

## Democracy and the Fijian Chiefly System: An Ongoing Problem

**Subhash Appana  
Malcolm Abbott**

### *Abstract*

*Fiji, once held as a shining example of multi-cultural democracy, moved through pariah phases for 27 years because of what was considered to be 'continuing political instability' emanating from coups that plagued the Pacific island state since 1987 when the gun was first accepted as the instrument of choice to change government within a democratic framework. At the centre of all major political decisions, from 1874 to the 2006 Bainimarama coup, lay the Fijian chiefly system. This paper critically examines the changing role(s) the Fijian chiefly system has played historically.*

### **Introduction**

There is little arguing that the Fijian chiefly system played a key role in supporting and complementing the different models of governance in Fiji at different times. It needs, however, to be noted that what the colonial administration 'froze' as the traditional Fijian chiefly system in 1874, was based on the context and prevailing power relationships at that point in time on an ever-changing power-political stage. This fossilization did not foresee the challenges that would inevitably test and threaten the system. The chiefly system thus formed the back of the liberal-democratic system that presented the 'face' of government in Fiji after independence in 1970. It was, therefore, very important that the hierarchy seen at the back (i.e. the chiefly structure) reflected that seen at the front (i.e. the government). This was accomplished, at times with great difficulty, through the appointment of chiefs in key positions within government, the

bureaucracy and the military. This participation of chiefs in public offices, and more particularly in national politics, within a framework that did not adequately demarcate or reconcile the traditional structure of Fijian society with the modern structure of Fiji society continued to render the institution of chief vulnerable in the face of unrelenting and inexorable change. Nayacakalou saw this problem way back in 1975 when he wrote:

There are already changes toward a more democratic type of leadership. But the process is difficult owing partly to the resistance of groups which have a vested interest in the preservation of the old order, and partly to actual conflict of authority between traditional and modern leaders (1975: 7-8).

The hybrid structure that continued to be used contained within it dilemmas inherent in juxtaposing traditional authority with modern democratic rule. Moreover, the advent of education as well as the inevitable influences of modernization, that could not be prevented from affecting Fijian society led to subtle redefinitions of the institution of chief as his role within the modern structure underwent expected as well as unexpected changes. The institution of chief has, therefore, been under increasing pressure that has taken on the proportions of a siege of late with Bainimarama's declaration that chiefs pose a major obstacle in the path to true democracy in Fiji (Fiji Sun 7/03/12).

This paper critically examines the changing role(s) the Fijian chiefly system has played historically from the time the chiefs were engaged by beachcombers to establish some sort of a centrally-organized authority in a fragmented Pacific Island (pre-1874), to the signing of the Deed of Cession (1874), independence in 1970, the first military coup of 1987, through all other coups until 2006 when the Bainimarama government declared itself opposed to the structure of chiefs in Fiji. The paper raises a number of key points about the changed context, related agendas and the challenges these pose to not only the chiefly system, but to what emerges as the new framework for governance in Fiji. It then clearly demarcates the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) from the Fijian chiefly system in providing a provocative in-depth discussion - based on the precepts of pragmatism, compatibility and contradiction - of what role the Fijian chiefly system could play from here onwards or whether it has surpassed its use value for governance in Fiji.

## Background

From 1987 when the gun was first accepted as the instrument of choice to change government, Fiji has been maligned, vilified, cajoled and assisted, at different times to varying extents, towards developing a functioning democratic framework of governance for the country. In September 2013, Fiji got its latest constitution after a painstaking and oft-criticized process. In September 2014, elections followed and Rear Admiral (Ret'd) Commodore Bainimarama's Fiji First Party won with 32 seats to the opposition's 18 (SODELPA 15, NFP 3). At this point in time Fiji is on a 'developmental phase' on its avowed path to democratic governance. Despite the fact that there are numerous complaints about the manner in which voices of dissent are 'managed', there is little arguing that Fiji is on the long-missed path to economic development as the best-endowed country in the South Pacific region.

