

CONFRONTING FIJI FUTURES

Edited by A Haroon Akram-Lodhi

Canberra (Australia): Asia Pacific Press and Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management, The Australian National University. 2000. xv, 321 pp. (Tables.) A\$30.00, paper. ISBN 0-7315-3642-8.

Fiji became the focus of international attention when it suffered two military coups in 1987, mounted on the pretext of retrieving indigenous hegemony. This book is a product of those events, providing a carefully-researched and well-documented review of the 're-assessment' and 'probing analysis' (p.12) that was forced upon Fiji's policy-makers during the succeeding 12 years.

It is noteworthy that among the 14 authors there are only one indigenous Fijian, and one woman. A useful introductory overview (Doornbos and Akram-Lodhi), is followed by a detailing (Ghai) of the 1997 Constitution which attempted to redress the racist inequities of the post-Coup 1990 Constitution. Then Prasad analyses the 1999 elections that, against all expectations, swept into power a multi-racial government under Fiji's first Indian Prime Minister.

"Confronting" was just going to press in May 2000 when 8 armed men, again mouthing the rhetoric of indigenous supremacy, kidnapped the Parliamentary cabinet. This obviously "collaterally damaged" the book's cautious optimism, and its economic forecast scenarios (Sepethri and Akram-Lodhi). But hindsight merely qualifies how we must now read it. It remains valuable for encapsulating and analyzing of many of the issues that still confront the country.

The editor expresses a wish that Fiji "move beyond the primacy of the politics of identity" (p.xiv). This may prove difficult. As Cameron points out (p.144), "the 1990s have witnessed a sharp intensification of the politics of identity around the world. While Leckie's important chapter on women confronting exploitation and oppression may suggest "that social identity is rooted in political and economic processes" (p.17), for Fijians the reverse has always been true. Political and economic processes have functioned to configure and sustain identity, and when they fail, other means are sought. As Robertson describes, the fact that their identity changes as fast as anyone else's requires a resort to myth. Myths can seem to justify even violence.

Sutherland identifies Fijian perceptions of their economic uncompetitiveness with Indians as central to 'the "Fijian" question' (p.206), and he and other authors (Chand, Leckie, Korth, Ratuva) show that involvement in business and affirmative action have failed to deliver for Fijians the economic, educational and political strength they desire.

The other contentious issue highlighted is land ownership. Here alone Fijians indisputably have the upper hand, and they guard it zealously. They own 83% of the land, while Indians may buy only from the 7% of freehold land available, and leaseholds have proven to have precarious tenure. The difficulties surrounding Fijian communal land ownership and leases are well explained by Prasad and Kumar. But

their proposal that Crown Land and reserved Fijian land be converted to freehold, seems naïve in a climate where Fijians so clearly fear Indian designs on their land. This book shows clearly that the 1987 Coups resolved no problems, created many, and failed to advantage ordinary Fijians. As this review is being written, the Court of Appeal has just declared the illegality of the 2000 Coup's abrogation of the 1997 Constitution, and of the "Interim Government." As Fiji enters this next precarious phase, this book will undoubtedly be valuable in assisting readers' understanding of its problems. However, the hope that it might help in 'constructing sound strategies oriented towards the country growing together, rather than growing apart' (p.13) may be expecting too much. Just maybe, that imperative might be brought home by the repeated failure of undemocratic and illegal tactics.

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