

Failure of political governance in Fiji

Dysfunctional policy and the media

Abstract: Failure of political governance is commonplace in Fiji where lack of media freedom, democratic bargaining, political transparency, and accountability has led to political dysfunction and political strife, including military coups, suppression of rights of journalists and media organisations, suspension of freedom of expression, lack of democratic accountability, including draconian media rules and laws that encourage media self-censorship and political oversight over media content. Democratic deficit theory highlights that so-called democratic governments such as Fiji fall short of fulfilling the principles of democracy in their practices and operation because of its history of suppressing media rights, including fundamental freedoms of citizens to express themselves freely. Under such circumstances, Fiji citizens have taken to social media, especially after the 2006 military coup as the future of media freedom remains uncertain.

Keywords: accountability, case study, democracy, democratic deficit, elections, Fiji, FijiFirst, governance, media freedom, media law, media policy, media self-censorship, social media, transparency

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Introduction

FAILURE of political governance in Fiji was commonplace under Fiji First where lack of media freedom, democratic bargaining, political transparency, and accountability led to political dysfunction and often political strife in this Pacific Island state. Democratic deficit theory highlights that so-called democratic governments such as Fiji under FijiFirst fall short of fulfilling the principles of democracy in their practices and operation, and these failures were at multiple levels of governance, including a controlled media, an electoral system that is partisan and imposed without consultation, and in favour of the political class that came to power following the 2006 military coup. Following the 2014 election, parliamentary committees were stacked in favour of FijiFirst with a lack of public oversight on policy and legislative processes or any meaningful integrity institutions and standards, even though there existed

a highly politicised Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) which was under the political control of the FijiFirst Party, including a poorly defined and non-implemented Transparency and Accountability Commission.

In addition, policy and legislative-making processes were more a tick-box exercise with policy debates often subject to political control with standing orders of parliament manipulated to suit the FijiFirst agenda. The political system did not allow for effective engagement from the civil society, or the NGOs, and with media freedom severely proscribed, major political issues were discussed mostly by the opposition parties exclusively on social media and forums hosted overseas. Parliamentary debates in such an environment were usually symptomatic of reactionary partisan discourse, aimed at reducing, marginalising, silencing, and compromising alternative opposition views and ideas. The Fijian state under FijiFirst was characterised by bureaucratic authoritarianism where media (Cass, 2022), everyday political discourses, and free speech were controlled by the party functionaries, including restrictions on the press and the granting of excessive power to the Fiji Elections Office, the Supervisor of Elections, and the FICAC (Lamour, 2008; 2020).

Democratic deficit

Pippa Norris (2011) argues that many citizens in ‘democratic countries fear that democracy is suffering from a legitimacy crisis because there is a disconnect between the promise of democracy and its actual practice. In her analysis, Norris analyses more than 50 societies worldwide, ‘challenging the pervasive claim that most established democracies have experienced a steadily rising tide of political disaffection during the third wave era of democratisation since the early 1970s’. The analysis diagnosed the reasons behind the democratic deficit, including demand (rising public aspirations for democracy), information (negative news about government), and supply (the performance and structure of democratic regimes). Finally, Norris examined the consequences for active citizenship, for governance, and ultimately, for democratisation (Norris, 2011).

The demand side theory of Norris focused on cultural shifts among mass societies. While rapid diffusion of education, technology, and affluence in Western societies have promoted democracy, at the same time demands for greater transparency and accountability against the political class have led to a loss of trust in the democratic system (Norris, 2011). Digitally connected communities have enabled the democratisation of the grassroots (Chandler, 2015) where deliberative citizens engage in digital grassroots democracy of connective action, challenging not just contemporary notions of democracy, but repurposing activist democracy to highlight climate issues, challenges facing minority communities and women, and most importantly, arguing for transparency, accountability, free press, and integrity in all public institutions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

There exists a dialectical tension between the democratic systems led by the political class or the elite which attempts to stay relevant through legitimacy discourses on one hand and the grassroots connected activities via digital social media on the other where digital anti-hegemonic social forces demand more deliberative forms of political discourse and engagement (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

In Fiji, control of the media and suppression of freedom of expression led Fijians to move to social media to discuss general news and political events, and in particular growing use of Facebook as a medium for exchanging political views, especially during the 2014, 2018 election (Tarai et al., 2015; Tarai, 2019; Tarai, 2020). These kinds of critical anti-hegemony forces via social media forced the realignment of people-centred democratic systems including deliberations on electoral systems, parliamentary committees, public integrity institutions, ethnic participation, free press, indigenous rights, and standards authorities as central tenants for constructive political change and deliberative media reforms. In line with the supply side theory propagated, media policy and structural accounts of political governance inform civil society participation in polity. According to Norris, 2011 process accounts emphasise that rational citizens can judge how democracy works or does not work in their own country; it follows that public satisfaction should reflect the quality of democratic governance existing in different countries with a more deliberative and participatory focus that circumscribes the structural and relational power of the political class over public policy including media policy.

