

ETHNIC RELATIONS IN FIJI: Threats & Opportunities

Selected Proceedings from the Dialogue on Ethnic Relations
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Foreword

Ethnic relations in Fiji has been an integral part of our social and political landscape and would perceptibly continue to be so in future. It would not be incorrect to say that ethnic relations has probably had the greatest impact on Fiji's development trajectory, particularly in its post- independence era, and remains one of the biggest challenges facing the nation and its future.

Ethnic relations has been a complex problem requiring the concerted efforts of both state and non-state actors to address. Since coming into power following the December 2006 political takeover, the Bainimarama Government vowed to undertake major reforms to remove institutionalised or state-sanctioned racism, and create a state and society that is free from ethnic discrimination. To this end, the Bainimarama Governments (both unelected and elected) have taken some decisive steps such as revamping government's distributive policies (in terms of education, welfare assistance, poverty alleviation programs, etc.) and making constitutional and legal reforms to ensure that every Fijian citizen has equal rights and privileges (such as single national voting roll, common national identity, etc.).

Some of the reforms, however, have been controversial and have been met with resistance from different segments of society. Perhaps one of the most glaring examples of a reform that would be deemed positive by the prevailing universal values/norms but which has been a very contentious issue in Fiji has been the imposition of a common

national identity. Government passed a law that every Fiji citizen is will be officially known as “Fijian”. A significant proportion of indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) perceive this law as a usurpation of their group identity. The Bainimarama Government has brushed off criticisms against a common name as politically motivated, but it is important for government and other actors to address this issue seriously given the apparent degree of discontent it has created.

It is disconcerting that many reforms undertaken by the government with the intent of removing structural racism and improving race relations appear to have had the opposite effect. Some reforms have created resentment, have given rise to radical views and have had a polarising effect on society. The government appears to believe that with time, the new reforms will become accepted in society, and multiracial ideologies will become mainstream. However, if the results of 2018 elections are any indication, this does not appear to be happening.

The government also seems to believe that if an issue is removed from the public discourse, it will become a non-issue. This seems to be the reason critical discourse on issues pertaining to ethnicity are not encouraged, and even quelled on some occasions. However, as a peacebuilding organisation, and as a result of our peacebuilding analyses, Dialogue Fiji holds a different view.

We believe that an ethno-blind approach can be as damaging as an overly ethnocentric approach. It is problematic when a government approaches everything in terms of ethnicity (as the Qarase

government was often accused of) and it is equally problematic when a government refuses to acknowledge the existence (or significance) of racial divisions and its impacts and dynamics in a society. By refusing to even release census data on ethnicity, the Bainimarama Government has demonstrated the extent to which it will go in refusing to recognise race as an important variable in our society.

Building a multiracial society on principles of fairness, equity, mutual respect and universal tolerance cannot be simply achieved through legislation. People will, of course, conform as long as the threat of punitive measures remain, but the multiracial ideologies and values would not be sustained in the long term. A change in governing regime could see the legislative safeguards changed very quickly. This the reason why the changes need to be carefully nurtured, and the attitudinal and behavioural changes required in society to sustain these transformations in the long term need to be brought about. This can never be achieved by government acting alone, and the role of neutral, non-state actors in this is critical, such as in peacebuilding at the grassroots level.

A first step to addressing the resentment and lack of trust and understanding emanating from some of the government's more contentious reforms is greater dialogue. To this end, the Dialogue on Ethnic Relations was an initial attempt by a CSO actor to put these contentious issues on the table for deliberation, and attempt to provide a space to stakeholders representing different segments of the major ethnic groups in Fiji to talk freely about these issues. While this

initial dialogue did not aspire to build consensus on the contentious issues involved, it was nonetheless satisfying to note the convergences of participants on issues such as the common national identity.

The Dialogue Forum consisted of a number of panel discussions and group dialogues on the selected themes pertaining to ethnic relations in Fiji. There were two panels run every day with 3-4 speakers from civil society, academia and government institutions. Each speaker was allocated around 10 minutes for his/her presentation, followed by a 15 minutes Q and A session for each panel.

Triggers for group dialogues were framed from points raised and arguments made in the panel discussions. The participants were divided into diverse groups, enabling deep engagements across social, political and ideological divides. The facilitated deliberations employed dialogue tools such as world café to ensure that all participants were able to fully engage on the various issues raised.

The following chapters provide a selection of presentations by the panelists who spoke at the dialogue. A number of these are verbatim records of the oral presentations made by the panelists which were minimally edited for syntactical consistencies. Others are more developed submissions by the authors. We hope that these presentations provide a varied and dynamic take on the most critical issues impacting ethnic relations in the country today, and would be useful for policy makers, scholars and practitioners in their various endeavours to address ethnic relations in Fiji.

Welcome Address

NILESH LAL

Executive Director, Dialogue Fiji

The Acting Prime Minister Honourable Jone Usamate, the European Union Ambassador His Excellency Julian Wilson, other members of the diplomatic corp, members of academia, fellow civil society leaders, ladies and gentlemen. It is my immense pleasure to welcome you all on behalf of Dialogue Fiji, and our other implementing partners the, Citizens Constitutional Forum and Conciliation Resources, to the Dialogue on Ethnic Relations. I would like to specially acknowledge the presence of the Acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Jone Usamate, who recognised the importance of this initiative and took time off his very busy schedule to be here.

For us Fijians, ethnicity or race has been an issue that we have grappled with for a long time. In fact, it is arguably the single most important issue that has had a marked impact on the social, political and economic development of this country. For a long time, we have struggled to come together as one people, belonging to a great nation, and see beyond our differences and group interests. It has, however, been very encouraging for those of us in the civil society who have championed multiracialism and equality, to see the Bainimarama Government take some decisive steps to end racial discrimination in this country.

However, we have also observed that there are significant problems with the implementation of some of the policies and reforms, which have negated the impact of these policies, and, in some instances, even had the opposite impact. As neutral and independent actors, NGOs have an important role in educating the masses about these policies and in creating the requisite social changes to sustain the positive reforms.

For those issues that remain contentious, there is a need for dialogue at different levels of our society to eventually build consensus on these. That is one of the key reasons Dialogue Fiji has convened this dialogue. You will notice from the programme that we will deliberate on contentious issues such as the common national identity, indigenous rights, political representation, etc. These are extremely sensitive issues which very few NGOs would take up given the context, but as a responsible peacebuilding organisation sincerely committed to improving peace prospects in our society, we took the bold step of convening this dialogue to initiate deliberation on these issues, especially across social, political, ethnic and religious divides. We hope that we will have some significant resolutions on some of these issues by the end of this dialogue.

This dialogue is also timely as we approach the general elections scheduled for next year. We encounter an intensification of divisive rhetoric around elections, which is extremely damaging to our fragile social fabric. We are hopeful that we will have some significant undertaking from key societal actors on how to curb these divisive rhetoric and strengthen our social fabric. I'm sure that all of us are

aware of the negative stereotyping, the prejudiced remarks and bigoted views that we encounter in everyday conversations—on social media and on blogsites—but most of us do not have the political will to do anything about it. I am hopeful that at the end of this dialogue, all of us will have a greater commitment to ending this, using our different spheres of influence, starting perhaps from our homes. Then only can we ensure that the future generations do not perceive every issue on racial lines.

To conclude, I'd like to again thank everyone for your commitment to this dialogue process. I would also like to specially acknowledge our NGO partners CCF and CR for the great support rendered. I would also like to thank the government and the honourable Acting Prime Minister for their participation. Once again, a very hearty welcome to all participants and we look forward, enthusiastically, to some great deliberations on the biggest issue confronting our society.

Vinaka vakalevu

Keynote Address

JONE USAMATE

Acting Prime Minister, Government of Fiji

Your Excellency, Julian Wilson, the Ambassador for the European Union; the organizers and participants; it's a pleasure for me to be here this morning at this social dialogue. I was here not too many years ago, at a dialogue of this nature. I was invited as a participant, and it's good to be here to be with you as you discuss this very, very important issue; an issue that has plagued developments in our country over the past few decades and continues to plague us today.

It's great that we have you all sitting together to discuss this issue and to address it because ethnic relations is always an important issue. As I was getting ready for this forum, I read through the documents provided to me, and I realised that there is a difference between race and ethnicity. I never knew that until I started googling it after getting the documents for this event. So I've learned something new by just being invited here. But in Fiji we tend to mix these things (race and ethnicity) up. And it is not only Fiji, it's something that is relevant for all the countries.

The divisions that we've had in the past, there will be a bit of kerosene thrown on it, and there will be a lot of oxygen put on it and it will flare up again. These things are bound to happen so it's good that we have this dialogue. As a government, we welcome efforts taken to address

the issue of ethnic relations to make sure that we can have strong and positive relations in the country. I thank Dialogue Fiji for putting together this dialogue to address this particular issue. It is always important for us to dialogue and to be able to listen to others' opinion, to think about it, to reflect upon it, because it can also have an effect on our own opinion. Dialogue allows us to get to grips on issues that impact us every day.

I feel that dialogue can do two things; it can either destroy or build. And it is a choice for us on how we deal with dialogue and the way we participate in dialogue. At the end of the day we must always choose dialogue that builds, and I am hopeful that with the design of the program, that is what your intention is—dialogue that builds. I know also that it's always important to have dialogues at all levels of our society. In parliament we dialogue at a particular level; here we'll dialogue at another level. Ultimately, the dialogue will need to be taken down to our society and that is always going to be a challenge.

I see from the design of the program that on the third day you hope to come up with a plan of action. I believe that you will have an approach to take that dialogue down to the lowest levels of our society. I am grateful that we have faith-based organisations here because in ethnic issues and race relations, they play a crucial role. Unfortunately, some of our religious leaders, sometimes do not practice being balanced in terms of ethnicity.

I was asked to talk about the state's perspective, which is very clear—we are always guided by the constitution, which basically sets out what

government is there to achieve. I was looking through the constitution yesterday, and I was particularly struck by the preamble, which starts with, “We the people of Fiji”. So already, in that sentence is captured the idea of unity, the idea of getting the different ethnicities, the different racial groupings in our country, to come together as one and to see themselves as part of the nation of Fiji. At the bottom, the constitution states that we are all Fijians united by common interests.

We will be diverse in many different things but the idea of unity—that we are all Fijians—becomes very critical. And because we are all Fijians, we are all equal under the law. We are all entitled to the benefits of what we are able to produce as a country, which needs to be shared equally amongst all citizens. It is critical that through unity, we build a better Fiji—that is the vision of government. The one thing that has led to our downfall in the past has been the ethnic divisions. This has plagued Fijian society and hindered our national development. I have listened to a lot of economists talking about our past, and in terms of economic development, whenever we had these racial issues coming to the fore, our economy goes down. I remember seeing Dr. Wadan Narsey present a graph once where he showed that whenever these things flare up, the economy goes down. So there is a clear link with our economy and an impact on the ability of government to deliver services.

