Fiji: Inter-group competitions and in-group fragmentation

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Abstract

There are common themes that run across the coups in Fiji and most prominent among them are racial and ethnic compartmentalisation or lack of inter-group contact, caused by colonialism. After independence, the indigenous Fijian chiefs, who took over the reigns of power, continued politicising ethnicity, resulting in military intervention and racial conflict. Beneath the ethnic conflict, there are deeper intra-communal tensions, which are often ignored by the western media due to its complexities. The Pacific rhythms of coups and ethnic domination were challenged by the Fiji military commander, Frank Bainimarama, in December in 2006, who broke the pattern of ethnic coups in the country by making inter-ethnic collaboration a central theme of his military intervention. However, indigenous forces which were targets of the coup re-grouped to challenge the commander. This article observes political developments in Fiji, in particular the 2000 and 2006 coups, within the theoretical framework of inter-group contact theory and argues that historically inter-group cooperation in the country was undermined by indigenous nationalist pressures for in-group solidarity.

Introduction

Ethnicisation of politics has played a major role in military interventions in Fiji. There exists a ‘culture of mistrust’ that is a product of society divided along ethnic and cultural lines. As a result, ethnic communities in Fiji strengthen their identity within their own culture and see others as a potential threat. These currents in Fiji’s politics are a result of colonial policies which discouraged inter-group contact and promoted ‘ethnic blocs’. By the 1960s, the leaders of the European community and the indigenous Fijian chiefs had formed inter-group alliance against Indo-Fijians. However, Indo-Fijians, who were introduced to Fiji as indentured labourers in 1879, found themselves struggling in their effort to form an alliance with indigenous Fijians against the colonial authorities. As a result, the Indo-Fijian push for de-colonisation resulted in further polarisation of Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijian leaders. Following independence, Fiji continued to suffer from “colonial hangover” where inter-ethnic relations continued to be guided by ideology of indigenous political paramountcy. Besides, inter-group contact among ethnic leaders became “contact of communal convenience”, without any regard for nation building, inter-ethnic conciliation or national identity.

This paper will analyse post-colonial 2000 and 2006 coups by using inter-group theory as its methodology. My argument is that a lack of inter-group contact since independence has bred prejudices and biases and assisted in the consolidation of an indigenous nationalist state, which led to inter-group and intra-group tensions and conflicts. My argument extends inter-group theory by highlighting that inter-ethnic tensions and ethnicisation of the indigenous polity had caused
intra-group conflict and these have featured prominently during the coups of 2000 and 2006.

**Inter-group Theory**

Inter-group contact in divided communities is a complex issue. It is complex because there are underlying cultural and sub-cultural currents that are not apparent in sociological observations. After World War II, researchers in the United States, influenced by the growing civil rights movement, started looking at the sociology of race. One such researcher Allport (1954) identified four conditions for a successful inter-group contact in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*. Firstly, he argued that all social groups, regardless of their size, should have *equal status*; secondly, there has to be *social enablers that promote inter-group cooperation*; thirdly, inter-group cooperation can only come about if there are *shared goals and values*; and fourthly, the whole structure of inter-group collaboration has to be assisted by an *agreed authority*.

Pettigrew (1998: 80) extended Allport's thesis and argued that ‘individual differences and societal norms shape inter-group contact effects', and societies suffering inter-group conflict *both restrict and undercut inter-group contact*. Pattigrew advanced ‘a longitudinal reformulation of the inter-group contact and ‘distinguished between essential and facilitating situational factors and time dimension with different outcomes predicted for different stages'. Both the work of Allport and Pettigrew influenced the works of Susan Fiske (2002), Eric Oliver and Janelle Wong (2003) and Leonie Huddy (2004).

Susan Fiske (2002: 128) analysed the role of bias in inter-group conflict and concluded that education and opportunities for economic advancement for marginalised groups produced positive inter-group contact. She continued that ‘genuine inter-group friendships reduce stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination’. Eric Oliver and Janelle Wong (2003: 567-582) looked at inter-group prejudice in multiethnic environment and observed that:

> In multiethnic contexts, relationship between racial environments and attitudes defy simple formulations. Hostility toward another group is based not simply on that group’s size, but on its relative economic position, the historical period and the contextual unit being measured (579).