Policy performance explanations emphasise at times public dissatisfaction with the capacity of governments to manage the delivery of public goods and services and lastly, structural accounts emphasise that democratic deficits are conditioned by the constitutional arrangements in any state, especially by power-sharing arrangements' (Norris, 2011). Power-sharing arrangements are not complementary and as we have seen in the case of Fiji, power-sharing can lead to an amplification of political conflict with communal political parties jostling for influence and hegemony (Coakley & Fraenkel, 2017). According to Trzciński (2022), the power-sharing arrangement under 'the 1997 constitution had neither a full consociational system nor an extensive centripetal one, but only selected important institutions of both models, which, however, were mutually exclusive', but did not foster any meaningful power-sharing leading to the demise of the 1997 Constitution in 2009 and the removal of power-sharing arrangement in the new 2013 Constitution. The 2013 Constitution assumed that the non-ethnic approaches of FijiFirst would be sufficient to discount any power-sharing anomalies available under the 1997 Constitution. These assumptions were extraordinary since it assumed that Fijians— Indo-Fijians and Taukei Fijians—had expunged their communal identities in favour of a singular national non-ethnic one.

One of the major challenges in the policy area had been in the realm of media

and freedom of expression. While these challenges existed in Fiji since independence, the issue came head-on following the April 1977 election when the Alliance government accused overseas media of ‘threatening racial order’ (Alley, 1977). This trajectory of attacking the media continued following the 1987 coup when the elected Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party Government were deposed by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. After the coup press releases were censored and journalists were harassed and intimidated from carrying out their duties. Media freedom deteriorated further with the introduction of the *Internal Security Decree*. With the general elections in 1992, media freedom improved, and this was confirmed in 1996 when two British media consultants argued ‘against curbing media independence’ (Robie, 2002). However, concerns were raised by local media following the sale of the *Fiji Daily Post* in February 1999 to the Fiji government and Robie (1998) quotes the late *Fiji Times* columnist Sir Vijay Singh who rightly noted:

The deal is out of the ordinary. It flies so flagrantly in the face of the government’s privatisation policy—was completed with such unseemly haste, and that too on the eve of the end of this government’s life; and Parliament was so blatantly bypassed, that it sprouts the persistent thought that there has to be much more than meets the eye. (Robie, 1998, p. 5)

Tensions continued between the Fiji government over media freedom, professionalism, and accountability after the May 1999 election of the Fiji Labour Party-led Coalition government (Chaudhry, 2000), but a larger media question emerged during the 56-day siege of the Fiji Parliament by the George Speight group.

There was a growing consensus among Pacific Island journalists that overseas media, in particular the Australian media, is only interested in covering the Pacific if it involves a coup, a conflict, or a natural disaster (Mason, 2001, p. 58). David Robie referenced a Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) statement calling gung ho journalists from overseas in particular ‘parachute journalists’ (Robie, 2000, p. 9) where overseas media focused entirely on the racist diatribe of George Speight while missing much more important news of Indo-Fijian families forced to flee to the Lautoka Girit Centre following a spate of violence in rebel-held areas of Fiji. Robie (2014) was also critical of inexperienced local journalists in his seminal book *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face* where he observed that ‘one media organisation that came under early criticism was the state-owned Radio Fiji, which seemed to suffer from a combination of confusion over who was in power or who was going to end up in power, and lack of newsroom discipline and leadership’ (Robie, 2014, p. 293). The 2000 coup brought to the surface the question of responsible journalism and the part media played in fulfilling the objectives of the 2000 coup. By 2003, the newly formed Soqososo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua Government passed a bill to control the Media Council by allowing

the minister to significantly influence the Council outcome. As Richard Naidu (2003) noted, ‘The Minister gets to appoint the Chairman; the Media then appoints its 13 representatives; then the Minister gets to appoint another 13 members.’