There was a marked difference between the 2006 coup and those preceding it in that it did not seek to find justification in the notion of Fijian self-determination, cultural protection and preservation. Instead, it sought to propagate the more universal notion of equal opportunity, equal weightage and equal impact of individual votes. In the process, the Bainimarama regime hobbled the Methodist Church, sidelined the Fijian chiefly system and strengthened the government apparatus in rural/Fijian Fiji by elevating the role of divisional commissioners, district officers and *Roko Tuis*. Each of these changes has had lasting implications not only for what has emerged as the framework for governance in Fiji, but more importantly for what was painstakingly developed and accepted as Fiji-style democracy until the 1987 elections tested its unspoken assumption of power in perpetuity for the Fijian establishment-backed political party (Appana, 2009). Since 1987, many of the assumptions behind that framework continued to come up for scrutiny as Fiji's political equation became multi-polar, diminishing the significance of the ethnic variable that provided much of the rationale for earlier bi-polar models of governance.

## Fijian Social Structure – A Fossilized Construction

After Fiji's cession in 1874, Governor Gordon's 'indirect rule' was designed to 'seize the spirit in which native institutions had been framed, and develop to the utmost extent the capacities of the people for the management of their own affairs, without exciting their suspicion or destroying their self-respect' (quoted in Legge, 1958: 204). When Gordon

established the Great Chiefly Council (later Great Council of Chiefs and then *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* or BLV) in 1875, he was enshrining the chief within the national government machinery. Government in Fiji was thus predicated on the back of a traditional system that was shaped, fossilized and maintained by the colonial administration. In his landmark study on power in pre-colonial Fiji, Routledge writes, 'the traditional socio-political order consisted of small, kinship-structured and locality-oriented entities fighting and intriguing for advantage over one another.' (1985: 5). Political power play, intrigue and internecine rivalry had no small part to play in these socio-political adjustments. Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century circumstances pushed these *vanua* further into combining to form still larger units called *matanitu* (confederacy). Thus these social units emerged 'within the context of political processes', and therefore, were 'power constructs articulated by the continual exercise of force' (Routledge, 1985: 29). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as contact with beachcombers, missionaries, traders, planters, and labourers began to impact further on internal social and economic relationships, strategic alliances and kinship bonds began to take on a new significance. It was this social and political organization of Fijian society that the colonial administration encountered and subsequently entrenched through its administrative strategy of 'indirect rule'.

Furthermore, the Fijian derives his identity from his links with the *qele* and the *vanua* to which he belongs and which belongs to him. The Fijian social structure is, in turn, designed, based on this link as Fijian society is organised around the *turaga* (chief). There is a chief at every level of the Fijian social hierarchy, and at the apex stands the paramount chief of the *matanitu*. 'The scheme ... is of a hierarchy of chiefs, graded in relation to one another according to the relative position of the units under their command' (Nayacakalou, 1975: 37). The institution of chief has traditionally been surrounded by a degree of mysticism. Tuwera (2002: 54) says that 'in old Fiji, the chief represented the god'. The installation ceremonies are closely linked to the *gunu* where the god is believed to enter the new chief through the traditional drink of *yaqona*. Sahlins (1985: 75) puts it more bluntly when he says that the Fijian chief is perceived to be the embodiment of god. In fact the chief has generally been accepted as being the embodiment of the *kalou-vu* or progenitor – this made him a key structure within the traditional framework of governance.

