

FIJI'S ELECTORAL STRATEGIES: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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This article analyzes Fiji's electoral projects by comparing Fiji's electoral experiences with those of South Africa, Namibia, Guyana, and Suriname. I argue that Fiji's electoral project of the 1990s was fraught with difficulty because it failed to reconcile competing communal and reformist positions within the democratic framework established by the 1997 Fiji Constitution. As a result, the electoral project of the 1990s failed, resulting in further coups in 2000 and 2006, with the political designers reframing the political agenda and adopting a proportional system of governance to promote national identity and interethnic collaboration following the 2006 coup. However, I contend that while a proportional electoral outcome was achieved in the 2014 general elections, the political and institutional structures, in particular the parliamentary committees, remain underdeveloped, resulting in a continued partisan and confrontational political landscape with potential for further conflict and instability.

Background on Electoral Engineering

IN FIJI, ELECTORAL SYSTEMS as a means of facilitating consensus democracy have had mixed outcomes. Following the promulgation of the 1970 Constitution, Fiji held its first postindependence election under the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system in 1972. As expected, the election result was divisive and highlighted ethnic fault lines that had plagued the island nation since the arrival of Indians in 1879. In postindependence Fiji, there was an expectation within the indigenous community

that Fijians of European descent, indigenous Fijians, and Indo-Fijians would vote for the chief-led Alliance Party. However, by 1977, this view of the political engineers in Fiji became contested as indigenous Fijian votes split in the 1977 Fiji general election, resulting in the defeat of the Alliance Party. Ten years later, split again in the indigenous Fijian urban votes led to the victory of the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party (NFP) coalition, resulting in Fiji's first military coup on May 14, 1987. The postcoup political engineers reframed the first-past-the-post electoral system under the 1990 Constitution, ensuring that indigenous Fijians held political power in perpetuity, with Indo-Fijians relegated to the opposition. As expected, the political arrangement of 1990 continued to cause disunity within the indigenous Fijian community, resulting in another constitution and electoral review in the mid-1990s.

The 1990s electoral engineering project in Fiji was bold at best, because most indigenous Fijians preferred chief-led political parties and murmurs of a new electoral system modeled along the alternative vote, used in electing the Australian Senate, were greeted with skepticism. Moreover, the proposal to soften a majoritarian electoral system with compulsory power sharing became the subject of intense debate among various political factions. For Indo-Fijians, power sharing was a laudable effort on the part of the political engineers but unworkable because ethnicity continued to play a dominant role in political outcomes. The political issues caused by the 1997 Constitution led to two further coups: one in 2000 and the other in 2006. Following the 2000 coup, the 1997 Constitution of Fiji survived, but the coup set in motion a series of unfortunate events: tensions between the government and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces triggered the December 2006 coup and the subsequent abrogation of the Fiji Constitution in 2009.

A new constitutional and electoral project was undertaken after 2009 based on the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress that argued for de-ethnicization of the Fijian state via a proportional electoral system. The election of September 2014 was a culmination of the aspirations of the military-backed regime for nonethnic political discourse based on one person, one vote, and one value. Leading the change in Fiji's political landscape was Voreqe Bainimarama, who formed the FijiFirst political party and won the election with a majority of seats.

This article analyzes Fiji's electoral projects by comparing Fiji's electoral experiences with those of South Africa, Namibia, Guyana, and Suriname. South Africa and Namibia are countries that had long periods of undemocratic rule similar to Fiji, where one ethnic group dominated political authority. Similarly, South Africa's minority preapartheid regime dominated the politics of Namibia from 1915 to 1989, when a popular movement led by

the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) forced the exit of South Africans in 1989. Since then, both Namibia and South Africa have embarked on significant political reforms, and these reforms—institutional, constitutional, and political—were undertaken at the same time as reforms in Fiji. The Fiji Constitution Review Commission (CRC), established in 1995, extensively drew on the experiences of structuring postapartheid multiethnic governance in South Africa. However, at the same time, Namibia established a hybrid form of a presidential and parliamentary system. In Fiji, the CRC also recommended a hybrid parliamentary and presidential system with a proposal for a Fijian parliament modeled along the Westminster system and a senate elected using the presidential system of electoral colleges. While there were challenges in South Africa, Namibia, and Fiji on reconciling ethnic and political interests, Guyana in the Caribbean and Suriname in South America have been closer cousins to Fiji when it comes to ethnic tensions and in particular the question of Indian indentured workers and their descendants who continue to claim political equality (27% of Suriname citizens are Indians, compared to 37% in Fiji and 43.5% in Guyana). Guyana and Suriname are highlighted as examples because these countries, which were prone to military coups, were able to break the cycle of political instability and coups through political engineering. In contrast, Fiji has failed in its national unity initiatives, and there are concerns that a large proportion of the indigenous community in the country voted against the multicultural vision of FijiFirst in the September 2014 general election.

