

4. Fiji's coup culture

Rediscovering a voice at the ballot box

Commentary: The second Fiji General Election in 12 years, since the fourth coup in 2006, took place on 14 November 2018, and once again the key players were the three parties that gained seats in Parliament in the 2014 election. The three parties: FijiFirst, the incumbent government led by the 2006 coup leader Voreqe Bainimarama; the preeminent opposition, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), whose leader was the instigator of the first two coups, Sitiveni Rabuka; and the National Federation Party (NFP) which was led by former University of the South Pacific economics academic Professor Biman Prasad. The 2018 election was widely seen as another sign of progress for Fiji's fragile democracy and both the significant protagonists were former military commanders and coup leaders seemingly committed to democracy. The media remained cowed, a legacy of the *2010 Media Industry Development Decree* (MIDD, 2010), giving rise to using other forms of media such as social media platforms, with Facebook being the most popular. This commentary reflects on the experience of a journalist on a postgraduate assignment to report on the 2018 election.

Keywords: corruption, elections, fake news, Fiji, political journalism, Qorvis, social media, Taukei

SRI KRISHNAMURTHI
Auckland University of Technology

Introduction

THE RESULT of the 2014 General Election in Fiji was a foregone conclusion. The freshly-minted FijiFirst, the newest significant party in the country with 2006 coup leader Voreqe Bainimarama as leader, won 59 percent of the vote, earning 32 seats, with the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) taking 16 seats and the National Federation Party (NFP) three seats.

Bainimarama's FijiFirst Party is the political embodiment of that military objective of transcending ethnic schisms, but it fought the election on two distinct communal fronts. In 2014, FijiFirst had obtained fairly solid support from the Fiji Indian community and around 40 percent of the Indigenous vote, with SODELPA obtaining most of the remainder. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 3)

That FijiFirst won the elections for a second term in November 2018 was no surprise, while the reduced margin of their victory was in some respects. The party won with a reduced majority, a surprising 50.2 percent of the vote, much lower than expected and gained 27-seats in the 51-seat Parliament.

A key thrust of FijiFirst's campaign, to an even greater extent than in 2014, was to play on deeply entrenched Fiji Indian insecurities. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 18)

SODELPA with 39.85 percent was the leading opposition party, winning 21-seats and correspondingly rewarded with the five seats which were lost by FijiFirst. The makeup of Parliament was completed by the NFP which won three seats, the same number as in 2014. The other three parties—Unity, HOPE and the Fiji Labour Party—which contested the elections did not make the 5 percent threshold required by the constitution to gain a seat in Parliament.

Although only some 70 percent of the total vote was initially counted due to adverse weather conditions, it was declared a legitimate result by the Fijian Supervisor of Elections, Mohammed Saneem (quoted by Krishnamurthi, 2018f), saying 'We have reached that benchmark, but this does not mean that counting has stopped, this does not mean that we will be counting again, this does not mean that the results will only be for 70 percent of the polling places.' Saneem announced that all the provisional results announced that night were 'actual results from those polling places'. He added that voters were now able to 'understand the dynamic of the results of the election'.

Background

Auckland University of Technology (AUT) hosts a Pacific Media Centre (PMC) which provides close attention to Pacific affairs, in a region that much of the mainstream New Zealand media largely ignores. One PMC postgraduate course—the JOUR810 International Journalism Project involving assessment in partnership with the University of the South Pacific Journalism Programme—focused on the uncertainty of what might happen during the Fiji General Election in 2018. I was dispatched to report on the elections in real-time. AUT (PMC and its *Asia-Pacific Report* publication <https://asiapacificreport.nz>), Radio New Zealand, *Stuff* and Radio Tarana were the only news media outlets from New Zealand present for the elections. According to the AUT project course contract brief, the assignment offered

an opportunity for students to develop a creatively focused journalism research and publication project relevant to the theme of political and experiential journalism and video storytelling based on the Fiji General Election—the second since the return to democracy after the country's

fourth coup in 2006. The project will be based on professional experience of coverage of Fiji with a range of election stories in partnership with Pacific Regional Journalism Programme at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and its media outlet *Wansolwara News*. The students would be based at USP and be attached to both: a) *Asia Pacific Report* at the PMC, and b) *Wansolwara* at USP. (JOUR810 International Journalism Project Contract, 2018)