It is little appreciated that the office of the chief was traditionally an achieved position (Nayacakalou, 1975: 39). Conquests and warfare were a common means of acquiring chiefly office. Certain outstanding traits,

characteristics, and/or circumstances could also lead to the assumption of chiefly positions. The succession process of traditional Fijian leadership as well as the physical chiefdoms were not a part of 'tradition' as is now made out to be. The three confederacies (Tovata, Kubuna and Burebasaga) plus the chiefly households that dominate these chiefdoms were part of the 'invented tradition' of the colonial administration. Many of the chiefly disputes that continue to arise from the cracks of these 'reinventions' can be better understood when seen from this perspective. In contemporary Fijian society, seniority of descent and political dominance have become key factors in the selection of chiefs. Chiefly authority, on the other hand, rests on the consent of his people. A chief who loses the support of his people is referred to as *Turaga vakasenitua* (literally, like a hibiscus - which does not have fragrance). This support is now dependent on generosity with personal wealth, knowledgeability, political clout, traditional as well as modern power networks, and official positions in the formal administration. Thus it is in the chiefs' personal interests to aspire to positions within the bureaucracy and politics; his progress within this however, can no longer be guaranteed as Fiji's unicameral legislature no longer allows him special access and as he faces increasing competition from enterprising and ambitious commoners.

### **Roles Played by Chiefs**

The significance of the chief in helping govern the country, connecting the Fijian to the national administration as well as rallying mass Fijian political support was well appreciated by colonial administrators, and later, politicians. Howard (1991: 27) writes that, the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) 'was used by Gordon to help legitimate his efforts to create a stable and uniform colonial state, and his power over the council was considerable'. This led to strategic use of chiefs in prescribed administrative positions in the colonial administration as the need to keep the Fijian within the ambit of national administration continued to escalate especially after the 1920s when the indentured labourers began to acquire 'free' status and embark on competitive endeavours to forge a new life in an essentially hostile environment. At this stage the 'divide and rule' doctrine became increasingly important to ensure that the two communities did not inter-mingle to the extent that either changed the prescribed orientation and position of the other in the wider scheme of governance for the country. To this end, the Fijian chief played a key role in keeping the Fijian community organized separately from the rest of the country via the bureaucratic apparatus that preceded

the Fijian Administration – a parallel government apparatus that helped retain and maintain the protected and special status of the Fijian. This is where the chiefs were employed most effectively in maintaining the Fijian community as a unified and generally satisfied grouping. This acceptance, of the centrality of chiefs, by the colonial administration was in no small measure due to pressure and support from 'hard-pressed European mercantile capitalists.' The establishment of the Fijian Administration in 1944 firmly entrenched the chief as a permanent part of the national bureaucracy. In fact this bureaucratic-political formation virtually created a 'state within a state' from 1945 to 1960. Subsequent setting up of exclusive schools further facilitated the access of chiefs to bureaucratic and leadership positions. This centrality of the chief in the colonial administration made it inevitable that they would play an increasingly active role in Fiji's politics.

As mentioned earlier, chiefly involvement in politics was linked to their indispensability within the doctrine of 'indirect rule' as well as the all-encompassing, reified, leadership position they held within the Fijian psyche. Fijian representation in the Legislative Council between 1904 and 1965 was through government selected nominees of the GCC. From the 1920s through the 1950s, as the Indo-Fijian voice for political representation became increasingly more assertive, Fijian (and European commercial) opposition to this was mainly articulated by and through the chiefs. This political voice of the Fijian chief moved to centre stage during the multi-racial December 1959 Oil and Allied Workers Union strike led by Apisai Tora and James Anthony, when it invoked Ratu Mara, Ratu George Cakobau and a handful of other chiefs to address a counter rally at Albert Park on 10 December 1959. The chiefly voice had thus steadily gained a direct place in Fiji's political landscape, and it would strive to entrench itself further as the full import of the dilemmas contained in juxtaposing traditional authority with modern democratic rule began to emerge. During the constitutional conferences of 1965 and 1969, chiefs were at the forefront of negotiations for Fiji's independence, and in 1970 it was the Big Four – Ratu Mara, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau and Ratu Penaia Ganilau - who steered Fiji through independence; without their direct backing the GCC would not have accepted independence.