Fiji's 1990 electoral project was fraught with difficulty because it failed to reconcile competing communal and reformist positions within the democratic framework. As a result, Fiji's electoral project failed, leading to further coups and political designers reframing the political agenda and adopting a proportional system of governance as a means for promoting national consciousness and interethnic collaboration. However, although a proportional electoral outcome was achieved in the 2014 general elections, the political institutional structures remain underdeveloped, resulting in a continued partisan and confrontational political landscape.

Comparisons with the Fijian Electoral Project

During the 1990s, electoral engineering as a means for promoting inclusion of minorities became a growing theme among political theorists as they tried to address majority and minority representations in parliamentary and presidential forms of government. In 1994, South Africa reorganized its government institutions (Ross 2008, 214) following the implementation of a new constitution that institutionalized mandatory power sharing. According to

the South African Constitution, any party with a minimum of 5 percent of the seats in the national parliament had the right to be in the cabinet. This institutional structure was the brainchild of Donald Horowitz (2000), who argued that the role of formal institutions was to structure incentives for political behavior in divided societies. For example, if group A was 55 percent of the population and group B was 45 percent but group A was divided into three political parties competing for the votes of group A, then according to Horowitz, "it is a dangerous situation in which ethnic outbidding can occur, but the situation is not necessarily solved by splitting support for group A, which is already split" (2000, 600).

As a political strategy, Horowitz suggested that institutional incentives be provided for the parties belonging to group A so that they behave moderately toward group B. As a consequence of this logic, multiparty governance as a power-sharing instrument was recommended for South Africa and then adopted for Fiji. Electoral theorist Arend Lijphardt argued that Horowitz's perspective on power sharing was fundamentally flawed, saying it was difficult to establish and maintain compulsory power sharing or multiparty government in divided societies because "it was not sufficiently democratic, could not work in practice, did not contain incentive for moderate political behaviour, could lead to secession and partition, and strengthened rather than weakened the cohesion and distinctiveness of ethnic groups" (Lijphardt 2002: 38–40). Furthermore, Lijphardt (2004, 98) argued that Horowitz's model "has found no support from either academic experts or constitutional writers. Its sole, and only partial, practical application to legislative elections in an ethnically divided society was the short-lived and ill-fated Fijian constitutional system, which tried to combine Alternative Vote with power sharing." Despite the misgivings of Lijphardt, South Africa's postapartheid institutions, unlike institutions in Fiji, have performed remarkably well despite ongoing racial schisms. According to Steven Friedman (2009, 109), "regular national, provincial, and local elections have produced results that are largely accepted as an accurate reflection of the voters' will. The relative ease with which society has moved from an authoritarian racial oligarchy to a functioning democracy remains remarkable, even though it is often taken for granted, particularly by many in the white minority."

While a multiparty cabinet worked for South Africa, in Fiji, constitutionalization of compulsory power sharing under the 1997 Constitution ended with the abrogation of Fiji Constitution by the military in April 2009. Fiji, unlike South Africa, had a general absence of multiparty consensus-building mechanisms, and as a result, there has been crisis in political governance since the inception of the 1997 Constitution. It was hoped by the constitutional designers that parliamentary committees would support multiparty

initiatives, but communal and ethnic issues dominated national politics from 1999 to 2006, with multiple points of failure. The first point of failure was that the 1997 Constitution failed to address divergent views on indigenous rights and the rights of minorities in the community. The second point of failure was the preponderance of communal seats and communal influence in national politics. Other points of failure included lack of clarity about the role of the military in national affairs and the continued extra parliamentary role of the Great Council of Chiefs in choosing presidents. Only a semblance of political unity was created in 1996 with the establishment of the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Constitution, which had a mandate to reach consensus on the CRC Report that genuinely attempted to address and balance the centripetal forces of communalism with the centrifugal forces of interethnic accommodation (Alley 1997: 248–9). Borrowing from South Africa, the CRC recommended the best parts of parliamentarianism and presidentialism while de-emphasizing communal representation. In the end, the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Constitution significantly changed the CRC Report in favor of communal politics.

