

Post-Colonial Struggles Haunt "Island Paradise"

Story and photos by Paul Barnsley

Since Indigenous people make up 52 percent of the population in Fiji, you would not think the country would have an "Indian problem". That's a uniquely North American situation, isn't it? But many will tell you that's the way it is in this former British colony. Others will say that is a simplistic, even dishonest, assessment of the situation.

As with so many post-colonial scenarios, the truth is never easy to discern. Racial tensions and resentments have played a role in two coups in the South Pacific nation. Everyone agrees on that point. The disagreement starts when the discussion turns to whether or not racism caused the coups.

Long before independence in 1970, the Indigenous Polynesian people of Fiji so charmed a colonial governor that he ordered them confined to their villages for their own protection. Labourers from India, another British colony, were brought in to do the work of the Empire. Today, descendants of those Indo-Fijians make up more than 40 percent of the population. They dominate the economy, running the shops, driving the cabs. Most Indigenous Fijians will tell you they are still trying to recover from that colonial governor's supposed act of kindness.

About 170 nations are ranked in the United Nations human development index. Canada has moved up and down in the top three positions over the last several years, ranking number one on more than one occasion; Fiji usually ranks around 100 in terms of quality of life. That's not the image the western world has of Fiji. Its many resorts and perfect climate make it a favourite vacation spot. But scratch the surface and you'll find, as the old cliché goes, there is trouble in paradise.

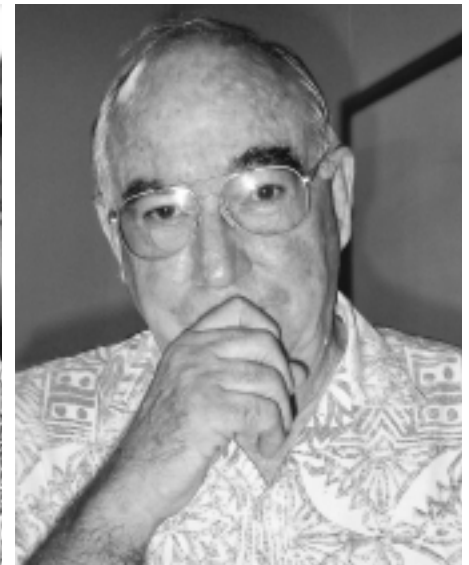
What was Really Behind the Coups?

In 1987 and again in 1990, armed insurgents seized the former colonial headquarters that now serves as Fiji's parliament building. In each case, the call to arms was based on the fear that Indo-Fijians were not paying proper attention and respect to Indigenous issues.

Fiji-TV journalist, Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, was right in the middle of the 1990 coup. His show, produced at a studio across the road from parliament in the capital city, Suva, angered the people who occupied the government building because the guests on the show suggested the coup leaders were exploiting deep-seated racial



Francis Sokonibogi.



tensions for political purposes.

"They did not like what had been said because it was very critical of what had happened in parliament, about these people who had taken over," the reporter admitted. "So they stormed Fiji Television with guns and rocks and, I'm not sure what else they had. Very fortunately, the staff members who were still inside the building escaped with their lives."

Grassroots people and social activists say racism is not predominant in Fiji. People normally get along. "The coups were done by the ambitious and failed politicians," declares Francis Sokonibogi, an Indigenous Elder and writer who speaks out for the poor on the main island, Viti Levu.

He believes the politicians were able to deflect the justifiable anger that was directed at them toward the Indo-Fijians. The anger is all about land. Terra Nullius, the now discredited western theory that Indigenous land everywhere was empty and therefore available for colonization, did not apply there. The people of Fiji owned their land.

"We had our title. We were recognized owners in the western legal sense and there was a deed of cession that provides this," Sokonibogi says. "This is the first law of the land. Our title is just as good as fee simple."

When independence arrived, land that had been seized by the British reverted to government control. Grassroots landowners have had to file land claims with their own government to get the land back. Frequently, the government keeps the land. Sokonibogi and others say there's a lot of corruption involved in this process.

Fijian people, 30 years or more behind their Indo-Fijian countrymen in terms of economic participation,



were not allowed during colonization to learn how to work the land for profit. Today, there are few places for them in the economy. For years, they leased their land to Indo-Fijians. Now, they're being told by politicians to take it back. This has caused economic disruption and produced some tensions between the races.

"The leaders and administration didn't do their jobs by progressing the development of the Fijian people with the times. They kept the disempowerment programme until today for their own interests," Sokonibogi says.

The Great Council of Chiefs plays an important role in the government of Fiji. It has veto power over legislation that affects Indigenous people. Activists say the chiefs have usually acted in their own best interests, often at the expense of the people.

"With my traditional standing, I've been able to tell the chiefs that. For years, I've been telling them off. I've told them that modernity demands that if you have a chiefly council, you must also have a commoners' council. All my writing is built on that," the Elder emphasizes. "There is a minority within the majority. The minorities are those who have used this system for their grievances, court cases and all, and just couldn't get any satisfaction for three or four generations. They want their land back but it's been set upon by someone else."

Sokonibogi believes the issues are more class-related than race-related - that the reality is there is no "Indian problem" in Fiji - but that's something the politicians seek to obscure by fanning racial tensions.

Father Kevin Barr, an Australian Catholic priest who has spent more than 30 years working with South Pacific peoples, agrees. He believes, like most people I interviewed in various parts of the country, that racism is not a major problem until the politicians invoke it to manipulate the electorate.

"Indo-Fijians have become the scapegoat," says Father Kevin. "But it's not that really. It can be the whole political process; it can be a carry-over from colonial times; it can be all these new economic policies - globalism - that they're upset with. A lot of things that are really class issues are deliberately transformed into ethnic issues. So people should be united because if they see these as class-based issues of poverty or equality they can be addressed. But somebody else is getting in there to manipulate, to say, 'No, no, no, this is an ethnic issue. It's those Indians that are to blame.' So they transfer the blame from, if you like, the elites, onto the Indians. It's been very subtly but consistently done and until people wake up to that, it can happen again."

Undoing the complicated threads left by the colonizers is a complex and painfully slow process. Many Fijian people say their entire system of government needs to be revamped. There is a growing notion among

Indigenous people that their chiefs have failed them and that there needs to be a great shaking out of even the traditional forms of government. Co-optation, a common tactic of colonization, has corrupted all forms of governance in the country, Sokonibogi believes.

"The problem that we have here is the legacy left by the colonialists, that the Fijian people should be protected. After the British left, [the chiefs] kept that archaic arrangement into modern times. To protect their power," he adds "there's a new phenomenon now being born. When the Indigenous people take over the reins of government, they do exactly what the colonialists do."

Paul Barnsley, senior writer for Windspeaker, Canada's national Aboriginal news source, has been covering Indigenous issues for more than 10 years, always in the employ of an Aboriginal-owned publication. He is frequently sought out by the mainstream press as an authoritative and neutral commentator on First Nation politics. He also contributes to human rights and race relations journals.



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