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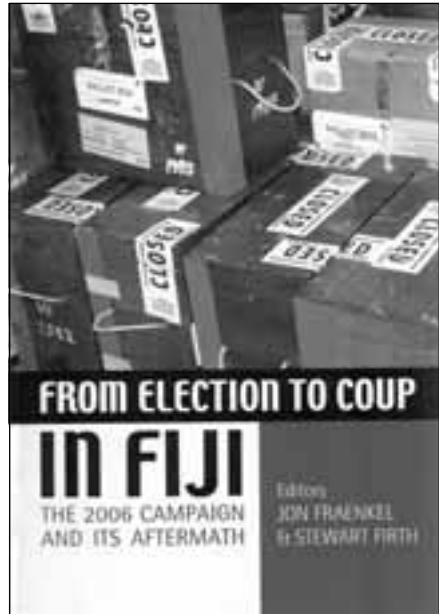
## Fiji playing hide-and-seek with democracy

*From Election to Coup in Fiji: The 2006 campaign and its aftermath*, edited by Jon Fraenkel and Stewart Firth. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies Publications, University of the South Pacific, 2007, 483 pp. ISBN 9780731538126

NONE of Fiji's three previous coups have resulted in a lasting military government, we are told at the outset:

Fiji is not Burma. Instead, both domestic and international pressures have encouraged a return to constitutional democracy as each wave of rulers seeks to consolidate its legitimacy. (p. xxi)

Nevertheless, in our present world, foreign policies, and domestic decisions are often based on an imagined idea of a nation as outlined more than two decades ago by Benedict Anderson:



Regardless of the actual inequality and the exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible [over the past two centuries], for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson, p. 7)

*From Election to Coup in Fiji*, a collection of more than 30 essays dealing with various aspects of political and social life of Fiji, gives a glimpse into issues and concerns faced by Fiji, a multiracial, multi ethnic nation that has been playing hide-and-seek with democracy and

identity politics since its independence from the British. Both the editors, Jon Fraenkel and Stewart Firth, have published before on the region and are well-versed in the history and politics of the Pacific.

This book compiles the essays from scholars, professionals, and politicians, including former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase; former Vice President Ratu Jone Madraiwiwi; the leader of the Fiji Labour Party, Mahendra Chaudhry, a former ousted Prime Minister, who is now the current finance minister; and Fiji journalist Samisoni Pareti. All are familiar with Fiji, its politics and history. Other distinguished contributors include professors Brij Lal, Paul Geraghty, Biman Prasad and Steven Ratuva.

Although the idea of democracy is centuries old, the 20th century has been defined by labelling nation states on the basis of their political-economic orientation. The Pacific, like much of the developing world, has struggled to maintain democracy. But what does democracy mean in a multiethnic nation where 'elections and coups' have historically been two methods for changing governments and 'neither is fully accepted as settling the matter?' (p. xx).

This book lays out the historical context in which such questions

are raised, illustrating through the example of Fiji that democracy is a continuum towards a destination that may take centuries to arrive at. No matter how confusing and conflicted the journey to democracy is, it is both worth the effort and deserving of documentation.

Divided into six sections after a preface and an introductory chapter, the book ends in an epilogue. While the preface and introductory chapter together summarise the electoral process, an addendum at the end of the book gives an account of the events immediately before and after the fateful day on 5 December 2006 when Fiji experienced its fourth coup.

The first section, *The Campaign*, discusses the social, cultural, constitutional and historical aspects of elections in Fiji. The second section titled, *The Parties*, gives the background on various political parties, including with a chapter by the famous 'yellow bucket team', credited with a column on Fiji politics in the Fijivillage news website. The third section has four chapters that highlight major issues during the 2006 election, including a chapter by USP lecturer Rae Nicholl on women candidates.

Section four, *Case Studies* (Kylie Anderson), provides an understanding of regional peculiarities in electoral

politics, including on the Polynesian island of Rotuma, which is culturally and demographically different from mainly Melanesian Fiji Islands. Section five and six, labeled Analysis and Perspectives respectively, provide both context and opinions from those on the opposite side of Fiji's political spectrum.

This book documents various issues and contentions, along with conventions and cultural practices, that have shaped Fiji's political climate during the elections since its independence. Although the chapters were written before the 2006 coup, *From Election to Coup in Fiji*, is still relevant, providing comprehensive information on social, political and historical background on the country's political culture and a deep understanding of the many conflicts that surround it.

The authors state that the book was an attempt to address the literary paucity on elections in Fiji. Never before has a book detailed the electoral system within the context of Fiji, or discussed everything from sociology of election songs to the role played by religious organisations (Hindu, Christian and Muslim), the military, and traditional chiefs during the election time.

The book reads like a story. It combines personal accounts with

detailed information accompanied with maps, graphs and tables where required. The diversity of voices is demonstrated in the range of writing styles used in the book, for example, professor Brij Lal writes in a personalised essay form, while professor Steven Ratuva takes a historical academic approach.

The book will appeal equally to academics and non-academics. *From Election to Coup in Fiji* would serve well as a supplemental text both for undergraduate and graduate courses that deal with Pacific politics. It can be used as a reference book for journalists and writers who are interested in the region.

But above all, the book serves to document the electoral process of a country that, though known for failing in the democratic process, eventually always returns to it, thereby progressing a step further on the democratic continuum.

#### **Reference**

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso: New York.