While both Fiske, Oliver and Wong emphasised economic factors, Huddy argued that there were contrasting theories on inter-group contact and none provided the holistic approach that integrated all the factors influencing inter-group conflict and cooperation. According to Huddy, social identity theory uncovered ‘ubiquitous in-group bias and resultant inter-group conflict’, system justification theory argued that inter-group conflict may be absent among subordinate groups because they do not succumb to in-group bias and social dominance theory analyses ideological hegemony ‘underlying various forms of discrimination’ (Huddy 2004: 968-49).

**Fiji Context**

Fiji is a socio-cultural plural society that recognises that humans are subject to diverse social and cultural conditions. Plural societies are those that contain a number of ethnic, cultural, or sub-national groups, and socio-cultural pluralism can mean, either, the empirical recognition of diverse social practices, or, the normative claim that such separate cultures are in some way intrinsically or consequentially valuable. The empirical assertion of the anthropological difference is not a normative claim. It also has no necessary logical bearing on the question as to whether
different communities or cultures ought or ought not to abide by certain universal moral imperatives (Vincent 2004: 210).

Fiji has a history of contested cultural values and identities, especially among two ethnically dominant communities, the indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians. These contestations are the main cause of inter-group conflict in the country. In 1987 and again in 2000, cultural and ethnic competitions for political power and cultural identity have led to military intervention and racial violence. In fact, due to colonialism, there never was throughout Fiji’s history any meaningful inter-group or inter-cultural contact between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. In Fiji, as well as elsewhere in the South Pacific, strong distinctions are made between natives and migrants. According to Margaret Jolly (2005: 423), the native/migrant distinction is more compelling for Fiji where ‘the white settlers were never a majority and where difference between native Fijian and migrant Indo-Fijian is still seen by many indigenous Fijians as a relation between guest and host’.

Indigenous Fijian academic Alumita Durutalo (2007: 580) observed that ethnic and communal orientation continues to influence election results in both communal and open seats and that ‘multicultural politics may take a while to gain acceptance across the ethnic divide’. Since the coups of 2000, Fiji had two racially-charged general elections. The 2001 election had low voter turnout and ethnic communities voted for their communal leaders despite a constitution that encouraged cross-cultural alliances and party manifestos that had wider ethnic appeal. In 2006, Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians were deeply divided as some 80 per cent of eligible voters supported their own communal parties.

One of the consequences of a lack of inter-group in Fiji is abrupt seizures of state power by a predominantly ethnic military, raising questions about the fragility of political institutions and the role of the armed forces in nation-building. Ethnic coups have taken place in a number countries throughout the globe, including Thailand (2006), Pakistan (1999), Burma (1988), Burundi (1993), Ghana (1966), Libya (1969), Chile (1973), Brazil (1964), Guatemala (1954), Sudan (1989), Haiti (1990), Nigeria (1993), Argentina (1976) and Fiji (1987, 2000 and 2006). In Fiji, however, in the past twenty one years, there has been four military coups. Two of these took place in 1987: the first one against a multiethnic government in May and the other one against the Governor General and the constitution in September. The cycle of military takeover in Fiji continued in 2000 against the multiethnic Peoples’ Coalition Government. Both the 1987 and the 2000 coups were aimed at entrenching indigenous political hegemony. In 2000, the coup makers went further than 1987 and unleashed unprecedented violence on Indo-Fijians living in rural areas.

According to Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, ‘there were approximately 357 attempted coups in the developing world from 1945 to 1985, and about half of all developing-world states experienced a coup during this period. Of these attempts, 183 coups were successful. This phenomenon is by no means fading: militaries staged 75 coups and coup attempts between 1986 and 2000’ (Belkin & Schofer 2005: 143). The 200 coup in Fiji, like the ones in 1987, was a successful coup because the coup leaders, who were eventually arrested and convicted for treason, were successful in ousting an elected government and putting in its place an indigenous regime that adopted the policies and priorities of the coup plotters. The interim regime, led by Laisenia Qarase, implemented immediately a ‘blueprint on indigenous supremacy’, which provided affirmative action programs for indigenous Fijians. Moreover, many coup sympathisers formed a political party, which became part of the governing coalition. Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, on many occasions, defended the 2000 coup as an assertion of indigenous ethnic identity.