An authoritative analysis on centripetalism was conducted by Benjamin Reilly (2006, 816), who argued that three factors can collectively promote accommodation in divided societies: the provision for electoral incentives, the presence of an arena of bargaining, and the development of centrist, aggregative, and multiethnic political parties or coalitions. The 1996 CRC in Fiji made recommendations for the development and promotion of centrist, aggregative parties and coalitions; Fiji's political leaders, however, reversed these recommendations of the CRC in favor of communal representation (45 communal seats vs. 25 common roll seats, as opposed to the 45 common seats and 25 communal seats recommended by the CRC). Worse, the indigenous nationalist governments in Fiji from 2001 to 2006 focused on parts of the Fiji Constitution to implement affirmative action policies in favor of its indigenous Fijian constituents while largely ignoring disadvantaged groups in nonindigenous communities. As a consequence, interethnic collaboration was defeated, resulting in two coups: one in 2000 and the other in 2006.

Looking toward West Africa, Namibia, unlike Fiji, has a mixture of presidential and parliamentary systems in which the president shares executive power with the prime minister and cabinet ministers are appointed by the president from among the members of the National Assembly. There are specific safeguards and checks and balances in the Namibian Constitution against the abuse of power by either the executive or the cabinet ministers. According to van Cranenburgh (2006, 590), Namibia is a consensus, multiparty system based on proportional representation with a party list. The Namibian National Assembly has the power to remove ministers from office following a

vote of no confidence by a simple majority, and there are safeguards against the abuse of authority by the president. In a sense, the Namibian model is based on a balance of power type of constitutional structure, even though the government has been dominated by the SWAPO Party since the end of civil conflict in 1989 (Hinz, Amoo, and van Wik 2002).

While South Africa and Namibia have with a degree of success sustained a consensus model of governance, Fiji moved in the opposite direction and mauled the intent of the 1997 Constitution following the indigenous nationalist coup of 2000. The indigenous nationalist government that came to office following the 2001 general election focused its energy on reinterpreting the Fiji Constitution to provide a legal rational argument in support of discriminating against Indo-Fijians, who in 2001 constituted nearly 40 percent of the population. Cottrell and Ghai (2007) analyzed in detail the affirmative action provision in the 1997 Constitution and argued that the provision for affirmative action could not be looked at in isolation. The principle features of affirmative action in Fiji Constitution were that programs had to be approved by parliament “for the benefit of all disadvantaged groups—no mention of ethnicity, gender or disability” (Cottrell and Ghai 2007, 239). In practice, the indigenous government implemented a number of affirmative action programs exclusively for indigenous Fijians and provided only “token” programs for other disadvantaged communities, including Indo-Fijians. However, since the indigenous government came into office entirely on indigenous Fijian votes, it chose to underfund programs for Indo-Fijians, leading to accusations of racial discrimination from the Indo-Fijian political parties.

In Fiji’s case, while the constitutional engineers envisaged moderate political parties to come together and build bridges among Fiji’s communal political leaders, in practice, there was selective use of constitutional provisions to fulfill communal agendas, resulting in constitutional failure. Moreover, unlike the Namibian Constitution, Fiji’s executive authority under the 1997 Constitution lay with the appointed president, who was accountable only to the Great Council of Chiefs, which was an unelected body comprising traditional hereditary indigenous chiefs from Fiji’s fourteen indigenous provinces. In addition, a compulsory power-sharing requirement created political gridlock in the cabinet. Amendments to the Fiji Constitution were extremely difficult because changes required two-thirds support from an ethnically divided House of Representatives and the Senate. There was ongoing debate in Fiji that the constitution should serve as a higher law binding the parliament, as is the case with other polities (Bulsara and Kissane 2009, 181). For example, in Ireland, one of the means for occasioning constitutional change is via a referendum. Since the inception of the 1937 Irish Constitution, there have been more than thirty proposed amendments, and most

of these amendments have been backed by cross-party consensus (Bulsara and Kissane 2009, 182). In Fiji's case, constitutional amendments did not get cross-party support. As a result, no major amendment to the Fiji Constitution was undertaken between 1999 and 2006, indicating constitutional rigidity and the prevalence of communal politics at the national level.

