

Fijian election dominated by racist politics and instability

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25 August 2001

When voting begins today in Fiji's general election, the 451,000 voters of the Pacific island state will face an unprecedented array of 18 parties, some of which did not even exist several months ago. Of the 351 candidates standing for 71 parliamentary seats, about half represent new parties.

The mushrooming of political factions, vying for support along racial, clan and regional lines, reflects the increasing fracturing of the former British colony's political elite into feuding cliques each seeking to use state power for their sectional interests. None of the major parties that dominated Fijian politics even a few years ago remain intact.

The week-long election, from August 25 to September 1, is being conducted—by order of the Fijian Court of Appeal—under the 1997 Constitution, which allocates most seats on a communal basis. Of the 71 seats, 23 are set aside for indigenous Fijians, 19 for Fijians of Indian descent, one for Rotumans and three for “other races”. Each voter must vote twice, once for a communal candidate and once for their regional electorate.

The political instability surrounding the poll is most sharply revealed in the candidacy of George Speight, the failed entrepreneur who led last year's coup attempt. Accompanied by key military personnel and apparently backed by business leaders, he occupied parliament house and held Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry—Fiji's first Indian prime minister—and other government members hostage at gunpoint for 56 days.

While formally disapproving of the coup attempt, sections of the military and state apparatus openly supported Speight's racist objectives. With the Chaudhry government held hostage, the military high command seized power, abrogated the Constitution, installed its own administration and eventually signed an accord with Speight to implement his anti-Indian agenda of strengthening the political and economic privileges of the ethnic Fijian chiefs and businessmen.

Under Western pressure, the military later arrested Speight, together with some immediate cronies, and charged

them with treason, but prosecution and judicial authorities have repeatedly delayed his trial and Speight was granted day release from prison to register for the poll. His ability to stand in the election confirms that he and his conspirators retain considerable support and influence in ruling circles, causing deep schisms in the military and judicial apparatus.

His trial was due to begin on August 31, the second last day of voting, but in the latest twist in the long-running saga, a High Court judge adjourned the case indefinitely on Friday. Without any warning, the judge, who is about to retire, declared that he could not hear the case because it would go for months. Speaking to journalists, prosecutors insisted that the delay had nothing to do with the election, yet the timing of the move suggests otherwise.

Also contesting the election is the newly-formed party of Laisenia Qarase, the merchant banker whom the military appointed interim Prime Minister last year. His Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SDL) or United Fiji Party was formed in an attempt to clothe his regime, widely seen as a stooge of the military, with some legitimacy. The SDL has a racist program that proclaims “the paramountcy of indigenous Fijian and Rotuman interests,” while espousing Christian ideals and seeking to meet the demands of the Western powers—led by Australia—for more stable and open investment conditions. It continues to call for the scrapping of the Constitution, on the grounds that it allocates too much power to Indo-Fijians.

Qarase's regime has been permitted to remain in office since March, when the Court of Appeal ruled it to be unlawful. While the court ruling necessitated the calling of elections earlier than the military-backed regime had planned, the judges did not reinstate Chaudhry's government, or even order the recall of the parliament, thus allowing Qarase's cabinet to cling to power.

Qarase has been giving away hundreds of thousands of dollars in government cash and kind to buy votes. The *Fiji Times* this week reported that he and other cabinet ministers recently travelled to the island of Rotuma to donate \$F100,000 worth of farming implements. Another village in

the north of the country received 10 outboard motor engines, farm tools, generators and fishing gear.

Ethnic Fijian ruling circles are so divided that Qarase's SDL is competing for the indigenous seats against the racist Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) and several other nationalist formations, including the Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua Party, which supports Speight, and the Fijian Association Party headed by Adi Kuini Speed, the widow of former Labour Party prime minister Timoci Bavadra.

During a television forum last Thursday night, both Qarase and Meteisuela Mua, leader of the Conservative Alliance, openly declared that Fiji was not ready for an Indian prime minister. By contrast, Speed, Baba and SVT leader Filipe Bole hedged their bets on a possible Labour Party victory, refusing to rule out Chaudhry's return.

For his part, Chaudhry is so anxious to resume office that last week he signalled his readiness to enter a coalition with his Labour Party's main rival in recent years, the SVT, formerly led by 1987 military coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka—who locked up Chaudhry and other labour leaders following his coup.

The SVT has a record of inciting anti-Indian sentiment. Chaudhry's willingness to embrace this party indicates that the election's most likely outcome is an unstable coalition in which the festering divisions within Fiji's ruling elites will be fought out anew.

While holding out the prospect of sharing power with the SVT, Chaudhry is also appealing for votes on a communalist basis, declaring this week that the "Indian community" had to stop being seen as a "weak community".

In its election program, the Labour Party claims to have "genuine concern for the workers, the poor and the disadvantaged" but in office Chaudhry's Peoples Coalition Government dropped promises of a minimum wage of \$120 per week and bitterly attacked striking nurses. Its platform seeks to meet the demands of investors, pledging to reduce the top personal and corporate tax rates from 35 percent to 30 percent, contract out hospital services and partially privatise public facilities.

The Labour Party itself has been hit by a racially-based split, led by Chaudhry's former deputy, Tupeni Baba, an ethnic Fijian. His New Labour Unity Party has openly warned that if Chaudhry were returned to office, the result would be another coup. Opinion polls suggest, however, that much of the Labour Party's electoral base among small Indian farmers and workers remains intact.

Having been unable to overcome their sectional differences and form a coherent bloc against the Labour Party, the nationalist Fijian parties have all placed Labour last in the distribution of their preference votes, hoping to

avoid a repeat of the 1999 election, when the Peoples Coalition won office with the help of preference votes.

Racist politics are an obvious diversion from the class tensions that dominate Fiji. Unelected clan chiefs control 90 percent of the country's land and under the Native Land Trust Act, almost half the revenues from land use go directly into the pockets of administrators and chiefs, while poorer clan members are often left with pittance.

In urban areas, wages are pitiful and conditions poor for workers, whether they be ethnic Fijian or descendants of the Indian indentured labourers imported by the British last century to work in the sugar fields. Poor families have been further devastated since Speight's coup by wholesale closures in the garment and tourism industries, deep cuts in government jobs and services and the termination of small sugar farmers' leases. According to figures published on the Labour Party website, garment exports have dropped from \$301 million in 1999 to \$230 million over the past year and tourist arrivals have fallen from 409,000 to 300,000.

The ballot is being held largely to meet the demands of the Western powers for an end to political turmoil and uncertainty, and the return of secure investment conditions. Fijian business and political leaders are counting on Australia and other countries to lift their partial economic sanctions once the election is over. Foreign investors will only return, however, if assured of low wages and taxes, ensuring that living standards will remain depressed.

Whatever the precise outcome of the ballot, the result will be an inherently unstable regime balancing between the interests of various brawling factions and the demands of international finance capital.



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