



Fiji Elections and Democracy

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The New Year ushered a sense of scepticism among Fiji's neighbours about elections in the country to be held in September 2014. With the appointment of seven Election Commissioners, Fiji has exhibited positive signs setting aside any apprehension about the formation of a democratic government. Since 2006, Fiji has been run by a military government under Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama and had failed to fulfil its promise to conduct elections.

Australia and New Zealand have welcomed the announcement of Parliamentary elections in 2014 but have raised concerns about the issues such as 'conduct', 'fairness' and 'transparency'. Fiji's Election Minister and the Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has proposed a single-day poll for the general elections and observed that it would promote voting and reduce security costs for safeguarding the ballot boxes. The opposition parties led by United Front for a Democratic Fiji (UFDF) have criticised the decision and stated that this would overstretch security forces, thereby facilitating tampering of ballot boxes.

Fiji's military government has released its fourth new Constitution (three previous Constitutions were adopted in 1970, 1990 and 1997) in August 2013 thus reinforcing its intent for state building and promotion of democracy. It outlined procedures for administrative, governance and electoral reform processes. Fijian President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau ratified the

Constitution in September 2013. In a landmark proposal, Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama had proposed “one person, one vote, one value principle” replacing the racially weighted formula. The other main features of the Constitution are the reduction in voting age from 21 to 18 years, the use of the term ‘Fijians’ to identify all its citizens (a complete departure from the race based identification) and protection of land ownership privileges of *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijians).

The new Constitution stipulates a 50-member Parliament for a term of four years. The three important principles which have been envisaged in the Constitution are: a secular state; freedom of speech and expression; and an impartial judiciary. Fiji’s attempt for nation building is commendable and the new Constitution has incrementally tried to reduce prerogatives of the indigenous people.

However, the earlier draft Constitution prepared by Professor Yash Ghai, Chairman, Fiji Constitution Commission, was rejected by Bainimarama administration in January last year for it proposed a completely apolitical military. The new Constitution does envisage a role for military, primarily in terms of security, defence and nation building processes. As per the new Constitution, the role of the military is "to ensure at all times the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians".

Meanwhile, it is expected that the new Constitution would rehabilitate the ethnic Indians who had migrated to Australia and New Zealand following the regressive policies of the previous military regimes which promoted the interests of ethnic Fijians. In the past, differences between the two ethnic communities’ i.e., Fijian Indians and ethnic Fijians had polarised electoral politics on the lines of their ethnic identities. This hampered economic growth and development in Fiji as well as hindered the nation building process. These ethnic fissures forced a number of talented and skilled Fijian Indians to migrate to New Zealand, Australia and the US. As per a New Zealand Survey (2010), the percentage of Fijian Indians in Fiji population reduced from nearly 49 percent in early 1990 to 37 percent in 2010. Commodore Bainimarama is trying to rectify the intrinsic anomalies in the social structure, political and governance priorities and has even asked

Fijian Indians to return to Fiji. The Fijian ruler has also urged the Non-Resident Fijians to register for Electronic Voter Registration (EVR).

Australia and New Zealand have continuously ostracised the current Fijian military regime as it defaulted on its promise of democratic elections in 2009. Further its suspension from the Commonwealth and the Pacific Island Forum was not taken favourably by Fiji and it made strong policy statements against these two countries. Fiji's Foreign Office also adopted a 'Look North' policy, aimed at engaging Asian countries such as China and India. Commodore Bainimarama has made landmark visits to China and Russia in May and June 2013, and has expressed his differences with the Australia and New Zealand dominated Pacific Islands security order. More recently, China has assured Fiji to provide aid and assistance for elections and also developing its economy. This clearly suggests that China is keen on enhancing its clout in the region.

In 2013, ANZ Bank Renminbi Trading Platform in Suva facilitated conversion of Fijian dollars directly into Chinese Renminbi. This would enhance trade between the two nations while cutting on double conversion costs and evicting dollar as a common conversion currency. In the last few years, both Russia and China have been proactively engaging Fiji's military government. Both countries have been scouting for investment and trade opportunities with the island nation.

Further, Fiji owing to its suspension from the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) floated a parallel forum known as the Pacific Island Development Forum and is keen on establishing a secretariat for the forum in Suva. Six major Pacific island nations attended the inaugural meet of the forum last year.

With Fiji's elections due this year, India could explore possibilities to extend material and diplomatic support to the Fijian government for conducting elections. As Fiji faces deficit in institutional infrastructure for conducting elections, India could assist in preparing and verifying electoral rolls, provide indelible ink, Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) and other necessary

electoral administrative assistance to the regime. This would also lay the foundation for engaging the current and the future governments of Fiji.

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