

Indo-Fijian struggles for political equality in Fiji: A historical perspective

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Abstract

Indo-Fijians make about 37 per cent of Fiji's population and have unique language and culture, which evolved since Indians arrived to Fiji as indentured labourers on board *Leonidas* in 1879. By the end of indenture in 1920, there were some 60,000 Indians in Fiji as their leaders started agitation for "equal" rights. The colonial government saw Indian political demands as a threat to law, order and good government in the colony and forged closer relations with the European settlers and the indigenous Fijian chiefs. By 1946, some 101,000 of the 120,000 Indians were born in the colony and had transformed from Indians to Indo-Fijians with their leaders ready to lead Fiji to independence. However, the demands and agitations for equality were seen by the indigenous Fijian leaders as plot to dominate indigenous Fijians politically and as a result, indigenous chiefs invoked the Deed of Cession of 1874 and requested that the colonial authority, when leaving the colony, transfer power back to the chiefs. The Indo-Fijian leaders found it increasingly difficult to secure support of the indigenous leaders as an interim solution based on indigenous political dominance was agreed to during constitutional conferences in the 1960s. The interim solution did not last long as demands for equality once again surfaced in the 1970s and again in the 1980s, leading to three military coups and a permanent fracture of Fiji's race relations. This paper will trace the Indo-Fijian demands for political equality and its ideological foundations, which is deeply embedded in the experiences of indentured labour, or, *girit* and responses to the three race based coups.

Introduction

The ancestors of Indo-Fijians were brought to Fiji to develop and sustain a viable economy based on sugar. After years of exploitation, the Indian indentured labourers were released from the bondage indenture in 1916 and by 1920, they utilized their organization skills on plantation and challenged the hegemony of the colonial government by demanding equal political representation based on a common roll franchise. However, the colonial regime broke the Indian challenges as the community

started increasingly to focus inwards, importing often to the detriment of communal cohesion, fractious ideas from the Indian subcontinent. It was only during World War II that Indo-Fijians, who had increased in number from 588 in 1881 to 120,414 by 1946, again challenged the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and indirectly the colonial government, resulting in the colonial administration forging a closer relationship with the indigenous chiefs, who ceded Fiji to Britain in 1874. It was argued by the colonial authorities in no uncertain terms that the transfer of political power would be from the colonial government to the chiefs, who were finally defeated at the polls by a multiethnic coalition in 1987, prompting a military takeover by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. In 1987, Indo-Fijians formed 348,704 or 48.7 per cent of the total population but the coup forced many to migrate and in 2006, the Indo-Fijian population stood at 313,181 or 36.7 per cent. After fourth coup, many Indo-Fijians ironically embraced the military takeover led by the commander of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces, Frank Bainimarama on 6 December 2006. The Indo-Fijians believe that a non-racial governance framework for Fiji will enable the community to finally achieve political equality with their indigenous counterparts. This paper traces the history of Indians to Fiji, including their transformation from Indians to Indo-Fijians and their quest for political equality.

The Indenture Experience

The first Governor to Fiji Sir Arthur Gordon devised a paternalistic system of indigenous administration, which spared the indigenous Fijians from the destructive forces of colonial capitalism. For Gordon, indigenous Fijians were not to suffer the same fate as their counterparts in Australia and the Americas and to ensure that the indigenous way of life was preserved, Gordon instituted the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) as the “official” custodian of indigenous custom and tradition. The Council campaigned on behalf of indigenous Fijians and requested the colonial government to cease using a small number of indigenous labourers on commercial farms. According to the chiefs, the rigours of plantation life compromised the “Fijian way of life”, which was based on communal mode of production. Gordon enthusiastically endorsed the views of the chiefs, but was also mindful that the survival of the Colony of Fiji depended on establishing a viable economy. Fiji’s land and climate were well suited for the establishment of sugar estates and in 1872 the sugar industry was established. At first the European planters relied on Melanesian labourers from New Hebrides and Solomon Islands but with growing protest against the use of slave labour in the Pacific, the British government intervened and ended the trade. British intervention, however, created a serious labour shortage as European commercial interests in Fiji pressured the colonial administration for labourers from South Asia.