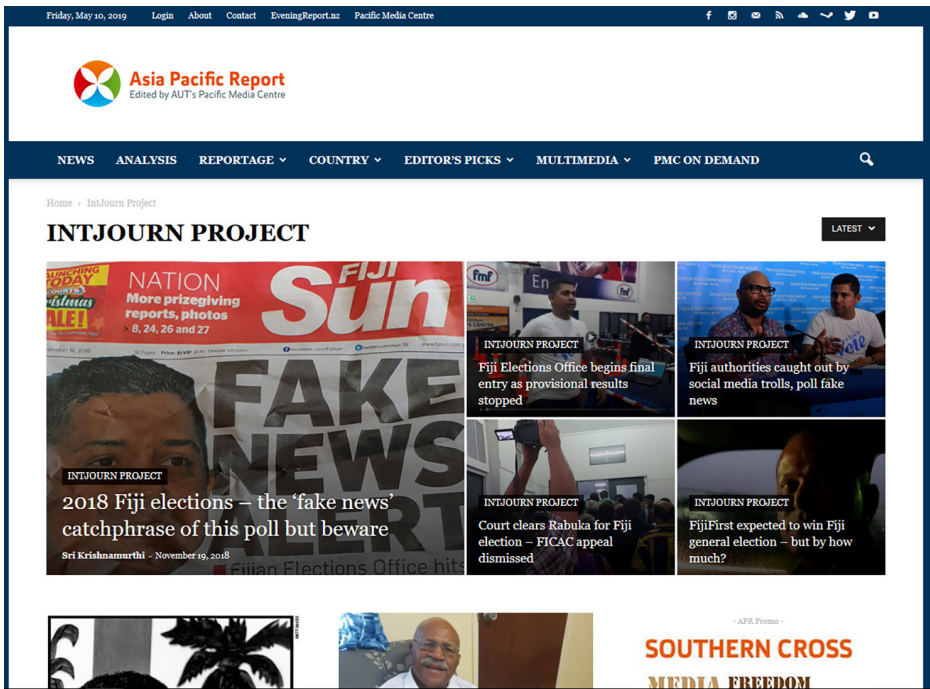


Figure 1: The *Asia Pacific Report* home page of the International Journalism Project Fiji general Election assignment in Semester 2, 2018.

Pre-elections coverage

Under the auspices of the project, I was able to make two visits to Fiji for the first time since the Sitiveni Rabuka staged his inaugural coup on 14 May 1987 for a total of three weeks. The first two-week assignment was spent in Fiji during the mid-semester break in September 2018 (originally the election date was expected during this period) and the third week coincided with the actual election on 14 November 2018.

Fiji has developed much in the 30 years since I last lived there and I migrated to New Zealand where I worked as a journalist for the New Zealand Press Association (NZPA) news agency (which closed in 2011 after 131 years) and other media. Fiji now has a population of 913,537 and is projected to pass the one

million mark by 2025 (Population of Fiji 2020 and Fiji population statistics, n.d.).

There were malls galore in Suva giving a superficial impression of affluence. Just as there were construction sites and cranes towering over the city giving the aura of growth and prosperity. Nothing can be further from the truth as homelessness, poverty, housing shortages and health services were all problematic, but conveniently swept under the carpet during the elections.

In Fiji, 45 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line, more than 250,000 individuals. According to economic surveys over 50 percent of the population lives on less than F\$25 a week and cannot meet their basic needs. The increase over time is apparent—in 1977, 15 percent of the population were living below the poverty rate, in 1991 this increased to 25.2 percent and in 2003 to about 34.4 percent. Professor Biman Prasad argues that the incidence of poverty is now more than 45 percent and approaching 50 percent. (Guadiana, 2016)

That led to the inevitable question of where all the investment money in Fiji was coming from. ‘Fiji now owes over \$500 million to China which amounts to be about 40 percent of all our external debt,’ said the leader of the NFP, Dr Biman Prasad (Krishnamurthi, 2018b). This was dismissed by the Economy Minister, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, as being of little concern because of a World Bank analysis of Fiji’s national debt.

Minister Sayed-Khaiyum said that the World Bank had done a thorough analysis of the national debt and was convinced that it was manageable. (Chinese banks provide 40 percent, 2017).

With that, and issues around landownership, the question of indigeneity and who should be called ‘Fijian’, the scene was set for the second post-coup general election.

