

# Democracy and its discontents

## Tonga, Fiji and the 'arc of instability'

Stephen Levine

As the last region of the world to experience decolonisation, the Pacific islands appeared for a time to be the most successful in preserving the institutions of democratic government bequeathed to newly independent states by their departing colonial rulers. Beginning in 1962 with independence for Western Samoa and continuing on for 25 years, as one island group after another regained sovereignty and self-government, not a single state saw its elected leadership ousted, or its independence constitution scrapped, through politically motivated acts of violence. This was in stark contrast with the post-colonial experience in Asia and Africa, which saw constitutional government and democratic processes disregarded with almost indecent haste in many of the former European possessions.

All this changed in 1987, when Fiji, widely regarded as a central player in Pacific regional affairs, experienced first one coup by its military and then a second. The country's elected leadership was removed from power; its constitution, drafted in London under British tutelage, was effectively nullified; and its military, the largest and most experienced of any of the island states, took over the governance of the country.

From that time on the narrative of Pacific governance has changed, from the 'success' of constitutional democracy and consensual government – a kind of Pacific 'paradise' myth in which conflict is not only muted but rendered harmless through an almost instinctive indigenous inclination for harmony – to the failure of democracy and the emergence of a deeply worrying 'arc of instability'.<sup>1</sup> In this view, perceptions of democracy as 'a foreign flower'<sup>2</sup> unsuited to Pacific climes take on self-fulfilling qualities: believing that ideas about human rights and elected governments are Western inventions inappropriate to Pacific island

circumstances, individuals begin to act accordingly, and a whole structure of ideas, values, relationships and institutions begins to crumble, before collapsing altogether.

### 'The Arc of Instability'

The concept of an 'arc of instability', intended to draw greater international attention to the Pacific region, was not originally intended to explain or predict political turbulence all across the Pacific. Proponents of the concept placed the 'arc' itself at one end of Melanesia, at Papua New Guinea, with its parabola sweeping across the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia before terminating at Fiji. Circumstances are somewhat more complex than that, however. There are other unstable polities in the Pacific outside of Melanesia. In Micronesia, for instance, Nauru has experienced virtual bankruptcy, in both its politics and its economy, only now beginning a thus far modest recovery. Kiribati has had both China and Taiwan competing for its attention, with effects on the country's internal politics as well as its diplomacy. While the US-affiliated territories – Guam, the Northern Marianas, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands – are stable, the 'war on terror' has had an impact here too on both the population and on security policy.

As for Polynesia, one country – Tuvalu – continues to be one of the most vocal on issues of climate change, its government taking the precaution of approaching other Pacific states about being prepared to accept its population given projections that the country may disappear altogether in several decades as a result of sea level rise. At the other tip of what would indeed be an immense 'arc', French Polynesia remains deeply divided about its future, with French constitutional con-

cessions establishing the territory as 'a country' within the French republic being seen as insufficient by pro-independence supporters. The weakening of French authority for much of the local population – in the sense of the legitimacy of the French state retaining a formal sovereign presence in Polynesia – has been mirrored, perhaps ironically, elsewhere in Polynesia, in the declining position of the Tongan monarchy for much of that country's population.

### Fiji and Tonga – a study in contrasts

#### *Colonial experience*

Fiji and Tonga, neighbouring states seen to be at the centre of the Pacific, are at the periphery of Melanesia and Polynesia. In pre-colonial times the two island nations had contact with one another, but since the arrival of the Europeans their histories significantly diverged. Fiji became a British possession; Tonga preserved its independence – the only Pacific island state able to do so. Fijian chiefs signed a treaty with Great Britain, surrendering sovereignty; a Tongan monarch signed a treaty with the British, gaining 'protection' as a corollary of 'friendship'. The Tongans, with external help, reorganised their government with the introduction of a written constitution in 1875; it is the oldest constitution in the Pacific and, for that matter, is one of the oldest surviving constitutions of any contemporary nation-state. Fiji experienced a protracted period of constitutional negotiation, occurring under British auspices, as the colony evolved towards self-government and eventual independence. Its first constitution, written in London in 1970, lasted but 17 years. It was replaced by a new document in 1997, as the country emerged from post-coup semi-ostracism through a new constitutional text developed with international assistance.