It was not until 1879 that the Fiji government, under the direction of Governor Sir Arthur Gordon, started to import Indians under the indentured labour scheme, which existed in the British colonies since the 1837. The Indians were to come to Fiji and work for five years as bonded labourers and another five as free workers after which they became entitled to a paid trip back to India, and those who did not wish to return were allowed to stay in the colony as British subjects. Fiji’s colonial authorities quickly established recruiting offices in Calcutta and from 1905 in South India. The recruiting office hired

sub-agents, who were paid to entice sometimes gullible and illiterate peasants from India's United Provinces. Recruiters played on the ignorance of the peasants saying for instance that Fiji was a place near Calcutta; or exaggerated the value of the wages to be earned whilst saying nothing about the penal nature of the indenture contract (Mayer 1961: 2). Indian labourers came mostly from North India, because it was a chief recruiting ground for other Sugar colonies: Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Natal, Surinam, etc (Lal 1979: 18). North India also had a high concentration of agricultural castes, which had experience in rigorous labour under India's harsh climate. The Indians came from different regions, spoke different dialects, and practiced different customs and religions. Most indentured labourers came from the United Provinces in colonial India. A large number of recruits came from Shahabad in Bihar, Parganas in Bengal; Allahabad, Basti, Benares, Cawnpore, Fyzabad, Gonda, Gorakhpur and Lucknow in the eastern part of the United Provinces. Other districts contributed more than 5 % in at least one year were Agra, Aligarh, Ghazipur, Jaunpur and Muttra in the United Provinces; Darbhanga, Gaya, Manbhum, Patna, and Saran in Bihar; Ambala and Rohtak in Punjab; and Bilaspur and Jaipur in the Central Provinces (Gillion 1959: 147). While the colonial regime in Fiji recruited physically fit men, they deliberately neglected the number of female in take, thereby creating competition for sexual partners on the sugar plantations in Fiji, resulting in suicide and murder. Brij Lal (1983: 102) notes that in the case of Fiji, there were altogether 13,696 females and 31,458 males transported during the period of indentured emigration. Indian women who emigrated to Fiji were believed to be fleeing social scorn in India. However in Fiji, women were sexually exploited by both male labourers as well as colonial overseers. The result was high suicide rate and violence against women. Between 1885 and 1920, 96 indentured immigrants in Fiji were murdered of whom 68 were women and 28 men. (Lal 1985: 137). It is the plight of the indentured women that provided anti-indenture activists with "moral" and "ethical" grounds to condemn the labour traffic. Two most publicised stories of European sexual oppression in Fiji were related to attacks on Indian women Kunti (Lal 1985:55) and Naraini. (Lal 1983: 97-98) The anti-indenture activists in India -Totaram Sanadhya, Indian journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, C.F. Andrews and Mohandas Gandhi-pressured the British government for an immediate end to indenture. To avoid further criticisms, the British colonial administrators abrogated the labour scheme in 1916. The end of indenture was a relief to the anti-indenture activists. But what was going to happen to the Indians in Fiji? A few Indians from Fiji returned to India, but most stayed in the colony and established permanent homes. Once the Indians were released from the authoritarian labour system, they diverted their attention to political and social issues including demands for better living conditions, wages, and political representation. For the Indians in Fiji the struggle was now for recognition of their labour and self respect.

In 1916, the Indians were partly successful in their struggle for political representation. Responding to the pressure from the Fiji Indians and India, the government appointed a colonial sympathiser, Badri Maharaj, to the Legislative Council. A nominated Indian member from the Indian community in Fiji provided hope to the colonial authorities that India would resume sending labourers to Fiji, despite anti-indenture activism by Indian nationalists. However, by 1920, India exhausted all avenues for acquiring labour and the indentured system became a thing of the past. Free from the shackles of indenture,

Indians in Fiji became a growing social and economic force and organizational skills acquired during indenture were quickly replicated to organise in other sectors of the economy.