It has been argued before that this close involvement of chief with government tended to create a mistaken and misplaced belief that the Fijian chiefly system is synonymous with government (Appana, 2005). This continued to distort the functioning of what was implemented as a democratic system of governance once Fiji gained dominion status. After

independence in 1970, the problem persisted through to 2006. Fiji is now once-again faced with the dilemma of how to relate the chiefly system to a modern system of democratic governance.

The 1970 Constitution attempted to establish a legitimate place for the chiefs in national government when it not only gave them numerical dominance in the Senate, but also accorded them veto powers over any matter that affected Fijian land, customs or customary rights. Unfortunately, the full import of this was neither fully understood nor appreciated by the majority of Fijians as seen in the build-up to, and the aftermath of, the 1987 coups. The role and conduct of the chief outside of these constitutional provisos has been unclear. There were no institutional mechanisms that allowed the GCC to have a direct say on matters of national interest. Legally speaking, their contribution was merely advisory. On matters of particular significance to Fijian traditional interests, the GCC adopted a position outside the ambit of the parliamentary process. A number of prominent chiefs entered politics as natural successors to the colonial administration. Others recognised the need to enter public office and jockeyed for positions over the years. It has paid handsome dividends for chiefs to augment their traditional sources of power with modern ones emanating from holding public offices and engaging in business ventures. Even though traditional bonds weakened, chiefs continued to hold sway over their people, over 50% of whom are rural dwellers. This is because 'chiefs are recognised by many as the guardians of those values that are essential to the life of a particular group or society'. Chiefly influence is still dependent on political and economic clout, but the nature of this has changed markedly. Political parties actively courted chiefs for blessings as this assured them of votes – not of the individual variety, but that of groupings. Rewards were then expected through appointments to public offices or partnerships in business enterprises.

In addition to this, chiefs (through the GCC) were called upon to find 'solutions' whenever Fiji faced political uprisings. In 1987, when the country was plunged into its first coup crisis, the chiefs deliberated long and hard before supporting Rabuka's coup. Their focus was not only on assuaging Fijian fears of 'Indian domination', but also on ensuring that Fiji came out of the disaster with as little damage as possible. Then again in 2000, after the initial trauma of the Speight upheavals, it was the GCC (with active military support) that played a key role in getting the hostages released safely from Parliament. The landmark 1997 Constitution was only promulgated after the unanimous blessings of the GCC. History shows that Fijian fears and insecurities have been invoked

to serve vested interests whenever the need has arisen and chiefs have played a central role in this mobilisation. Opposition against the Bavadra government of 1987 began with roadblocks into Tavua ordered by the Tui Tavua, Ratu Ovini Bokini. Then again in 2000, it was both the overt and covert support of some of the chiefs that lent credence to and fuelled the anti-Chaudhry marches.

### A Hybrid Model of Governance

What evolved as models of government in Fiji were always hybrids - borne of two different frameworks of governance: one a traditional model and the other a purportedly modern one based on democratic traditions. Within this, the chief was expected to, and did, play the role of primary unifying force of the Fijian community. His influence and leadership was very much dependent on his holding a bureaucratic/administrative position within the colonial administration. This was later supplemented with political positions via the GCC. Through this setup a virtually symbiotic relationship was perpetuated between the Fijian, the chief and government. In order to maintain the centrality of the chief within this bridge between the traditional and modern structures at play, the chief was strategically allowed to play the role of provider, as development projects, resources and assistance flowed through him from government. This distorted, to a damaging extent, the Fijian conceptualization of government as he saw the chiefly system as being synonymous with government.

This also almost automatically ensured that the Fijian was given to expect special assistance from government as of right. As a natural consequence, it was inevitable that tensions would arise when the chief's hold weakened and when Fijian demands became unmanageable.