Fiji is not alone when it comes to a problematic constitution. Suriname's 1987 Constitution failed to incorporate the lessons from the past, and the governance structure, as set out in the constitution, failed to cement an effective political system. The Suriname Constitution was a long, wide-ranging document that established a mixed presidential–parliamentary system with weak checks and balances. On certain important constitutional matters, such as the procedures for removing a president, the constitution lacked clarity, and this contributed to a constitutional crisis in 1999. According to Kambel and Mackay (1999, 147), the Suriname Constitution is more a “policy document rather than an effective legal instrument protecting the rights of Suriname citizens.”

The political situation in Suriname can be compared with that of Fiji as debates over the powers of the president ended with the abrogation of the 1997 Constitution in April 2009. Similar to Fiji's situation, Suriname's National Assembly performed poorly, resulting in lack of legislative accountability and causing institutional fragmentation and collapse. Taylor and Berns (2010) argued that contemporary Suriname politics is based on consociational democracy, where friendship and collaboration among political leaders are greatly valued as noninstitutionalized binding forces among political parties. However, Roeder (2005, 61) argued that a consociational system has not worked well in the country and constitutional fragility remains. Nevertheless, the Suriname experience included fewer political and institutional failures compared to the experience in Fiji, where contending views on governance and political institution led to factionalization of the state and military intervention.

Electoral Engineering Following the 2006 Military Coup

Electoral engineering is an important element in the political engineering process. Poorly structured constitutions, such as Fiji's 1997 Constitution and Suriname's 1987 Constitution, amplified intergroup conflict and led to, in the case of Fiji, the collapse of the legal–constitutional authority. To fill the political vacuum, the military in Fiji intervened in national affairs and permanently implanted an authoritarian agenda of forcing ethnic unity. Following the 2006 coup, the military regime in Fiji realized that the indigenous nationalist order it replaced was still active with an agenda to undermine the

forced reforms of the military. The deposed Prime Minister of Fiji Laisenia Qarase challenged the 2006 military coup, and in 2009, the Court of Appeal of Fiji adjudicated that the 2006 coup was illegal and advised the president of Fiji to hold elections under the 1997 Constitution.

The military regime abrogated the 1997 Constitution and started a new political process for a nonethnic constitution. The framework for the new constitution and the electoral system was finalized in the People's Charter for Change in 2008, which was endorsed by the National Council for Building a Better Fiji. It proposed shared values, vision, and principles as the basis for eleven key pillars for building a better Fiji. The pillars were ensuring sustainable democracy and good and just governance; developing a common national identity and building social cohesion; ensuring effective, enlightened and accountable leadership; enhancing public sector efficiency, performance effectiveness and service delivery; achieving higher economic growth while ensuring sustainability; making more land available for productive and social purposes; developing an integrated development structure at the provincial level; reducing poverty to a negligible level by 2015; making Fiji a knowledge-based society; improving health service delivery; and enhancing global integration and international relations. Proposed actions include the use of proportional electoral systems for all future elections, realigning the role of the military, a common national identity, and the promulgation of an antidiscrimination act.

The charter also proposed to end the cycle of coups by applying a number of principle-based strategies, including political reforms addressing ethnonationalism, leadership, good governance, human rights, and national reconciliation.

As part of an agenda to engineer a nonethnic outcome, two proportional electoral systems were examined: d'Hondt and Sainte-Lague. These systems allow divided communities to engineer inclusive proportional electoral outcomes. The Sainte-Lague method was introduced in Latvia in 1922, was used for the interwar-period parliamentary elections, and was reintroduced in the country in 1992. Modified versions of the Sainte-Lague system have been used in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Grofman and Lijphardt 2002). In the d'Hondt divisor method, the division of votes is sequential—one, two, three, four, etc.—among the contesting political parties. For example, if there are three parties contesting three seats, each party's seat is divided sequentially by one, two, and three, and depending on the proportion of votes following division, the seats are allocated accordingly.