Royal Palace in Nuku'alofa, Tonga

### *Ethnicity*

These differences between the two Pacific states are matters of history and law. What is perhaps more striking as a point of difference between Fiji and Tonga is the ethnic composition of the two countries. Tonga is very nearly as homogeneous as it is possible for any nation to be. As noted, the country was never colonised and the numbers of European residents have never been very great. Nor have other nationalities been brought into the country, or allowed to migrate there, in any significant numbers. It would be odd therefore, though admittedly not impossible, to imagine a Tongan nationalist declaring, 'Tonga for the Tongans', as the country has already secured that objective even if political power amongst the Tongan people remains unevenly distributed.

Fiji, however, is a bi-racial (or bi-national) country. Having acquired the islands, the British thought it best to make the colonial government it was establishing as self-supporting as possible. Economic progress involved the development of sugar plantations, which were situated, inevitably, on Fijian land – the whole country was Fijian – but on which Fijians proved unenthusiastic about working. The British brought Indian workers into the country, the workers (and their families) stayed on and, as a result, in one of its intermittent fits of absent-mindedness, the coloniser had re-engineered the demographics of the country. It is not the case that Fiji's ethnic composition is the Pacific's most complex

– the number of ethnic groups in Papua New Guinea is staggeringly high, running at least into the many hundreds (definitions of 'ethnicity' vary) – but the numbers involved (several hundred thousand each of indigenous Fijians and Fijians of Indian ancestry) combined with a degree of mutual mistrust, disdain and avoidance have made the Fijian experience by far the most explosive.

The political systems of the two countries reflect their very different circumstances. Their constitutions and, in particular, their electoral systems were devised to solve different 'problems'. Tonga's constitution, a nineteenth century artefact, was in some ways a public relations exercise, intended to communicate the view that the country had an established political structure and that a colonial takeover would be improper. For Fiji, the country's complex and uneasy demographics meant that the political engineers – British colonial officers in the first

instance, eminent 'wise men' more recently – have repeatedly sought to develop and embed in the system elaborate contrivances intended to complicate Indo-Fijian attempts to gain political power or ownership of Fijian land. Avoiding the consequences of implementing simple 'majority rule', while at the same time seeking to conform to the requirements of democratic government, has been an ongoing and complex challenge for the country's politicians and institutional designers.<sup>3</sup>

### *Stability and tradition*

For Fiji, 'stability' has meant preserving control of the country's government, culture and land in the hands of indigenous Fijians and, where possible, in the descendants of the chiefly group whose signature on the treaty of cession gave Britain control in the first place. For Tonga, by contrast, 'stability' has meant preserving political power and pre-eminence in the person of a sovereign, descended from the very monarch who consolidated power over his islands with external help and went on to sign the treaty of friendship with the British. The Tongan political system – with a royal family at its apex, augmented by a class of 'nobles' – was devised to preserve the governing group with its prerogatives, their power and position neatly summarised in the tidy legal language of a respectable Western-style written constitution. If the Fijian electoral system was designed to make it difficult for there to be stable rule by a majority irrespective of ethnicity, so the Tongan system was established to make it impossible for the Tongan people to gain legislative or executive power at all.