Following December 2006, the dark days for journalism and media in Fiji returned as the military imposed censorship on news materials and monitored anti-coup blog activities in Fiji. Military media control agents were placed in newsrooms and editors and contributors were taken into questioning by the military and the police if they breached strict censorship guidelines. In reality, the policy discourse was premised upon the overt approaches of the 2006 coup makers, who indulged in the control of media and silencing critical journalism by initiating the fire sale of *The Fiji Times*, enabling a local business, Motibhai Group of Companies, to take over the reins of the newspaper. However, *The Fiji Times* maintained its political and editorial independence and continued with its fight against media control and censorship. As Russell Hunter noted the situation of the press deteriorated rapidly after the 2006 Coup:

A team of soldiers was to be posted in the newsroom to vet all content. Courageously and rightly, *The Fiji Times* declined to publish under such circumstances. The paper’s senior management declared that it would cease publication until the soldiers were removed. A military team also visited the offices of the *Fiji Sun* on the same evening but arrived only as the last truck was leaving the premises with the next day’s issue, giving the *Fiji Sun* an advantage over its rival, which did not publish. (Hunter, 2009, p. 279)

The media found itself facing censorship with journalists not reporting any information critical of the interim government (2006-2014) and later of any news critical to the FijiFirst (Hooper, 2013). Only the *Fiji Sun*, the mouthpiece of the FijiFirst government, was allowed to disseminate disinformation on behalf of FijiFirst. A draconian media decree was drafted and imposed by the interim government following an inquiry into the media industry by James Anthony (Robie, 2009, p. 86). However, following the 2014 election, the ‘fine stipulated for journalists was removed from the *Media Decree* in 2015, but the penalties for editors and publishers remained intact’ (Singh, 2020).

Fiji’s media policy is often compared with Singapore but the way the *Media Decree* was formulated by the interim government and implemented highlighted the apparent fear of the regime of any negative information on the political class that came to power following the 2006 coup. Proper policy consultation provides a useful tool for exploring how policy decisions are made and implemented. For example, it flags the importance of issue identification and suggests the need to examine how interest groups or other actors organise and compete to assert control over the way issues are defined as a problem requiring action by the

government (Ward & Stewart, 2010).

While Fiji replaced ethnic-based policy with partisan-based policymaking, knowing very well that the Fijian population remained divided along ethnic lines with political dichotomies fairly pronounced between the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban and the indigenous and the non-indigenous, including those living in squatter settlements and those in the urban gated communities. Under such circumstances, control of the media became a necessity and as Shailendra Singh noted, *The Fiji Times*, in particular, ‘faced flak from the two most powerful men in the country—FijiFirst Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and FijiFirst Attorney General Aiyaz Saiyed Khaiyum over the reporting of government plans to prioritise rural students at state boarding schools and an opinion poll indicating some public disdain about government plans to redesign the national flag’ (Singh, 2020).

According to Ward and Stewart (2010), policy is a word that can be used in very different ways to describe the government’s actions and goals. The policy provides the basis for what government does. It should not be seen as a sole preserve, interest, or concern of ministers, senior officers, or those who work on policy units. The policy is to some degree everybody’s business. However, policy matters are also highly contested and rarely settled, and as such different opinions on policy often can cause community dissent, leading to a deficit in the policy-making process and hence a democratic deficit. Theoretics aside, policy engagement in Fiji, such as the debate on the national flag, was highly controlled and proscribed and discussions on policy items were only available to those who were permitted to participate, and this created what is often called a highly ‘tiered’ and ‘controlled’ society.

There were groups within the society that were labelled by the FijiFirst government as incapable of rational thought, and these groups were excluded from policy discourses through political selection. However, others are considered as political ingroup and they could participate fully in all policy deliberations without interference, but behind closed doors and under the strict supervision of FijiFirst Attorney-General and his many cronies that kept a watchful eye on anyone going off script. The selective framework for Fiji’s policy participation, under FijiFirst, highlights serious and unforgiving problems with its dysfunctional political governance, despite the rituals of democratic elections (Lawson, 2012).

The structural approach to evidence-based decision-making has fundamental foundations: a favourable political culture can allow substantial elements of transparency and rationality in the policy process, and this may facilitate a preference by decision-makers for increased utilisation of policy-relevant knowledge, and the associated research culture will encourage and foster an analytical commitment to rigorous methodologies for generating a range of policy-relevant evidence. In Fiji, evidence-based decisions did not exist, and policy agendas were

aimed at ensuring anti-opposition themes, carefully orchestrated to muzzle the participation of opposition parties.