Indian Activism in Fiji

Among the activists who came from India to Fiji was the lawyer Manilal Maganlal in 1912. As a champion of Indian rights abroad, Manilal established in Fiji the Indian Imperial Association, which assisted in providing social programs for the general improvement of the Indian community in Fiji. The activities of Manilal created uneasiness among the affluent Europeans, who saw him as an agent of Indian nationalism, attempting to stir up revolt among Indians in Fiji. In a letter to *The Fiji Times and Herald*, the Europeans complained that the Indian Imperial Association was a “quasi-secret society” consisting of Manilal, George Suchit, Ram Singh, and about a dozen of their personal friends (Gillion 1977: 22). What probably bothered the Europeans most was the challenge to the municipal ordinance, which was amended by the European settlers to make voter registration conditional upon the ratepayers proving literacy in the English language. Manilal struck at the heart of the colonial organisation that excluded Indians through imposition of a racist precondition. By 15 January 1920, Indian discontent with the colonial government exploded in a strike at the Public Works Department in Suva. The strike escalated as Indians protested among other things highlighted increasing poverty in their community as a result of a rise in the cost of living during and after World War I and when the colonial authorities refused to acquiesce to the demands of the workers, the Indian strikers turned to sabotage. Telephone wires between Suva and Nausori were disconnected, bridges were sabotaged, and on 12 February 1920, police with fixed bayonets dispersed a stone-throwing crowd at Nausori near Suva.

In the 1920 strike, indigenous Fijians were enlisted to assist the colonial government in restoring law and order as the colonial regime moved quickly against the strike leaders and Manilal was deported. In a dispatch to London, Fiji’s Governor Rodwell justified the deportation order by stating that Manilal was “regarded beyond all reasonable doubt as the prime mover in the agitation”(Tinker 1974: 237). Manilal was removed but a more serious trouble was brewing in the canefields of Western Viti Levu. In January 1921 another strike started in the sugar cane producing areas of the western part of Fiji. The strike was led by a *Sadhu* (Hindu priest) Basist Muni. He challenged the hegemony of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and asked for wage increases across the board for all Indian labourers. Sadhu argued that the CSR made huge profit by exploiting Indian workers and caused widespread poverty and social problems in the community by paying low wages. The colonial regime intervened and persuaded the CSR to grant moderate wage increases. But the strike, which lasted for nearly six months, quickly took a more political posture. Basist Muni demanded an unconditional return of Manilal from exile and called for an immediate release of 1920 strikers from the Suva prison. The colonial authorities labeled *Sadhu* as an anti-government agitator and he was also deported from Fiji to India. Before his deportation, Muni predicted that lightning would strike the government building in Suva and burn it to the ground. The prediction miraculously came true as the Fiji government building was desecrated by lightning soon after Muni’s

deportation. As a result, Muni became regarded as a saint among many Indians in Fiji. The two strikes nevertheless hardened colonial attitudes towards the Indians as Europeans turned to indigenous Fijian chiefs for assistance and support. At first, the Indians were seen by the colonial government as sugar producing machines but after the strikes of 1920-21, the Indians became a political “problem” that could contaminate the whole island with anti-establishment agitation and ideas, mostly imported from the Indian subcontinent. Fiji’s colonial administrators argued persistently that Indians wanted to establish an Indian government in Fiji. In 1921, there were 60,634 Indians in the colony of Fiji but by 1936, the number had increased to 85,002 (Tinker 1974: 199). The strikes of 1920-21 politicised the Indian community with calls for elected Indian members to the Legislative Council. Badri Maharaj, the first Indian appointee to the Council, was despised by the Indian community as a traitor, because of his close affiliation with the colonial administration. By 1929, the colonial government conceded to the Indian demand and permitted the election of Indians Vishnu Deo, James Ramchandrar and Parmanand Singh to the Legislative Council of Fiji. After assuming office, the newly elected Indian members demanded common roll franchise based on representation by population as opposed to the existing communal appointments by the Governor. Moreover, Indian members argued for equality with the Europeans, who expressed concern that the Indians wanted to use their numerical superiority to obtain political power. The Indians, however, were not after political control but did want a system where their political aspirations were realized. By leaving the Indians on the fringes of political participation, the colonial administration heightened their sense of insecurity, which was building up since the end of indenture. According to historian Doug Munro, the agitations by the Indians against the colonial authorities were to regain their respect (*izzat*) following the hell (*narak*) of plantation life by seeking political equality and (unsuccessfully) demanding common roll voting system (Munro: 2005: 95).

