Abstract

Widely known as a tropical tourist destination, the Fiji Islands have been gripped by political turmoil and have had four coups in a span of 20 years. Various factors such as tradition versus modernity, military-civilian relations, failure of constitutionality, nationalism and power struggle are identified in this paper as factors of Fiji’s political instability. This paper examines how socio-economic and cultural differences between the country’s two major races, Fijians and Indians, have been the underlying cause of Fiji’s proclivity to coups from 1987-2006. Along with other factors, the socio-economic and cultural differences between Fijians and Indians have crippled Fiji’s political progress and development and have significantly interfered with the country’s democratic process.

Introduction

Nestled in the South Pacific and known for its lush, swaying palm trees, heavenly white sandy beaches and tranquil, crystal-clear waters, Fiji is widely acclaimed as a hidden paradise. The warmth, genuine friendliness, and hospitality of its people has stamped Fiji’s mark as an acclaimed tourist destination. Fiji has also come to be known as an exotic melting pot of the Pacific as its culture encompasses a vibrant and eclectic mixture of the indigenous Fijian, Indian, Chinese, European, and other South Pacific Island influences, which is reflected in its cuisine, language, architecture and religion and creates a truly, unique national identity. In this diverse island nation, the indigenous Fijians and Indians are the two major races and they have peacefully coexisted since the 19th century when the first Indians arrived in Fiji. For many years the country had the popular tourist slogan “Fiji, the way the world should be”. However, its turbulent political climate suggests otherwise. The tropical paradise’s scenic beauty has been gripped in political strife as it has experienced four coups in the span of twenty years.

Fiji experienced its first two coups in 1987. On May 14, 1987, Lt. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka staged a military coup and overthrew Prime Minister Dr. Timoci Bavadvra and his Fiji Labor Party and National Federation Party coalition government. Shortly after, on September 28, 1987, Rabuka staged yet another coup in which he revoked Fiji’s 1970 constitution and declared Fiji a republic, thus making it no longer part of the Commonwealth. On May 19, 2000, a civilian coup led by George Speight transpired, which deposed Fiji’s first ever elected Indian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry and his Fiji Labour
Party dominated cabinet. The last coup was yet again a military coup spearheaded by Fiji military commander Commodore Frank Bainimarama who overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and placed the country under military rule and dictatorship. Being from Fiji, the author has always wrestled as to why her island country, which is relatively peaceful, despite the political instability, has been marred with political conflict. The last two coups occurred during the author’s lifetime as she can vividly remember the coup of 2000 as a ten-year old primary school student in the national capital of Suva. Despite being away from home and living in Washington DC when the last coup of 2006 occurred, the author has seen first hand the significant impact political instability has had on my country as she can ascertain the socio-economic deteriorating state of the country under military dictatorship compared to democratic rule, especially since the author last visited my country back in 2010. The author is thus compelled as a Fijian citizen to understand the array of issues that manifests itself in Fiji’s unstable political climate and its proclivity to having coups.

Understanding the nature and underlying causes of coups as well as its aftermath is critical in assessing a country’s political progress and development and maintaining order and stability in the country and its region. The last major military coup occurred in Mali in March 2012 with rebel soldiers over throwing the country’s President, Amadou Toure. The escalation of violence in Mali with the French military intervention in January 2013 shows the extent of instability that can take place in a country that has experienced political turmoil in the aftermath of a coup. Many coups are successfully undertaken and vary in their outcomes whilst other coup attempts fail, as was the case in the failed coup attempt in Eritrea in January 2013 when renegade soldiers seeking to remove its authoritarian government were crushed by government forces. In international relations, it is critical to examine the underlying causes and effects of coups not only because they disrupt a country’s political stability, but they may also affect regional security and stability and have ramifications that extend outside their borders. With despotic regimes falling in the Middle East and others struggling to maintain their rule, execution of coups and their effects are a matter of importance. Coups may be carried out to remove despotic regimes, only to be replaced with another or it can benefit a country by allowing for progress and development. In this research a review of literature on coups and Fiji’s political instability is completed, followed by my hypotheses, methodology, and analysis of data collected. A discussion of my findings and recommendations conclude this paper.