Nelson Kasfin (1979:365-366) argued that ethnic identities are both fluid and intermittent. Using
the case study of Uganda, he argued that ‘when political participation is based on ethnicity, individuals are necessarily constrained (though to a greater or lesser degree) by those objective indicators of common ancestry thought to be especially salient—culture, myths, language, or territory’. Kasfin continued that shared perception create social solidarity and turns ‘individuals assigned to an ethnic category to an active ethnic group’. Kasfin (1979: 371) further noted that the British colonial rule created multiple ethnic identities, which according to Carmen White (2002: 14) are either ‘ranked or unranked’. White argues that ‘while in ranked societies, social conventions prescribe difference in subordinate groups concomitant with the perjorative assessment of their very worth, ethnic relations in an unranked system are marked by mutual ambivalence, with negative perceptions balanced by begrudgingly allowances for other group’s competence in a given sector’. In her case study of Fiji, Carmen highlighted that colonial policies structured conflicting, political and economic interests for indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, while colonial ideologies about the ‘nature’ of groups have survived in the form of invidious comparisons.

The impact of colonial rule in establishing ethnic compartments and grooming indigenous elite in Fiji is often under-emphasised. Benjamin Reilly (2004: 486) noted that colonial rule had diverse impacts in the South Pacific Islands, where ‘post-colonial state-building led to the growth of new cleavages which served to restructure politics along a more confrontational axis’. Matha Kaplan argued that in Fiji, the colonial encounter led indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians to ‘construct each other in terms of their own, quite different cultural systems’ (Kaplan 1989: 350). The British colonial rule consciously divided the communities along ethnic and cultural lines and intervened to circumvent cross-cultural collaboration or inter-group contact. However, Robert Norton (2001: 154) observed that ‘Britain willingly perpetuated ethnic division is not supported’. However, ethnic divisions and a ‘political system based on race’ (Lal 2003: 347) have played a major role in colonial as well as post-colonial Fiji.

Indigenous cultural assertions or indigenous in-group militancy have played a dominant role in shaping political action in the South Pacific and strong distinctions are made between indigenous groups and migrants. Besides group differences, there are contested cultural values and heterogeneous indigenous Fijian strategies of ‘de-legitimising non-indigenous elements’ (Cretton 2005: 415), including parliamentary democracy, constitutional rules, human and minority rights. Vivian Cretton notes that indigenous cultural strategies are ‘located in the continuity of the past in the present, consolidating cultural identities to various degrees, depending on the situation of the parties concerned’. Culture, therefore, has become a political tool for the unification of the indigenous Fijian society against the immigrant and less secure Indo-Fijian. Ironically, following the 2006 coup, democracy, constitutional rule and human rights have become legitimate elements for the indigenous leaders. As a result, indigenous political assertions in Fiji are ridden with contradictions and these contradictions have caused in-group fragmentation.

In Fiji indigenous nationalist assertions on the political stage have been made possible by an ethnicised and a politicised army. However, there is exception to this rule because from 2000, the commander of the Fiji Military Forces, Frank Bainimarama, challenged the indigenous government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, resulting in the 2006 military coup. The military in Fiji is predominantly indigenous Fijian since the Second World War and following independence, the military became the final authority on governance and constitutionalism. The degree of politicisation of the Fiji military was illustrated in the biography of the 1987 Fiji coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka, following the election of the Indo-Fijian National Federation Party (NFP) in the April 1997 Fiji elections. According to Sharpham:
Rabuka, with his lack of interest in things political, was surprised by the [1977] election result, and found himself upset at the thought of serving a government that was dominated by Indo-Fijians…(Sharpham 2000: 59).

Fiji is not a special case when it comes to an ethnicised and a politicised army. There are similar currents following through the African continent, where ‘previously separated groups held in check by colonialism suddenly became open competitors for political power’ (Jenkins & Kposowa 1992: 274). The theme running across a number of political commentators on Fiji is that a lack of inter-group contact has played a significant role in amplifying ethnic conflict. Moreover, there is an apparent lack of initiative on the part of Fiji’s communal leaders to address this issue because it undermines their political position within their in-group. More importantly, this lack of inter-group contact has led to ethnicisation of the Fijian state, resulting in indigenous political domination followed by in-group conflict.