Parliament House in Suva, Fiji

The certitudes of race, class and ethnicity allowed the Fijian and Tongan systems to endure for a perhaps surprisingly long time. In recent years, however, as these certitudes have begun to collapse with the growing impact of external ideas – many of them brought back to Fiji and Tonga by islanders educated in Western countries – the authority of chiefs (in Fiji) and nobles and royals (in Tonga) has begun to become more apparent than real. Other community leaders – middle class business people and military leaders (in Fiji), pro-democracy activists (in Tonga) – have gained influence and respect. Before a clash of arms there has been, in each country, a clash of ideas and values, with ‘tradition’ and ‘democracy’ increasingly at loggerheads.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘tradition’ that the chiefs rule in Fiji was able to be continued, post-independence, when the leading political force in the country, the Alliance Party, was led by a chief, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara – a ‘chief’ in both the Fijian and (with his knighthood) British social order – who served successive terms as Prime Minister, going on later to hold the symbolic position of President when the post-1987 coup saw Fiji ousted from the Commonwealth and decide, in response, to become a republic. A further ‘tradition’, that the Fijians held political power while the Indian community devoted itself to the economy, proved less viable, as indigenous Fijians sought economic advancement while Indo-Fijians chafed at restrictions on their political position and prospects.

Likewise, the ‘tradition’ that the Tongan people could be regarded as ‘commoners’, with a duty of respect to their nobles and royal family, came under strain as the king and his cabinet struggled to cope with the challenges of governance. A succession of mishaps over a period of years substantially eroded the government’s reputation for competence; in other ways, too, the authority of the royal family was weakened as family members took advantage of new economic opportunities, gaining control over resources that might more generally be considered to belong to the nation as a whole or to the Tongan state.

#### *Efficiency and nationhood – competing visions*

While an individual’s use of their official position or family status for personal enrichment is questionable, in the Tongan case matters are not so clear-cut. To whom ultimately does the Tongan state belong? Is it, in fact, a country for all its citizens, each equal in their entitlements, or is the country rather one in which a certain class, encompassing a small group of people, possess an inherent and inevitable ‘right’ to rule? If that were the case, then it would not only be understandable, but even defensible, for the nation’s resources to be held by members of that class.

The core issue in Fiji’s politics is strikingly similar to Tonga’s. Is Fiji a state for all its citizens? Or is the country best understood as a Fijian state, one in which Fijians are ‘paramount’? If that is the case, then the best that other groups of citizens can expect are equal rights, and adherence to the rule of law, a degree of high-minded tolerance that falls short of recognising the appropriateness of aspirations to gain control over the symbols of the state or the levers of government power. If Fiji is to be considered a bi-national state, however, a land to be shared between indigenous Fijians and the descendants of those Indian migrants brought to the country by the British, then obviously a different kind of constitutional settlement, national identity and vision for the country emerges.

These visions – in both Tonga and Fiji – are, in the end, irreconcilable. Either Fiji is, or it is not, a democratic state in which power is within the grasp of any citizen, irrespective of ethnicity. Either Tonga is, or it is not, a democratic state in which the people rule and in which all citizens have, at least in principle, an equal opportunity to gain a place in the nation’s legislative assembly and cabinet. In both countries, the political and cultural values that have seen only a handful of people rule – chiefs in Fiji, monarchs and their appointees in Tonga – have come under serious challenge. In 2006, the clash of values and visions in both countries intensified, erupting into violence in Tonga – previously the most placid of Pacific polities – and in a singularly bloodless coup in Fiji, the nation’s fourth in 20 years.

#### **Upheaval in Tonga – the 2006 riots**

In Tonga, riots broke out on 16 November when the Tongan Parliament adjourned without having taken action on proposals for political reform. The rioting and arson, though chaotic, was not altogether aimless, as its targets were business properties that had been owned by the royal family as well as enterprises owned by Chinese residents of the capital, Nuku’alofa. The looting and destruction of Chinese-owned premises mirrored similar conduct in the Solomon Islands’ capital, Honiara, in April, following election of a new prime minister by the country’s parliament. In this regard there are both similarities and contrasts with Fiji, where attitudes towards families lawfully in the country, descended from earlier migrants, have long been a principal focal point for national and communal politics to revolve around.

In both Tonga and Fiji, there remains the potential for indigenous frustration with government, with political parties, with traditional and elected leaders, and with economic prospects to be directed outwards towards a highly visible ‘other’, namely, migrants from Asian countries. It is evident that, for some, the Indian community in Fiji and the Chinese of Tonga will never be considered fully to ‘belong’, to become part of the land, the nation and its people in a wholly authentic and acceptable manner. Their presence, and their relative success in economic and educational terms, makes members of those communities (and their properties) conspicuous targets for the angry, the aggrieved and the disaffected.