Internal divisions within Indo-Fijians

Indians in Fiji were united despite their diversity of origin and caste to end the indenture system. However, after the collapse of the indenture, Indians, especially the Hindus in Fiji, engaged in acrimonious debates on morality and religion. The two groups that emerged from the Fiji Hindu community were *Arya Samaj* and *Sanatan Dharam*. The *Arya Samaj* was a reform movement aimed at changing the Hindu community in Fiji from priest dominance and expensive religious rituals, which characterised conservative Hinduism of *Sanatan Dharam* in India. The *Samaj* was in favour of widow remarriage, against child marriage, and scornful of almost entire corpus of Hindu myths, epics and scriptures. The *Sanatan Dharam* on the other hand advocated respect for a wide range of Hindu religious writings, support for child marriage, criticism of widow remarriage (Kelly 1991: 5). Pundit Vishnu Deo and K.B. Singh were prominent *Arya Samaj* activists who challenged the foundations of priest dominated *Sanatan Dharam* in Fiji. The *Arya Samaj* project in Fiji, as in India, began with missionaries and soon the *Samajis* started spreading their religious ideas with the establishment of the newspaper *Fiji Samachar* in 1923 (Kelly 1991: 133). *Samaji* missionary such as Shri Krishna Sharma extensively toured the country and held various public meetings, where a blend of oratory and poetry were used to emphasise the utility of educating women and learning English. The

Sanatan Dharam members were concerned about *Samaj* activities and in an attempt to retain support, the *Sanatanis* challenged the *Samajis* to a public debate on religion and morality. During the debate, the *Samaj* activists, influenced by the communal politics in India, made racist remarks towards the Muslim community in Fiji and in 1929, the *Arya Samaj* called for a forceful conversion of Muslims to Hinduism, creating grave concern among the Muslim community as Muslim leaders looked towards the colonial government for intervention in a growing inter communal tension. The *Samaj* politics was greatly influenced by the events in India. From 1925, India was in a grip of a bitter communal feud between Hindus and Muslims after *Samajis* accused the Muslims of converting Hindus and launched the *Suddhi* Movement to purify Hindus converted to Islam. According to Zeenath Kausar, “major riots took place in 1925 in Calcutta, and in 1928 in Bombay and in the 1930s in Kanpur” (Kausar 2006: 354). Not only the Hindus but the Muslims in Fiji as well imported their religious organisation from India. The Fiji Muslim League was formed in 1926 and according to Lawson, “the Fiji Muslim League argued that the *Arya Samajis* were anti-Muslim and accused the *Samaji* leaders of hate mongering” (Lawson 1991: 146).

Sanatan Dharam missionaries from India, Ram Chandra Sharma and Murarilal Shastri, sympathised with Muslim fears of *Samaji* extremism and urged Hindus to exercise religious tolerance in Fiji. The colonial government saw the growing division between the two Hindu groups as an opportunity to split the Hindu community in Fiji and it quickly associating itself with the *Sanatanis* and supported moderate views expressed by *Sanatani* leaders. At a special gathering of *Samajis* and *Sanatanis*, Pundit Vishnu Deo ridiculed Hindu deities and published what the colonial government considered to be obscene excerpts from Hindu scriptures. Vishnu Deo was charged and forced to vacate his seat in the Legislative Assembly. Nevertheless, the differences between the *Sanatanis* and *Samajis* continued throughout the late 1920s. By the 1930s, the debate among Indians in Fiji became increasingly focused on Fiji born as opposed to Indians born in India as colonial government moved legislations to allow emigration from India of merchants and traders. The debate on Fiji-born and India-born started to once again split the Indian community in Fiji. In the 1920s, two known Indian political leaders, A.D. Patel and S.B. Patel came to Fiji and championed unrestricted immigration from India. But Indo-Fijians objected and started to emphasise differences between descendants of indenture and new migrants. After growing protests from Indo-Fijians, the colonial government by 1930 moved to restrict free migrants and appointed a committee to examine its open immigration policy towards India. The anti-immigration campaign was led by Fiji-born Parmanand Singh, who argued persistently on the economic strengthen of the new migrants and subsequently their ability to dominate Indo-Fijians. The India born money lenders, in particular, were accused of unscrupulous practices and fraud against the descendants of indentured labourers. Since immigrants from India came with capital, they were in a structurally advantageous position, especially in electoral contests and this created further animosity and concerns among Indo-Fijians.