**Framing post-colonial discourse**

John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (2001: 133) highlighted that from independence in 1970 until 1987, Fiji’s national leaders were high chiefs and indigenous paramountcy firmly entrenched. However in May 1987, a popular multiethnic government was deposed by the military and democracy was suspended for five years as a military-backed interim civilian government administered the state in a rule marked by ethnic discrimination and terror (Premdas 1993: 997). Fiji’s military remained dominated by indigenous Fijians who were, until 2006, susceptible to manipulation by indigenous chiefs.

According to Baba and Fields (2005: 20), it is Fiji’s diversity of ‘language, culture and politics which is at the core of a tragic cycle of conflict over power. However, indigenous cultural assertions due a lack of inter-ethnic contact have played a major role on nationalist claims on state power. Indigenous Fijians, in particular the ‘militant section of the indigenous community’ (Lal 2003: 158), have led both the 1987 and the 2000 coups, and Fiji’s post-independence constitutions and legislature have failed to manage underlying communal divisions, even though Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts (2005: 279) argued that ‘Fiji’s bicameralism reflects the ongoing efforts by ethnic Fijians to protect their lands, resources, status and perceived entitlements’. In fact, indigenous Fijian chiefs have throughout Fiji’s history protected their position in the indigenous cultural hierarchy and at times taken the role of the colonial overseer by ensuring that Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians remain divided. Even the new ‘Fijian ruling class’ or the indigenous elite (Halapua 2003: 122) championed indigenous communal living because it provided the cultural legitimacy for claims on wealth, power and privilege.

The historical lack of inter-group contact was broken in December 2006 when the commander of the Fiji military, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, ousted an indigenous government of Laisenia Qarase, arguing among other things that there was an urgent need to bring the ethnic communities together. However, the commander’s efforts of encouraging inter-group contact were met with resistance from the indigenous establishment, including the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), the deposed Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua Party (SDL) and the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB). Moreover, some non-government organisations, the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement and various youth group argued that policies on inter-group contact should be instituted only by an elected entity, thereby questioning and challenging the foundations of the 2006 military intervention.
The origins of the 2006 coup lay in the failure of inter-ethnic alliance following the 1999 general election where an Indo-Fijian became Prime Minister of the nation and attempted without success to manage a multi-ethnic coalition plagued in-group tensions. Before and after the 1999 election, Inter-group contact among communal leaders initially led to a broad multi-ethnic coalition in the form of the Peoples’ Coalition Government. However, intra-group tensions caused by calls for in-group solidarity undid the coalition, resulting in the 2000 coup.

The 2000 Coup: Failure of inter-group contact

The coalition (the Peoples’ Coalition Government) formed under the political hegemony of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) collapsed by the end of 1999 as various indigenous political groups in government started to openly challenge the policies of the FLP. For the indigenous party, the multi-ethnic coalition was a smokescreen for Indo-Fijian domination. The irony was that similar arguments had been used before the 1999 election by mostly Indo-Fijian political leaders. The collapse of inter-group alliance resulted in indigenous communal fortification or in-group solidarity and on 19 May 2000, armed indigenous men, with the support of a section of the army, stormed Fiji’s parliament and held cabinet members hostage for 56 days.

The May 2000 coup, third in a series of coups, was once again indigenous communal assertions against the failure of inter-group contact. However, unlike 1987, the 2000 putsch caused indigenous in-group conflict, paving the way for further military intervention. Like in May 1987, the 2000 coup leaders mistakenly thought that there would be overwhelming in-group support among indigenous Fijians for the takeover, following claims by indigenous nationalists that the Peoples’ Coalition Government, led by an Indo-Fijian Mahendra Chaudhry, proposed a number of bills aimed at diluting the rights of indigenous Fijians. When the 200 coup was not progressing according to plan, the coup makers attempted to oust the President of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who remained steadfast in his support for the multiracial 1997 Constitution, after indigenous petitions for its abrogation.