Landownership

For as long as I can remember there have been vexed landownership issues in Fiji. These issues have been mainly between the two major ethnic groups, the *iTaukei* and the Fiji-Indians, or Indo-Fijians. Indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*) believe landownership is their birthright and as such FijiFirst maintained a targeted campaign to appeal to the 60 percent of the Indigenous Fijian population. While assured of Fiji-Indian support it was the split vote of the *iTaukei* that saw the party sweep into government in 2014 and would again in 2018.

The sensitive issue of the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) in 2012, an institution that had been in existence since 1876, involve what was considered an assault on Indigenous rights. Bainimarama said the GCC was abolished because it was considered as not-fit-for-purpose in a multicultural Fiji as

among its ills it maintained the privileges of the old *iTaukei* order. Bainimarama campaigned on both the planks of stability and indigenous landownership, but were the people listening to him or SODELPA and the NFP in greater numbers in 2018?

Indigeneity

While Bainimarama stood on a multicultural platform for all Fijians, Rabuka had always backed Indigenous rights and supported the call for the restoration of the GCC. At the same time, Rabuka wooed the NFP, a predominantly Fiji-Indian party, thereby creating the impression that with the inter-ethnic harmony he was the man of the people.

If SODELPA became the government, he promised:

‘We’ll change back to Fijians for the native Fijians and everybody else goes back to their ethnic identities.’

That switch is, for many ethnic Fijians, the most controversial of all the FijiFirst government’s many policy changes. It is commonly perceived as an attack on Indigenous identity. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 13)

When I arrived in Fiji for the first time before the election in September, I decided to do pre-election coverage, interviews with leaders of parties and with media outlets, asking them how they intended to cover the elections. However, it was not as easy as that. The contentious *Media Industry Development Decree* (MIDD), which came into force in 2010, needed to be considered because it kept the media cowed with a ‘climate of fear’ (Pareti, 2009; Robie, 2009, 2016, p. 98).

The decree became an Act in 2015 and is a draconian piece of legislation that gives journalists the feeling of having the police or military looking their shoulder constantly, or even listening-in their phone calls. I recalled conversation that I had with Television New Zealand Pacific Affairs reporter Barbara Dreaver on her detention by the authorities on that trip and how she, on one occasion, went back to her hotel room and found her laptop had been tampered with.

The Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA) was established through the MIDD and has the power to enforce the decree and to investigate possible violations. The MIDD also established a separate media tribunal to hear cases referred by the authority, and to impose penalties on journalists whose work is deemed to be against the ‘public interest or public order’. Violations are punishable by a fine of up to FJ\$1,000 (US\$530), or imprisonment of up to two years for journalists; the penalty for any media company that breaches the decree may be as high as FJ\$100,000 (US\$53,000). (Freedom House, 2015)

Mindful that I was on assignment for AUT’s IJP course and the thought of possibly spending time in Suva’s police cells did have an effect of deterring

me from some of the interviews I had originally planned to do. I shared the sentiment of Samisoni Pareti, the *Islands Business* editor who, reflecting on the trauma faced by journalists in Fiji, wrote:

The time for the media in Fiji to take a good look at itself, on how it responds to the constant cycle of coups, is long overdue... Peacefully using the powers of influence it has been entrusted with, the news media can be a force for the good of all in Fiji. (Pareti, 2009, p. 275)

The media law is designed to intimidate and it does that to great effect right through the Fijian news industry. I believe this legislation explains why none of the local media outlets responded to requests for my interviews (with the exception of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) which I did not approach because it is closely tied to the government). I believe the fear and intimidation from years of being conditioned would have prevented them from speaking with me.

Then, on September 6, the government sent an e-mail to the University of the South Pacific requiring an 'Internship (Application for Waiver of Work Permit)' five days after my arrival in Fiji. As this bureaucratic wrangling with the authorities would take longer than the two weeks I would be there, I decided to proceed with my interviews very carefully, continually looking over my shoulder for any sign of trouble.

It was decided best not to approach Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama, his deputy, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, or the military for interviews, due to the sensitivity over a New Zealand journalist attached to the USP's *Wansolwara* newspaper and website for fear of my presence causing problems for the local institution. That ruled out the governing FijiFirst party for interviews, leaving just the option of opposition party leaders, and leaving the government interviews to the partner students at USP (other USP student journalists carried out the FijiFirst interviews in collaboration).