World War II and the Indo-Fijians

Debates over morality, religion and immigration were overtaken by the events of World War II. On one hand, the militarisation of elements of the Indian nationalist movement in India created concerns within the colonial government about the loyalty of Indo-Fijians to the Crown. Whilst Indo-Fijians or Fiji-born were against the Nazi and Japanese expansionism, the India-born in Fiji, after engineering themselves to prominent positions in the farming sector, saw the war as an opportunity to strike at the heart of the colonial administration. In fact, statements by some Indian nationalist politicians such as Subhas Chandra Bose and the formation of the Indian National Army (INA) further eroded the credibility of Indo-Fijian leaders in Fiji. Nevertheless, the colonial government wanted to enlist Indo-Fijians for military service in the Solomon Islands, but the recruitment of Indo-Fijian soldiers was short-lived. In 1939, *Arya Samaj* supporters formed *Kisan Sangh*: a cane grower's organization, which worked with the CSR to improve wages and working conditions of farmers. However, some Indo-Fijian farmers and leaders, particularly A.D. Patel and Rudranand, denounced the *Kisan Sangh* and formed a rival militant *Maha Sangh* in 1941. In the middle of the war, *Kisan Sangh* started negotiations with the CSR on wage issues and by 1943, efforts on a settlement collapsed as rival *Maha Sangh* accused the *Kisan Sangh* of failing farmers and called for an immediate strike. The manipulation by *Maha Sangh* of the farmers and the strike during the height of the war convinced both the colonial government and the indigenous Great Council of Chiefs that Indo-Fijians and in particular their leaders were disloyal and manipulative. Worse perhaps was the refusal by many Indo-Fijians to join the army as opposed to indigenous Fijians who contributed heroically to the war effort. Not only did Indo-Fijians refuse to enlist for service overseas in protest over unequal pay and conditions, they also engaged in a long and bitter strike in sugar areas over cane prices (Lawson 1991: 167). The prevailing mood of the authorities in Fiji towards the Indo-Fijians is articulated by colonial writer J.C. Furnas.

Indians usually disdains marriage with the Fijian, relies too much on the new Indian nationalism for emotional ballast, and spend much of his political energy toward social and economic gains, directly at the Fijian's expense. During World War II, Indians made unhappily sure of being detested by staging large-scale strikes in the sugar fields. As yet, only a limited stratum of Indian young people tries to consider themselves people of Fiji, rather than Indians justifiably sulking under exploitation in a foreign land (Furnas 1989: 109).

Furnas argued that indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian interests were antagonistic and that Indo-Fijian non-participation in the war was due to a lack of attachment to Fiji. Forty-four years later, this argument was re-invented during the 1987 coups by the *Taukei Movement*, which argued in favour of the removal of the "Indian-dominated" Bavadra Government from power. It was after the war that Europeans in Fiji started emphasising that the Indo-Fijian population boom could result in Indo-Fijian political domination. European members of the Legislative Council- A.A. Ragg, R.W. Robson, and A.W. Macmillan- suggested repatriating all Indo-Fijians to India, beginning with sixteen-year-old males and fourteen year old females (Lal 1992: 143). The efforts of Europeans in Fiji to repatriate Indo-Fijians failed but as anticipated, the European members of the legislative Council, realizing post war population realities, started debates on the Deed of

Cession of 1874, arguing that any transfer of political power would be from the colonial government to the indigenous chiefs as it was agreed by the Crown before taking over the administration of the colony in 1874.