As Fiji headed towards general elections in 2014, there were several information strategies in place including the use of information consultants Qorvis and Vatis for disinformation and information re-engineering in favour of the FijiFirst Party. In addition, media both television print and online already heavily censored their news so as not to offend the FijiFirst political class that rose to power after the 2006 coup. The leader of the FijiFirst Party Voreqe Bainimarama campaigned on the theme of equal rights and equal citizenry while other parties including the Social Democratic Liberal Party championed indigenous Fijian rights.

According to David Robie, media policy ‘restricted freedom of the press’ by firstly placing too much executive power in the offices of the Prime Minister and the Attorney General as they controlled nearly all appointments to the judiciary and independent commissions’. Secondly, the Chief Justice and the President of the Court of Appeal are political appointments with the risk of abuse of power. Thirdly the Bill of Rights is weakened using a ‘claw-back-clause’ that limits the rights of journalists and media organisations and fourthly, there are few avenues to participate in ‘good and transparent government’ (Robie, 2016, pp. 84-5).

FijiFirst hegemony and entrenchment of democratic deficit

Elections are a measure of democracy and in the post-December 2006 coup in Fiji, elections took eight years to conduct under a constitution designed and implemented hastily by the 2006 coup masters to secure and strengthen the positions of coup sympathisers within a new legal-constitutional framework and a restrictive media policy. Fiji went to the polls on 17 September 2014 the first democratic election since the government of former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was deposed in a bloodless coup on 6 December 2006 by the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

The 2014 election was held under Fiji’s 2013 Constitution that required the election of a single chamber 50-member Parliament under a proportional voting divisor rule of modified D’Hondt where political parties and independent candidates had to win more than 5 percent of the vote to win any seats in parliament (Ramesh 2015, p. 9). Unlike other proportional systems, Fiji has a single national constituency without any regions or districts as was the case under the 1970, 1990, and 1987 constitutions. The ballot paper consisted of numbers from 135 to 382 and each number was randomly allocated to a candidate who represented a registered political party. There were two independent candidates, Rashika Deo, and Umesh Chand but the proportional system favoured larger political parties, especially those with popular political leaders (Nanau, 2015).

The new *Electoral Decree 2014* provided information on the conduct of elections, the role of the Supervisor of Elections in managing the election process, and the code

of conduct for media and overseas observers. Media was under strict instructions not to publish material that could inflame ethnic tensions and social media users in Fiji were urged to follow pre-election campaign blackout rules (Robie, 2016, p. 87). Some 92 international observers from 13 countries oversaw the election, which was contested by seven political parties including FijiFirst, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji Labour Party (FLP), One Fiji, and Fiji United Freedom Party.

Consolidating FijiFirst

The FijiFirst party was led by retired Rear Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama, who has been the Prime Minister of Fiji since the military coup in December 2006. Following the 2006 coup, Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) for not progressing with general elections under the 1997 Constitution in 2009. Fiji, in response, conducted its regional meetings called 'Engaging with the Pacific' which mutated into the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013 (Tarte, 2014). Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, European Union, and the United States saw Fiji's PIDF initiative as a countermove against a recalcitrant Pacific Islands Forum led by Australia and New Zealand which spearheaded smart sanctions against members of the Bainimarama regime between 2006 and 2014 as diplomatic tensions deepened after Fiji sought closer cooperation with China.

The FijiFirst party, led by Voreqe Bainimarama, was modelled along the principles enshrined in the People's Charter of 2008 which laid out a non-ethnic political and social foundation for Fiji. FijiFirst called for the separation of state and religion, a common name of 'Fijian' for all Fiji citizens, allocation of state resources based on community needs instead of race, fair agricultural leases, land bank for indigenous landowners, anti-corruption measures spearheaded by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption, reducing violence against women, affordable housing, national employment scheme, infrastructure investment plan, agri-business diversification, reducing bureaucratic red tape, modernising the legal framework with greater access to legal aid, encouraging women in the workplace, lowering youth unemployment, tough on sacrilege and other criminal acts, free water, reasonable rates for electricity and gas, fee free education, investment in higher education, subsidised milk for primary school students and equal citizenry (Norton, 2015).