**Literature Review**

Coups are a commonplace occurrence in the international arena and its causes have been widely debated as it varies from one country to another with none being alike. In the case of Fiji, the country has experienced not only military coups, but a civilian coup as well, each coup different from the others in terms of its nature and alleged intentions by the various coup plotters. It is therefore critical to recognize under what circumstances a country at risk of having a coup. Scholars have acknowledged that political instability as a result of military-civilian relationships and ethnic differences between two major ethnic groups play a significant role in coups. In my review of the literature, I examine scholars perspectives and their findings on coup risk and on military coups from around the world, as well as studies on the ethnically driven political tension in Fiji. This will establish a clear and defined notion not only on determining under what conditions is a coup likely to occur, but most importantly how to channel their findings to Fiji’s coup culture.
Gauging coup risk is an important way to establish a country’s proclivity to coups thereby determining what major factors fuel coup risk. According to Belkin and Schofer (2003), coup risk may be conceptualized as a structural function of government, society, political-culture, and state-society relations, where the precipitation of a coup is usually triggered by short-term crises (Belkin and Schofer). The strength of civil society, regime legitimacy and the past history of coups were identified by Belkin and Schofer (2003) as being the main factors that reflected underlying structural coup risk. They stated the importance of differentiating between coup risk, which is based on structural attributes in government, society, political-culture, and state-society relations, and triggers of coups, which are short-term crises, as triggers alone cannot lead to a coup without the presence of structural causes. In distinguishing between structural and triggering causes they recognized that structural causes of coups tend to change slowly whilst triggering causes can be quite fickle. Also, compared to triggering causes, structural causes tend to be more deeply set in the political system, and triggering causes do not lead to coups with the absence of structural causes. Structural causes of coups determined a country’s vulnerability to coups, as they were present in high coup risk countries as opposed to low coup risk countries, in which structural causes of coups were absent making them invulnerable. Effective coup-proofing strategies needed to be implemented by leaders in vulnerable regimes with the presence of structural causes in order to protect themselves and prevent the possibility of a coup from occurring. It is no surprise that developing countries find themselves at higher risk of having a coup, since structural causes tend to be more prevalent in these countries where democratic ideals are less plausible and in which authoritarian governments take precedence.

Despite many developing countries the fact that many developing countries have weak structural attributes, some of these countries hardly experience the occurrence of a coup despite these structural defects because they have solidified coup-proofing strategies. Quinlivan analyzed how regimes in the Middle-East had been able to effectively make themselves coup proof, focusing specifically on the policies of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria. Coup-proofing policies adopted by these countries included the regime’s reliance on groups with special loyalties to the regime and the creation of parallel military organizations and multiple internal security agencies (Quinlivan). Because the leaderships of these states divert much of their resources to protect their regimes, the heavily politicized militaries are incapable of realizing their potential of carrying out a coup, and the militarized politics apparent in these states remain stringently resilient when faced with defeat. Structural political-military arrangements that are present in these states had enabled them to remain in power despite external threats, military defeats and internal tensions. Quinlivan identified five factors; the exploitation of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties, the creation of parallel militaries that offset the regular military, the establishment of security agencies that carries out surveillance on everyone including other security agencies, the strong emphasis on military expertise in the regular military and funding, as the structural elements that were shared by the regimes in these three states and made them less prone to coups. Thus, these structural elements were able to offset the prevalent and major structural failures such as ethnic tension and religious animosity that would have made these countries have a high coup risk.

In their assessment of military coups from around the globe, through their analysis of political and economic data between 1950 and 1982, Londegran and Poole cited poverty as a common denominator (Londegarn and Poole). In their research they found that coups were almost non-existent in developed countries, with coups being 21 times more likely to occur in poor countries rather than in
wealthy countries. Interestingly, they found that the aftereffects of a coup includes a legacy of political instability in the form of an increased likelihood of having more coups in the future when low levels of economic well-being and coups are accounted for in a country. When it comes to military-civilian relations there is a distinction between motives and opportunities for launching a coup, as Finer found when distinguishing between the two. He argued three factors that result in the launching of a coup are civilian dependence on the military, domestic crises, and military popularity (Finer). In a similar light, when it comes to motives and opportunities for coups Zimmerman also identifies the difference between the factors that motivate military forces to launch coups and the factors that provide the conditions for a possibility of a coup to occur (Zimmerman). According to Belkin and Schofer coup risk and opportunities for launching a coup are not necessarily equivalent (Belkin and Schofer). They state that opportunities for launching a coup are based on a conflation of the level of structural coup risk, which is reflected in the robustness of civilian institutions, the rule of law, the freedom of the press and other related factors, and the effectiveness of coup-proofing measures that leaders have implemented in subordinating armed forces.

The legacy of military coups as pointed out by Londegran et al., and the motives and opportunities of military coups cited by Finer, Zimmerman, and Belkin et. al is evident in Fiji as the military has been at the forefront of the political instability. Concerns have been raised that their functionality to remain out of politics is essential in eliminating the coup cycle, as they have only intensified ethnic division between the two major races in Fiji for their own institutional self-interest which has caused political discord (Scorbell, 1994; McCarthy 2011) which continues to run rife today as Fiji has yet to return to democracy and is currently under the dictatorship of military commander, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who also is Fiji’s current Prime Minister. According to McCarthy, democracy has been significantly affected by a power struggle between socio-economic institutions and elites cultivated by traditional forces. This conflict usually plays out in whether elites interests align with or are threatened by major traditional power institutions in Fiji. In Fiji the interests of the military has been a prevailing determinant in the quality of democracy, and thus they need to remain independent and apolitical for a stable democracy to ensue and put an end to the coup cycle.