When we’re looking at the preamble of the constitution, what is very important is the part that comes immediately after: “We the people”. It talks about recognizing the indigenous people, their ownership of *iTaukei* lands, and their unique culture, customs, traditions and

languages. Recognising the indigenous people of Rotuma, their ownership of Rotuman lands and their unique culture, customs, traditions, and language. Also recognising the descendants of the indentured labourers from British India and the Pacific Islands, as well as the descendants of settlers and immigrants to Fiji, their cultures, traditions and languages. We not only want unity but we recognise diversity and we recognise the strength in diversity. We recognize the unique cultures of the *iTaukei* and the Rotumans. That is very important for the state. By the same token, we recognise the unique make up of all the various ethnic components that make up our society.

We want unity but we recognize the differences and we value both. That is going to be our challenge. Because sometimes when you value too much, this diversity, it can be at the expense of unity—the unity can downgrade the diversity. So it's always a question of finding the right balance between these two. Under the Bainimarama government, and followed up by the Fiji First government, we have seen significant reforms to address institutionalised racism under a common national identity. We've talked about the merit-based system, merit-based recruitment, merit-based scholarship-type systems, and the non-racial electoral system. That should be the basis upon which we choose our leaders, rather than whether we come from the same race or the same part of Fiji, or the same religion. That is going to be quite a challenge because a lot of our people are still rooted in the old ways of thinking.

A major thing that we have tried to do in government is not allow hate speech. We do not want hate speeches in the media or in public.

Hatred has led to death and destruction in a lot of other countries. We have seen this in Rwanda, where the speeches and the media inflamed people.

Government is also focused on building strong, independent institutions, which is very important. If we have a lot of dialogue but do not have the institutions to make things happen, then it is not going to bear fruit. You need institutions to ensure accountability, transparency and impartiality. That's very important: impartiality in government and even in civil society organisations.

In this country, since colonial times, separating people into different racial groups has been practiced in the interest of the elites—whether traditional, political or business elites. Things like gender and access to social economic opportunities go beyond the issues of race. When the people are poor they are poor. It is immaterial whether they come from this or that race, or, this or that religion. These are the people whose needs we need to address. So a lot of government work is focused on these people, on the margins of society.

There is a strong role for civil society but it needs to be focused on what is in the best interest of Fiji in the long run. This issue that you're addressing today has my full support because it is important for us. In the next few months, leading up to the elections, we will see it become a major issue and it will require us to make sure that it does not become divisive.

The challenge for us, with some standing in society, is to also become models ourselves. In Fiji we tend to mix with people similar to us. So if we're talking about dialogue and policies, and we ourselves are not doing the right things, the message is mixed. It is important to dialogue but the challenge for us is also to look in the mirror, as I did when preparing for this. I looked in the mirror and I could see some of my own faults; I could see some of the things that I have been doing this past week, this past month, and I asked myself, 'when I do these things even though I think that nobody's watching, people are watching; what you do is your message to other people'.

I wish the dialogue well and I give us a challenge also to become models of what we're trying to achieve here. I hope that through this dialogue you will come up with good programs and look at the way forward.

God bless you all and I look forward to a successful dialogue.

1

Common National Identity in Fiji

JONE DAKUVULA

Activist

I am the Chair of the Panel on **Common National Identity** and the purpose of the panel is to critically examine the implementation of the Common National identity policy of the current government.

I have been given 10 minutes to introduce the subject and I will tackle this by way of a general and brief introduction to the historical background to the “**life and times**” of the issue of national identity in Fiji.

Nation, nationality, national identity and **nationalism** are related concepts that form probably the most powerful political ideology in modern history of the world. We can read in the media and watch on the TV the various manifestations of nations and national identity and expressions of nationalism in different parts of the world as the struggles of people. It is the cause of conflicts such as wars and undeclared wars, resulting in deaths, genocide and mass migrations, hunger and destruction of individuals, families, states, societies, economies and institutions. On the other hand, the “nation” also is the ideology that is the social cement that keeps people living together

in a state of peace and harmony under civilised rules and stable institutions.

In other words, national identity fosters solidarity, and preserves communities on the one hand, but it can also destroy them. At this juncture, let us consider some definitions of Nation, National Identity and Nationalism from one of the world's leading scholars of nationalism, Professor Anthony D Smith:

The Nation- "A named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive, public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland and create and disseminate common laws and custom (Smith 2003, 23-25).

National Identity- "The maintenance and continued interpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation and the identification of individuals with that heritage and pattern" (Smith). "A sense of a nation as cohesive whole as represented by distinctive, traditions, culture and language" (English Oxford Dictionary)

Nationalism- "A political movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential "nation"*.

Historical Evolution of the Nation State

National identity and nationalism are usually the creation of elites who, articulate and lead a community which identifies as a nation. The nation may achieve the status of a “nation state” recognised internationally within the system of states as sovereign or it may remain part of a state and in control of a region and given some autonomy to be in control of some resources, laws, and things that are important materially or symbolically to that nation. (e.g. Catalonia, Scotland) There are cases where a nation is split up between various recognised nation states. Kurdistan for example, is a split between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and other countries in the Middle East.

Now we try and relate these definitions briefly to historical experience in Fiji. Since the Fiji Islands became a British Colony in 1874, the *iTaukei* or indigenous Fijians (descendants of various first settlers) have through the leadership of some prominent chiefs like Ratu Seru Cakobau in the 19th century, and Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna in the first half of the 20th century, developed the concept of a Fijian or *iTaukei* nation that embraced the different chieftainships and communities. This nation, or ethnic group formation, grew from the historical event of the chiefs, who were influenced to cede Fiji to Great Britain under the Deed of Cession in 1874. The Council of Chiefs or *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* (BLV), became a consultative Council to the British Governors of Fiji.

To prevent increased conflict between *iTaukei* and European settlers over the latter's' land claims, the first Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, formed a land Commission to settle claims, and allowed alienation of

about 10 per cent of the most fertile lands. He, subsequently, introduced a system of land tenure on native land based on communal groups called *mataqali*, and created a system of indirect rule through the Chiefs, who were selected to lead the native system of administration (divided into 12 Provinces) that regulated communal living of ordinary *iTaukei* in the colonial era. In the time of Ratu Sukuna, the registration of *iTaukei* lands was developed further and the rule of chiefs at all levels consolidated.

The *iTaukei* nation adopted the Bauan dialect as the official local language, developed common ancestral myths, narratives, pattern of values influenced by Christianity, cultural ceremonies, customs, rituals, dances, patriotic chants, songs, and ceremonial rhetoric, that reinforced their identity and as a cohesive nation under colonial rule**.

The British Colonial administration encouraged this sense of subservient ethnic community, or nation, because it strengthened Fijian loyalty to the Colonial state and therefore the security of British Colonial rule in Fiji. In the Colonial legislatures the *iTaukei* were represented by Chiefs nominated by the BLV and appointed by the Governor. A native security force used to pacify parts of Fiji that had not accepted Colonial rule was the forefather of the Fiji Military Forces. This national system, with some changes over time, lasted up to Fijis' independence in 1970. The autonomous structure of native administration under the preeminent BLV, was incorporated into the Independence Constitution 1970, and successor constitutions in 1990 and 1997. The BLV nominated their representatives in the Senate Upper House. Indigenous nationalism

was a cohesive conservative and defensive ideology under the leadership of chiefs who were political leaders during the colonial period and in government after independence.

The Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia (CSR) also bought large areas of native land with Colonial Government influence on *iTaukei*. With the arrival of the indentured Indian labourers after Cession to work in CSR plantations, indigenous nationalism became a political force that asserted the principle of “paramountcy of the indigenous interest” in its relationships with the Colonial state and against the increasing numbers of Indians in Fiji. The doctrine of paramountcy of *iTaukei* interest was first espoused by the minority European settlers against the Indian community, and then it was taken over by the Fijian Chiefs with support of the Europeans. Paramountcy functioned as a shield for white privilege politically, socially and economically, and enabled the descendants of the European minority to have disproportionate representation in the parliament in the first 20 years after independence.

The paramountcy of Fijian interest later turned into a demand for control of the post-independence political and administrative state apparatus. This demand was reflected in the 1970 Constitution through the composition of Parliament with a communal electorate, representation of Chiefs in the Senate and Constitutional protection of legislations governing indigenous interest in land, fisheries and culture. This also involved basically the weighting of the institutions of the state in favour of the *iTaukei*. The *iTaukei* were predominant at the political level as well as the upper policy making administration

levels. This “bias” within the Constitutions of 1970, 1990, 1997 remained up to the decreed 2013 Constitution. The 2006 Military Coup overthrew the overtly ethnic nationalistic *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL) Government that was briefly in coalition with the predominantly Indian workers’- supported Fiji Labour Party.

The Indigenous Nation vs Indians

The Indian community that had decided to settle in Fiji and become small holder farmers after indenture were largely Hindus (with sectarian differences) and a minority of Muslims and the Gujarati’s (the latter, also Hindus) who came to Fiji later in the 20th Century as traders and professionals.

The leasing out of native land to Indian farmers became an issue because of the indigenous concept of land ownership, which regards land as part of the communal and spiritual identity which should not be alienated for very long. This conflicts with the “Indian” and modern concept of land ownership as individually-owned or leased, and alienable, commercial commodity (the Indians also developed their own spiritual identity with the land). It was an ideological conflict between the communal sense of security and identity and the individualistic, market-based and settler sense of security.

Before independence, the Indian community was inspired by the anti-colonial struggles in India. Indian demand for common roll and equality of treatment alienated both Europeans and the *iTaukei* chiefs. The *iTaukei* transformed their concept of the paramountcy of Fijian interest into the demand for domination and control of the state after

political independence. So, the challenge for Fiji, especially after political independence, is how do we build a nation of two main ethnic communities with different religions, cultures political beliefs and interests, including other minorities into a modern nation that is democratically stable, cohesive, and with a strong sense of an all-embracing national identity. How do we build a tolerant and inclusive nationalism given the persistence of narrower ethnic nationalism amongst the *iTaukei*, as represented by the SODELPA Party. This is a challenge facing even older nation states today, like Germany, the UK, and France.

Ironically, the RFMF, which was a bastion of *iTaukei* nationalism, as manifested in the coups of 1987 and 2000, has become the protector of the new multiracial or multicultural nationalism. Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and his Fiji First Party, with the support of the current leadership of the RFMF, are the adherents and protectors of the belief in multicultural nation. The ideology of “multiculturalism” or “multiracialism” has been espoused by all governments since 1970, but superficially. Four post-independence Prime Ministers (excepted Laisenia Qarase of SDL) had been in favour of “Fijian” as the national name, but were constrained by their more cautious and conservative followers from implementing it constitutionally.