Sitiveni Rabuka, the leader of SODELPA, the largest opposition party, promoted a vision designed to appeal to the Indigenous *i-Taukei* people, the restitution of the 1997 constitution and the re-introduction of the Great Council Chiefs which had been abolished by the Voreqe Bainimarama government in 2012 after being in existence for 136 years.

Gone was the authoritarian military figure of some 31-years ago whom I had seen at the back of Parliament mustering MPs into a truck after his first coup in May 1987. In his place sat a confident, reassuring political leader who had previously been Fiji's elected Prime Minister, serving between 1992 and 1999.

Rabuka said before the elections:

The biggest challenge to multiracialism all over the world is understanding—cross-cultural understanding. As long as we understand each other we

can co-operate—not integrate and not assimilate, but we can harmoniously co-exist. (Quoted in Krishnamurthi, 2018d)

The third of the parties which made Parliament in 2014, and again five years later, was the National Federation Party, which is the oldest surviving political party in Fiji, having been founded in 1968. Led by Dr Biman Prasad a former economics professor from the University of the South Pacific, the party's key policies were a promised 'living wage' of \$5 an hour and a guaranteed \$100-a-tonne sugar price.

The General Election

With the scene being set for the General Election, I returned to Fiji for the event just hours before a 48-hour media blackout period was enforced (RNZ, 2018) There were two major events that may have had a bearing on the outcome of the election, but the impact of both remain unknown today.

The first was a Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) appeal against the dismissal of charges, for allegedly providing a false declaration of assets under the electoral rules, brought against former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka. In the High Court, Chief Justice Anthony Gates dismissed the appeal, saying the magistrate, a month previously, had been correct in his findings that the prosecution had not been able to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt (Krishnamurthi, 2018e).

Justice Gates added that FICAC took the appeal from the Magistrate's Court to the High Court, as was its right, and vice versa Rabuka could have appealed the decision had it gone against him, thereby cancelling the notion that something was amiss two days before the country went to polls. However, the timing of the appeal could be seen to be vexatious given the hearing was two days before the elections and had Rabuka lost he would not have been able to stand in the elections. Instead he possibly could have spent the rest of the week in prison and had all of his supporters' votes annulled.

More importantly, once again downtown Suva streets could frighteningly have seen a rampaging by the 2,000-strong supporters who sang songs of jubilation on the steps of Parliament when the case was dismissed. The notions of rampaging on the streets of Suva brought back memories of the reality in 1987 (Kristoff, 1987) and then it happened again in 2000 (Marks, 2000).

The question looms of how did that affect Rabuka's personal vote? His candidate number was 530, whereas the Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama had the number 688. In 2014, Fiji introduced a new open list proportional representation (OLPR) system, and each candidate was accorded a number. The people voted for the number rather than a name at the ballot box. As an aside, one of the vagaries of the OLPR system became clear with the election of Alipati Nagata.



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Figure 2: The scene outside the High Court in Suva for the FICAC appeal against the dismissal of electoral charges against Sitiveni Rabuka on 12 November 2018.

Among those, FijiFirst's third highest vote-recipient was Alipati Nagata, whose electoral number 668 closely resembled Bainimarama's number 688. Contrary to his subsequent protestations, he secured his seat largely due to erroneously completed ballots. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 24)

However, had the FICAC appeal been heard earlier or after the elections, would Rabuka and his party have gained more votes?

Fake news and social media

The second issue was the effect of social media during the media blackout period of 48 hours before polling day, which was extended due to voting taking place in areas that were affected by heavy rain. While MIDD hangs over the media like the sword of Damocles, the authorities had no control or did not choose to control social media. Statistics counter Global Stats noted that 85.51 percent of people in Fiji were on Facebook from October 2017 to October 2018. In comparison, Twitter had 1.19 percent for same period (StatcounterGlobalStats, n.d.). The media blackout created a vacuum for those who indulged in the black arts of fake news and the media trolls who were strongly active at the time.