Fiji’s coup cycle has had great socio-economic implications on such a small country with a population of under a million people that is struggling to maintain political stability given its unique racial composition that has led to much political disparity (Davies 2005). Scholars have attributed Fiji’s political turmoil as an extension of its colonial past under British rule, which was responsible for bringing to Fiji indentured laborers who first arrived from India in 1879 (Davies, McCarthy, Emde ; Lal). According to Davies (2005) since gaining independence in 1970, the political power struggle between the Fijians and Indians began to brew and quickly hardened and erupted as attested to the coups of 1987 and 2000, in which the main motives of coup frontmen Lt. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka and George Speight was discontentment with a political party in power that was predominantly Indian (Trnka, Davies, McCarthy Finn, Wesley-Smith White Lal). Upon gaining its independence in 1970, there was much deliberation on how to best cater to the interests of Fiji’s diverse population in its Constitution, which led many to believe that a balance would be found in Fijians maintaining supremacy through control of land and power and Indians continuing to enjoy the economic advantages they had over the natives (Finn, Wesley-Smith). According to Finn and Wesley Smith the structure of communal and cross-voting that was put in place under the 1970 constitution allowed Indians to participate in
politics, but the chances of an Indo-Fijian led government was highly unlikely.

Despite major cultural and religious differences between Fijians and Indo-Fijians, they have managed to lead a peaceful co-existence in terms of low-level violence or death compared to other similar countries (Davies), which is a reflection of the non-confrontational cultural stance of Fijians, and seemingly similar outlook on the part of Indians. Since their arrival as indentured laborers, Indians in Fiji have been able to progress at a faster rate than the native population due to their work ethic, which has greatly contributed to the country’s economic development. In analyzing the Indian interpretation of conflict and history, Davies states that “victimization” was a major theme, and that Indians perceived their own status as second-class citizens in a country that rightfully belonged to the Fijians, but had also become their own home which they have had to toil hard for as well (Lal). This victim status was solidified with the 1987 and 2000 coups and its blatant message that the indigenous did not want any Indo-Fijian dominance in their country and this would not be tolerated. Indians have been further victimized by racial discrimination in the form of affirmative action, which has been displayed through various measures of preferential treatment towards Fijians at the expense of Indians (Davies, Lal). Davies states that Fijians have had to struggle in integrating their cultural and traditional norms to accommodate to Indians, especially when it comes to land and their cultural sense of belonging to a certain geographical location. The notion of having to share their ancestral land with the uninvited immigrant groups who also seek to maintain their equality of rights as second to none has become a triggering factor for native cultural sensitivities. Davies emphasizes how Fijians pride themselves on having their own country, playing out their own nationalism, and cultural pride in shaping their own national identity. However, these have been crippled by the British colonial rule and the Indo-Fijian political dominance that threatens what Fijians feel is an erosion of their own culture at the hands of foreigners in their land (Davies). Thus, according to Davies, the affirmative action that Indians are fighting against is trivial in comparison to the greater injustice Fijians fear of their own country and cultural traditions being transformed by outsiders.

In her analysis of the status of the two major races in Fiji, White assesses that racial subjectivity exists between Fijians and Indians, with Fijians being considered “backward” and Indians “advanced”. This racial subjectivity can be traced back to the first arrival of Indians in Fiji in which they considered themselves superior to the savage-like ways of the native Fijians they first encountered, and that has led to many stereotypes between the two races. The Fijian communal way of life, which emphasizes sharing and caring for the extended family and community, varies in comparison to the individualistic way of life espoused by Indians. Indians would place much emphasis on education and hard work, considering themselves disciplined, as opposed to Fijians who place more emphasis on community and sharing whatever little they have with family and giving to the church. These different outlooks have led to the stereotypes between the two races of Fijians being “lazy”, “naive”, and “carefree” and Indians being “cunning”, “greedy”, “stingy” and not to be trusted by Fijians (White). In her observation of Fijian culture, White observes that Fijians tend to base their stereotypical and prejudicial views of non-Fijians on Fijian standards of behavior culturally prescribed, which were condescending and ethno-centric. Thus, Fijians usually draw the comparison between themselves and non-Fijians when it comes to how much time and money they devote to family and church commitments and ceremonial events and honoring communal obligations, distinguishing that other groups, especially the individualistic Indians, do not place much emphasis on such matters and must therefore have no manners or customs.
These internalized prejudicial and stereotypical sentiments may not be easily picked up and evident, but much of the animosity on the political level can be traced to these very notions, and once triggered can prove volatile and erupt as is evident in the politicized racial tension that is prevalent today in Fiji.