The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) was led by Rewa chief Ro Teimumu Kepa and the support for her campaign was provided by former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. SODELPA criticised 'Fijian' as a common name, wanted Fiji to be declared a Christian state, preferred changes to land lease money distribution in favour of indigenous chiefs, return the political role of the Great Council of Chiefs, reinstatement of Fijian Affairs Board scholar-

ships, a restructured Taukei Land Trust Board, possibility of bringing back the 1997 Constitution, reforming the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, establishing Indigenous Fijian foreshore rights via a Qoliqoli legislation, a review of all decrees between 2006 and 2014, and implementation of the social justice and affirmative action programmes for indigenous Fijians, similar to what existed during the reign of the former SDL government (2001 to 2006).

The Fiji Labour Party, the Peoples' Democratic Party and the National Federation Party supported the reinstatement of the Great Council of Chiefs but criticised SODELPA on their stand against 'Fijian' as a common name and on the introduction of a Christian state. The Fiji Labour Party was led by former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, who was disqualified from standing in the September 2014 election due to his conviction for breaching Fiji's foreign exchange laws. The party continued to campaign for the rights of workers and farmers. However, the Peoples' Democratic Party also had workers' rights as part of its election manifesto. Led by a former Fiji Labour Party member and trade unionist, Felix Anthony, the Peoples' Democratic Party criticised the Essential Industries Decree with claims that the Decree had diminished the rights of workers in specific industries such as tourism, infrastructure, and emergency services (Nanau, 2015).

The National Federation Party (Madraiwiwi, 2015) was led by Professor Biman Prasad, who resigned from the University of the South Pacific as a professor of economics to lead the party. The National Federation Party vowed to reduce Value Added Tax (VAT) and address poverty, unemployment, and inflation. The party called for 99-year leases so that there was some certainty for tenants with agricultural leases.

One Fiji party was led by Filimoni Vosarogo, and the party planned to boost Fiji's economy by creating more local jobs and investing in education. The party highlighted that the issues of economic development require a 10-year development plan. The Fiji United Freedom Party was led by Jagath Karunaratne, and the party has plans to provide a platform for Fiji's youth to voice their issues. In 2011, Karunaratne, a Sri Lankan-born Fiji citizen, was accused of painting anti-government graffiti.

The media in Fiji was highly circumscribed by the *Media Decree 2010* and it made critical journalism very difficult. Journalism students at the University of the South Pacific were advised that they had to be extremely careful while expressing their opinion on any political event. Except for the *Fiji Sun*, which chose to support FijiFirst, all other media outlets, including those online, imposed self-censorship and discouraged any critical analysis of the election (Cass, 2022).

Most of the discussions on party candidates and party policies were conducted on social media sites with no critical analysis from the local media, and on some anti-government blog sites, highly charged racial comments led political parties to

caution their supporters from stirring ethnic emotions. Race-based issues dominated past elections, but the September 2014 election was designed in such a way that forced political parties to address national on ethnic issues as part of the national political engagement. Some political parties criticised the electoral process including the ballot paper for being too complex and designed in a way to favour the incumbent FijiFirst Party. Brij Lal noted that the 2014 campaign was carried under the shadow of the military strongman Voreqe Bainimarama who was both a feared and revered leader in Fiji (Lal, 2014). Lal's observation was spot on. The election was conducted under a constitution that was designed to ensure the continuity of the government that came to power following the 2006 coup and, more importantly, the constitution ensured that future governments enacting ethnic-based policies may find themselves being deposed by the military.

The fears of political parties not only stemmed from the 2013 Constitution and the new order under FijiFirst but a conscious effort by the Bainimarama government to ensure coup loyalists in key strategic positions such as the Commander of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces, the Commissioner of Police, the Commissioner of Prisons, the Human Rights Commissioner and Constitutional Offices Commission and the President enabled continuation of the FijiFirst government. The most pressing issue is the role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces under section 131 of the 2013 Constitution (Kant, 2017; Lal, 2014). Moreover, FijiFirst Party donors and benefactors were guaranteed plum positions overseas at Fiji's diplomatic missions, international organisations, and regional bodies and on the government-owned constitution, confirming patrimonialism and extreme forms of patronage in official appointments and recruitment.

Fiji went to the polls on 17 September 2014 as overseas anti-government 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, suppressing media, and threatening non-FijiFirst participants, but the international observer group found no evidence of such activities. Some disgruntled political candidates defacing party posters, made prank calls, and threatened journalists.

