in the 1960s, with the 1966 elections serving as a critical event. His account is clear, evenhanded, and well documented, as well as important for an understanding of subsequent partisan activities.

The third chapter is taken from Robert Norton's 1977 monograph on race and politics in Fiji. "Colonial Fiji: Ethnic Divisions and Elite Conciliation" delineates what Norton considers to be an increasing accommodation in ethnic political relations, one mediated in large part by leaders of the ethnic Fijian elite. He is particularly effective in addressing false comparisons with other Commonwealth nations, ones where, in his view, ethnic divisions are both deeper and more central to political life. As he writes, "To depict politics in Fiji simply as ethnic conflict is to impoverish a rich and complex story of nation-building that has evolved a procedure for handling seemingly irresolvable contradictions" (p. 66). This is a critical caution to keep in mind in interpreting 1987 events; "ethnicity" may seem to be a simpler and, for some groups at least, politically quite useful explanation of the coup, but it is unlikely that it captures the complexities of what has actually taken place.

Lal, although trained as a historian, has done a fine bit of political science in his chapter, a consideration of politics between independence in 1970 and the 1982 general elections. His essay is particularly important in pointing to the ongoing concern of Fijians for their central role in political life. In a somewhat prophetic paragraph, he writes: "Many Fijians still appear concerned, constitutional guarantees to the contrary, that only a Fijian-dominated Alliance government will protect their heritage and rights. A government headed by high chiefs has been in power since independence, and in the eyes of many Fijians this is only natural and just and they desire its continuation. . . . Concerted efforts by the NFP to dislodge the Alliance from power would suggest that it has not yet recognised the dire consequences that await the Indians

should it ever capture government" (p. 79). It is critical to note that it is not solely Fijian *ethnic* dominance that is an issue here but, more specifically, the continuation of *chiefly* power.

Lal is also helpful in documenting the various minor parties and factions that developed during the 1970s. His treatment of Butadroka's Fijian Nationalist Party and, particularly important in relation to the contemporary situation, the Western United Front is especially enlightening.

Ralph R. Premdas, a political scientist, provides a more abstract and analytical argument in the final chapter. He focuses first on exchanges between former Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and then opposition leader Jai Ram Reddy concerning a "government of national unity" proposed by Ratu Mara in the late 1970s. He then considers this debate in terms of two models for postcolonial ethnic relations, one consensual, the other "consociational." He argues for the latter model, one that draws on groups' pragmatic concerns and involves considerable willingness to bargain and compromise. Finally, Premdas critically considers Alley's position, one that he considers could have been tenable in the mid-1970s but not subsequently. Ethnic interests have so diverged and tensions so increased, he argues, that the formerly conciliatory elite actors central to Alley's account are less committed to such a course of action. While Premdas raises a number of compelling points in this argument, I did not find myself fully convinced, in large part because a complex range of issues was reduced, more or less, to the single dimension of ethnicity.

In many ways Lal's thoughtful and engaging postscript is the most important chapter in the book. He delineates political activity in Fiji between 1982 and 1985 and provides a detailed account of the economic, social, and educational issues dominating the early 1980s. His account of this period, in fact, includes the first real consideration of Fiji on the international scene in which the United States, the Soviet Union, and other non-Commonwealth nations are seen as important and concerned players. The focus of the postscript, however, is on the emergence of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). In addition to his own excellent account of this critical development, Lal also includes the full text of Dr. Timoci Bavadra's manifesto for the FLP, first published in *South Pacific Forum* in 1985.

Although Lal claims in his introduction that, given its primary focus on the implications of ethnicity, the "volume is by no means a comprehensive attempt to cover all facets of Fijian political life" (p. x), we are given a very rich and multidimensional picture of Fiji, one that represents the considerable intraethnic divisions characteristic of indepen-

dent Fiji as well as the diverse areas in which Fiji citizens are drawn together irrespective of ethnic identity. It is a collection that both explains and informs, at the same time making any simplistic interpretations of the coup untenable.