In-group fragmentation

As mentioned before, plans to consolidate an indigenous polity or in-group solidarity led to in-group fragmentation, because of divisions among indigenous Fijians. Firstly, there were indigenous groups that continued to support the constitutional government even though the government was incapacitated by armed gun men. Secondly, there were a number of influential chiefs that resisted plans to oust President Ratu Mara from office. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, there were divisions within the army, in particular among senior officers.

At the height of the crisis in 2000, Macuata Provincial Council Chairman, Sakeo Tuiwainikai, claimed that ‘if the President steps down and gives his position to the Kubuna confederacy, then there will be no problems’ (The Fiji Times, 24 May 2000). Fiji is divided into three confederacies: Tovata, Kubuna and Burebasaga, consisting of 14 indigenous provinces. Since independence in 1970, conflicting aspirations of the confederacies were managed politically by indigenous chiefs who exploited kinship and cultural ties. However, according to Alumita Durutalo (2000: 73-75), the indigenous political unity was a ‘social construction’, beneath which lay ‘traditional political rivalry’. Intra-group solidarity among indigenous Fijians was used by Fiji’s chiefly leaders in post-colonial Fiji to manage intra-group tensions. This solidarity was built on the ideology of ethnic and communal divisions in particular the need to manage the anti-indigenous Fijian ambitions of Indo-Fijian leaders. Once Indo-Fijians were removed from the political scene by force, traditional
intra-group rivalries came sharply into focus as coup leader George Speight negotiated with the vanua of Vuda to nominate Ratu Josefa Iloilo (Burebasaga) to the position of the President and a high chief of Bau, Ratu Jope Seniloili (Kubuna) to the position of Vice President. The Speight group argued that President Ratu Mara had become an obstacle to their ‘objective’ because he had failed to persuade deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government to ‘voluntarily resign’, and ‘address the grievances of the indigenous community in the light of the 1997 Constitution’ (Confidential Draft, George Speight group, Parliamentary Complex, Suva, 21 May 2000).

George Speight produced more than divisions and fragmentation among indigenous Fijians. For the coup leaders, the consolidation of indigenous political rights meant unleashing a wave of racial vilification and violence. According to Graham Dobell (2000: 176), ‘there were Pacific rhythms at work’ and one such rhythm involved racial violence. After the Speight group failed to unite indigenous Fijians behind its cause, it started exploiting ethnic and cultural divisions and ordered indigenous supporters to attack Indo-Fijians in areas sympathetic to the coup. At the end of the 56 day siege of the parliament, George Speight and his rebels humiliated the military, divided the Great Council of Chiefs, and succeeded in having their own supporters in an interim government (Alley 2000: 515).

The interim government that was eventually established after the 2000 coup continued with the vision expressed by the Speight group. The interim Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, argued against inter-group contact or conciliation and emphasised that there was an urgent need to bridge the economic gap between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians and implemented the ‘blueprint on supremacy’, which re-invented affirmative actions programs that had existed under previous indigenous governments. The ‘blueprint’, after the 2001 elections, was transformed into a government legislation, Social Justice Act 2001, which had scheduled 29 scheduled schemes, out of which ‘9 were discriminatory in racial terms’ (Cottrell & Ghai 2007: 240-41). According to Citizens’ Constitutional Forum (CCF), the Social Justice Act contained a number of anomalies that required revisions and amendments. The CCF further observed that the weaknesses in the Act existed because it was promoted as a General Election promise (Citizens Constitutional Forum, 11 February 2002).

Historian Brij Lal notes that ‘indigenous Fijian nationalists want Fijian paramountcy recognised as a right, but there is no basis on which the paramountcy of Fijian interests or Fijian political paramountcy can be elevated into a right …But no constitution can guarantee political paramountcy of a particular ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state unless, of course, it abandons all claim to be democratic” (Lal 2000: 292). Brian Martin (1993: 53) observed that ‘the use of ethnic divisions for political purposes has a long history in Fiji. The Labour Party itself represented a challenge to this political use of ethnicity, and the coup represented a reversion to this status quo’, both in 1987 and 2000. However, after the 2001 election, the military had started to question ethnically exclusive policies of the Qarase government and in particular deliberate absence of policies on inter-group contact, especially after George Speight group caused irreparable damage to Fiji’s race relations.