FijiFirst established its political hegemony in Fiji, but the 2014 election also highlighted that there were ongoing restrictions on media and free speech, and some journalists were arrested or intimidated, leading to concerns about freedom of the press and freedom of speech during the election period. There were restrictions on political parties with political parties not allowed to campaign freely, and some opposition parties and leaders banned from participating in the election. Mosmi Bhim notes that the media invariably favoured FijiFirst, particularly the *Fiji Sun* and the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, which gave extensive and preferential coverage to the FijiFirst party and negative or little coverage to other parties' (Bhim, 2015). In addition, there were allegations of vote rigging,

and some opposition parties and international observers raised concerns about irregularities in the vote-counting process. In addition, there were concerns about a lack of transparency in the election, particularly in the funding of political parties and the management of the voter roll.

Additionally, there have been allegations of corruption in the awarding of government contracts and the management of government-owned enterprises. Some have claimed that government contracts were awarded to companies with close ties to the FijiFirst party, while others have accused the government of mismanaging state-owned enterprises and failing to hold those responsible accountable. While FijiFirst denied any wrongdoing, there was growing discontent among Taukei Fijians who saw FijiFirst as promoting Indo-Fijian domination instead of political equality as highlighted during the 2014 political campaign, and as a result, Taukei Fijians started to abandon FijiFirst.

2018 General Election: Ethnic realignment and discontent

The year 2018 started with the usual superstitions with the number 666 excluded from the Fijian ballot. Fiji's political candidates were identified by a number on the ballot paper and for the 2018 election the number started from 508 and candidates were elected under a proportional elections system in a single 51-member parliament (666 excluded from Fiji ballot paper, 2018). Under the 2013 Constitution, there is no Senate or Upper House, as is the case in many Westminster systems and political parties must achieve a threshold of 5 percent to elect any member. The ballot numbers are drawn at random by a civil servant who is blindfolded and then the numbers are entered against the party list candidates.

A Fiji Tebbutt-Times poll conducted from 5 to 8 February 2018 sampled 1000 eligible voters. According to the results of the poll on the public's voting intention, 34 percent were not sure who to vote for, 8 percent declined to answer the question and half a percent did not intend to vote. '32 percent said they would vote for FijiFirst, 22 percent for Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), 3 percent for National Federation Party (NFP), and 1 percent for Fiji Labour Party (FLP). When looking only at the percentages for those who selected a party (removing the undecided voters), 56 percent selected FijiFirst, 38 percent SODELPA, 5 percent NFP, 1 percent FLP, 0.2 percent Unity Fiji Party, and 0.1 percent independent (Tebbutt-Times poll result, 2018).

Analysing the results, the University of the South Pacific economist Dr. Neelesh Gounder stated that the support for FijiFirst had reached an all-time low since the 2014 election when it received almost 60 percent of all the votes cast. Voreqe Bainimarama's popularity increased by 20 percent in February 2018 compared with February 2017, and FijiFirst party as the preferred choice decreased by 5 percent during the same period (from 37 percent in February

2017 to 32 percent in February 2018) according to the poll.

By September 2018, SODELPA's new leader Sitiveni Rabuka was confident of winning the 2018 Fiji general election. According to *Asia Pacific Report*, Rabuka stated 'I'm looking at, at least 28 seats, which gives us a majority. I have calculated based on the 18 seats that we held. We won 18 seats but then lost three—two to debt and one to imprisonment,' said the enigmatic leader of SODELPA. Rabuka further highlighted that he disagreed with the interim government's decision to abolish the Great Council of Chiefs, a concerted push by the government of Fiji to discard cultural protections accorded in the United Nations Declarations on Indigenous People of 2007 and further moves to suppress debates on the future of the indigenous community in Fiji (SODELPA's Rabuka confident of winning power in Fiji election, 2018).

In early October 2018, it was disclosed that Australia would co-lead the Multinational Observer Group, alongside India and Indonesia, as it did in 2014. The Group stated that it would monitor processes from pre-election preparations, through the campaign period, to the announcement of official results (Australian support to Fiji's 2018 election, 3 October 2018). The Australian Electoral Commission was also flagged to provide technical assistance to the Fiji Elections Office. New Zealand followed Australia, led by former Labour MP Ross Robertson who had already commenced his observation role in Fiji. He was joined by MPs Darroch Ball, Poto Williams, Louisa Wall, and Michael Wood, and several New Zealand officials.