The 2013 Constitution has excluded the BLV from the Constitution, diminished the autonomy of *iTaukei* self-governing institutions and is the first to give us all the national name Fijian. From the colonial period and up to 2010, Fijian was exclusively the identity of the

iTaukei. The FijiFirst Government is also the first in Fiji's history that is seriously committed to building a new national identity, and it has taken positive actions to promote this ideology. It tried to introduce a new national flag and it has done much through its messages through the media, speeches and ceremonies, to reinforce the importance of our new national identity as Fijians, with the indigenous Fijian called the *iTaukei*. Many of the *iTaukei* have begun to accept Fijian as the national identity.

*Quoted by John Breuilly in; *When Is the Nation?* Edited by Atsuke IT chijo and Gordana Uzela, Routledge 2005, p17.

**The original patriotic Fijian national anthem, *Meda dau doka ka vinakata na Vanua*, translates as "Let us give respect and love for the *vanua*" or people. The national anthem in English is "Blessing Grant O lord our God for the Isles of Fiji....."; same song but different meanings.

2

National Identity: A Personal Perspective

SEONA SMILES

Feminist, Human Rights Activist, Journalist, Writer

This presentation is experiential, drawn from life in a mixed race family. Just to clarify: **Race** refers to a person's physical characteristics, such as bone structure and skin, hair or eye colour. **Ethnicity** refers to cultural factors, including nationality, culture, ancestry and language. People can have more than one ethnicity but are said to have one race, even if it's "mixed race". Since the discovery of DNA and the ability to trace the human genome, it is apparent that we are all racially mixed and all people have genetic traces that reach back to the Neanderthals and the earliest humans; there is simply no such thing as 'pure blood'. Race and ethnicity can overlap, and we all have multiple identities.

For instance, important identities for me are 'woman' and 'journalist and writer'. Within Fiji I am described as 'European' although it is not a term used much outside the South Pacific because for most other people the word refers to those from continental Europe. For those outside the region I may describe myself as being a 'white' Fijian,

or of 'European descent'. But Europeans are statistically a tiny figure in the Fiji race debate, although largely responsible for divisions in society that exist today.

I will not go into the national identity label of 'Fijian' which is fine in itself but has made many people feel uncomfortable because it was imposed without due consultation with the part of the population who were traditionally known by that name. In any case, once we were all Fijians, those who were previously known as 'Fijian' were given the label *iTaukei*, so the difference remains. It is also somewhat possible that if extensive consultation was sought we may still not have reached a consensus or even a conclusion.

The racial differences we struggle with in Fiji are peculiar to us and for us to sort out. Outsiders do not necessarily identify our differences and wouldn't know a Rotuman from an African, let alone from a Tongan. But our practised eyes do. That's not bad in itself, it is the attitudes that we bring to such identification.

Most people, even the urban mixes, are still identifiable by Fijian, Indian, Chinese, European or part European, or by any of the labels we have, including 'Other'. We are officially required to give our race categories less often now than in the past, but in any case they don't make a lot of sense for at least a section of the population. Also it perhaps doesn't matter what the mix is, what is the overriding identity is the cultural one. There is usually one, possibly two cultures predominating in the home.

To avoid acknowledging that we commonly do identify people by race, as part of getting to know someone, or just dealing with someone in ordinary daily life, is trying to avoid the elephant in the room. We need to accept that ethnicity and race are just facets of a person's identity. Race is one of the descriptors of people, it places them in context in a person's own world and often helps establish connections with new acquaintances. Fiji is a small population and it is difficult to visit a place where some distant cousin or relationship through marriage or relative of a friend is not identified.

I am fortunate enough to be part of an extended family that was welcoming and inclusive of difference, and to be part of a relatively privileged community at the University of the South Pacific, and elsewhere, in which 'mixed' families were not unusual but a normal part of the work and social environment. I think I could now get into what I call 'But you don't have to marry one', in tribute to a lecture Professor Sudesh Mishra of the University of the South Pacific once gave at a USP Indian Students Association gathering some years ago.

His point, although not his words which were much more poetic and analytical, is that we don't have to get into the whole 'melting pot' idea – that if we mix around enough and especially if we intermarry and get madly miscegenated, this will eventually, automatically, solve the problem of racial difference. No, where we, as a society, have to get is to the point where so-called 'mixed' marriages or relationships are unremarkable...they happen, nobody makes a fuss, no more than about the many people who partner with those of their own race and/or ethnicity. Which means we need to feel secure enough in our

own identity not to worry about such differences or the crossing of racial lines.

It is all right to want to be with people like yourself, who come from the same culinary background, who speak your language and know your community's stories and customs; it is okay to celebrate your own culture. What isn't at all helpful is to consider your own race and culture as somehow better and those who are different as lesser or in some ways unacceptable. It can be difficult, for instance, for some parents who are not 'racist' to still want their children to marry suitable spouses with a similar background to their own, to avoid a 'mixed' or cross-cultural marriage with all its inherent mysteries, misunderstandings and downright dangers. Yet my experience is that it is the usual personality differences, not the cultural ones, that cause the most disruption in a life partnership.

Eliminating stereotypes by not speaking of people by race, as the recent Fiji television advertisement urges us, is well meant, but it is the attitudes that go with racial labelling that is the problem. To be asked to ignore the racial identity of people suggests to me that there is something wrong with their racial identity, that it is not valuable and should be discarded for the greater good of 'nationality'.

We need to seriously investigate when and where the environment of racism starts to affect an individual. It is my experience that children do not recognise race until well after they start school and get into groups of 'difference'. They learn the labels and attitudes from others, regrettably often from older folk at home.

Do we ever have real discussion about race and difference at an early stage? In primary school? Is it conversation that continues through to university? Are schools really made capable of teaching the ‘other’ language, as education policy has been trying to make work for many years now. Are religious communities prepared to tackle the roots of racism in an honest way? Will the tourism industry examine racism in how it portrays Fiji – the smiling Fijian and the materialistic Indian, the happy singers and dancers and the no-talent servers and merchants, while the particular unique multi-ethnic nature of Fiji could be promoted. Will television images which now do such a good job of portraying the ordinary lives of people in the channel promotions (as opposed to years of watching them demonstrate viewers’ happy lives in *meke*, Chinese fan dance and other fancy dress signifiers) make a further effort to find situations in which racially mixed groups are working together and enjoying each other’s company.

Main Points:

- We need to feel secure enough in our own identity to celebrate our race as part of our nationhood.
- It is attitudes to people of other races that must be explored and changed, not the race identities.
- We need to confront the differences and racism as they arise from an early stage of a child’s development and continue the conversation into maturity.
- Discussions must start early, at home, with honesty. They must continue throughout the education system,

particularly through learning of the 'other' language. This is not a magic bullet, but many people do appreciate and value more the words of those who can speak to them in their own language.

Schools, churches, business, especially the tourism industry, and social groups should all investigate where racism exists in their structures and activities and develop strategies for countering it.

Trust, in each other and in the institutions of governance, is vital to building our nation.

- Many non-*iTaukei* believe that being named 'Fijian' is a true sign that they are accepted as full citizens of Fiji. It should be our reality.

3

Implementing a Common National Identity

DR. NATASHA KHAN

School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific

I am going to talk about the concept of fostering national identity that we have had in recent years in Fiji and whether it is top-down or bottom-up approach. Some initiatives and policies that the interim government and later the Bainimarama government took have been in the right direction, such as fostering a common national identity, nation-building, the electoral reforms, etc., but many of these reforms have been implemented in a top-down approach, so there is a lack of ownership by the people. Who is implementing change is an important factor in any policy changes that occur.

In law, there are three approaches pertaining to policy changes. Firstly, the substance, or content of the law; secondly, the structure of the law, including the courts, court administration and the law enforcement agencies; and thirdly, the culture in which the law operates, including social and economic conditions, as well as the attitudes of people in the legal system and in the community. Certainly, the role of

government is crucial in the first part, and most democratic governments will integrate stakeholders' view in the process of any new legislation. However, majority of the decrees that were developed and implemented by the interim government bypassed the legislative processes of law making, as decrees were developed with very limited input from the stakeholders and the wider public. If it is a good law, such as the concept of a common identity in Fiji, changing the content of the law itself can be symbolic, even if the law was developed as tokenism. Symbolically it indicates that the country is moving in the right direction, by viewing all citizens of Fiji commonly as Fijians, irrespective of their ethnicity.

But the government has been unsuccessful in changing the culture and attitudes of the people in regards to identifying all citizens of Fiji as Fijians. There is a lack of acceptance **and** ownership by the community—for example “Fijian” as a common name—it is problematic. By way of comparison, do we have good litter laws in Fiji? How affective are they? The jaywalking policies? Are they effective? Besides implementing and enforcing new laws, culture is an important factor. Singapore has litter laws, as we do. But the culture is different in both the countries. That is what I'm talking about—the difference between formal and informal ownership.

I would like to draw parallels with Yugoslavia and Fiji on the issue of conflict. After World War II, Yugoslav Prime Minister Josip Tito encouraged brotherhood amongst the country's diverse groups—the Bosnians, Croats and Serbs. Discussions on being Bosnian, Serb, or Croat or Muslim, Christian or Orthodox Christian, were suppressed.

However, after upon his death there was an upsurge of nationalist viewpoints. Many researches (e.g. Kritz, 2002) attribute the suppressive period under Tito as one of the main contributing factors to ethnic cleansing in Yugoslav in the 1990s.

The use of education to foster national identity formally through the school system and informally through workshops by NGOs is common in many ethnically diverse countries around the world. Such educational policies and curricula could serve the pressing agenda of fostering a national identity. But we also need to have some forthright discussions on issues such as:

1. Is it possible to develop a common national identity in a multiracial country like Fiji? Can we balance diversity with unity?
2. What does the term 'Fijian' imply? Does it imply a connection with the land and *vanua* only, or does it go beyond that?
3. The issue of *vulagi* and the misunderstanding around this term.
4. What about sports! Why have we missed the opportunity of using sports to develop national identity? And what types of educational activities should be undertaken? Should it be at the surface level, where we just talk about it? Or should it more be in depth—immersive programs that integrate all ethnic groups into all forms of sports.
5. What types of educational activities should be undertaken: surface level or immersion?

6. How will people own these changes? Are they going to own these changes? How can we encourage people to own the changes?

On the issue of developing a common national identity in a multiracial country like Fiji, during my PhD research, some respondents stated as below:

- Difficult to foster a national identity because the two cultures (Fijian and Indian) are so strong and different from each other that they hinder cultural pluralism prevalent in countries like Barbados and Mauritius.
- Frequently Indo-Fijians have been branded as unpatriotic (lack of involvement in military) but they themselves complain that they are not even recognized as Fijians.