The Political Role of the Military

Indigenous in-group fragmentation continued despite some semblance of in-group solidarity after the military challenged the government following the 2001 general elections. The ruling Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) party and its coalition partner Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua (CAMV) were accused by the military of supporting coup suspects and muzzling...
inter-group contact by implementing nationalist policies.

The situation reached a melting point in December 2003 when allegations surfaced that the military commander, Frank Bainimarama, provided scenarios to his senior officers for deposing the SDL-CAMV government. In response, Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase instituted a National Security Committee (NSC) and recommended a Commission of Inquiry into the conduct of the army commander. However, the proposed Commission of Inquiry was rejected by the President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, following consultations with the army.

The first high profile chief to take the full brunt of the force of the law was Vice-President, Ratu Jope Seniloli, who was convicted of treason. State witness Ratu Tua’akitau Cokanauto emphasised that ‘in our traditional roles as chiefs, when Ratu Seru Cakobau (the king of Fiji who ceded Fiji to Great Britain) put down his club, he took up the rule of law’ and coup trials forced indigenous Fijians to consider not only indigenous tradition but the law of the land as well (*Fijilive*, 4 August, 2004).

On 26 November 2004, Justice Anthony Gates convicted Naitasiri chief Ratu Inoke Takiveikata on three counts of inciting mutiny, aimed at deposing the commander of the Fiji Military Forces (*The Age*, 24 November 2004). It was alleged during the trial that Metuisela Turagacati and another person known only as Kadi arranged a number of meetings between Takiveikata and members of the army’s Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit (CRWU) including its leader, Captain Shane Stevens. The two became state witnesses and revealed in detail how the Naitasiri chief wanted to repeat the events of May 2000 and get villagers to congregate and eventually barricade themselves inside the Queen Elizabeth Barracks in support of the mutiny in November 2000. (*Radio New Zealand*, 1 November 2004)

On the same day, the Attorney General and the Minister for Justice announced that Ratu Jope Seniloli would be released on Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) due to health reasons. Seniloli and four others Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, Peceli Rinakama, Viliame Volavola and Viliame Savu were convicted of taking an engagement in the nature of an oath to commit a capital offence. (*The Fiji Sun*, 29 November 2004) The Fiji Military Forces closely monitored the situation and the commander expressed disappointment at the decision by the Attorney General to free Ratu Seniloli. Bainimarama argued that the intervention by the state in releasing Seniloli sent a wrong signal to future coup conspirators.

In response, the government criticised the commander in the media for involving himself in politics. Supporters of the commander felt that the National Security Committee established by the Government was a political tool for special interest within the to oust the commander. The SDL-CAMV Government desperately wanted to replace the commander with an appointee from overseas. Justification for the government’s move came following audit claims that the military misused $3 million for the purchase of army uniforms. The auditor’s 2004 report revealed that approvals from the Major Tenders Board (MTB) was not obtained for all purchases and this resulted in the unauthorised issue of Local Purchase Orders, totalling more than $2.54 million. (*The Fiji Sun*, 22 February, 2005).

Next budget restraints forced the army commander to withdraw bodyguards for Prime Minister Qarase. Members of Cabinet complained that the manner in which the guards were withdrawn was very unprofessional. Meanwhile, Fiji’s military commander asked the United Nations to cooperate in returning a former military spokesman, to assist with investigations into the 2000 coup and subsequent military mutiny in the country. Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini was officially...
listed as a deserter, despite claiming to have resigned from the Fiji military. Following his departure from Fiji, he was based in New York for some time, and is now is working as a security officer for the United Nations in Israel.

During court martial trial of Corporal Lagilagi Vosabeci, former Government Printer Pio Bosco Tikoisuva told military court on 17 February 2005 that Fiji Military Forces spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini was to be the new chief-of-staff when George Speight and his group overthrew the elected government in May 2000 (The Fiji Times, 18 February 2005). Tarakinikini was the hostage negotiator and played a leading role in negotiating the Muanikau Accord, which gave immunity to the George Speight group in July 2000.