Indo-Fijians in Retreat

The strike in the cane fields in 1960 had all the hallmarks of the 1943 strike. This strike became political when A.D. Patel pushed for security of tenure on land leased to Indo-Fijian farmers by the indigenous land owning units. Moreover, A.D. Patel advocated a common roll electoral system and independence, which was seen by the newly established indigenous lobby, the Fijian Association, as another ploy by Indians to use its majority to force political change on indigenous Fijians. In 1964, A.D. Patel, James Madhavan, and S.M. Koya formed the Federation Party. Despite overwhelming support for the Federation among Indo-Fijians, some Indo-Fijian leaders attacked A.D. Patel for forcing the issue of independence on indigenous Fijians. Indo-Fijians, particularly the descendants of *girmitiyas*, demanded full Fiji citizenship and political rights following independence and further suggested that those on Indian passport to be placed on temporary visa. Such calls from within the Indo-Fijian community caused bitter divisions and concerns, especially among Indian migrants who came to Fiji after indenture. Debates on morality, religion, immigration, independence, and disputes in the cane fields left an impression of a community divided along social, cultural and linguistic groups, united only occasionally by its insecurities, an abiding sense of injustice, and the political equality and self respect (Macdonald 1982: 182). In 1969, A.D. Patel passed away and the mantle of Indo-Fijian leadership fell on Fiji-born Siddiq Koya, who came under immense political pressure to continue with the hardline politics of Patel. By 1970, it became clear that Koya was willing to work with indigenous Fijian leadership, resulting in the finalisation of the 1970 Constitution. Eventhough the constitution was communally based, it provided equal political participation, based on First Past the Post Voting System.

Post Independence Indo-Fijian Politics

Under the leadership of Siddiq Koya, Indo-Fijians entered the 1972 election as a divided community. Despite attempts to entice indigenous Fijian votes, the National Federation Party failed to win majority of seats in the new parliament of Fiji. Following the election defeat, the party pressured Prime Minister Ratu Mara to implement common roll electoral system. The Indo-Fijian intent behind the push for common roll was essentially to entrench political equality but indigenous nationalists saw the move as an attempt to disenfranchise and politically insubordinate the indigenous community and alienate indigenous land. By 1977, National Federation Party secured itself as the communal voice of Indo-Fijians in Fiji and in a surprise turn of events, the Federation won the 1977 general elections. The National Federation Party victory was short-lived as divisions and Koya's own indecisions and swift maneuvers by the indigenous Governor General Ratu Sir George Cakobau shattered the Indo-Fijian dream of political equality. Further more, for two-days, Federation party officials argued relentlessly on next steps and one of the newly elected Indo-Fijian members, Jai Ram Reddy, publicly stated that there was

nobody in the National Federation Party with the stature to lead the country (Ali 1979: 79). Unable to form a government, the National Federation Party fractured along cultural and religious lines afterwards. The party was unable to function and as a result lost the second general election in 1977 Ratu Mara's Alliance Party clawed back indigenous support to win government yet once again. Immediately afterwards, Jai Ram Reddy became the leader of the National Federation Party after Siddiq Koya lost his seat due to factional in-fighting. Reddy was unable to stop the political machinery of Ratu Mara's Alliance Party and lost the 1982 elections, even after forming an alliance with the regional indigenous separatist movement, the Western United Front (WUF).

By 1985, Indo-Fijian frustration with the National Federation Party had grown and a new political party, the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), was formed by Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian trade unionists. In the 1987 elections, the FLP formed a coalition with the National Federation Party and successfully dislodged Ratu Mara's Alliance Party from power. The success for multiracial unity was shattered by the coups of 1987. Indo-Fijians were targeted by the coup supporters at all levels of government and pro-indigenous Fijian *Taukei Movement* rioted in the streets of Suva. Indo-Fijians in large numbers migrated overseas as the Fiji military with the support of Methodist fundamentalists imposed Sunday ban. The multiracial 1970 constitution was quickly torn up and in its place a pro-indigenous Fijian 1990 Constitution was implemented. The events of 1987 decimated the Indo-Fijian community. While many skilled professionals migrated, others became frightened of political participation. A new racial contract was drawn up in the name of indigenous rights as Indo-Fijians were relegated to permanent opposition in the new parliament, which convened following the May 1992 general elections.