Pluralism, which is prevalent in Mauritius and Barbados and some other countries, would be difficult to achieve in Fiji. Fiji is different from Mauritius. In Mauritius, the majority of the population was imported from other parts of the world and brought together in one place. In Fiji we have an indigenous population and then we have imported people, and the indentured Indians that settled in Fiji retained a strong link with their ethnic identity and there was little intermingling amongst the two ethnic groups, partly because of the way the colonial government had in place laws that did not allow indigenous Fijians to take part in the cash economy.

On the issue of what does being 'Fijian' mean, respondents stated:

Interestingly, once outside Fiji, many Indo-Fijians would identify themselves as Fijians with pride. However, they would not act this way 'back home' as historically, some Fijians would have taken offence at the use of the term 'Fijian' by Indo-Fijians to describe themselves.

At times of conflict, it is not uncommon to hear an indigenous Fijian say 'go back to India' to Indo-Fijians.

- See the Fijians as tribes. While we classify all indigenous as Fijians, but among Fijians we tend to look at ourselves as Naitasiri people, Tailevu people, etc. along tribal lines. We still do this. This could change with civic education but I don't know if it would work for the Fijians as they might feel they are giving up their identity. (Joseph Brown -Secretary to the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara)

It is really interesting as research shows that Indo-Fijians were initially involved in the military but they fought for equal rights and wanted the same salary as the colonial staff and protested over this issue but the colonial British staff viewed them as being disrespectful and did not recruit them. So it was not lack of patriotism on the part of Indo-Fijians but a protest that led to their non-involvement in the Fiji military.

Interestingly once outside Fiji, many of us, including myself, are proud to be known as Fijian, but once we return to Fiji, we are of skeptical of using the word "Fijian". We become Indo-Fijian. Let us explore why

that is happening. At times of conflict, it is also not uncommon to hear some indigenous Fijians saying to Indo-Fijians: *“Go back to India”*. In times of conflict, such prejudices come to the surface and we need to explore this, even though it is not comfortable since there are prejudices and discrimination from both sides. There are also divisions within the indigenous Fijians. Have we talked about this at all? Or do we assume that all indigenous Fijians equally own being Fijian?

Another contentious issue in forming a national identity in Fiji is the concept of *‘vulagi’* (foreigner) assigned to Indo-Fijians, despite many Indo-Fijians being fourth or fifth generation Fiji born citizens. There should be more discussion and awareness on this concept and how it is perceived by the two major ethnic groups in Fiji.

The research respondents stated:

Pacific Islanders are quite exclusive in that [land issue] aspect and although little is known about this by other ethnic groups, this exclusivity is not only towards other ethnic groups, it’s even amongst themselves as well. So if you from another mataqali [tribe], you are treated differently. Let’s say a man comes into the village from another mataqali and settles into his wife’s village and their family continue to be there for some generations, the village will still say that he is an outsider. It’s also the same for woman, when the husband dies; usually her relatives will come and take her to her village because she will no longer be counted as part of her husband’s village. (Makalesi-pseudonym for a University scholar)

Talking about exclusivity, the way ethnic groups think of that and the land issue. Within the Fijian setting, in the village, you do have exclusivity at different layers, e.g., a man cannot follow his wife's religion. I believe it [the concept of excluding the other] starts from there. So for Fijians the concept of citizenships is belonging to a specific place because of your connection and that's why many Fijians still don't consider Indo-Fijians as citizens of Fiji as they don't have the connection with land as the Fijians have. (Makalesi-pseudonym for a University scholar)

The land and citizenship explanation is a little confusing because there are Fijians who don't have land but are still considered indigenous Fijians whereas Indo-Fijians who have purchased land won't be considered citizens of Fiji by some Fijians. (Atalia-pseudonym for [indigenous Fijian] University scholar)

The Fijian concept of exclusivity and its link with the word *vulagi* needs to be widely discussed among both ethnic groups to eliminate any misunderstanding. But there also needs to be an acknowledgement among the indigenous Fijians that *vulagi* may have been used selectively as well as discriminately in some situations. Otherwise, the bestowing of chiefly title of Ratu Peni Ryani to Fiji Rugby Sevens Coach, Ben Ryan, after the Olympic gold medal win, indicates that certain groups within Fiji, even if they are not indigenous Fijians may be given privilege, but Indo-Fijians could not be granted similar acceptance.

Some recommendations for a truly accepted concept of national identity that is owned by the society:

National identity should be fostered through generational change, quick fix would not be sustainable;

Inter-racial/religious activities e.g. school visits and stays with other cultural groups should be implemented from lower primary school when children have not formed or established prejudices of other ethnic groups and are more accepting of each other;

Prejudices are developed within our 'comfort-zone groups', encourage critical questioning of these attitudes.

Any policy changes has to be truly participatory and acknowledges the different voices, even if they are uncomfortable;

Ensure such changes are promoted by ETHICAL leaders, who have are perceived as role models by the major ethnic groups in Fiji; and

- Celebrate the common goodness of all cultures in Fiji, as that showcases our uniqueness.

4

Political Negotiation and Consensus Building

KRISHNA DATT

Former Government Minister

I have been trying to restructure what I wanted to talk about in regard to what the others have said. So I will give a summary of what I want to say, based on experience right from independence to the present time. Whenever there was trust, between individuals, across ethnicities, between people, there was progress and there was democracy. Whenever there was distrust there was conflict and suffering.

I've seen no barriers against young people coming into politics. The idea that older people keep them down, in my experience, isn't true. I became the president of the Fiji Teachers' Union at 24-25 years of age, when the vice-presidents and presidents were in their 60s. The whole organisation was very conservative—I was probably the youngest person in there, largely due to my interest and probably due to post-independence euphoria. The leaders had gone overseas to form a constitution and had returned with the idea that we should all get involved in nation-building. For a good 16-17 years after

independence there was peace and relative prosperity. Only when authoritarianism came in, things changed.

In the beginning, with the tripartite forum, the workers, the management, the government sat together and we worked things out—we agreed on our cost of living adjustments and things progressed relatively well. There were no serious disputes and strikes. But in the 1980s, the government ministers started introducing, in my area – in the teaching area—a volunteer service scheme for untrained people to go into the classrooms to teach. This was done in a very authoritative manner—as if this is the way the world should go – you do not need training to be teachers, etc. When we challenged them we realised that this issue could not be resolved within the trade dispute mechanisms that were established after independence, that these were not industrial issues; that in fact we were fighting a political battle. It was then some of us formed the Fiji Labour Party.

My point is that once unilateralism comes in, when that kind of imposition came in, people began to react. I was addressing both the Fijian Teachers Association and The Fiji Teachers' Union. We went together, Saulekaleka and myself, and we made speeches throughout the country together. It had nothing to do with ethnicity, it had to do with issues. The Fijian Labour party was launched in the Fijian Teachers' Association building, which would be unthinkable these days. The rest, of course, is history. The 1987 coup, a lot of people have explained, so I don't want to go back into it. The 1990 Constitution was imposed on the people. One of the good things in the 1990 Constitution was the provision that during its lifetime

there should be a revision, and that there should be a new constitution. Most of us decided not to boycott the 1990 Constitution and work towards this change.

Yesterday, someone was talking about why the NFP-SVT coalition died and why the Labour-Coalition won (the 1999) election. There were a number of reasons. One of the things that Ganesh Chand pointed out was the lack of articulation. But I have a private reason. In the negotiation of the 1997 Constitution, the leaders of political parties were not involved in the nitty-gritty of the 1997 Constitution. They came only at the end to shake hands and the newspapers said, 'okay, the leaders have now signed and this is the document'. There were three members from each party that actually honed an agreement and unless there was trust in those groups, there would not been any agreement. In the final analysis, the leaders had not gone through this process of building trust so there was distrust. Chaudhry wasn't involved, Reddy wasn't involved, Rabuka wasn't involved—not in the nitty-gritty. There were five sub-committees of the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee. I was in three of them.

What worked in the essential development of the 1997 Constitution was the trust developed between some individuals in the post-independence era and in the era before that. Let me give you an example: Filipe Bole, he was the education man who was dealing with us, the union, while I was the president. So he and I had worked through the period of the euphoria of nation building. And one day around the grog bowl, when nothing was moving, when the constitution wasn't moving, I said 'Filipe, what is it that you people

want? And I said, 'you wear a Fijian cap, I wear an Indian cap, and let's share our fears. What do you want in your constitution? And what do I want?' And Filipe said, 'Krish, the Fijian people, we want paramountcy of interest in the parliament'. And he said, 'what do you want?'; I said, 'we have been branded as being in the opposition right from the 1920s. If you look at your Fiji- Indian history, you will see that the Indians are accused by the *iTaukei* of opposing, opposing, opposing'. I said, 'look, I don't want to be in the opposition anymore. Find a system where we can be part of the government. I will convince my side to give you paramountcy in numbers'. That was the deal. That was the origins of the multi-party government. And the rest became history. It became so easy after that.

We went back to the sub-committees and held a full committee meeting and both sides presented their case and that framework was the framework that we set ourselves to work through. Remember that the theme I posted is based on my experience. When there was trust between me and Filipe, there was something going. The biggest enemies of the system have always been political leaders who do not trust each other. Not the people.

It's the leaders who make it, those individuals who engage, who across the barriers, who can trust. The group of leaders who do not have that trust; who do not want to have that trust for all kinds of reasons, break it.

5

Just Representation and Collective Decision-Making

DR. GANESH CHAND

Academic/Researcher

One of the important questions that we all ask is, ‘in terms of policy making, what moral authority or legal authority, does someone have to make the decisions that affect you?’ That is the fundamental question. And that is where the issue of representation comes in. In the paper that I have circulated, I have made known the foundations of democracy. Most of the content of that paper was published in 1994.

At that time, we were arguing that there is an absolute need for a new system of representation which was called proportional representation. Finally, we do have proportional representation in Fiji. But it stops only at the composition of parliament. The current system is composed of proportional representation to the extent of the numbers of people representing the different parties and the parties number.

Where the 1997 constitution was different was in taking proportional representation one step further. That was in terms of power-sharing.

Power-sharing is the way forward in societies like ours. Power-sharing in terms of the legislature, that's proportional representation up to that point, but one more step in terms of the executive at the cabinet level. Irrespective of which group interest is represented by those who are in parliament through proportional representation—whether it be gender, ethnicity, economic interests—as long as they remain outside the cabinet, outside decision making, and majority rule used in the parliament, then these people will be effectively useless. The opposition—SODELPA and NFP—have been totally ineffective in the last three years.