On 4 April 2005, Lands Minister Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, Senator Ratu Josefa Dimuri, Tui Wailevu Ratu Rokodewala Niumataiwalu and Tui Nadogo Ratu Viliame Rovabokola were convicted for unlawful assembly at Sukanaivalu Barracks in Labasa at the height of the political crisis in 2000. Immediately after the verdict, Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase visited both Ratu Lalabalavu and Ratu Dimuri in prison and shortly afterwards both were released on the Compulsory Supervision Order.

The commander once again criticised the Government for demonstrating poor judgment and a war of words similar to the one a year earlier regarding the release of Ratu Jope Seniloli ensued. Citizens’ Constitutional Forum (CCF) President Reverend Akuila Yabaki asked “what about the hundreds of prisoners who have been serving their sentences and have been on good behaviour? They will now learn that they are lesser human beings than a government Minister or Senator under the Qarase government. Are they going to release Senator Ratu Takiveitaka responsible for the mutiny and 7 deaths at the FMF as well? A Minister sentenced by our Courts should serve his sentence on the same terms as other citizens.” (Citizens’ Constitutional Forum, 14 April, 2005).

On 5 May 2005, another four individuals were convicted of coup related offences. Tevita Bukarau, Metuisela Mua and Eroni Lewaqai were sentenced to two-and-a-half years each while Viliame Sausauwai received a two-year jail term and Joji Bakoso, 15 months (The Fiji Times, 6 May 2005).

On the same day, the Government of Fiji announced the establishment of Independent Reconciliation and Unity Commission.

Victim groups, opposition and Non Government Organisations (NGOs) expressed concern over the Prime Minister and the Attorney General’s support for amnesty for individuals involved in the 2000 coup. Both argued that indigenous Fijians involved in the 2000 upheavals were simply fulfilling their customary obligations. As a result, the proposed Commission was given powers to pardon offences ‘political’ in nature. The Qarase Government further stated that over 20,000 indigenous Fijians converged on the Parliament at the height of the crisis in 2000 and that it would take a long time to finalise all investigations. It was, according to Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, in the national interest to seek closure on the events of 2000 via the Racial Tolerance and Unity Bill (RTU).

The commander of the Fiji Military Forces criticised the Bill as an instrument designed to undermine the judiciary, the Office of Public Prosecution, the Fiji Police Force and the Military which played a leading role in ensuring that the perpetrators of the 2000 coup were brought to justice. The Fiji Military Forces argued that the amnesty provision in the Bill will provide license to coup perpetrators to continue on the path of lawlessness.

Meanwhile the Government went to various indigenous provincial councils and presented the Bill
as an opportunity to heal the wounds of 2000. The Government explained that the Bill was inspired by the Christian ethos of forgiveness. However, it did not explain the inequities inherent in the Bill. For example, the perpetrators of racial violence may not tell the truth or seek meaningful reconciliation with the victims but could be granted amnesty, whereas the victims had to prove ‘gross human rights violation’ before being considered for reparation.

The Fiji Military Forces Commander saw the RTU Bill as a form of ethnic cleansing and set in motion a series of public criticisms leading to the 5 December 2006 coup. Commander Bainimarama argued that cultural assertions of indigenous nationalists were misplaced attempts to re-invent the indigenous elite, who failed indigenous Fijians. The commander, after the coup, ‘peremptorily sidelined the once powerful cultural and social institutions of the indigenous community’ (Lal 2007: 136) following the restructure of the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) and the GCC.

In order to promote inter-group contact, the commander instituted a National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) but indigenous groups, including the deposed SDL party, criticised the initiative. The 45-member National Council for Building a Better Fiji met at the Raffles Tradewinds Hotel in Lami, Suva on 16 January 2008. Among those present at the meeting at the Raffles Tradewinds Hotel in Lami were eight cabinet ministers and interim Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, who co-chaired the council.

Also present were Fiji Labour Party president Jokapeci Koroi, who confirmed her membership of the 45-member council.

