

Fiji's military strongman voted out in landslide to the Labour Party

Peter Symonds
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Twelve years after seizing power in a military coup, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka has been swept from office in a landslide vote for the Fijian Labour Party (FLP) in elections over the last week. Counting is yet to be finalised, but Labour has won 37 of the 71 parliamentary seats. Rabuka's Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) has only seven seats—down from the 31 seats it gained at the last elections.

Earlier in the year Rabuka had formed a coalition with the National Federation Party (NFP)—then the major opposition party based among the more conservative, business layers of the substantial ethnic Indian community in Fiji—and the General Voters' Party. The NFP, which had 20 seats after the last elections, has lost all its seats, including that of its leader Jai Ram Reddy. All 19 seats allocated to ethnic Indians were won by Labour.

Rabuka, who has already conceded defeat, blamed the outcome on opposition to the constitutional reform instituted by his government with NFP backing in 1997. The amendments have been touted as paving the way for more democratic and multiracial elections. In reality, however, the new constitution retains the racial divisions between indigenous Fijians and ethnic Indians as the basis of voting, and continues to give significant powers to the unelected Fijian Council of Chiefs to choose the president. Of the 71 seats, 46 are designated on the basis of race, and only 25 are open or multi-racial seats.

The constitutional changes undoubtedly played a role in undermining support for the SVT and the NFP. In 1987, Rabuka, then head of the Fijian army, seized power in a military coup and toppled the Labour-NFP coalition government of prime minister Timoci Bavadra, which had just been elected. Backed by elements of the Council of Chiefs, the defeated conservative Alliance Party, and with the tacit support of the Australian and New Zealand governments, Rabuka sought to buttress his hold on power by appealing to Fijian chauvinism directed against the ethnic Indian community.

The army seized Labour, NFP and trade union leaders,

instigated military censorship of the media, shut down the trade unions and banned demonstrations and strikes. Rabuka claimed that the new Labour-NFP government threatened the rights of indigenous Fijians and in 1991, amended the constitution so that indigenous Fijians would be ensured of a parliamentary majority and would hold the positions of president and prime minister. As a result of the coup and subsequent repression against Fijian Indians, thousands emigrated to New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere.

By moderating the openly chauvinist basis of the constitution to allow non-indigenous Fijians to become president and prime minister, Rabuka lost support to openly right-wing Fijian nationalist parties who attacked him for betraying indigenous Fijians. On the other hand, the NFP by joining hands with the military strongman and accepting a racially based constitution, lost support among Fijian Indians who as a result of the coup were reduced to the status of second class citizens.

Far more significant, however, in the landslide against Rabuka is the country's deepening economic and social crisis. Hit hard by the Asian economic crisis, the Fijian economy has had negative growth rates over the last two years—it shrunk by 3 percent last year. Unemployment is about 25 percent overall and 40 percent for young people aged 18-25. Inflation is running at 10 percent and 15 percent for food. Early last year water charges rose by 40 percent. An estimated one third of all Fijian families are living below the official poverty line.

In order to attract foreign investment, the Rabuka government carried out a program of privatisation of government bodies, cut spending on health, education and welfare services, and offered financial incentives to overseas investors. More than 400 jobs are about to go in the Civil Aviation Authority after it is broken up into two private profit-making companies.

The onset of the economic slump in Asia compounded the difficulties facing Fiji. At the end of April, 400 employees of the Kentia Clothing were locked out by management and effectively sacked after the company was placed in

receivership. The constitutional changes were aimed improving Fiji's image and that of the government in a bid to attract foreign investors, boost tourism and reestablish a collaboration with sections of ethnic Indian business and finance.

While it has been able to exploit the widespread discontent with the Rabuka government, the Labour Party has no solutions to the joblessness and poverty affecting wide layers of working people. Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry has promised to save the jobs of the Civil Aviation Authority workers and to halt other retrenchments in the public sector. Once in office, Labour will quickly drop its promises and, in the name of “efficiency” and “competitiveness”, institute similar changes to that of the Rabuka government in a bid to attract investment.

Throughout the entire 12-year period, Rabuka was able to rely directly on the Labour Party and the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) to stifle the opposition of workers to his attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights. In 1987, the coup provoked widespread protests and strikes, particularly by largely Indian sugar farmers and workers. But far from seeking to overthrow Rabuka, the Labour and union leaders called off the strikes and entered into abortive constitutional talks with the military dictatorship. After the 1992 elections, the Labour party and Chaudhry, who as FTUC leader had been imprisoned during the coup, backed Rabuka and his newly formed SVT party to form the government.

Chaudhry and the Labour leaders claim to represent all races in Fiji but they are just as deeply imbued with the entrenched racism of the ruling elites as Rabuka. The Labour Party is part of the so-called People's Coalition with two smaller parties based among indigenous Fijians—the Fijian Association Party (FAP) and the Party of National Unity (PANU) headed by Apisai Tora. The FAP won 11 seats and PANU gained four—all from the 23 ethnically-based seats allocated to Fijians.

During the 1987 coup, Tora played a key auxiliary role in whipping up Fijian chauvinism and intimidating government supporters with the thugs of his right-wing Taukei movement. Bavadra and his political adviser James Anthony accused the US of providing \$US200,000 in funds for Tora via the South Pacific regional director of the US Agency for International Development, William Paupe, who Anthony described as “a barefoot Ollie North running around the US embassy in Fiji”.

The coup itself was not directly primarily against the Labour Party but against a growing movement of the working class. The Labour Party had been able to capitalise on the opposition of workers—both Indian and Fijian—to the austerity measures being instituted by the conservative

Alliance government of then prime minister Kamisese Mara [now Fiji's president]. The Fijian ruling class, like their previous British colonial masters had in the past, deliberately played the racial card to divide and disorient the working class.

The Labour Party's landslide win does not usher in a new period of democracy and stability. Already Fijian nationalist elements are seeking to whip up anti-Indian sentiment by pointing to the prospect of Chaudhry becoming the first non-indigenous Fijian prime minister. Rabuka has pointed to the unease of indigenous Fijians at the prospect of Chaudhry government but quickly stated that he would not be involved in any move against the Labour Party or any new coup. But the very fact that Rabuka is compelled to publicly deny involvement in any intrigues indicates that in ruling circles such alternatives are being canvassed. According to Chaudhry, security has been tightened to prevent a coup.

Even though the Labour Party has won a clear majority there is no guarantee that the president, Kamisese Mara will necessarily appoint Chaudhry as prime minister. Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed, Bavadra's widow and leader of Labour's coalition partner, the Fijian Association Party, has indicated that she should be a candidate for the post of prime minister. Moreover, a key constitutional amendment means that even if Chaudhry does become prime minister, he will be forced to offer cabinet posts to any party which secures at least 10 percent of the parliamentary seats. Thus Chaudhry may be compelled to include Rabuka or one of his supporters in a multi-party cabinet.

Whatever the final composition of the next government, it is likely to face considerable opposition from working people as Labour promises to defend jobs and raise living standards evaporate under the pressure of international capital for more stringent austerity measures and greater financial incentives for business and investors.



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