The concept of democracy is not an easy concept to be accepted by native Fijians who place a lot of reverence on the chiefly structure that serves as the epitome of Fijian leadership. To express disdain and disrespect towards a chief is highly deplorable and offensive amongst Fijians as they hold sovereign supremacy in the traditional structure of Fijian culture. To dishonor the chiefs would ignite the fury of natives, and this has been a firm belief as to why there is much political tension. Indians have been perceived to have taken this for granted, placing more emphasis on allowing the democratic process to take precedence, whereas Fijians rely heavily on the leadership and backing of chiefs and is why institutions like the Great Council of Chiefs have the final say on issues such as land and custom (Finn, Wesley-Smith). According to McCarthy the extent of the progression of democracy in Fiji is highly influenced by ethnic divisions and indigenous sources power and influence in society. Therefore, given Fiji’s political history, a more stable democracy in Fiji can exist if inclusive deliberation of all the races takes place and does not necessarily insist on what is best for all, but instead balances delicate cultural, religious, military and ethnic interests.

Hypothesis

To understand Fiji’s proclivity to coups, structural causes that heightens its coup risk have to be identified. Despite an array of structural attributes that contributes to Fiji’s political instability with military-civilian relations being a major factor, racial tension caused by socio-economic and cultural differences between Fijians and Indians has been the underlying cause for the coup culture that has gripped Fiji. This coup culture has had many turning points and overtures, which has been exacerbated by power struggle between elites and institutions. The four coups all vary in nature, with racial division as a primary factor. However, what is addressed and measured in this research is how much emphasis and to what extent were racial differences played out from the coups that occurred between 1987 and 2006. The last coup had an interesting twist to it because it has since seen indigenous institutions and national identity being threatened by a military whose commander is Fijian but is claimed to be a puppet for Indian individuals and their interests. This is in contrast to the three coups before it, which was championed by nationalist inclinations and sought to represent indigenous ideals. The dynamics and power play of the racial tensions in Fiji politics have definitely changed from 1987 to the 2006 coup aftermath, which needs to be examined in order to put an end to Fiji’s proclivity to use racial division as a coup trump card. My hypothesis is that socio-economic and cultural differences between Fijians and Indians have been the underlying cause for Fiji’s proclivity to coups.

Methodology

The political instability in Fiji has been attributed to factors such as an extension of Fiji’s colonial history, elite power struggle, and military self-interest. It is true that various factors are played out in Fiji’s political history, however socio-economic and cultural differences between Indians and Fijians fuels the political instability in Fiji and results in its proclivity to have coups. In this research an assessment of how racial differences between Fijians and Indians contributed to the coup cycle in Fiji from between 1987 to 2006 is made. History plays a critical role in establishing these differences, which
is why it is essential to include historical aspects from years before 1987 as well.

In determining the correlation between socio-economic and cultural differences and Fiji’s proclivity to coups, political instability as a result of the coup cycle that has presided over Fiji between 1987 and 2006 is used as the dependent variable and socio-economic and cultural differences between Fijians and Indians is the independent variable. The research is based on both quantitative and qualitative data in order to gauge just how much of an impact differences between the races have had over the years that would solidify the hypothesis that socio-economic and cultural differences between Fijians and Indians have been the underlying cause for Fiji’s proclivity to coups.

In the collection of quantitative data, socio economic progression and development of the two races was analyzed. An analysis of the growth of the Indian population since their first arrival in Fiji and how it compares with the growth of the Fijian population within the same time frame is carried out, as this is a pivotal factor that indicates how Fijians would feel threatened by having another major ethnic group steadily gaining leverage with them in terms of political influence and population. Another important factor that differentiates between the two is religious affiliation, which greatly shapes and strengthens an ethnic identity. In further solidifying the socio-economic and cultural differences between the two races, comparing education and economic levels is of considerable importance to gauge how one ethnic group’s access and successful pursuit of education and their professional and economic advantages would merit friction between Fijians and Indians. Most of this information was obtained through the statistics provided by the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics.

In terms of gathering qualitative data, an analysis was carried out on the constitutional processes of the three different Constitutions from 1970, 1990 and 1997 that Fiji has had, as well as the different measures that have been implemented in order to create Constitution that would accommodate and consolidate the unique ethnic makeup of the Fiji population and take into consideration traditional aspects of the Fijian hierarchy which is most sacred and paramount to the Fijian people. Political party affiliation between the two races is critical because it revealed the sort of ideology their interests were aligned with and particularly shows the direction in which the two races based on their party affiliation wanted the country to move towards pertaining to political party principles and representation. Much of the findings on the three Constitutions were based on a case study by Cottrell and Ghai, as well as other reports on the constitutional processes and ethnic tension in Fiji.