Realising that the political superstructure has become exclusionary, Indo-Fijian leaders focused entirely on the sugar industry. Militancy in the cane field, a hallmark of Indo-Fijian political history after indenture, returned with the assistance of the new National Farmers Union (NFU). In 1976, the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA) (Lal 2000: 111-134) provided a new lease of life to the Indo-Fijian farmers, but by 1997 this lease ran out. In total 45 agricultural leases expired in 1997; 157 in 1998; 209 in 1999; 1622 in 2000; and 1762 in 2001. Indo-Fijians remained divided in the 1990s, splitting votes evenly between the National Federation Party and the FLP. However by 1999, Indo-Fijians had snubbed the leader of the National Federation Party, Jai Ram Reddy, for engaging his party in a political partnership with Sitiveni Rabuka, who remains accused of causing enormous pain and suffering to the Indo-Fijian community in 1987. Interestingly, it was Sitiveni Rabuka who fought off indigenous hardliners within his party to push through, with the support of Indo-Fijians, an internationally acceptable 1997 Constitution. It was under this constitution that the FLP won the 1999 general elections and Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. However, on 19 May 2000, armed gunmen incapacitated the Government of Mahendra Chaudhry (Lal 2001: 281-293). The crisis created by the armed hijacking of parliament had far reaching impact for Indo-Fijians in remote and rural areas, where support for the armed insurrection was strongest. A number of Indo-Fijians were attacked by indigenous Fijians in rural Fiji, including Muaniweni, Dawasamu, Wainibokasi, Dreketi, Korovou,

and Tailevu.¹ A Tailevu farmer, whose home was ransacked and his family tied up and beaten, was shocked to learn that the indigenous thugs had detailed knowledge of his property and further alleged that such information could only have been provided by other Indo-Fijians. Many Indo-Fijians fled with their belongings to the Fiji Girit Centre in Lautoka. The Centre, which was the symbol of celebrating Indo-Fijian culture in Fiji, was transformed into a refugee camp.

After the August 2001 elections, an indigenous Fijian nationalist government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase came to power in Fiji and immediately after taking office implemented the Social Justice Act 2001, which was analysed by the Fiji Human Rights Commission as discriminatory against Indo-Fijians. According to Cottrell and Ghai, “the Commission analysed all 29 ‘programmes’ appended to the Social Justice Act and concluded that eight were acceptable as non discriminatory on racial grounds; three were acceptable on racial ground but suffered from gender imbalance; nine were discriminatory in racial terms” (Cottrell & Ghai 2007: 240-41). In 2004, the Indo-Fijians celebrated 125 years since their ancestors landed on the shores of Fiji from the Indian subcontinent. Brij Lal noted that the pride of the descendants of *giritiyas* is replaced by despair and dejection. Since the coups of 1987, which deposed a government in which Indo-Fijians had appropriate representation for the first time in their history, some 80,000 people have left, the best and the brightest, taking with them skills and talents the country can ill afford to lose (Lal 2004: 3). Satendra Nandan writing in the *Stolen Worlds* argues passionately that it was indentured labourers and their industrious descendants who contributed in protecting the indigenous Fijian way of life. According to Nandan:

I know of no people anywhere who, as a migrant community, gave whatever they had to protect the way of life of an indigenous community; who never killed single native person to steal an acre of their land; or attempted to convert or crush their systems of belief and faith; who through their toil sweat and tears, made a bankrupt colony into a prosperous country (Nandan 2005: 7).

Auckland based writer Rajendra Prasad argues that Indo-Fijians were victimised since indenture and this continues with the massive displacement of Indo-Fijian farmers from land leased from Fijians, unemployment, the rising cost of goods and resultant poverty, all of which contributes to a sudden rise in suicide in the Indo-Fijian community (Prasad 2006: 262). Moreover, the Indo-Fijian insecurity was further heightened by the non-inclusion of the FLP in a multiparty cabinet from 2001 to 2006 as stipulated under section 99 of the 1997 Constitution. After the May 2006 elections, Prime Minister Qarase invited nine FLP members to join the cabinet. Before the 2006 election, there were reports that the approval rating of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase had significantly improved among Indo-Fijians who largely saw his government’s policies as promoting indigenous nationalism similar to the ideas espoused by the George Speight group in 2000. Shailendra Singh and Som Prakash (2006: 72) quoted the July 2006 *Fiji Times* Tebbutt Poll, where one thousand and twenty eight adults were polled in six districts

¹ John McEvoy, *Columban Fathers*, Nasese, Suva, Fiji, pp. 1-5. Also see Social Action for human Rights, “The Civilian Takeover- Martial Law-Interim Administration and its effects on Indians.” Lautoka, Fiji, pp.1-14.

between 28 to 31 July 2006. Qarase who was championing the multiparty concept scored a 53 per cent approval rating among Indo-Fijians. However, in August 2006, Qarase insisted on reintroducing bills which the Indo-Fijians felt violated their political rights and as a result his popularity declined as some Indo-Fijians pressured members of the FLP to withdraw from the multiparty government.