There were a number of assumptions within this framework that were to be tested severely over time, these included: that Fijians would always remain united under the chiefly system, that Fijian chiefs would remain united and operate harmoniously, that Fijian aspirations and demands would be met in perpetuity, that political opposition would never come from within the Fijian hierarchy, that political opposition would only come from the outside and hence galvanize Fijian unity and that the three underpinning pedestals of the traditional system - the *lotu*,

*matanitu* kei na *vanua* - would never crack and buckle.<sup>1</sup> Each of these was to fall with time and propel the country into coup-coup land.

### Chiefs Against Chiefs

The 1987 coup unleashed a plethora of conflicting interests and ambitions that had flow-on effects on the GCC. One of the first significant acts of defiance against the GCC was seen when judges of the Supreme Court of Fiji rejected the coup and Chief Justice (CJ) Timoci Tuivaga advised the Governor General (GG) to assume executive authority in defiance of Rabuka and his nationalist supporters. The GG refused to endorse Rabuka's coup and a tug of war ensued until the CJ found a first breakthrough by calling on the GG to form a Council of Advisors to run government.<sup>2</sup> When he arrived at the Suva Civic Centre to address that crucial GCC meeting on 21 May 1987, the GG and paramount chief, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, was booed by coup supporters who saw his vacillation as a sign of opposition to Rabuka and his coup.<sup>3</sup> This unprecedented act of disrespect and effrontery appeared to show that the GCC was divided. More importantly, it appeared that vested interests could blatantly use and abuse the chiefs for personal advancement.

This indeed turned out to be true as wholesale changes were made to the composition of the GCC in 1990 under the rhetoric of re-establishing chiefly power in national governance. Out of a total of 55 members, the GCC now comprised: 3 nominees from each of the 14 provinces and Rotuma, 6 nominees of the Minister of Fijian Affairs, the PM, President, Vice President and Sitiveni Rabuka (as the only life member). The provincial representatives did not have to be chiefs, and it became common to have chiefs and influential commoners making the provincial trio. Then the 6 nominees of the Fijian Affairs Minister comprised a mixed composition. In effect the GCC was turned not only into a divided

entity, but one that was no longer the sole domain of the chiefs.

During the 2000 siege of Fiji's parliament by George Speight and his supporters, the GCC was openly defied on a number of occasions by the military, other chiefs and Speight's group. Decisional dithering and bickering amongst the chiefs prompted the Chief Justice to remark at one stage that the chiefs 'were supposed to be the voice of reason, the voice of wisdom ... But they are at war among themselves' (*Australian*, 6/6/00: 9). Post 2000 coup Interim Deputy PM, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau was scathing in his condemnation when he acknowledged the 'unadulterated greed and the unbelievable arrogance (that) was shamelessly displayed by chiefs and people alike on May 19' (*scoop*, 20/12/00).

It is an open secret that chiefs were aggressively jockeying for positions of power and influence within the vacuum created by the 2000 coup. One incident that broke out of the hallowed halls of silence of the GCC at the time involved one coup-intoxicated Naitasiri chief who broke protocol and berated *yanuyanu* or island chiefs saying that they were overstepping their marks as 'visitors' to Viti Levu. In the aftermath of the bloody mutiny at the Fiji Military Forces HQ in Nabua on 2 November 2000, Commodore Bainimarama, who emerged in a strengthened position, was reported to have lamented that the instability 'would not have happened if the chiefs had been united,' and that the chiefs should be 'more honest and open to each other' (*Fiji Times*, 9/11/00).

Moreover, the *Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL) government had within its ranks a number of Ministers and senior members who were part of the illegal and treasonous Speight regime. This association of PM Qarase with coup elements created an unprecedented public divide within the ranks of the GCC. The ascension of Ratu Epeli Ganilau, a Fiji Labour Party (FLP) government nominated member of the GCC, to the prominent position of GCC Chairman, helped paper over the ominous rifts that were threatening a number of political groupings within the Fijian establishment. The GCC Chairman's strong public pronouncements on the need for tolerance, multiracialism and reconciliation tended to grate against government rhetoric on special Fijian rights and privileges. Ratu Epeli was also consistently calling for the paramountcy of the rule of law in dealing with coup elements. This came to a head when Ratu Epeli asked the Vice-President, Ratu Jope Seniloli, a *Kubuna* chief, to resign because of his involvement in the 2000 coup. Government's initial response was to attempt to discredit him through the media. In a scathing public attack Information Minister Simone Kaitani, a commoner, called for his resignation accusing him of causing divisions among his own people and being disrespectful to his