The pro-democracy cause was not assisted in Tonga by the initial reactions of pro-democracy legislators, who in blaming the government (and criticising external intervention to restore order) chose to condone what they ought more unequivocally to have condemned. The disorder in the Tongan capital subsided as an outside presence – Australian and New Zealand soldiers and police – arrived at the request of the government to assist Tongan security. For some Tongans, the word ‘democracy’ will have been discredited by the disturbances, which left much

of the capital's business district in ruins, as an ugly alternative to the placid politics of deference that had for so long characterised the country's social and political life. Nevertheless Tonga began the year with one king appointing a 'commoner' prime minister for the first time, and while it ended the year with another king on the throne and more than 700 people in court or in prison for their involvement in the riots, further change in the direction of a more publicly accountable system of cabinet government seems inevitable.<sup>5</sup>

#### A fourth Fijian coup

In Fiji, likewise, by year's end a disrupted political order was not entirely without bright spots. While the military again intervened to remove an elected government from office, the 2006 coup was different from earlier events in not being motivated by perceptions that the Indo-Fijian community had gained too much power. The first coup in 1987 ousted a government led by a Fijian but considered to be under Indo-Fijian dominance; the second coup, later that year, was instigated in a further attempt to entrench indigenous chiefly domination.<sup>6</sup> The third coup, in 2000, had a more equivocal outcome for those responsible, with some of the coup makers imprisoned but with their most obvious objective – the removal from office of a government led by the country's first-ever Indo-Fijian prime minister – achieved. The 2006 coup, by contrast, ousted a Fijian-led government, one that had been seeking further gains for indigenous Fijians and that had been demonstrating in various ways its basic sympathy with the aims and purposes of the 2000 coup-makers.

Thus the entire basis for the military's intervention in December 2006 – when Parliament was dissolved and the government dismissed – was different from what had been the case with the previous three coups. Indeed, when a new government was formed in January 2007, the leader of the principal Indo-Fijian party, the man who had been ousted as prime minister in 2000, Mahendra Chaudhry, agreed to accept the invitation from the



The headline of the Fiji Times when it resumed publication on December 7, 2006

country's new self-appointed leader, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, to become deputy prime minister. By this act – a 'betrayal' of democracy in the view of interested and unhappy Western governments – Mr Chaudhry demonstrated that this coup, unlike previous ones, did not have its basis in hostility or suspicion towards Indo-Fijians, at least among the coup-makers. Indeed, the coup to which the 2006 Fijian intervention appears most similar is that of Thailand, where the military's intervention on 19 September – as in Fiji, unseating a government that had been elected earlier in the year – was presented by those responsible as necessary to stop corruption, almost as a regrettable but necessary 'good governance' measure.

The 2006 Fiji coup is also distinguishable from earlier interventions by the Fiji military (which is almost entirely indigenous Fijian in composition) by the lack of respect extended by its leader to the chiefly elite. Far from intervening in order to protect their power or authority, Commodore Bainimarama's statements and actions ignored, then challenged, contrary advice from the country's Great Council of Chiefs (which has had considerable influence as a communal voice for indigenous Fijians and is endowed with the constitutional authority to appoint the country's president). At one stage Cmdr. Bainimarama refused even to meet with representatives of the council, issuing warnings to its members and advising them to return to their homes and villages.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006\\_Fijian\\_coup\\_d%27%3%A99at](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_Fijian_coup_d%27%3%A99at)

## Conclusion

As in Thailand, so too in Fiji the 2006 coup was both peaceful and popular, reflecting perceptions among at least some (if not most) of the public that the normal rhythms of political life needed to be interrupted. In each case the military leadership determined for itself that there were higher priorities than constitutional or electoral procedure and acted accordingly. If it is possible for there to be such a thing as 'a coup with the consent of the governed' – what might be called a 'democratic' coup – then perhaps these two events so qualified.