Analysis

Population

The emergence of the Fiji Indian identity began upon Indians’ first arrival in Fiji as indentured laborers by the British colonial power between 1879 and 1916 and later complemented with the arrival of Gujarati and Punjabi immigrants who came as free settlers in the early 1900s (Grieco). The census statistics from the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics comprised of the ethnic population of Fiji from 1881 to 2007 and is categorized by the five major ethnic groups in Fiji which is indigenous Fijian, Indian, European, Part European, Chinese and a section called “All Others” in reference to other ethnicities (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics) and Fijians and Indians have remained the two major races in Fiji ever since. In 1881, the Fijian population was 114,748 acres compared to the mere 588, which made up the Indian population, thus Fijians accounted for 90 percent of the entire population,
whilst Indians accounted for less than one percent. However, over the years the Indian population steadily increased from 1891 till 1986, with the 1966 census indicating for the first time that they made up 50.5 percent of the population whilst Fijians accounted for 42.4 percent of the population. In the 1976 and 1986 censuses there were slightly more Indians than Fijians, as in 1976 they made up 49.8 percent and in 1986 they were 48.7 percent of the population compared to the Fijian population which was 44.2 percent in 1976 and 46 percent in 1986. The last census carried out in 2007 indicated that the population of Fiji is 837,271, with Fijians accounting for 56.8 percent of the population and Indians accounting for 37.5 percent of the population. Ever since 1986 the Indian population has decreased and according to Fiji’s Bureau of Statistics a continuing very high rate of emigration of Indians since 1987 has been by far the most important factor (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics).

**Religion**

According to the 2007 Census, Christianity and Hinduism are the biggest religions in Fiji, followed by Islam and then Sikhism. Christianity accounted for 539,553 of the population and Hinduism has 233,414 believers which has been surpassed by the Methodist church being the largest religious denomination with 289,990 adherents (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics). In the 1996 census they actually had population by race and religion in which the majority of Fijians were Methodists with 261,972 out of a population of 393,575 whilst the majority of Indians were Hindu and part of the Sanatan religious sect with 193,061 out of 338,818 (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics). It is clear from the statistics that there is a clear difference between the two races when it comes to religion. Fijians tend to be predominantly Christian and Methodist at that, whilst Indians are largely Hindu.

**Employment**

The Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics conducted a 1996 census by employed population aged 15 years and over, by ethnicity and gender focused solely on Fijians and Indians. It revealed that Indian males had an edge over both male and female Fijians in the occupations of legislators, senior managers, professionals, technicians, associate professionals, service workers, craft and related traders, plant and machinery operators, and elementary occupations except for the occupation of clerks in which Fijian females dominated and the occupation of skilled agriculture and fishery workers in which Fijian males dominated. Indian males and females held the most occupations for legislators, senior office managers as Indian males accounted for 51 percent and Indian females accounted for 7.6 percent compared to 15.9 percent for Fijian males and 5.1 percent for Fijian females. When it came to elementary occupations Indian males made up 46.6 percent, Fijian males 31.7 percent, Fijian females 13.8 percent and Indian females 5.8 percent.

**Education**

In the analysis of the education levels of the two races, the 1986 and 1996 education census of population aged 5-20 years old by school attendance and ethnic origin was used(Fiji Island Bureau of Statistics). In 1986, 64 percent of the Indian population was attending school, whilst for Fijians it was 63.2 percent, and the statistics show that the school attendance for Indians was 82,565, whilst for Fijians it was 76,066. However, in 1996 76.6 percent of the Fijian population was in school, whilst for Indians it was 76.2 percent. There was a significant rise in numbers for Fijians attending school as it
was 109, 215 and for Indians it was 92,226. Statistics on education based on the ethnic categories of Fijians, Indians, and Others was also analyzed and was broken down into the three different levels of primary, secondary and post-secondary education for the years 1986 and 1996 (Fiji Island Bureau of Statistics). In 1986, we see that Indians make up 50.7 percent of the students attending secondary school compared to Fijians who made up 44.1 percent of the student population. In 1986, the gap between Fijians and Indians pursuing post-secondary education is even wider with Indians 54 percent whilst Fijians are 32.2 percent. In 1996, 58 percent of Indians are pursuing post-secondary education whilst only 34 percent of Fijians are doing the same.

According to a case study by Jill Cottrell and Yash Ghai, Indians tend to be more business oriented than Fijians and as a process more well off (Cottrell and Ghai). In 1993, $10.7 million worth of tax revenue in Fijian currency was derived from Indians individuals as opposed $1.2 million from Fijians in business. In their case study they also highlight that in 1970 44.4 percent of Fijian students passed the secondary school entrance exams compared to the 69.7 percent of Indians who did better and 22.3 percent of Fijian candidates passed the New Zealand university entrance exam, as opposed to 33.3 percent of Indians who also took the exam. Other notable quantitative data provided from the case study include how the discrepancy in education achievement presumably explains the imbalance in the public service by the time the first coup occurred in 1987, as Indians comprised 54.62 percent of the public sector when they made up 51.43 percent of the population. Also, there were greater differences between the two races when it came to highly qualified jobs, which were predominantly held by Indians.