<sup>1</sup> The military had a tenuous link with all three of these pedestals in that: it was headed by Chiefs; it was dominated by Methodists; and it was predominantly made up of iTaukei personnel (see Halapua, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that there are different interpretations of the GG's actions at that juncture, it was clear that, as a subject of *Cakaudrove*, Rabuka turned to him for traditional chiefly support throughout the post-coup period till elections in 1992

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that this booing clearly came from a public that was unaware of the deep bonds of respect, caring and to some extent, *patrohage*, between Rabuka and his paramount chief, Ratu Sir Penaia, the GG. The perception of the indigenous people when a non-'High Chief' local from within the indigenous community became the military commander has not been examined so far.

high chief, the Tui Cakau (fijilive 22/6/04). Similar attacks followed from Ratu Josefa Dimuri who also called for Ratu Epeli to step down as Chairman of the GCC for his alleged involvement in the removal of former President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. He then reintroduced the *Kubuna-Tovata* tug-of-war that was a major part of the hidden power struggle in the 2000 upheavals by saying that Ratu Epeli, a high chief of *Tovata* had insulted the *Kubuna* people by calling for the resignation of their high chief, the Vice-President (fijilive, 22/6/04). Ironically, by saying this publicly Ratu Josefa was himself insulting a high chief linked to his own *vanua* of Macuata. These outbursts exposed publicly, for the first time, open, undignified and unchiefly acrimony among ranking chiefs in Fiji. It also eroded further the already frayed *mana* of the chief.

### Three Divided Houses

In the Fijian conceptualization of *matanitu* or government there are three distinct geographically demarcated, but kinship-linked political entities as 'Fijians speak of Fiji in terms of *Kubuna*, *Burebasaga*, and *Tovata*' (Tuwere, 2002: 30). The assumption has been that each of the three households would remain united and hold the wider traditional power structure together. Unfortunately, at this point in time, two of the three paramount chiefly houses in Fiji are virtually irreconcilably divided; the third is fractured.

With the passing away of *Tui Cakau*, Ratu Glenville Lalabalavu in 1999, *Tovata* endured an unprecedented and silently acrimonious power struggle between two cousins: Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu and Ratu Epeli Ganilau. Ratu Naiqama was finally installed as *Tui Cakau* in April 2001, but the people of Cakaudrove have been divided on this. Ratu Naiqama's involvement with the 2000 coup also tarnished his image to some extent. His rival Ratu Epeli Ganilau's removal from chairmanship of the GCC by a government in which Ratu Naiqama was DPM, tended to widen the rift between these two chiefly cousins of *Tovata*. Furthermore, the removal of Ratu Naiqama from Deputy-PM by Bainimarama in 2006 and the subsequent inclusion of Ratu Epeli Ganilau as DPM damaged relations at *Vuniduva* (seat of the *Tui Cakau*) virtually beyond repair.

On the other hand, the confederacy of *Kubuna* has been without a head called *Vunivalu* since the passing away of Ratu Sir George Cakobau in December 1989, because of intense internal disagreement among the cousins of the House of *Mataiwelagi* in Bau. When pushed on this issue, senior title aspirant, the late Adi Samanunu Talakuli, was reported to have said that the Cakobau family had not talked about the issue for some time

and that they would 'wait for God's time'. This in Fijian-speak meant that it would probably not be done in this lifetime.