Since there was no framework for a multiparty government, tensions between the SDL party and the FLP frequently flared up. Prime Minister Qarase argued that the multiparty cabinet be governed by the policy direction of the majority party in the House whereas the FLP leader ordered the FLP members in cabinet to vote on cabinet policies along party lines. On Wednesday 22 November 2006, four FLP cabinet ministers voted against the 2007 Budget in the parliament. The FLP leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, had ordered that all nine FLP cabinet ministers in cabinet must be present for the vote on the budget and vote against it as agreed to by the party. However, five FLP cabinet members were granted leave of absence by Prime Minister Qarase while the other four followed the party directive and voted against the budget. Chaudhry was clearly unhappy after the budget passed with 40 votes to 26. On Friday 24 November 2006, Prime Minister Qarase attempted to salvage multiparty government and came up with a compromise, which was rejected by Chaudhry. Qarase proposed that he will allow the 4 FLP cabinet ministers to stay in the cabinet provided the FLP did not take disciplinary action against the other five. Adding to the multiparty woes was the outburst by FLP cabinet minister, Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, who attacked the Fiji Police for raiding the President's Office on 23 November in search of documents allegedly incriminating the Commander of the Fiji military, Frank Bainimarama (*Fiji TV*, 27 November 2006). On 28 November, three FLP members, Atu Bain, Prem Chand and Vijay Singh and two cabinet ministers, Krishna Datt and Poseci Bune, were expelled from the FLP (*The Fiji Daily Post*, 29 November, 2006).

On 9 January 2007, the FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry was sworn in as the interim Minister for Finance in the interim government, which was established by the military following a military coup on 6 December 2006 (*Fijilive*, 9 January 2007). The involvement of two FLP members, Mahendra Chaudhry and Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, in the military installed interim government have led indigenous Fijian nationalists to conclude that the FLP was one of the party behind the overthrow of the Qarase government. Moreover, Indo-Fijians welcomed the coup and this added to racial tensions. On 28 March 2007, the *Fiji TV* asked people in Suva about the impact of the coup on their lives. Indo-Fijians interviewed were largely happy with the takeover while indigenous Fijians refused to comment on camera fearing backlash from the army (*Fiji TV*, 28 March 2007). Not only in Fiji but many Indo-Fijians overseas saw the coup as a necessary intervention to circumvent the ethno-nationalist policies of the Qarase government. There is a belief among Indo-Fijians that the commander of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces Commodore Frank Bainimarama will provide political equality to the Indo-Fijians within a non racial policy framework. In April 2007, the interim government released *A People's Charter for Change and Progress* with the objective "to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally-vibrant and united, well governed, truly democratic nation that seeks

progress and prosperity through merit-based equality of opportunity and peace” (*A People’s Charter for Change and Progress*, April 2007, p. 4).

While Indo-Fijians support the initiatives of the interim government for a non-racial government and a political future based on equality, there are fears that racial divisions may have widened as a result of the events of December 2006. Some 80 per cent the indigenous Fijians supported the Qarase government and many within the community fear that the interim government’s policy on land may disadvantage indigenous landowners who may be forced to provide land to the Indo-Fijians on generous conditions. More over, indigenous chiefs and the growing indigenous middle class fear that they would be pressured to share political power with the Indo-Fijians, who may end up dominating them politically. Indo-Fijian leadership has a massive challenge on its hands not only to form effective political partnership with the indigenous Fijian leaders but to educate and influence the indigenous grassroot in accepting political equality. The involvement of the FLP in the military backed interim government and the Indo-Fijian support for the December 2006 coup have created an unfavourable perception among the indigenous Fijians of an Indo-Fijian counter-coup as a response to the three earlier race-based coups where the political rights of the community were significantly diminished. If such perceptions are not resolved, Fiji will continue on the path of endless racial conflict, defeating the Indo-Fijian drive for political equality.

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