Tourism and Political Change

14

Edited by Richard Butler and Wantanee Suntikul

Political Change and Tourism: Coups in Fiji

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

14 Political Change and Tourism: Coups in Fiji

David Harrison and Stephen Pratt

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the relationship between tourism development in the Fiji Islands and political change. Political unrest has had a negative impact on tourist arrivals, employment, earnings and investment over the last two decades, but the tourism industry has been resilient and the effects, though serious, have been relatively short-term. However, political uncertainties have also affected the wider socio-economic context of tourism, leading to emigration of Indo-Fijians and an increasingly obvious mismatch of the Fiji promoted by the tourism industry and the social and economic reality.

Fiji: the background

When Fiji became a British colony in 1874, the colonial government attempted to shield indigenous Fijians from incorporation into a market economy by insisting that more than 80% of the land was retained under the communal ownership of *mataqali* (exogamous patrilineages) (Legge, 1958: 170–201; Prasad, 1997: 17). From 1879 until 1918, some 60,000 indentured labourers from India were imported to work in the sugar industry, of whom 40,000 remained after their indentures (Lawson, 1996: 51). These two policies, along with the colonial establishment of a Council of Chiefs (Bose Levu Vakaturaga), which much favoured chiefs in the east of Viti Levu (Lawson, 1996: 44–57), laid the foundations for the present socio-cultural and economic nature of modern Fiji, and the social tensions that continue to beset it.

By 1956, the Indo-Fijian population had outstripped that of indigenous Fijians and in 1966, the last census before independence (1970), revealed that of a population of 480,000, 43.4% were indigenous Fijian, 50.5% Indo-Fijian, and 3.4% European and part-European, with other minorities making up the remainder (Bureau of Statistics, 2009: 3). This ethnic mix was characterised by Fisk (who arguably failed to recognise that 'the poor' came from all non-European groups, and that some (chiefly) indigenous Fijians were highly privileged), as 'three Fijis', where Europeans/Chinese managed and operated large corporations, mainly for foreign owners, Indo-Fijians owned medium and small-scale enterprises, including commercial farms, and indigenous Fijians communally owned most land and were primarily subsistence farmers (Fisk, 1970: 42).

Ethnic divisions were reinforced in the 1966 Constitution, which established communal rolls for elections (favouring indigenous Fijian constituencies), which survived constitutional changes in 1970, 1990 and 1997. Consequently, Indo-Fijian disadvantage was institutionalised (Fisk, 1970: 34–36; Lawson, 1996: 57–74). Thus, at independence, Fiji was (and might still be considered) a prime example of a 'plural society' (Norton, 1990: 1-5; Lawson, 1996: 42–44), containing ethnic groups with different cultures and forms of association, and differential access to civil and political rights, meeting primarily in the market place, where 'they mix, but do not combine' (Harrison, 1997: 170).

The point was not lost on astute observers at the time, and Fisk prophetically noted that 'the two main engines of economic growth' in Fiji, tourism and foreign investment, were 'virtually dependent on the absence of serious racial disturbance' (1970: 48).

Political change in post-indepence Fiji

By 1946, Indo-Fijians were in the majority, a situation that remained until 1986, when they constituted 49% of the population, with indigenous Fijians at 46% (Bureau of Statistics, 2009: 3). The perceived significance of such demographic changes explains why, since 1970, Fiji has (so far) seen nine general elections, four coups and three Constitutions, and events since independence have graphically demonstrated the validity of Fisk's apprehension.

Indigenous Fijians dominated government until 1987, when a coalition of the (mainly Indo-Fijian) National Federation Party and the (mixed-race) Fiji Labour Party was formed, with a Fijian Prime Minister and a racially mixed Cabinet. Soon afterwards, claiming the 'pro-Indo-Fijian' government was leading Fiji into disaster, Sitiveni Rabuka, an army officer, carried out two (relatively bloodless) coups (or arguably, one in two parts), formed a military government, oversaw a changed (1990) Constitution, which reinforced the supremacy of indigenous Fijians, and remained in power until 1992. Then, when the newly formed Fijian Political Party was elected, he was reinstated, this time as legitimate Prime Minister, and again oversaw amendments to the Constitution (1997). However, in 1999 he was electorally defeated by the Fiji Labour Party, led by Mahendra Chaudhury, who became the country's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, only to be overthrown in 2000 in a violent and prolonged pro-Fijian coup. These coup leaders themselves were then arrested by the military, led by Commodore Bainimarama, who subsequently invited Laisenia Qarase to form an interim government. In March 2001 Qarase and his new party, the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua Party (SDL), were elected and remained in power until 2006, when Qarase and Bainimarama disagreed over what Bainimarama considered were excessively pro-Fijian policies, and the former's support for leaders of the 2000 coup. Bainimarama again instigated military government and later, in April 2009, abrogated the 1997 Constitution, vowing to hold elections in 2014 after the introduction of a non-racist constitution, guided by a People's Charter, collated by aNational Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF, 2008). As a consequence, Fiji was suspended from the regional Pacific Forum and, on 1 September 2009, from the (British) Commonwealth of Nations – which it had rejoined only in 1997 after its membership had been withdrawn on becoming a Republic in 1987.

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