There have been bills which have been enacted which have contained errors. The opposition has pointed out these errors—even then they haven't been changed. The important point is that there ought to be power-sharing in the cabinet; that is what a divided society requires.

When the race report came out, it was a 700-page document, with no mention of power-sharing. At that time the report was presented in parliament through the channels and given to the various political parties to look at and find a way forward. The NFP and the FLP had 19 members at the time. They invited three outsiders: one of them was me; of the other two, one was from within Fiji and one from outside. So there were 18 MPs and three of us. And from morning to lunch, we were debating what to do with this report: whether to go page by page or something different.

We were not moving forward until a suggestion was made to keep the book aside and ask the same questions: what does the majority, the

indigenous Fijians, want of Indians? How do they see Indians in Fiji? That was the fundamental question. If that was addressed, the rest would follow. Finally, Mr. Jai Ram Reddy was nominated by this group to come and talk to Mr. Rabuka and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the President. So the questions that Reddy was to ask were very specific: Do you see any roles for Indians in Fiji? If so, what is it? Tell us so that we can begin to consider our position on this race report and in the country. And then the rest is history.

Trust was built between Rabuka and the President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Jai Ram Reddy. The hard questions have to be asked, whether it be gender, ethnicity, religion, or any other identifier. It is unfortunate that in this session we are not talking about identity—people have different identities; people have multiple identities—what constitutes a primary identity? What constitutes a secondary identity? There must be no restriction on this. I'm arguing that people must be given the full liberty to talk. Yesterday, the Minister talked about hate speech. I beg to disagree with him. If you internalise all this pressure, then it is going to blow up. The world is full of examples. Let people articulate their views and then let's deal with it. If you evade the hard questions you will never solve the fundamental problems.

Importantly, articulate the hard questions in a manner that does not destroy trust. Rather, articulate them in a manner that builds trust. When we are talking about power-sharing, I was a part of it in 1997-99. The 1997 constitution mandated power-sharing as per a particular formula. The first government formed after the 1997 constitution practiced power-sharing for various reasons. The SVT made some

demands but the Labour Party did not agree, so the SVT decided to stay out of cabinet. In 2001, Laisenia Qarase came in as Prime Minister. He agreed to power-sharing but he created a number of ministries which were useless and offered them to the Labour Party, which declined.

In 2006 some potentially meaningful power-sharing arrangements emerged with SDL offering the Labour Party substantial ministerial portfolios. But it ended within months. The power-sharing concept was never given a chance to work. And my suggestion is that unless and until power-sharing is given a chance, this country will continue to suffer from the same problems—discord, disharmony, disunity, lack of progress on the economic front, corruption and unethical conduct.

Granted that power-sharing is not easy. Forget about power-sharing, is sharing easy? Do you want to share your wealth? This morning Alisi and I were talking about wisdom. Do people want to share their wisdom, their ideas? We are all greedy; human beings are greedy, they don't want to share their money, their space, their houses, their land, their property, education. Power-sharing is one of the most difficult things to do, but it's a requirement, and I'm suggesting that it must be mandatory. Those who don't want to share power have no right to be at the cabinet level and in the parliament.

6

Elections and Ethnic Relations

ALISI DAUREWA

Former Electoral Commissioner

I will begin by connecting to what Romitesh just said about political parties being interested in youth. I am not trying to be cynical, but it's probably because 70 per cent of the electorate next year is going to be made up of young people.

I am here because the theme for this workshop is ethnic relationships. The Electoral Decree, as I see it, is designed in such a way that you have to be very popular —you need be a star to be able to bring those votes in. You need somebody with a very unique persona to be able to speak to the people and the people will respond accordingly. The constituency mandates that you strengthen your relationship with people or friends, whoever you have a connection with, in terms of a particular area, regardless of your ethnicity. You might choose to be with the people you went to school with, or people who belong to the same province or religion.

It does contribute to social cohesion because it makes you go out there and strengthen that relationship with the voter. In terms of the government of the day, they have the recognition already. They don't

have to work very hard to win those votes. And let's face it: this country is not the only country where the running government applies all these particular strategies prior to the elections to win votes. It is the nature of governments all over the world. I'm not saying this to defend the government; I'm just saying that it is a reality. The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), for example, used their relationships with the communities that they identify with to get votes. We do not have to say we are victims of the system; we just make the best use of what is there for now and see how it goes. I am hopeful that the (electoral) system will work eventually. But it is going to take time for people to get used to. And I'm probably just referring to the older people here.

When I was out in the Lau group, I made a point of speaking particularly to the older people. They voted confidently. When we were appointed in the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Decree had not been adopted. There was no supervisor of elections. The Acting Permanent Secretary under the Attorney-General functioned as the Supervisor of Elections. When we came into the office, the first thing we were asked to do was to appoint senior staff to the Fijian Elections Office. Thankfully the government had consultants from Australia, New Zealand and one from the EU.

So while we were appointed in January 2014, we were not called until about February. We had to work within the 2014 Electoral Decree that did not come out until end of March. The draft was given to us over a weekend to comment on, that was it. It became legal. The supervisor of elections was appointed despite the fact that we strongly recommended that the position should be advertised again. But

we worked with that; we accepted that, and I'm not sitting here to complain about that. It's done. We're over it.

We took on a very hands-on approach. We had to go out and conduct our own voter education along with the Acting Supervisor of Elections. We met with key organisations—first the political parties, our primary stakeholders, the media, the police, the transport industry, the civil society groups—we needed to make all these connections and reassure people that we were going to have elections. We continued to be in touch with the people, including those involved with the management of the 2014 elections, such as the polling assistants. We received several invitations to visit other countries as election observers. Then we realised that we could not accept all those invitations because we had too much to do. We only accepted two—the Australian and the New Zealand electoral commissions.

We came up with our recommendations. The key recommendation is the independence of the Electoral Commission. You cannot say it is fully independent because it still depends on the Fijian Elections Office. Funding and other things are managed by the Fijian Elections Office. We believe that independence is when the commission has a totally independent office. What we wanted was to be able to choose our own observers. We wanted both international and local election observers. We were not given that. These are the sorts of things that should be totally independent and we have not stopped saying that because at the end of the day, we hold the responsibility of whether it is a good or poorly-conducted election: it is not the supervisor of elections, it is the electoral commission. We are the ones who are

issued with the writ by the President, not the supervisor of elections. Where we are directed to go out and conduct a general election. That's the responsibility that lies with the electoral commission.

So yes, we have issues regarding the management of the election, including good governance, which are all contained in our recommendations. We were asked to work only with the Solicitor General, and while we respect that office, we realised that there were times when it was necessary to seek legal advice from other sources outside of the boundary of government. Hence why we wanted our own legal advisor, with electoral expertise, and the external donors were prepared to help secure this position for us. Unfortunately, we did not get the support we'd hoped to get from the government. Thankfully we had a very experienced, chairman with a lot of wisdom.

7

Role of FBOs in Ethnic Relations: Perspective from the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma

REV. ILIESA NAIVALU

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Methodist Church in Fiji (MCIF); Secretary General
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The universal Christian general statement on racial relations says that:

"All people are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all men and it must be given ever greater recognition. "Undoubtedly not all men are alike as regards physical capacity and intellectual and moral powers. But forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design."

Race doesn't exist, racism does.

The Church and Racism

Racial prejudice, which denies the equal dignity of all the members of the human family and blasphemes the Creator, can only be eradicated by going to its roots, where it is formed: in the human heart. It is from the heart that just or unjust behavior is born, according to whether persons are open to God's will in the natural order and in the Living Word or whether they close themselves up in those egoisms dictated by fear or the instinct of domination. It is the way we look at others that must be purified. Harboring racist thoughts and entertaining racist attitudes is a sin against the specific message of Christ, for whom one's 'neighbor' is not only a person from my tribe, my religion or my nation, it is every person that I meet along the way.

A change of heart cannot occur without strengthening spiritual convictions regarding respect for other races and ethnic groups. The Church, on its part, contributes to forming consciences by clearly presenting the entire Christian doctrine on this subject. The Church particularly asks pastors, preachers, teachers and catechists to explain the true teaching of Scripture and Tradition about the origin of all people in God and their final common destiny in the Kingdom of God.

The Church's persuasive task is equally carried out through the witness of life of Christians: respect for foreigners, acceptance of dialogue, sharing, and collaboration with other ethnic groups.

The Holy See, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome had instructed its members worldwide with other Christians and all others to respect all persons irrespective of color, creed or culture. The

message proposed to everyone, and which she tries to live is: "Every person is my brother or sister." The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace document of 1988 stated that, "racism and racist acts must be condemned.

"Respect for every person and every race is respect for basic rights, dignity and fundamental equality," the document stated. It clarified that this respect for all races "does not mean erasing cultural differences," but that "it is important to educate to a positive appreciation of the complementary diversity of peoples."

In America, after the Charlottesville rallies where white supremacy protestors attacked blacks and Jews, the Catholic bishops from around the country condemned the white nationalism in Charlottesville, Virginia. "If we want a different kind of country in the future, we need to start today with a conversion in our own hearts, and an insistence on the same in others," Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia said after the Charlottesville rallies.

Well, these are known facts, that racism is a problem in almost all the countries in the world. Even the most democratic and more advanced nations—USA, Britain, Germany, South Africa, Australia—and countries in Europe and the Middle East, are grappling with racism.

How does the Church in Fiji tackle this problem? I'm sorry to say that the Church, with the indigenous *iTaukei* being the largest ethnic group whose members are Protestants, Catholics and Pentecostals, have been part of nearly all the racial upheavals in the last 30 years.

To those of you, of other races we've hurt, I wish to reiterate what our leaders have stated in the past, saying: "We are deeply sorry."

All of us anchor our attitudes on the holy scriptures of our respective religions, and sadly, we at times delve only on certain texts that go together with what suits us, without taking into account all other texts that may have given us the right perspective on situations at hand to cement our dreams of true peace and unity.

In Fiji, we have two great major races that are rich in culture, religious beliefs and practices and it is always a thrill to see us in close interactions. We have so much to share, however, our social structures is such that it created frictions and conflicts at times. Ralph Premdas, in his 1992 book: *Religion and Reconciliation in the multi-ethnic states of the 3rd world countries: Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana*, said:

"Left to themselves, these ethnic groups, each expressing disdain against each other.....will probably resort to open inter-communal conflict.Religion was part of the package of inter-communal factors that actively fed the fires of communal distrust and hate over the past decade."

But in Fiji, the two races have suffered so much in the last three decades. Thousands of our citizens have left the country with their wisdom, skills and experiences. Fiji is the loser. I reckon that one of our problems in the past many years is our lack of understanding for each other.

