

FIJI BEFORE THE STORM: Elections and the politics of development

Edited by Brij V. Lal

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It has become a commonplace that the latest news, entertainment, and marketing from the most technologically and economically advanced societies now have a huge impact on people whose traditional values are often dramatically at odds with the new ways. The resultant personal confusion is compounded by globalizing political and economic pressures at national level, and when overlaid on histories of colonial social and 'racial' engineering, the brew has often proven highly volatile.

This book presents the perspectives of nine authors on how this has recently manifested in Fiji. Though the 'storm' has been far less bloody than its counterparts in Africa or other Pacific nations, this should not disguise the depth or intransigence of the problems. The authors elucidate some of those, using as their temporal fulcrum the 1997 Constitution and the landslide victory of the multi-ethnic Labour party in 1999 that directly, although unexpectedly, resulted from it. They scan backward to the aftermath of the 1987 Fiji Coups, the descent into blatant indigenous supremacism, the painful struggle to reinstate some semblance of democratic process, and its dramatic reversal when a small group of armed Fijians again overthrew the elected government in May 2000 on the shaky platform of the 'paramourncy of Fijian interests'.

There is not space to discuss all of the authors' themes and arguments. Most are well-written, astute and relevant, even including a self-justifying piece by Sitiveni Rabuka, instigator of the 1987 Coups and putatively born-again statesman and peace-maker. Perhaps the book's major achievement is highlighting the multiplicity of voices raised in the identity struggles that have underpinned Fiji's difficulties since long before Independence in 1970. This is particularly clear in Brij Lal's lucid description of the 21 factions that contested the 1999 election, and Ulamita Durutalo's eloquent updating of the issues of 'invented tradition' and 'the myth of Fijian homogeneity' that have veneered over the deep fractures in intra-Fijian relationships.

The final chapter is Brij Lal's retrospective look at the 'Madness in May' when George Speight and his cohort 'unmade modern Fiji'. The 1987 agenda of bolstering traditional élites was reversed, a policy vindicated, paradoxically, by the hopeless incapacity of the Great Council of Chiefs to overcome diverse self-interests and provide leadership, while racism and violence reached depths not plumbed previously. As he notes, the drone behind the melody of Fiji's political and social life is indigenous Fijians' deep mistrust and fear of the economic and academic success of Indians, and Indians' frustration at their inability to own more than a tiny proportion of the land or achieve an equal political voice.

The Constitution bequeathed by the departing British in 1970 entrenched these animosities. It was a poison chalice, entrenching the pre-eminence of racial difference over social or economic policies, hobbling the political process and hammering the wedge through society. Collateral victims, as Chandra Reddy and Teresia Teaiwa point out, have been women and ethnic minorities, marginalized by history, tradition, and consistent political neglect. But as Lal concludes, in this small archipelago 'there is no alternative to co-existence' (p.193) if Fiji is not to replay endlessly its recent conflicts.

This valuable book extends the scope of 'Confronting Fiji Futures,' edited by Akram-Lodhi (recently reviewed in this journal), and leads logically toward a forthcoming collection (scheduled for July 2001), edited by Brij Lal and Michael Pretes, with the working title: 'Coup: Reflections on the Fiji Crisis.' A composite reading might yield better understanding of Fiji's turbulent recent history, and only through such understanding might solutions to its deeply entrenched problems be evolved.

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