**Failure of Constitutionality**

Fiji has had three Constitutions and according to Cottrell and Ghai each have all had a pivotal role in creating racial contempt and dissatisfaction between the Indians and Fijians. Under the 1970 Constitution, racial segregation was encouraged by the electorate system in which seats were allocated based on race. Due to the Constitution’s favorable position towards Fijians, Fijians under the main Fijian based Alliance Party, along with their alliances with Europeans and Part Europeans, were able to enjoy majority rule in the House until 1987. The provisions of the 1970 Constitution assured a majority by Fijians in the Senate as well as allowing any nominee of the Great Council of Chiefs (Fijian traditional body) to veto any amendments made to any law that safe-guarded Fijian traditional interests such as land, development assistance, and the traditional governing role of the Great Council of Chiefs (Cottrell and Ghai). Fijians, under the Alliance Party dominated cabinet whilst the main Indian based party, the National Federation Party made up the opposition. This racially compartmentalized form of politics was contrary to parliamentary democracy and exacerbated racial animosities. This fake notion of “multi-culturalism” in Fiji politics was downplayed by elections that were openly fought along racial lines between the two political parties, which both invoked blatant emotive appeals that appealed to racial interests which created fear and suspicion of the other race and helped maintain their racial constituencies (Sharma).

Indians began to develop a lot of frustration and discontent with the political structure of the system and what they saw was the monopolization of political power by the Alliance Party, which was heavily influenced by the traditional system as policies were designed to advance Fijian interests. Also, there was discontent among educated, commoner Fijians who felt that their political aspirations were thwarted by the elites who enjoyed political power and were mostly Fijian chiefs. The Fiji Labour Party
emerged in the mid 1980’s and was led by Dr. Timoci Bavadra who was Fijian and whose members were mainly Indians, defectors from the National Federation Party, as well as other Fijians. The Fiji Labor Party was not based on ethnicity but more on class lines, but was predominantly Indian. This party and Dr. Bavadra were viewed negatively within the Fijian community as Bavadra and the FLP was seen to be abandoning the more traditional stance of backing the role of chiefs in politics as opposed to the modern thought of chieftaincy being separate from politics. Thus, tradition versus modernity had become the crux of not only relations between Fijians and Indians in politics, but also friction amongst Fijians themselves.

The Fiji Labour Party and National Federation Party coalition were able to narrowly defeat the Alliance Party in the elections of April 1987, only to be overthrown a month later by Lt. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka. The major aim for the coup was that the 1970 Constitution was to be changed in order to avoid an election of an “Indian-dominated parliament” (Sharma) Rabuka justified the coup that he carried out against newly elected Prime Minister Bavadra in order to protect the rights and interests of the Fijian people, especially land ownership and political power, even to the extent of making Fiji a Christian state (Bush). Following the first coup, there was a power struggle between Rabuka and Governor-General Penaia Ganilau, in which Rabuka felt that if the objectives of his first coup were not realized, he would take full control (Nanda). This is exactly what Rabuka did on September 26, 1987 after the Governor General had proposed for a multiracial parliamentary democracy. Firm in his traditional beliefs and obligation to his people, Rabuka abrogated the 1970 Constitution in order for the creation of a new constitution that would benefit the Fijian cause. The 1990 Constitution rejected racial diversity and heavily favored Fijians, as it made sure there were not any loopholes that would impose on Fijian supremacy and encouraged racial segregation and Indian subordination and focused on the dominance of Fijian institutions over the state (Cottrell and Ghai). When it came to the electoral system, all votes were communal as there was no provision for cross-voting, also 37 seats were reserved for Fijians in the House of Representatives, which meant that Fijians did not need to make any alliances with any other ethnicity to form a government (Cottrell and Ghai). The entrenchment for legislation of Fijian land was enhanced by this Constitution and it guaranteed that only a Fijian could be Prime Minister. It strengthened the role of traditional institutions and gave special status to customary law which further segregated Fijians from other communities (Cottrell and Ghai). It also made the traditional body of the Great Council of Chiefs above the law and not held accountable to any institution or process (Cottrell and Ghai). However with the 1990 Constitution, there were negative ramifications for the Fijians as it led to internal conflict, especially with Indians out of the picture, which resulted in a political power struggle between Fijian commoners and chiefs which resulted in the creation of many Fijian parties which elicited that no one party could form a government without the support of an Indian party (Cottrell and Ghai). Perhaps acknowledging how his constitutional initiative had somewhat backfired, Rabuka agreed to the revision of the 1990 Constitution after seven years as there was a provision in the Constitution for that.