The Methodist Church believes that any attempt to solve the racial problem in Fiji must take into consideration the indigenous issue. And we believe there is no guarantee for a lasting peace without really addressing this particular concern. We believe that consideration of the indigenous identity question should be given priority, and ought to be done responsibly, as part of the solution to this crisis and to light the path to the future.

Many wise people among the two races who have lived longer in this country have reached the conclusion that when the *iTaukei* are at rest in their motherland, all other races also enjoy a time of rest. Fiji is big enough to fit all of us and our generations.

The Church has seen a new face of racism in Fiji today. It's not so much between the two major races, but by a third party, namely, the power that be, the State, which is putting a wedge between us by creating more fear to the indigenous Fijians.

The nature of my work is travelling to different corners of Fiji week in week out, doing training and preaching. While sitting down and mingling with the people, the stories they shared and their questions clearly indicated that there is a deep fear and a feeling of hopelessness towards the government policies, decrees and regulations.

It is clear from our *talanoa* that no amount of development, financial assistance and handouts and promises of greater things to come will easily erase these fears. I feel that the longer we go on with such an

atmosphere, the more these fears will grip a whole lot of the indigenous populace.

So what does the Church should do in such a situation?

In my new role as general secretary of the Fiji Council of Churches, I will see that we continue where we left in 2006, to revive the committee of religious leaders working towards reconciliation. After the sad events of 1999, the then President Ratu Iloilo called all on religious leaders to work together in finding ways to unify our people and prevent future political upheavals of that kind.

It was a tough call, but we made some progress. Indeed it was a great time when leaders of all our major religions and churches came together for nearly three years, finding ways to move forward together. Sadly those who led the 2006 military coup abolished the Ministry of Reconciliation and all our efforts were brought to naught.

For me personally, it was a painful experience because I had just obtained my masters in my thesis on Reconciliation at Emory University, GA, USA, (Bishop Desmond Tutu was a member of the Faculty at that time during his sabbatical after the Reconciliation and Unity Processes in South Africa). My thesis topic was, *The Reconciliatory role of the Methodist Church Towards Racial Relations in Fiji.*

As of now, 11 years later, the Church will knock on the doors of the Government, pleading to do all it could to help members of the two major races to really understand each other. One of our problems is lack of understanding of our neighbour. We say things and do things to downgrade others while not knowing who they really are.

We will fight hard to stop prejudice. We will prepare lessons and run workshops for our members on good race and ethnic relations.

We will work hard to help families especially parents to lay the foundations in the lives of their children based on true spiritual teachings in love, respect for others, compassion and goodwill for all people.

We will see that our schools, over 60 in all, take subjects that promote racial relations.

We will work with the Government, leaders of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh religions, and leaders of the Christian Churches to have continuous dialogue.

The indigenous Fijians and Fijians of Indian descent are two great people. We have our differences and our similarities. We do have one thing in common: we are both children of fate. The majority of indigenous Fijians were neither consulted nor being made aware of the mass migration into our country of a people from an entirely different context. And the Fijians of the Indian descent were brought with false

promises and under slavery conditions, dumped in Fiji by their colonial masters.

So instead of putting our backs against each other, our two races must accept that we were never brought to our current situation by our own intentions or our own making. Let's change our fate to one of faith. Let us hold our hands together and build bridges among ourselves for the sake of our children and their children's children.

God bless you all and God bless Fiji.

8

Hinduism and Ethnic Relations

JAY DAYAL

President, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Fiji

I am representing Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), which is part of the Hindu Council of Fiji. It's one of the chapters representing Hindu interests all over the world. VHP is comprised of different Hindu divisions, so it is representative of the faith as a whole.

We need to have a greater understanding of Hindu religious beliefs and philosophy. What we Hindus follow is called *dharma*. *Dharma* is a Sanskrit or a Hindi word. It basically means, 'to sustain'. So that which has the capacity to sustain is *dharma*. We Hindus believe that there is a difference between religion and *dharma* because the latter goes beyond religion.

It is important to understand the foundation of Hindu *dharma* to better understand Hindu thought and ideology, and the Hindu approach towards humanity, country, nation and universalism. *Dharma* means the world is a greater family. Narrow-minded people say 'this is mine, that is theirs' and they try to segregate people. But those with a big heart and with good understanding will always regard

dharma as meaning 'the world is my family'. That is what the Hindu foundation is based upon. According to *dharma*, we should not discriminate. *Dharma*, we say, is above any form of discrimination. If we practice discrimination in any form, then we are not fully practicing *dharma*. *Dharma* is also a call to deliver welfare, relief, prosperity and spirituality. In pursuit of spiritual greatness or spirituality, we practice *dharma*.

How does Hinduism guide us regarding the presence of social media? As Hindus, we believe in democracy and free speech, and any suppression of these ideals is regarded as an injustice to mankind. We talk about democracy and free speech so we encourage some active discussions and criticism on social media. However, social media should not provide a conduit to trespass on individual privacy.

For example, India is largely a Hindu nation, although it has not been a declared Hindu nation. India is a secular nation with a large Hindu population and Hindu belief system. Although India is 83 per cent Hindu, it is still a secular nation. In the past, Hindu groups have largely been quiet and often politically-divided. However, people's preferences change with time and circumstances. In Fiji, no particular organisation is aligned with a political party. Everybody is free to exercise their own political right and in Fiji, we have seen a large percentage of Hindus in different parties—whether FijiFirst, NFP or SODELPA.

The bottom line is, we support equality and justice to protect every faith in Fiji. Section 22 of our Fijian Constitution provides us with

the right to practice our religion. An issue that is affecting the relationship of Hindus with some other communities is the deity confusion. It is common in Fiji for Hindus to be labeled ‘idol-worshippers’ or ‘tree-worshippers’, without understanding the reasons behind our worshipping behavior. We Hindus are not simply idol-worshippers. Just like other beliefs, we use images to focus on divinity. Students from a Hindu background are ridiculed in schools by students of different faiths. It is affecting our children and if anything, it creates animosity between communities. We can only overcome this problem through more dialogue like this one and by sitting and discussing with our children. There has to be mutual respect of one another’s culture and religion.

A few years ago we had a case in Navua where a church distributed a book called *Kali the Traitor*. The book portrayed our goddess in a very negative light—as if she’s was a devil who was going to kill. We have always been on the receiving end of such practices, which only create divisions in the community. In Hinduism, we say that all beliefs are to be respected without undermining anybody. I have the right to practice my beliefs; you have the right to practice yours, in mutual respect. Eliminating racism and upholding equality, justice and human rights, are part of Hindu *dharma*. We are also encouraging gender equality. This is a shortcoming in our organisation. We must not accept it.

Fiji is home to proud Indo-Fijians, and one may ask what our organisation is doing for our country? We are part of Interfaith Dialogue, and we have annual conferences, whereby we invite other

racess for cross-cultural learning. We also have cultural programmes and we encourage everyone to participate in events like holi and diwali. We spread the significance of such cultural events through messages about brotherhood and togetherness. And we invite other races to work hand-in- hand for the benefit of every Fijian. We actually make it a point to attend events hosted by other communities, so we embrace diversity.

When I ask, what are we doing for our country, I am reminded of a famous episode from Hindu holy scriptures regarding Lord Rama's conquest of Sri Lanka. Following the Lanka war, Lord Rama did not appoint a king from his kingdom, but rather from Sri Lanka. So in a sense, there was no conquest, with Lord Rama saying that mother, and motherland, are higher in status than heaven. Lord Rama was not interested in, imperialist expansions or depriving others of their motherland. This touched a lot of devotees. For us, Hindus, Fiji is our motherland. For the past four, five generations, we have sweated blood and tears on this land. For us the soil of Fiji is as precious as it is for anybody else in this room. There is no going back. We are only going forward. That is the Hindu belief in Fiji.

I am glad to say that here in Fiji; we assisted 3000 families with food and clothes in the aftermath of Cyclone Winston. Around 1000 homes received solar lanterns. All these distributions took place without any form of racial or religious discrimination. We only saw fellow human beings suffering and we went to their assistance, regardless of their ethnicity or religious backgrounds. Our motto is,

‘Service is our righteous duty. Service to mankind is service to God’.
It’s a universal concept.

And while I’m at it, I would like to share events from 2012 and 2013. We had a religious group from Suva distributing food rations and clothes to a particular community only. On one side of the road, we had Hindus and on the other side, non-Hindus. So they came only for the non-Hindus, while the Hindus looked on. What kind of humanity is that? What kind of charitable entity only feeds its own community?

In order to build a cohesive community, we need to embrace everyone and work together to build this great nation of ours. Our country has immense potential and if we can co-exist peacefully and work together, we will be able to reap the benefits in terms of nation building and economic prosperity. Inclusivity and tolerance are key tenets of Hindu philosophy and they teach us that we are not superior to others in any way, whether in religious beliefs or ideologies or status, and this is critical towards creating an egalitarian, peaceful and secular societies where diversity is celebrated.

9

Building Social Cohesion- The Role of Other Actors

ROSHIKA DEO

Feminist Activist

Introduction

Social cohesion is about cultural diversity and social integration; where we trust and value each other. It is indicative of a society where we nurture relationships, and embrace and celebrate diversity. It is one where we are part of each other's social and cultural functions. It is a society in which hate is not an immediate reaction to tension and differences. Social cohesion in Fiji would mean a society where we accept each other instead of merely tolerating each other. *Be The Change* movement played an integral role in using community and political spaces to build social cohesion in Fiji. This paper shares a part of my journey in the *Be The Change* movement that has contributed to efforts in building social cohesion in a fractured society like ours.

Background

I expressed my interest to stand for elections in mid 2013, however I was officially accepted as an election candidate a couple of months before the September

2014 elections. In September 2013, we set up a Facebook page to promote my interest, making us the first group to use social media for an election campaign. Social media campaigning was our most feasible option since we had limited financial resources. A series of events unfolded when I expressed my interest to stand for elections. Some of it is relevant and important to share to contextualise my journey in *Be The Change*.

I was told it was a 'wrong' decision to stand for elections once it became known that I was interested in standing for elections. A founding board member of the organisation I worked for said to me that it was not necessary for me to stand for elections, and I should think about advocating for issues in other ways. She also said to other young women that I was not old enough to stand for elections, contrary to the values and flagship program of her organisation – the young women's leadership program. Ironically, I was what one would say a 'product' of their trainings and political forums.

Furthermore, my workplace decided to change their human resources policy in response to my intention to stand for elections and to my increasing popularity. This arbitrary change in policy forced me out of a job and a source of income for basic living costs. As it was, I was living pay-to-pay given the salary and living costs.

I had been fully aware of the challenges, risks and hurdles that I would encounter in standing for elections as a young Indo-Fijian feminist in a military dictatorship. However, I was not prepared for the animosity and retaliation shown by the very people that had created the space in

which I was empowered. Other significant events had unfolded during this phase but that is a story for another time.