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama, leader of the ruling FijiFirst party, finished off on a strong footing after an early scare in a challenge from the 1987 Fiji coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka's SODELPA, raking in 167,732 votes in the results by candidate tally to have the highest personal vote. FijiFirst has narrowly won the 2018 general election in Fiji, raking in 227,241 votes (50.02 percent) from 2173 stations counted and securing a second four-year term in office. FijiFirst dominated the polls in the later counting ahead of the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) in an earlier tight contest. SODELPA finished in second place with 181,072 votes (39.85 percent).

The National Federation Party (NFP) finished in third place with 33,515 (7.38 percent) followed by Unity Fiji with 6,896, Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality with 2,811 votes, and Fiji Labour Party (FLP) with 2,800 votes. After the election, there were concerns about the state of media freedom in Fiji during this period. Some journalists and media organisations faced harassment, intimidation, and censorship, with reports of journalists being arrested or having their equipment seized. There were also allegations of government censorship and interference in the media, including the removal of critical content from websites and social media platforms.

On the legislative front, FijiFirst Attorney General passed laws that provided

excessive powers to the Supervisor of Elections to pursue opposition parties and their candidates and established FICAC as FijiFirst's political prosecution arm distinct from the Fiji Office of Public Prosecution. These developments caused alarm with the international jurists, but Australia remained circumspect after investment in the \$100 million Black Rock complex in Nadi which was designated as the peacekeeping hub of the South Pacific (Blackrock camp to be completed this month, 2022).

2022 election and the demise of FijiFirst

The 2022 election was conducted under the cloud of repressive legislation under which one of the aspiring opposition candidates was disbarred from contesting the election due to the FijiFirst Attorney General's interpretation that Solicitor Richard Naidu in suggesting emendation to a legal judgment on social media had acted in a manner that constituted a breach of public interest.

The international Mission Observer Group led by Australia was set in place with the assistance of the Australian High Commission in Suva which was confirmed by the Fiji's Supervisor of Elections, Mohammed Saneem (Fiji announces election date after months-long wait, 2022). The abuse of the legislative majority was not only restricted to Fiji parliament as opposition candidates and parties were subjected to harsh requirements of fully costing their election promises to the satisfaction of the Fiji Elections Office including any polling after the Fiji Sun Western Force poll, showing support for the FFP government slipping away. Key candidates of the opposition were summarily referred to FICAC, which became the political prosecution arm of the state with opposition figures Lynda Tabuya and Sajjal Narayan of the People's Alliance Party (PAP) charged with breach of electoral laws (Where is the justice?—Tabuya, 2022).

Even the leader of the National Federation Party, Professor Biman Chand Prasad, an economist by profession was charged by the Fiji Police for violating the modesty of a person, only to have the charge dismissed by the Office of the Public Prosecution. However, the former Fiji Police Commissioner questioned the decision of Fiji's Department of Public Prosecution and published the complaint in full (Fiji opposition leader Prasad escapes charges over complaint, 2022).

The Mission Observer Group (MoG) under the co-Chair of Australia failed to see fundamental problems with the electoral system and the electoral process by endorsing the official version of the electoral count. The Terms of Reference for the Ministerial Observer Group were written by the former Attorney General of Fiji and signed by all parties, India, Australia, and India, on 22 October 2022 (Terms of Reference, 2022).

The counting of the votes was marred by a 'glitch' on 14 December 2022 and for two and a half hours, the Results Management System (RMS) had IT issues that were not explained properly by the Supervisor of Election (SoE) and

for some reason during the ‘glitch’, FijiFirst resumed its lead in votes, leaving many opposition parties questioning the integrity of the vote counting process. It was alleged that the Fiji elections NADRA platform could be remotely accessed, and results changed in favour of FijiFirst (Khan & Akhter, 2016).

The opposition parties wrote a letter to the SoE, the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, and the President of Fiji and initiated a voters’ petition, arguing significant discrepancies between what was reported by ballot invigilators and the Results Management System. The SoE protested that there was no law in place for a vote recount and continued with the manual count much to the concern of opposition parties. There are vote count issues that require auditing including some 20,000 votes incorrectly allocated to FijiFirst. Was it innocent misallocation or deliberate since electoral projections suggested the People’s Alliance and National Federation Party victory (Fiji military says will not intervene over election, 2022).