Already, prior to the 2018 election, commentators had discussed the proliferation of blogs and social media and their influence on Fiji's political scene (Foster, 2007; Walsh, 2010) while researchers Patrick Vakaoti and Vanisha Mishra-Vakaoti had analysed the impact on social media after the 2014 election:

Editors who stood up to the regime's intimidation ... were deported ...
Even when formal restrictions were lifted, reporters prudently exercised

deliberate self-censorship for fear of retribution from the regime'. Restrictions on traditional media saw the proliferation of internet-based media sources and discussions. Blogs, social networking sites and social media accounts burgeoned. Although internet-based media platforms were not widely accessible they influenced a shift in the way Fijians, both locally and internationally, digested political information and (at times) misinformation. (Vakaoti & Mishra-Vakaoti, 2015, p. 189)

Ashwin Raj, chairperson of the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA), admitted being caught out by the ferocity of social media.

'It is a completely new terrain, [during] the last elections [2014] we weren't talking about fake news; social media is now saturated with this stuff,' said Raj during the elections. 'This is now a completely new phenomenon. Obviously, we know who the culprits are, why they are doing it and what they are doing.' (Krishnamurthi, 2018g)

Pacific Freedom Forum (PFF) co-chair Bernadette Carreon accurately told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

The media is not allowed to publish any information regarding the election and so there have been reports of some fake websites coming up during the blackout and we call it fake news because it could potentially influence the voting. (Murray-Atfield, 2018)

Qorvis and NADRA

The proliferation of fake news and social media trolls was a curious trend given that FijiFirst employed Qorvis, a Washington DC-based Public Relations firm that is an expert in the art of influencing elections in many countries.

An advocate for using online tools for manipulating people, Qorvis was reported on Twitter (according to unaudited financial declarations) as having been paid \$1.9 million for advertising and \$80,000 for social media by FijiFirst for the month of September. The question remains whether FijiFirst exploited social media in an attempt to influence the outcome of the elections? (Cohen & Webb, 2017).

A month after winning the elections, FijiFirst appointed Anne Dunn Baleilevuka as Commissioner of the Online Safety Commission, with a mission to eliminate online safety concerns and passed the *Online Safety Act* which came into force on 1 January 2019.

Another concern was the involvement of NADRA, a Pakistani election management system software company that had been embroiled in controversy because it had been accused of corruption, ballot stuffing, tampering with voter registration and giving ID cards to terrorists (*ABC Pacific Beat*, 2017). However,

an ABC *Pacific Beat* report exposing this did not say where this took place.

As the ballots were being counted, the Fiji Elections Office unwisely announced ‘provisional results’ drawing on results phoned in from around three-quarters of all polling venues, then stopped publicly releasing those results and restarted the count from scratch based on centralisation of official paperwork. Exactly the same practice had been followed in 2014. That method is tailor-made to raise suspicions, and wild allegations swirled on social media about a secret computer program designed to deliver a fraudulent FijiFirst victory. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 24)

I did not see any evidence of this; and the supervisor of the elections, Mohammed Saneem confirmed that NADRA was not used in the result management system. (*Fiji Sun*, 2018).

Conclusion

Regardless of the rumours, the fact remains that FijiFirst won a close election as the people once again found their voice at the ballot boxes. Then again it is difficult to win a third term on the Treasury benches for any party and the multitude of factors that come into play when the elections are on-hand.

The economy, social welfare, GDP, ethnic-bias, appeal through the charisma of a party leader, policy planks, stability of the Nation are just a few factors that could come into play in 2022. As Jon Fraenkel so eloquently points out:

Political parties long bear the identity that drove their inception. FijiFirst initially emerged as Bainimarama’s personal vehicle for the retention of state power, with the backing of the RFMF. Its incumbency and military backing differentiates it from the previous reformist parties of 1987 and 1999, which never contested an election from office. Yet FijiFirst has not established a political base outside the state, and the military has now been constitutionally affirmed as the guardian of that state. FijiFirst’s inability to forge coalitions, or countenance new alliances, also indicates the precariousness of its hold on office, and left its leaders watching as a new generation of politicians started to emerge on the opposition benches. (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 27)

That ‘inability to forge coalitions’ spells out the dilemma for FijiFirst: to continue to go it alone, or it may have to consider a coalition partner in future and with potential partner party leaders. As it stands, potential leaders for 2022 appeared to me to be lawyer Lynda Tabuya (SODELPA); broadcaster Lenora Qereqeretabua (NFP); and HOPE lawyer Tupou Draunidalo—all impressive politicians, and all most importantly, women.

Note

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