Be The Change

After indicating my intention to stand for elections, I approached Ratu Meli Vesikula who took me to Vunivaivai village and introduced me to the Nakelo Youth Club. This is where the movement began. During this time, “be the change” was put forward as a slogan for my independent election candidate campaign. However, over time people started using the slogan to identify with the values of the campaign and it evolved organically to become a movement - *Be The Change*.

Be The Change is a political movement to create public and political spaces for the participation and visibility of young people and women. It became a political revolution movement. We made sincere, conscious effort to ensure that the system and process we had in place was transformational and didn't perpetuate status quo. We tried many things, some of which worked and some didn't.

We started by setting up a strategic core group of around 25 young people, aged 35 years and under. We sought advice and opinions from trusted people like the late Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi and Ratu Meli Vesikula. Around the country, we had around 100 community liaisons and representatives who helped develop community based campaign strategies, organised logistics and were our key focal points in their communities.

There were also stark differences in how family members reacted to women and girls engaging in political spaces. There was tension and conflict at homes of Indo- Fijian young women that wanted to be part of the campaign team. I was asked to speak to parents to explain their roles, or to seek permission or to give assurances many times. I discovered during the course of the campaign that many Indo-Fijian girls also concealed their political activities from their parents and families for fear of being stopped. There was a lot of pressure from their families to not engage and to remain distant from the campaign and me. It was a difficult situation, as we did not want to cause conflict. However, we also had to respect the autonomy and agency that the young women were exercising by making their own decisions. They were breaking rigid patriarchal and ethnically nuanced boundaries to participate.

With female campaign members from the *iTaukei* communities, it was a different experience altogether. The family members of young *iTaukei* women generally encouraged them. Some even went to the extent of asking their daughters to consider taking a semester off from tertiary schools so they could participate fully in the campaign.

Be The Change was more than an election campaign. It was a platform for the participation and visibility of young people and women. It was about demonstrating a different kind of politics and redefining political spaces. *Be The Change* was about social cohesion and fostering better ethnic relations.

What does success look like?

Our election campaign polling results show that we gained a substantial amount of votes from polling booths that were located in villages, and where all, or majority, of the voting population were *iTaukei*.

We gained a considerable number of votes relative to the overall results. To put this into context, we had more votes than most seasoned politicians and more than all the candidates in two political parties, one of which was the Fiji Labour Party. We have more votes than nearly half of the current MPs in parliament. The votes gained relative to the others is important because *Be The Change* was a movement made up of people who had not participated in an election campaign before and/or were first time voters. We didn't use any rhetoric to incite or create fear based on race or religion. We didn't practice 'dirty politics'. We also didn't fit the norm of what a status quo candidate or campaigns look like.

Building Social Cohesion

We made a conscious effort to ensure people were included and felt valued. For us the process was just as important as our goal. We undertook several different approaches to transform the culture of politics and to foster cultural understanding.

One of the most important strategies used was during campaign and outreach meetings. When we went to *iTaukei* villages we made sure that people of other ethnicities came along as part of the campaign team

and interacted with the audience. The same principle was applied when visiting an all Indo-Fijian community.

Given that I was the candidate and primary speaker, I was always asked to sit in the front during the *sevusevu* and for speaking purposes. Almost always a male *iTaukei* campaign member would end up sitting with me at the top of the room and it happened quite fluidly. However, the women campaign members would move to the sides or to the back of the room. I made it a campaign and outreach meeting rule that at least one *iTaukei* woman would also join us at the front of the room and given speaking time.

As an example, Ana one of our key campaign team member who started her journey as a teenager, refused when I initially asked her to join me in the front of the room. Her reasoning being she wasn't 'important enough' to be at the front. However, I remained adamant and insisted she join us in the front of the room. Sometimes we would have other people saying that I should only sit in the front and not other campaign members. Yes, it was awkward at times. But it was an important change we had to bring in and I had the power to negotiate this change.

The first time Ana sat with me in the front during a meeting she didn't say anything. However, after a few meetings she became one of our key people sharing campaign messages, translating and responding to questions. After Ana started sitting along with me, it was much easier to get other women to sit with me in the front of the room and take a direct leadership role. We did the same in Indo-Fijian settings,

ensuring Indo-Fijian female campaign members were in the front and had a leadership role.

In multi-ethnic settings we had campaign members from both the ethnic groups taking an active leadership role at meetings. Another strategy we used was creating opportunity to allow people to be exposed to cultural settings they were not familiar with and learn more about issues that affected these communities. For instance, for many Indo-Fijians campaign members it was the first time they had been to a village and participated in village meetings. This created a level of awareness about *iTaukei* culture and issues specific to the *iTaukei* community that usually is not understood by many.

In another example, another key campaign member, Meli, became a professional sign language interpreter. His journey to learning sign language started through *Be The Change*, where he participated in campaign meetings with the Deaf community and interacted with Deaf campaign members

We had a very diverse group that also included members of the LGBTIQ groups. I remember at one meeting, a transwoman stood up and said this was the political movement for her and that she was there because it meant LGBTIQ people would get rights. This led to a couple of members being worried about the inclusion of queer and trans people. I remember one member went to Ana and expressed concern over the inclusion of LGBTIQ people and said this would lead to the end of the movement and the election campaign. He said he was going to pray for me.

I was shared this information by Ana and we strategised around how best to address this without isolating anyone and ensuring the space remained safe for the LGBTIQ campaign members. We decided to create more opportunities for relationship building among the core group and other campaign members. We created spaces for LGBTIQ members to share their experiences and aspirations with the larger group. After a couple of months, we ended up with this person becoming one of the strongest allies for LGBTIQ community, and a confidant to many of the LGBTIQ members in the campaign. For us this is success.

Our primary constituency was young people and women, and it also became a strategy given our lack of resources. However as time progressed and the more outreach we did, word got around and we started receiving invites to speak to groups that were initially hostile to *Be The Change* or to me as a proposed candidate. For instance, once we got a call from a group of sugar cane farmers in Labasa. It was an all-male older Indo-Fijian sugar cane farmers meeting. I attended the meeting with Gyan, an older Indo-Fijian woman in her late 50s. It was the first time for Gyan to actively engage in a context like this, despite being from a sugar cane farming background. We also received a request from Kiuva village and we spent a whole day there talking about issues affecting young people. Apart from Fiji First, we were the only election campaign team that went to Kiuva village in 2014.

There are many other stories like this that demonstrate how we broke barriers and built social cohesion. Success for us is the consciousness-

raising that was happening in the campaign. It is about learning how to accept and embrace diversity, and foster social inclusion. Ultimately it was about care and humanity. *Be The Change* is about creating new systems and ensuring politics is not only about gaining votes but also about fostering better relationships and culture. It is about change and acceptance.

Indicators of lack of social cohesion

There is structural and cultural racism entrenched against Indo-Fijians in many spaces and racial prejudice remains prevalent among both the major ethnic communities. There is also evidence of structural racism against *iTaukeis* in some spaces brought about by prejudicial laws.

The following are some obvious and some not so obvious examples of our fractured society: Political parties and their supporters are actively campaigning and relying on ethnicity and religion to divide and conquer for votes and power. Furthermore, social media as a microcosm of our society is a fair reflection of the division that is prevalent in our society. Social media is rife with comments telling Indo-Fijians to go back to India. Indo-Fijians are constantly referred to as foreigners and migrants, thus erasing their colonised histories.

Overwhelmingly at Indo-Fijian weddings, one will find only a handful of *iTaukeis*, if any at all, and vice versa. We have gone to school together, lived side-by-side and are work colleagues, yet we don't have friends and colleagues who we can invite to our important cultural events. Many times even when invitation is extended, there is a

reluctance to attend. I recognise that there are other complexities present but they all indicate a lack of social cohesion.

There is a strong ethnic interaction that occurs during *Diwali* and *Eid* with people of all ethnicities visiting homes of people celebrating the cultural festivals. However, when it comes to Easter and Christmas, which is largely celebrated by the *iTaukei* community, there is hardly any Indo-Fijians that are invited or attend the cultural functions. We still have many Indo-Fijian taxi drivers that speak about *iTaukeis* in a *derogatory manner* laced with racial prejudice and bias. This is just a glimpse of our society and there are many examples of prejudice, harmful stereotypes and bias pin all our communities. We are failing each other.

Social Cohesion Indicators

Fostering social cohesion, specifically better ethnic relations, was an integral part of *Be The Change*. Whilst we were not successful in getting elected into parliament, we made an impact along the way. Some of the ways in which we made impact are outlined as follows:

I did not have any strong political identity such as being a practising Hindu or Christian, or being from an elite family. I didn't have a chiefly lineage, neither was I from a political dynasty, or belonged to any religious organisation. We campaigned beyond these identities and social markers. We didn't campaign along ethnic lines or incited communities based on religion or race. We didn't use fear, intimidation or threats to seek votes.

This is reflective in the votes we garnered. We maintained the values and integrity of *Be The Change* throughout. We raised issues - that affected both communities and issues that affected specific communities, whether Indo-Fijian, *iTaukei*, LGBTIQ, people with disability, or women.

The impact we made is further illustrated with the following experiences in the campaign:

There was an incident where three Indo-Fijian campaign members whilst distributing campaign materials were subjected to racial slurs and the male member was assaulted. We ended up at Valelevu Health Center and whilst waiting for him to be treated, an elderly man approaches us and asked if I'm Roshika. When I said 'yes', he takes both my hands and starts handing over some money saying it's his contribution towards the campaign. He starts giving his blessing and gets very emotional. I politely refuse several times, and say it's okay, and that his blessing is enough. He responded and said, "I will vote for you, you all are our hope". After a few minutes of a very emotional interaction over a clasped \$5, I asked him his name. He said 'Jeremaia Soko, the father of the boy that was killed by the police. Please continue speaking out for justice'.

In another example, in the very beginning, due to resource limitations, our target community was young people and women of all diversities. However, over time, communities started approaching us to come and speak. This included groups that are generally hostile to women's leadership and political visibility.

Through the election campaign and the movement, we promoted for social inclusion, created ownership and made opportunities for our collective to experience social mobility. It was not easy. It took resources away from election campaign but we knew that it was part of the process and the change we wanted to see.

What did *Be The Change* members do?

Building social cohesion requires commitment, action and resistance. We had to become hugely uncomfortable at times. We had to speak out. It was so important to have open and frank conversations. Initial responses included defense, resistance, retaliation and even violence at times, but we persevered and continued, as this was our lives and our country at stake.

We were continuously asked to adjust to the perception of people. We resisted this as much as possible. For example, some people would call us a 'kid party' and ask me to not have so many young people around, as it detracted from my credibility and value.