In the Saint-Lague methodology, the votes are divided by one, three, five, and so on, and because the second and third divisors are more than double, smaller parties with fewer votes have a higher weighting and as a result

have a greater probability of electoral success than do larger parties (Riedwyl and Steiner 1995: 357–69). According to Brendan O'Leary, Bernard Grofman, and Jorgen Elkit (2005), d'Hondt is most commonly used for European party-list proportional representations. However, to address collective choice problems including ethnic conflict and multiparty governance, these authors recommend sequential portfolio allocation based on party seat shares: "The basic idea is that each party's seat share in the legislature is used as a measure of its legitimate claims to ministerial office" (O'Leary, Grofman, and Elkit 2005: 198–200). The sequential divisor method is considered appropriate when there is a climate of distrust and hostility among the parties that are forced to share governing responsibilities.

In Fiji, the military regime chose a modified d'Hondt proportional electoral system under the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji.

The 2014 Fiji Elections

Fiji went to the polls on September 17, 2014, as overseas antigovernment blog sites ramped up their anti-FijiFirst commentary, even though there was a 48-hour political campaign blackout. Blog sites accused FijiFirst of manipulating the election, planning curfews, buying votes, and threatening non-FijiFirst participants, but the international observer group found no evidence of such activities. Some disgruntled political candidates engaged in nuisances such as defacing party posters, making prank calls, smashing party-car windows, and threatening journalists.

There were 590,000 registered voters, out of which 496,364 people (83.9 percent) voted in the 2014 general election. The voting was carried out at 1,500 polling stations, where voters showed their identity cards to electoral officers who verified their name on the voter list, marked their finger with an indelible ink, and then issued them the ballot paper, whereupon the voter marked with a cross or a tick against the preferred candidate's number and deposited the ballot into a secured ballot box. Most of the voting on September 17 was completed before 3 p.m., and the provisional results were published in the morning of September 18.

The provisional election figures placed FijiFirst in the lead with 60 percent of the seats, followed by the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) and the NFP. The Fiji Labour Party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, One Fiji, and the Fiji United Freedom Party failed to secure the required 5 percent threshold of 24,818 votes.

In the afternoon of September 18, the Fiji Labour Party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, SODELPA, One Fiji, and the NFP issued a joint statement, arguing that there were irregularities in the conduct of the election

TABLE 1. Fiji Political Parties' Performance in the 2014 General Election.

Political Parties	% Votes	Total Votes	Total Seats
FijiFirst	59.2%	293,714	32
FLP	2.4%	11,670	0
NFP	5.5%	27,066	3
PDP	3.2%	15,864	0
SODELPA	28.2%	139,857	15
One Fiji	1.2%	5,839	0
FUFP	0.2%	1,072	0
Roshika Deo (independent)	0.2%	1,055	0
Umesh Chand (independent)	0.1%	227	0
Total	100.0%	496,364	50

FLP, Fiji Labour Party; PDP, Peoples' Democratic Party; FUFP, Fiji United Freedom Party.

Source: Fiji Elections Office (2014).

and requesting that the count of the votes be suspended. The supervisor of elections responded that the allegations from the political parties were too general and refused to suspend counting. On September 19, the political parties questioning the election produced a list of "evidence," claiming that extra ballot papers were printed, seals on the ballot boxes were broken, the count was suspended without explanation, and ballot papers were tampered with. The Elections Office rejected the claims on September 20, and the full and final results of the election were published on September 21.

FijiFirst won a majority of the seats with 59.2 percent of the votes (Table 1). The majority of support for FijiFirst was from Indo-Fijians (80 percent), urban indigenous Fijians and youths, and rural indigenous Fijians. More than 50 percent of indigenous Fijians voted for FijiFirst.

Testing Proportionality

The promise of the 2014 Fiji election was that it would be the most proportional election compared to previous elections based on majoritarian and

TABLE 2. **Gallagher Index—2014 Fiji General Election.**

Political Parties	% Votes	Total Seats	% Seats	Seats – Votes	Difference Squared
FijiFirst	59.2%	32	64%	0.05	0.22
FLP	2.4%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
NFP	5.5%	3	6%	0.01	0.07
PDP	3.2%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
SODELPA	28.2%	15	30%	0.02	0.13
One Fiji	1.2%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
FUFP	0.2%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
Roshika Deo (independent)	0.2%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
Umesh Chand (independent)	0.1%	0	0%	0.00	0.00
Total	100.0%	50	100%		0.42
				Total difference squared/2	0.21
				Gallagher Index (square root of total/2)	0.46

FLP, Fiji Labour Party; PDP, Peoples' Democratic Party; FUFP, Fiji United Freedom Party.

preferential electoral systems. The regime in Fiji argued that the election was based on one person, one vote, and one value, and this system was aimed at forcing political parties to put in place political manifestos that addressed national issues as opposed to communal ones.