When the country thought that they were ready to install the new government, SODELPA General Secretary, Lenaitasi Duru, resigned from SODELPA and wrote a letter to the President of Fiji stating that some of the members of the SODELPA Management Board who voted were no longer members and a new vote was warranted. The President responded that he was in no hurry to convene Parliament (President responds to Duru, 2022). But a bigger issue was emerging when the Commissioner of Police and the General Secretary of the Fiji First Party accused the opposition of targeting Indo-Fijians (The West Australian, 22 December 2022). However, it soon became evident that rumours of attacks on Indo-Fijians were orchestrated by a fake Facebook account as members of the public confirmed to various media outlets that there were no such attacks as alleged (Fiji General Election of 2022, 2022).

The FFP Military Council along with the Commissioner of Police approached the military commander, but by then the SODELPA Management Board met again on 23 Dec and reaffirmed their support for the PAP-NFP Coalition. After a razor-thin vote for the second time in a week, the President convened parliament on Christmas Eve where Retired Major General Sitiveni Rabuka won the secret ballot by 28 votes to become Fiji’s Prime Minister. The former Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama became leader of the opposition and a new Rabuka cabinet was sworn in in the afternoon on 24 December.

In the 2022 election, the ruling FFP and the PAP had 55 candidates contesting the election, while the NFP and SODELPA had 54 candidates each. The Fiji Labour Party had 42 approved candidates, Unity Fiji 38, We Unite Fiji 20, All Peoples Party 14, and New Generation Party 5. There were two independents, but independents could not get the five percent threshold required to win any seat in parliament (*Fiji Elections Office*, December 2022).

In this election, there were 56 females, and 287 males who contested the

election under the D'Hondt proportional system, and ethnic bloc voting was a glaring feature with Indo-Fijians supporting FijiFirst Party and Taukei indigenous Fijians supporting the Peoples' Alliance Party and the National Federation Party. Unity Fiji and the Fiji Labour Party polled less than five percent of the total votes.

With retired Major General Sitiveni Rabuka back at the helm, there is hope that the indigenous Taukei population's concerns on land and resources, including rampant poverty and unemployment in their community will finally be addressed. Indo-Fijians voted for FFP following a concerted campaign of fear in which the community was warned of further coups and bloodshed under PAP were guaranteed. However, Rabuka has reiterated that he will embrace all Fijians and ensure that he governs over a united country where fundamental freedoms are respected and enforced.

The new coalition government promised freedom of the press and a more consultative approach to political governance and policy making. Investigations were conducted into the affairs of FijiFirst with several FijiFirst appointed Permanent Secretaries suspended, and inquiries were initiated against many allegations of fraud, corruption and abuse of public funds. More serious were allegations of abuse of office and incitement against the former Prime Minister and the Attorney-General. The SoE, the former Commissioner of Police, and the Prisons Commissioner were suspended as the Constitutional Offices Commission proceeded with investigations.

Media in Fiji has had a rough ride with various restrictive media decrees and legislations since 1987 and there remains a fear among the newly elected Coalition government that too much media freedom may lead to political instability or, as the Alliance government envisaged in 1977, contribute to racial tensions. These fears and concerns will drive media policy in the future in Fiji, but for a moment, there appears to be a pause and hope for a consultative framework, following the repeal of Fiji's *2010 Media Industry Development Act* (Pacnews, 6 April 2023).

Conclusion

Failure of political governance in Fiji has led to serious corruption, fraud, and mismanagement under FijiFirst, including suspension of media freedom, suspension of freedom of expression, and interference in the judiciary and the executive. Since independence, Fiji has had a tenuous and often conflicted relationship with the media, and suppression of media freedom became a norm following the military coup in 1987. Attempts to restore freedom of the press were short circuited by the 2000 coup where 'parachute journalists, from overseas and experienced local media organisations ensured that the objectives of the 2000 coup were met. Tensions with the media continued following the 2000 coup and the political class that came to power following 2006 formed the Fiji-

First party and won the 2014 and 2018 elections, but ongoing media censorship forced Fijians to use social media to discuss political and current affairs, and many Taukei Fijians started to abandon the party from 2018 and by 2022, the PAP polled the highest percentage of Taukei votes to form a government with SODELPA and NFP. The new coalition government promised a free press as it embarked on the process of establishing transparency and accountability over the abuse of public funds. There is hope that the coalition government in Fiji will implement sound political governance, ensure civil and NGOs are consulted on policy matters, and media outlets are free to publish without fear of prosecution, harassment, or intimidation.

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