Another action we took was to assess our own attitudes and move away from narratives such as - 'the time is not right'; 'you cannot do that now'; 'Fiji is not ready'; 'it takes time for change'; and so forth. We had started using this as a crutch and it was preventing us from being authentic to ourselves. Over time we merely existed instead of living with purpose, and exercising ownership and responsibility of our country, its problems and our people.

The Reverend in his talk at the dialogue said we are “children of fate”. This resonated so deeply with me because we have as the younger generation inherited the prejudice and racism from generations before. We decided to break this generational cycle. We actively spent a copious amount of time approaching people, building relationships and trust in different communities. In all my free time I would volunteer to do civic education for youth and women’s networks.

We stayed adamant and refused cultural practises that elevated the status of some people over others or perpetuated harmful power dynamics. For instance, I would ask Indo-Fijian groups not to garland me or would receive the garland rather than have it put on me. I acknowledge the Indo-Fijian practise of garlanding guests, but as a politician going into these spaces I had to ensure that the power dynamics were conducive to an open and honest meeting. Most times a chair and/or table would be put in the front for politicians to sit at while everyone else would sit on the floor. I would also refuse to sit on the chair and would join the people on the floor. We continuously put in effort and worked to transform spaces and challenge harmful power dynamics.

Conclusion

We created an environment in the campaign where we were learning from each other. We made sure regular cross-cultural and knowledge sharing within our group were happening. We treated each other as experts. We all were equal in different ways.

We achieved something equally, if not more important than a seat in parliament – we transformed the political, social and cultural spaces. We showed people that one could gain votes beyond prejudice and incitement. Elections and politics should be more than just voting and gaining a seat in parliament. It should be a process of fostering better relations and creating systems that work in response to all people and their needs. It should be about cultural and social shifts. We showed Fiji that politics can work differently and we redefined politics.

Ultimately for *Be The Change*, the means to the end was just as important as the end. *Be The Change* broke barriers and pushed boundaries to force people to think about a society and culture in which we valued each other equally and one where diversity is celebrated.

10

Building Social Cohesion— The Role of the News Media

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The mainstream news media's alleged role in fermenting conflict in multi-ethnic societies is a long-held concern in Fiji, and elsewhere. Looking overseas, the media's culpability in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is a stark reminder: what became known as the "hate media" whipped up the Hutu extremists into a murderous frenzy. An estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred in a mere 100 days. In Kenya the media stand accused of fueling election violence in 2007 and 2008 by publishing extreme views.

While the situation is not that dangerous in Fiji, the African case studies indicate how quickly media can escalate tense situations, with lessons to be learnt. In Fiji, sections of the media stand accused of complicity in the nationalist 2000 coup that toppled the country's first Fiji Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. It would be prudent to examine claims of incitements against the Fiji media rather than dismiss them out of hand.

Internationally, some studies indicate that a dominant Anglo-American news reporting frame prioritising conflict as a premium news value can put nations and people on a war footing—both within countries and between countries. This understanding has been the impetus for new fields of studies in news media, such as peace journalism and conflict-sensitive reporting. These frameworks recommend a problem-solving approach, with conflict prevention as a key priority, but critics dismiss these as ‘advocacy’ rather than journalism based on the objectivity creed.

The Fiji Government supports ‘journalism of hope’ to promote social cohesion—enforced by punitive legislation. However, critics dismiss the government’s plan as a form of media control. To some extent, the skepticism is understandable since concepts like development journalism, which are based on a more cooperative, less adversarial stance towards government, have been shown to be more at risk of state capture and control. Due to such challenges, defining some sort of a role for the media in development or social cohesion is not only complex, but fraught with risks.

Proposing media reforms is also tough because the mainstream media establishment usually favours the standard Anglo- American news reporting frame. This is due to historical, commercial, professional and ethical reasons. This ‘watchdog’ role based on adversarialism is founded on the idea of an unrestricted media holding governments to account. So entrenched is this idea in that mainstream media culture worldwide that the mere mention of newer concepts, such as development journalism, or peace journalism, are quickly shouted

down, even before they can be properly discussed or examined, let alone applied.

The watchdog role was conceived by liberal theorists in Western democracies, with largely homogeneous populations. Fiji, however, is neither a liberal democracy in the same sense as Australia or New Zealand, nor is it an ethnically homogeneous entity. Fiji, for a good part of its recent history, represented a “hybrid” political order combining Western and indigenous modes of governance.

Ethnic differences in Fiji were magnified under a racially- based constitution which pitted an indigenous government against an Indo-Fijian opposition. Super-imposing an adversarial media system on a hyper- adversarial political structure made for a potent mix. Many analysts question whether a western news reporting formula can be ‘transplanted’ into fragile Pacific societies on the assumption that it will serve the same purpose and produce similar results. This is more so in vulnerable societies, where criticism that media habitually misreport conflict, is quite valid at times.

To be clear, media are not totally responsible for conflict and they should not be used as a scapegoat: conflict is usually a product of society. In Fiji’s case, allegations that the media are behind the country’s coup culture is somewhat tenuous: while some media were apparently implicated for their role in the 2000 and 2006 coups, media did not play any discernable part in the 1987 coups. At worst, media acted as catalysts in 2000. Professor Steven Ratuva explained this best when he stated that the media portrayal of Prime Minister Chaudhry

in 2000 fed into the rising tide of ethno-nationalist mobilisation. Although media did not create the conditions for the ethno-nationalist upsurge, media did provide the nationalists with the 'legitimacy' to roll on, stated Ratuva.

As a journalist, I interviewed Labour MP Krishna Dutt after the 2000 coup. This is what he told me: Journalists abroad have a certain style in questioning issues and adopt a particular slant, which is fine in fully-fledged democracies. But here we had a fledgling democracy, which hadn't got its roots dug in. That kind of journalism did a lot of damage.

Dutt's comments, along with some research findings of the media coverage of the Chaudhry Government are reminiscent of media hyper-adversarialism. This signifies a worldwide paradigm shift in political reporting—from 'healthy skepticism' to a 'corrosively cynical' position. One researcher, Spiess, calls it 'attack dog journalism'—an aggressive strain that harms 'fledgling democracies' by 'nurturing intolerance and diminishing faith' in elected leaders.

Hyper-adversarialism is a problem even in Australia. The respected Australian political journalist Laurie Oakes has alluded to a media culture based on contempt for politicians. So has former Australian Labour minister Lindsay Tanner in his book, *Sideshow, Dumbing Down Democracy*. It is plausible that hyper-adversarialism spread to Fiji from Australia, our major source of publishers, editors, trainers and funds. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that Fiji and Australia share similar concerns about the risks of media self-regulation and belligerent political coverage.

As a journalist in Fiji in 2000, and a PhD student in Australia from 2011 to 2014, I could not help but notice parallels between the coverage that preceded Chaudhry's fall in 2000, and that of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2013, by different branches of the Murdoch media. Both times, there was an air of inevitability and a palpable sense of labour governments under siege, living on borrowed time.

However, there was a major difference in the manner in which the two prime ministers fell: in Australia there was an orderly transfer of power via a palace coup. In Fiji, there was a violent overthrow of government with dire social & economic consequences. Fiji's experience belies former Labour MP Dutt's remarks about the different impacts of media messages in mature and immature democracies. The Fiji media need to learn from such experiences and factor them into their reporting.

Paul Collier's words in his book, *Guns, Wars and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*, ring true for Fiji: "wars and coups are not tea parties: they are development in reverse". The moot point is whether journalism in Fiji is informed and influenced by our historical context, such as ethnic tensions, political instability and the coup culture, resulting in social divisions, economic decline and underdevelopment. When I investigated this issue in my PhD research through a content analysis of the 2006 election coverage, I found the lack of in-depth reporting was a bigger problem than inflammatory reporting. Most 2006 election articles dealt with

political rhetoric and the logistics of the poll. Socio-economic issues—often at the heart of conflict—yielded just 13 per cent of the content.

My research showed that media tend to misrepresent sensitive issues, such as land and demography, our major flashpoints. These have been reported in emotional rather than rational terms. In 2000, the *Fiji Daily Post* editorialised that to indigenous Fijians, land is ‘culture’, their ‘soul’, and their ‘very spirit’. Land is ‘sovereignty’; to be ‘defended to the death, like honour’. Land is ‘so sacred’ that indigenous Fijians would rather see it ‘lying idle, overgrown with grass and not fetching any economic return at all’.

The *Post* did not explain the basis of its claims. But its opinion piece was in stark contrast to Stephanie Sienkiewicz’s 2000 study, *Ethnic relations in Fiji: peaceful coexistence and the recent shift in the ethnic balance*. Her work shows indigenous landowners willing to offer leases for the right rental and also keen to earn income through farming, rather than see their land ‘lying idle and ‘overgrown’, as claimed by the *Daily Post*. One possible explanation for the reporting slant is that the paper was taking its cue from elite sources. Such sources are considered a prime news value in the dominant news reporting frame. The views of ordinary people are deemed to be of lesser news value, so the media quote ‘experts and ‘leaders’ to speak on the people’s behalf. This approach is risky if the elites distort the message to further their own political and economic interests.

Historically, the Fiji media have also misreported demographic trends, both wittingly and unwittingly. Margret Chung's research published in 1999 shows media were part of the disinformation campaigns of the 1950s-60s in portraying Indian fertility as a threat to Fijian cultural survival, while depicting Indians as land-grabbers. The only private media at the time, *The Fiji Times*, never fully explained the real reason for the disparity in birthrates— the two populations' different age structures and the high number of Fijian infant and child deaths. Chung's research also showed that Indo-Fijians responded in greater numbers to a national family planning campaign launched in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in a steeper decline in Indo-Fijian fertility rates.

In Fiji, land and demography are complex issues easily misrepresented by inexperienced, unqualified or biased journalists. Indeed, journalistic professionalism can be a weakness in developing countries due to the lack of training opportunities and poor work conditions. Experts contend that untrained journalists can unintentionally inflame grievances and promote stereotypes. This is described as *involuntary* or *passive* incitement of conflict due to poor professional skills. This can be a bigger problem than deliberate incitement by biased journalists. Towards this end, my PhD fieldwork in Fiji found a young, inexperienced, under-qualified, journalist corps.

So, while the Fiji Government is right to be concerned about conflict reporting, is stronger legislation on its own enough to address the problem? According to peace journalism dogma, to understand peace, one must first understand the dynamics of violence. This comes

through training. Experts point out that even if professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict, they can achieve positive results by presenting accurate, impartial news. The point is, heaping all the blame on the media is wrong and futile. It can become a ploy to absolve politicians and other actors of their role in conflict, and become a handy excuse to impose excessive, unnecessary censorship.

In other words, punitive laws alone do nothing to address the structural problems—capacity building through regular training and education is a more sustainable strategy to improve conflict reporting and foster social cohesion through news media.