The following are the members of the Council: former Opposition Leader Mick Beddoes, Fiji Trade Union Congress President Daniel Urai, Ratu Jo Nawalowalo, chairman of the Kadavu Provincial Council, Ratu Jolame Lewanavanua (Lomaiviti), Jo Serulagilagi (Tailevu), Atunaisa Lacabuka (Serua), Teatu Rewi (Rabi), Taterani Rigamoto (Rotuma), Ratu Meli Bolobolo (Ra), Ratu Filimone Ralogaivau (Bua), Kamlesh Arya, President Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Diwan Chand Maharaj, President Sanatan Pratinidhi Sabha, Lorine Tevi (Fiji Council of Social Services), Selina Leewai (Labasa Town civil servant), Daryl Tarte (Fiji Media Council), Desmond Whiteside (businessman), Peni Moore, Reverend Akula Yabaki (Citizen Constitutional Forum), Nasinu Town Mayor Rajendra Kumar and Fiji Visitors Bureau chairman Pat Wong (Fijilive, 16 January 2008).

There were a number of groups that refused to participate including the SDL president Kalokalo Loki, National Federation Party president Raman Pratap Singh, Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions president Maika Namudu, Fiji Chinese Association of Fiji president Lionel Yee, National Council of Women Fiji president Miriama Leweniqila, Methodist Church president Reverend Laisiasa Ratabacaca, Fiji Council of Churches chairman Reverend Tuikilaikila Waqairatu, TISI Sangam president Dorsami Naidu and Fiji Muslim League president Hafiz Khan. Bainimarama also approached the ousted Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase who also declined (Fijilive, 18 January 2008).

Coup leader Frank Bainimarama had argued that the Peoples’ Charter aimed at de-ethnicising Fiji politics and promoting inter-group contact would form the basis for evaluating future government policies. Such a view had been criticised by the Fiji Law Society as unconstitutional. Moreover, the dissidents argue that policies aimed at promoting inter-group cooperation should come from an elected entity, thereby challenging the ideological basis for the December 2006 coup.

Both the coups of 2000 and 2006 highlighted the states and the civil society’s failure to
successfully implement inter-group contact. There was no common identity in Fiji except communal ones and Indo-Fijians were never accorded equal political status by various indigenous Fijian governments since independence. Post-colonial Fiji strengthened identities of the dominant indigenous group by implementing a series of affirmative action programs. But these programs led to intra-group dissention and conflict followed. In 1999, various indigenous political parties formed alliances with the Indo-Fijian-dominated FLP with the hope of promoting better inter-ethnic relations. However, communal in-group pressures caused inter-group alliance to fail, sparking indigenous nationalist intervention. But strategies to implement indigenous political paramountcy had an adverse effect on indigenous in-group solidarity. The military, which earlier played a leading role in strengthening the indigenous political bloc, had taken on the theme of inter-group conciliation much to the displeasure of indigenous nationalists. In December 2006, the military overthrew an indigenous government and implemented policies on inter-group cooperation, but entrenched indigenous interests challenged the military and called for indigenous in-group solidarity.

Conclusion

Post-colonial Fiji lacked any institutional or political framework for inter-group contact and as a result, racial prejudices reigned free leading military interventions and ethnic conflict. The indigenous chiefs and the Indo-Fijian leaders were not interested in pursuing inter-group contact because it diminished their power and influence over their communal bloc. As a result, an indigenous polity emerged and attempts to unseat it through inter-ethnic alliances led to military intervention. However, following the 1999 election, there was an opportunity to forge a broad inter-group alliance but communal in-group tensions led to political fragmentation and instability. The coup of 2000 was against inter-group contact and alliance but in an attempt to consolidate and indigenous state, the coup leaders caused in-group divisions and dissension. I have noted that there were three distinct layers of divisions within the indigenous community: divisions among indigenous political parties, among chiefs and within the armed forces. The 2000 coup and the following fragmentation of indigenous bloc led military commander Frank Bainimarama to challenge the indigenous order and on 5 December 2006, the Fiji Military Forces deposed the government of Laisenia Qarase and instituted policies aimed at encouraging inter-group contact and conciliation. However, indigenous groups called for in-group solidarity and started protests against military intervention. The tensions between inter-group contact on one hand and pressure for communal in-group solidarity on the other is by no means over as Fiji continues to struggle with the cycle of political instability and ethnic conflict.

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