The 1997 Constitution sought to promote racial harmony and unity and with the insistence of Indians, was constructed by a constitutional review commission, which was headed by Sir Paul Reeves, who was a New Zealander, Tomasi Vakatora, a Fijian, and Brij Lal, an Indian (Cottrell and Ghai). This had never been done before as the country desperately sought a better solution for its constitutional woes after the failure of the 1970 and 1997 constitutions. The commission made recommendations
that would ease ethnic tension and ensure multi-racialism in the political spectrum and emphasize national identity. The 1997 Constitution introduced the alternative-voting system, which provided for moderation and cooperation across ethnic lines, in which each party had the incentive of collaborating with another party and encouraging supporters to vote for the party in agreement as second choice in their ballots and in the process facilitate national unity and achieve a broader national agenda (Cottrell and Ghai). However this sort of system leads to greater polarization as is evident in the 1999 election in which the predominantly and radically Indian Fiji Labor Party won, as well as in the 2001 election in which the United Party of Fiji under Laisenia Qarase won with a conservative Fijian party alliance.

With the Fiji Labour Party win in the 1999 election which saw Fiji’s first ever elected Indian Prime Minister, traditionalist Fijians once again felt threatened as they felt that the push towards multi-racial political power as too liberal and modern for their traditional inclinations. The May 19, 2000 overthrow of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry saw the call for the abrogation of the 1997 Constitution. According to coup front man, George Speight, the 1997 Constitution was not in the interest of the Fijian people, as it had been rejected by Fijian provinces and not properly explained to the people, but was instead brashly implemented (Lal). Also, George Speight felt that Prime Minister Chaudhry was favoring Indians by appointing them in the public sector in senior positions and accused Chaudhry of entrenching the interests of Indians, as well as being confrontational and insensitive towards Fijian interests and concerns. Thus, Speight felt compelled to overthrow the government because along with the Constitution, it did not serve the best interests of the Fijian people and needed to be removed by force (Lal). Fijians were surprised at Speight’s brazenness, however for many he was viewed as a hero for championing what they were all quietly talking and thinking about. However, Speight was unsuccessful in having the Constitution removed, as this task was successfully undertaken by military commander Frank Bainimarama. After overthrowing the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, Bainimarama successfully maneuvered the abrogation of the constitution in 2008 through his influence on the President Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Bainimarama justified his coup because he claimed Qarase adopted racist policies that explicitly favored Fijians over other races. Thus, the 2006 coup was the first coup in Fiji’s history that has been ostensibly justified not for the Fijians, but out of the concern of the interests of the other ethnic groups in the country (Castellinoa and Keane). However, Bainimarama and his coup has been regarded as an Indian plot by the indigenous population and resentment runs deep as his coup has led to unsustainable debt and poverty (Lal and Hunter). Bainimarama has since launched an election campaign for 2014 and has set up the construction of yet another constitution for Fiji (Lal and Hunter). Given the heavy animosity Fijians have against him, since he has total disregard for the Great Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church, the potential for racial mayhem is inevitable and is a ticking bomb waiting to explode (Lal and Hunter). Fiji is in current disarray and has been elusive to political instability, shaken by ethnic tensions and the failure of constitutionality, there is no way of telling what the future holds as it looks grim.

Discussion

As the Indian population steadily grew in the early 1900s, surpassing the Fijian population for the first time in 1966, it is no wonder the Fijian leadership were not as excited as Indians were about the idea of independence. With the history of indentured labor behind them and inspired by Indian nationalism from their old country, their growing numbers and bright future prospects in their
new home would ignite a passionate drive for independence amongst Indians. Fijians on the other hand were faring comfortably under their British colonial power, which seemed to cater to every sensitive Fijian whim, recognizing and establishing policies and institutions that safeguarded the Fijian interests, especially their control of the land, which the British never sought to take away from them. In the eyes of the Fijians, if anything, independence not only signified uncertainty, but more then anything it threatened their own identity amongst foreigners who had only arrived not long ago, and who were trying to take. Indians were not only able to become the majority, but were also able to fare well in socio-economic terms, further widening the gap between themselves and the Fijians, who stringently sought dominion over them through the political sphere. However when that failed, all hell broke loose and has since seen the country crippled by a system that fails to successfully reconcile tradition and modernity to counterbalance the racial differences between the two major races.

Since, the 1987 coup, there has been a high level of anxiety amongst the Indian community in Fiji, as thousands left the country. They have been driven to the leave due to anxieties that revolve around security, human rights, fair political representation, and land rights. Fijians control 83 percent of the land which is leased on a long term basis which ensures the Fijians continued control and economic benefit, however other reports suggest that this figure is much higher as the Citizens Constitutional Forum believes that it is actually more than 90 percent (Castellinoa and Keane), thus expiration and non-renewal of these leases to Indians in the country leaves them in a difficult situation as it threatens their livelihood. According to report on the lands woes of Indians from lease expirations, the human costs are immense as it leads to the break-up of families and communities, social and cultural poverty, stress and emotional anguish, and economic hardship (Barr). Indians feel a grave injustice as they are overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness and a loss of faith in the political and legal system, developing resentment against the establishment and an increasing all-round impoverishment (Barr).