Michael Gallagher (1991, 1992) developed a quantitative methodology on measuring proportionality. The formula prescribed used the least squares statistical method to the measure disproportionality of an electoral outcome. Known as the Gallagher Index, the calculation involves taking the square root of half of the sum of the squares of the difference between the percentage of vote and the percentage of seats for each of the political parties (Table 2).

One the face of it, Fiji's 2014 general election was highly proportional compared with elections in other countries with proportional systems

(Vanhanen 2003). The closer the calculated value is to zero, the greater the proportionality of the electoral outcome, and the farther the value is from zero, the lesser the proportionality. However, the proportional system with a 5 percent electoral threshold in Fiji favored larger political parties such as FijiFirst and SODELPA. Five factors played a significant role in determining the electoral outcome: the modified d'Hondt electoral divisor rule, the 5 percent electoral threshold, the ballot structure, the Government of Fiji's Electoral Decree 2014, and the political parties' registration rules. The modified d'Hondt method used was unique to Fiji, where the whole country became one constituency and each voter casted a single vote for their preferred candidate. There were a number of candidates, and these candidates were ranked according to the number of votes received. After all votes were received, the Elections Office allocated the candidate votes to parties, eliminated those parties and independent candidates that did not meet the 5 percent threshold, and then redistributed the seats, recalculated the seats to the parties as percentages, and allocated them to successful candidates. The ballot structure also played an influencing role in the electoral outcome. The ballot paper consisted of numbers from 135 to 382, and each number was randomly allocated to a candidate who represented a political party. The ballot structure was influenced by the Government of Fiji's Electoral Decree 2014, which implemented a national candidates' list, where the number allocated to the candidate was randomly selected. According to Section 36 of the decree, a number of balls equal to the number of candidates, being balls of equal size and weight and each of which was distinctly marked with a number commencing from number 135, were placed in a container. A blindfolded individual then randomly picked a ball, whose number was assigned to a candidate. The issues with random numbers for political candidates were that the voters found memorizing the numbers of their preferred candidates problematic and confused the random number and its relationship with the party because voters in the past mainly voted along party lines.

There were also concerns about the rules governing the registration of political parties, the Government of Fiji's Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Decree 2013. The Electoral Commission requires 5,000 signatures before a party can be registered, and the party must have at least 5,000 members from all four divisions of Fiji—2,000 members from the Central Division, 1,750 members from the Western Division, 1,000 members from the Northern Division, and 250 members from the Eastern Division. Public servants were disbarred from holding party positions, and union members were reminded that they had to resign from their positions before taking up a position in a political party. The union-led parties, the Peoples' Democratic Party and the Fiji Labour Party, protested that these

were restrictive conventions and that the same did not apply to the political representatives of the military regime.

Following the 2014 election, Fiji embarked on embedding democratic institutions, but compared to South Africa, Namibia, Suriname, and Guyana, Fiji's political institutions remain grossly underdeveloped, mainly due to eight years of authoritarian rule that did not champion any form of democratic bargaining. The constitution-making process, initiated in 2009, was seen by the antiregime groups as a carefully managed process aimed at facilitating the agenda of the coup leaders. While there were a number of issues leading to the 2014 general election, the elected government of Fiji used a parliamentary committee system to manage issues of national importance. However, soon after the election, partisan politics emerged, leading to allegations that the newly elected Fiji government is continuing with its authoritarian past and not engaging effectively with the opposition parties.

Parliamentary Committees

The new parliament of Fiji is a multiethnic polity, with FijiFirst firmly in control of the legislative agenda. Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama was sworn into office by the president of Fiji on September 23, 2014, with fourteen cabinet ministers and five assistant ministers sworn in on September 24. SODELPA and the NFP banded together and formed the opposition bloc, with Ro Teimumu Kepa as the elected leader of the opposition and NFP's Professor Biman Prasad as deputy.