In these two countries, and in Tonga, further constitutional change can be anticipated. Whether this can be accomplished while preserving respect for the idea of constitutionalism – of a polity disciplined by its constitutional procedures and values – remains to be seen. While in Thailand the military's involvement was legitimised in part through its professions of loyalty to the monarch (and the king's apparent appreciation of their efforts on his be-

half), in Fiji and Tonga aspects of an old order appear to be crumbling. In Fiji, a new government, led by the military, has entered the scene while distancing itself from the deference towards the chiefs and the ambivalence (among Fijians) towards Indo-Fijians that in some ways set the parameters for the country's politics both during colonial times and afterwards. As for Tonga, a new king presides over a devastated capital, its ruins a complement to the collapsing structure of chiefly authority that is his frail inheritance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For commentary on this concept in respect of the South Pacific, see Ben Reilly, 'The Africanisation of the South Pacific', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2000, pp. 261-268; Ben Reilly, *Internal Conflict and Regional Security in Island Asia: Stabilising the "Arc of Instability"*, in Bruce Vaughn (ed.), *The Unravelling of Island Asia? Governmental, Communal, and Regional Instability*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002; and Jon Fraenkel, 'The Coming Anarchy in Oceania? A Critique of the "Africanisation of the South Pacific" Thesis', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-34.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Larmour, 'A Foreign Flower?: Democracy in the South Pacific', *Pacific Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1994, pp. 99-126.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Fraenkel has written or contributed to several papers offering a critique of electoral system redesign in Fiji, noting the failure of a revised electoral system to produce anything like the consequences predicted of it by its designers. See, for instance, Jon Fraenkel, 'Institutions without Architects: Reassessing Fiji's May 1999 Elections in the Wake of George Speight's Coup', *Revue Juridique Polynésienne, numéro hors série, volume 2*, 2002, pp. 151-170 [also available at: <http://www.upf.pf/>]; Jon Fraenkel and Bernard Grofman, 'Does the Alternative Vote Foster Moderation in Ethnically Divided Societies? The Case of Fiji', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 39, no. 5, June 2006, pp. 623-651; and Jon Fraenkel and Bernard Grofman, 'The Failure of the Alternative Vote as a Tool for Ethnic Moderation in Fiji: A Rejoinder to Horowitz', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 39, no. 5, June 2006, pp. 663-666.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Stephanie Lawson, *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> The king, Tausifa'abau Tupou IV, died in September and his son, who had then held the title of Prince Tupouto'a, succeeded to the throne as King Siaosi Tupou V.

<sup>6</sup> For a comparative analysis of Fiji's 1987 and 2000 coups, see Roderic Alley, 'Fiji's Coups of 1987 and 2000: A Comparison', *Revue Juridique Polynésienne, numéro hors série, volume 1*, 2001, pp. 217-234 [also available at: <http://www.upf.pf/>].

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## Schriftenreihe der APSA

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# Pazifik Forum



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Am Beispiel gewaltsamer Konflikte in Südthailand, Aceh, Birma (Myanmar), den Südphilippinen, Kambodscha, Osttimor und dem pazifischen Inselstaat Salomonen diskutiert der Band die vielfältigen ökonomisch begründeten Interessenkonflikte als Grundstruktur gewaltsamer Auseinandersetzungen in der Region und zeigt dabei die strukturellen Beziehungen zwischen 'alten' Konfliktlinien und 'neuen' Kriegen im pazifischen Raum auf. Im Zentrum steht dabei die Frage, ob und inwiefern aktuelle Konflikte in dieser Region unter dem Gesichtspunkt 'neuer Kriege' betrachtet werden können.

Mit Beiträgen von Shane Barter, Volker Böge, Ea Meng Try, Andrea Fleschenberg, Rolf Jordan, Alfred Oehlers, Helmut Schneider, Michael Waibel und Patrick Ziegenhain.