Historically, social and economic inequalities have presided between Fijians and Indians in which Fijians perform poorly compared to Indians in terms of education and certain economic sectors. With the politicized racial prodding of parties, these notions are deeply ingrained in the mindsets of these two communities, which leads to the undermining of peaceful and fair racial relations. Once Fijians allow Indians access to equal political rights they see themselves as dispossessed in their own country. High levels of violence against Indians by Fijians had been unleashed by the coups which included systematic looting and burning of Indian homes, temples, and businesses with little intervention from security forces (Prasad, Dakuvula and Snell. Fijians are very religious and the Methodist Church, which has the largest Fijian adherents, carries a lot of influence in Fijian society and espousing tradition and Fijian nationalism. There is a deep separation between the two races when it comes to religion, and freedom of religion has been threatened with Fiji’s political upheavals. After the 1987 coup, sabbatarianism was enforced by Rabuka, a devout Methodist, in a decree in which it stated that whether or not one was a Christian, Sunday would be observed as a sacred day(Castellinoa and Keane). In light of this decree, the Economist described Methodists as the ayatollahs of Pacific Christianity as the Methodist Sunday enforced after the coups meant no public transportation and the closure of businesses (The Economist) and was seen as an attack on Fiji’s non-Christians who are mainly Indians as there have been incidents of arson and other attacks on Hindu temples before and after the coup of 1987 (Nanda). Hindu temples have been the main target of attacks and compared to churches and mosques have been targeted disproportionately with the destruction of religious texts and
Vitusagavulu

statues (Radio New Zealand). Indians have been unequivocally suppressed by the traditional Fijian mandate as they have been deprived of their basic rights and had their equality threatened.

The fact that each time an Indian dominated parliament is elected into power, it ignites Fijian fury and leads to it being overthrown shows that Fijians will not tolerate Indian political dominance and reflects Fijian distrust towards Indians. Fijians are just not ready for Indian political dominance, which also shows their total disregard for the principles of democracy. As policies have been directed towards lessening the socio-economic gap between Indians and Fijians, it has only made matters worse for the country, as these policies have been considered to be racist against Indians. The question of the Fijian cause stems from the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, as Fiji’s political history encapsulates that democracy is a concept that Fijians have undeniably had a hard time grappling with. Fijians contend that they have a right to self-determination as the indigenous people of Fiji even at the expense of Indians. It places Indians in a very unfortunate position as they fail to be accepted in their own country which they have all grown up in and helped contribute to its development and progress. They have reason to be frustrated, as their unfair predicament has driven them overseas in search of a better life.

However, the ugly coup cycle that mars Fiji is not going to go away unless the two races recognize and embrace each other’s grievances for the benefit of the entire country. Due to Fiji’s unique ethnic make-up, effective race-based policies should be based on areas where a particular race lags, such as gauging socio-economic levels and making suitable provisions that do not leave one ethnicity disadvantaged completely disadvantaged as a result.

Conclusion

Fiji’s proclivity to coups is deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural differences that exist between Fijians and Indians. Other factors such as civil-military relations, failure of Fiji’s constitutions, Fiji’s colonial legacy, elitism and power struggle both between Indians and Fijians and within the Fijian community itself, have all played a part in Fiji’s political deterioration. However, all these factors are all centered on the sensitive racial intricacies between how best to accommodate the two major races in Fiji. Dialogue and education are necessary to bridge the racial divide and bring about a better platform for political resurrection. A deeper appreciation for the country’s social fabric is critical in bringing about peace and conflict resolution. Democratic progress and constitutionality adherence will not be achieved unless the people work out ways to accommodate the unique racial composition of the country.

Since this research focused mainly on socio-economic and cultural differences between Indians and Fijians, it limits the scope of research, which could have been extended to other critical factors, with the role of the military being the main one. In many other countries socio-economic and cultural differences between races do exist, but they do not necessarily lead to the actualization of a military coup. The Fiji military was highly involved and instrumental in each coup, which is why it is essential to deeply analyze its role and function in Fiji’s history since independence till the last coup in 2006, which has since seen a military dictatorship rule Fiji. It seems that unlike other countries whose militaries remain apolitical and subservient towards the government in the country, leaving politics to politicians, the Fiji military seems to use its position to foster its own interests, especially those of its leadership in politics. On reflection of Fiji’s coups, the military has seen the need to act in the interests of the people instead of allowing the democratic process to take its course. Thus, future research
could perhaps focus on the Fiji military and its leadership and how it contributes to Fiji’s proclivity to coups. This research shows the many complexities involved in Fiji’s unstable political history when it comes to dealing with socio-economic and cultural differences between two major races and proves overwhelming for the nation to move forward and past racial lines for a more stable and secure future. However, coups should not be the answer, but unless people realize that, this coup mentality will continue to mar the country’s political progress.
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