



View Point

Fiji in Transition and Democracy

*Dr. Pankaj Jha**

Fiji's military dictator Commodore Voreqe Frank Bainimarama abrogated the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) on 13th March 2012 stating that it was a colonial relic which promoted elitism and caused ethnic divisions in the country. The GCC predominantly comprised of ethnic Fijians, responsible for the nomination of President and Vice-President prior to the 2006 coup, and had rights to nominate 14 members to Fijian Senate which is a 32 members body. Barring financial bills, the Fijian Senate has the right to amend or veto any legislation proposed by House of Representatives. Lamenting the divisive politics played in Fiji in the last four decades and justifying his decision, Bainimarama urged the Fijian population for greater unity, resilience and sincere efforts in nation building. He has rechristened the ethnic Fijians as *i-Taukei* and declared that ethnic Indians would be counted as the Fijians.

Bainimarama's abolition of GCC especially in the wake of his declaration for formation of a new constitution (previous constitution of 1997 was repealed in 2009 when the Supreme Court declared that 2006 coup was unconstitutional), was seen as a proactive measure to abridge ethnic fault lines within the country. Fiji has a unique history of four constitutions in four decades of its independence. Bainimarama announced that for the return of democracy in Fiji, people's participation should be encouraged so that work on the new constitution could be initiated at the earliest.

In order to streamline the efforts for drafting of the new constitution, he has appointed a five member constitutional expert committee headed by Yash Ghai, a Kenyan born person of Indian Origin. Many political leaders such as the deposed former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, former Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, former Prime Minister and ex-finance minister in Bainimarama government, Mahendra Pal Choudhary have expressed reservations about the whole process but have welcomed the move for the sake of return of democracy in Fiji. People from different walks of life and a few opposition leaders have opined that the 1997 constitution was a well researched and complete document; however, there were some anomalies in terms of reservation of the high posts only to ethnic Fijians in the government. Professor Brij Lal, who is now based in Australia, was member of the three-member Constitutional Review Commission which drafted the 1997 constitution had stated that with the induction of Professor Yash Ghai in the constitutional review process, the efforts shows seriousness and a sincerity towards removing the discrepancies in the earlier edition of the constitution.

Earlier, in the January 2012, Bainimarama announced lifting the emergency laws imposed in Fiji since his ascendancy to power. However, emergency laws were replaced with a public order decree and restrictions were enforced on public gatherings. The Fijians are therefore uncertain about the return of democracy in the country that has witnessed several military coups and hollow promises by military rulers. Bainimarama had not kept his promise in 2009 and again he has promised that he would make arrangement for democracy to return to Fiji in 2014.

South Pacific nations and larger neighbours like Australia and New Zealand have welcomed the announcement but have been treading cautiously about the return of democracy to the coup infested island. Foreign Ministers of the two countries are making extra efforts, in terms of statements and policy pronouncements, to ensure that democracy returns to Fiji.

It will be useful to note that after gaining independence from British in 1970, Fiji has tried to structure itself as a parliamentary democracy but in that quest, it faced four military coups and a number of racial and ethnic riots, jeopardizing the inter-ethnic relations and demographic composition of the country. In 1980s and 1990s, the percentage of Fiji Indians comprised nearly half of the total population. Now, after a spate of coups

and inter-ethnic frictions, the demographic representation of Fijian Indians has decreased drastically to 37 per cent of the total population. This was due to large exodus of skilled professional Fijian Indians to New Zealand, Australia and US. Under such circumstances, Bainimarama's steps might be seen as positive step; but his commitment to democracy is still seen with doubt.

As part of the nation building exercise, Bainimarama issued a decree which dilutes the veto rights of Qantas (Australian Airlines) in Air Pacific. This need was felt because Qantas had been using the veto rights in decision making and even determining the business routes for the Air Pacific. This was detrimental to Fiji's international business where direct flights seen helpful for promotion of trade, tourism and investment in national economy. Also, Air Pacific was losing revenue from Qantas and Jet Star, an Australian budget carrier.

While Fiji is preparing for transition, the above move is aimed at whipping up nationalism so that Commodore Bainimarama can ride the wave of power. However, it is still a matter of conjecture how Fiji would survive or even eke out its own economic plan of action when it slowly detaches itself from the South Pacific theatre especially New Zealand and Australia which have been dictating terms for return of democracy in Fiji. Of late, there has been visit by a Russian business delegation to Fiji and also major economies are closely looking at the economic potential of Fiji.

Fiji has been trying to evolve an independent foreign and economic policy to preclude intervention by its larger neighbours such as New Zealand and Australia. Whether Bainimarama succeeds in such an endeavour is still to be seen; but for the time being, he has carefully orchestrated his hold over power through 'promised' changes.

In such a situation, what should be India's policy? Firstly, it could consider urging the Fijian government to invite a high level international election advisers to suggest electoral reforms process. New Delhi should send high level science and technology as well as business delegation to look into the possible areas of cooperation in Southwest Pacific particularly in Fiji. India can also conduct a conference on the possibilities that exist in this region especially when Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea and Fiji are slated for elections in the next two years.

It would also be prudent for the international community to reengage Fiji in a proactive way and look for a stable transition. India should take a major study of the economic prospects of the Southwest Pacific Island nations and discuss a comprehensive growth strategy in the Commonwealth and also Pacific Islands Forum. Fiji being the major island nation in the region, development in Fiji concerns not only the Indian Diaspora but also international community. One hopes that Fiji will emerge as a democratic and prosperous nation rather than an island having strong ethnic divisions.

**Dr. Pankaj Jha, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi 110001*

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