The first order of government business was the scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee of the Auditor General's Report into government finances, which highlighted a number of problems emanating from lack of accountability and probity in the financial dealings of various government departments since 2006. While the debate within the Public Accounts Committee heated up, the government tabled its first budget, which was criticized by the opposition as fiscally irresponsible. However, the budget provided for the many promises made by FijiFirst during the election; the most important features included government subsidies to water, electricity, and education, followed by an ambitious infrastructure and investment plan. On the day the budget was passed, the opposition members walked out in protest, arguing that none of their suggestions had been taken into consideration via the various parliamentary committees and not enough time was allocated to the budget debate.

In multiparty settings such as in Fiji, consensus-based decisions strengthen governance, and there are studies (Reynolds 1995; Blaug 2002; Premdas 2004; Reilly 2007) that prove that in divided communities, democratic

elections are not sufficient for consensus building among political parties. Structures must be in place that support discourses between and among political parties that represent a multitude of interests, values, and perceptions. The problem with the current Fijian committee system is that it is extremely partisan and fails to instill deliberative democracy, whereby committee systems are enabled to build and sustain consensus political and policy outcomes.

While countries such as Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, and Scotland have advanced forms of the committee system, Fiji's committee system fails to meet the consensus-building threshold established in countries like Guyana, Suriname, South Africa, and Namibia.

South Africa has made great advances on encouraging committees by establishing sixty parliamentary committees with various degrees of engagement with both the public and the opposition (Geisler 2000; Rose-Ackerman, Egidy, and Fowkes 2015). The most significant contribution of South Africa is its ability to engage the opposition in the committee system (Nijzink 2001, 53) and in particular the establishment of the Parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights (Anne Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim 2003, 75). South Africa has not only adopted the basic concept of democracy but has expedited the involvement of the opposition and the public in political and policy processes. Guyana, which, like Fiji, struggled with questions of ethnicity and culture, was successful in rising above communal politics and instituting controls on public accounts via the Public Accounts Committee (Ann Marie Bissessar and John Gaffar La Guerre 2013). A similar outcome to that of South Africa and Guyana was achieved by Suriname (Singh 2014: 131–48), which engaged in a broad-based consensus initiative on fundamental social issues affecting the community. Namibia, the shining beacon of West Africa, has implemented similar consensus-based programming that allows the country to progress consensus democracy (van Cranenburgh 2006).

In Fiji, the committee system of parliamentary governance is seen by many political observers as institutional engineering by the elected government to manage opposition views. The Privileges Committee was used to punish an opposition member of Parliament who made comments on the Speaker of the House at a SODELPA rally. The opposition was concerned that government members who raised privilege issues in the House against the opposition member were also on the Privileges Committee and as such, the committee processes could not be seen as free from political influence and fair to the accused.

The ongoing failures of parliamentary committees in Fiji raise further questions on good governance and accountability in the country. The

objective of the post-2009 electoral project was to develop and implement consensus-based democracy based on the principles of the 2008 People's Charter for Change. However, as I have highlighted, the institutional structures, such as parliamentary committees, are used not for consensus building but rather to further partisan politics. While the elected government has made significant progress on national identity and proportional-based electoral outcomes, it remains far from instituting deliberative changes that will allow collaborative decision making and an end to the confrontation politics that still is a feature of the new Fijian democracy.

Conclusion

As discussed, compared with South Africa, Namibia, Suriname, and Guyana, Fiji's electoral project of the 1990s failed because it was unsuccessful in reconciling communal and national agendas within a nonethnic political framework. The 1997 Constitution struggled on a number of fronts, including curbing rampant communalism and multiparty governance. Forcing communal parties to work together as a unified cabinet not only created further ethnic tensions but also triggered military intervention in the forms of a civilian coup in 2000 and a military coup in 2006. The post-2006 regime reframed the electoral and the constitutional agendas after 2009 and sought to lead nonethnic political and institutional reforms via the 2013 Constitution, electoral rules, and rules on registration of political party. However, as I have argued, while the 2014 election was highly proportional, a number of factors influenced participation in the election and the final result. These included the ballot structure, the electoral system, and the electoral and political party registration rules. After the 2014 election, a number of parliamentary committees were established to assist in embedding democracy in Fiji. However, the intention of the government was to use the committees to manage opposition views instead of a building consensus democracy, as was the case in other democratic nations that use committee systems. Partisan-led approaches in Fiji have a potential to cause political instability and ethnic tensions that have marred the country's postindependence politics.

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