The third confederacy of *Burebasaga* has a unanimously endorsed and installed *Roko Tui Dreketi*, Ro Teimumu Kepa. However, she appears to lack the larger-than-life profile of her late sister, Adi Lady Lala Mara. Moreover, she has been defied from very close by Rewa after the 2006 coup. This came to the fore in a bitterly acrimonious public debate on the historical status of *Ve'i Dovi* between her spokesman and a prominent member of the *Vunivalu* of Rewa clan.

There is thus little arguing, that with the passing away in May 2004 of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, in July 2004 of Adi Lady Lala Mara, and the death of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo in 2010, the Fijian establishment has been left with a yawning leadership void. Fiji does not have any unanimously installed paramount chiefs of larger-than-life stature anymore. This, and the fact that all three paramount chiefly households are divided, plus the fact that chiefs have begun to openly speak against other chiefs, clearly shows that the Fijian chiefly system is no longer the enduring unifying force that it once was when it was used by successive governments to provide the foundation for an acceptable democratic system of governance. The system has also been facing increasing challenges from the Fijian commoner. It needs to be noted that these demands and challenges have been boosted by the periodic occurrence of coups in the country when the chiefly structure has been at its weakest.

### Commoners Against Chiefs

Reported public proclamations against chiefs by commoners began with Sakeasi Butadroka when he formed the Fijian Nationalist Party in 1975 and started to criticize Ratu Mara and his multi-racial policy on Fiji. This came to a head just after the 1987 coup when he called Ratu Mara 'bloody Judas Iscariot' before a milling crowd of confused people in front of the newly-besieged Opposition Office. Straight after this, coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka engaged Mara in a protracted battle for leadership of government that involved unprecedented defiance and intrigue within the undeclared power struggle. Ultimately Rabuka managed to accomplish the following: he beat Ro Lady Lala Mara for the position of leader of the GCC-created *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) Party in 1990 in a GCC meeting; he beat back a leadership challenge from Mara protégé Josevata Kamikamica to become PM in 1992; he became the first and only permanent member of the GCC in 1990; he became the first commoner chair of the GCC in 1999; and he was part of the group that

sent Mara away from Government House on 29 May 2000. After the signing of the Muanikau Accord between the military and Speight on 9 July 2000, civil defiance and violence escalated throughout the country in an attempt to intimidate and influence the forthcoming GCC meeting. When questioned about this, rebel Jo Nata boasted that this was like 'holding a gun to the chief's heads' (*Australian*, 13/7/00: 7). In 2001, army spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini was reported to have said that the chiefs were 'riddled with personal agendas' and incapable of impartial, decisive action (DP 2/12/01). This was unprecedented at the time from an active army officer and a commoner at that.

After Laisenia Qarase became PM in 2001, a number of commoner members of his government openly criticized chiefs without censure – Simone Kaitani has been mentioned earlier in this article. Qarase went one step further when in June 2004 he refused to renew Ratu Epeli Ganilau's nomination as one of government's six representatives on the GCC. This prematurely ended Ganilau's term as Chairman of the Council as its regulations require the Chairman to be a member.

Qarase continued with his campaign to push through reforms regardless of intermittent disapproval from chiefs when he accepted 2000 coup tainted individuals into his government and even gave a number of them cabinet positions. Of particular significance was the fact that PM Qarase and Attorney General Qoriniasi Bale, commoners from the same province of Lau, spear-headed the Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill through all the provincial councils, including the Lau Provincial Council in July 2005 when the council met at the Fijian Teachers Association building in Suva. At that meeting, the Mara family vehemently opposed the initiative as they saw it as an affront to the late Ratu Mara. This was a major show of strength bordering on defiance by professional commoners against traditional authority. Later another Lauan, Anare Jale, challenged the dominance of the Mara clan in Lau in June 2008 by contesting the chairmanship of the Lau Provincial Council against Roko Ului Mara (Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba). When he lost, he threatened cession of the island of Ono-i-Lau to the Kingdom of Tonga. It is of interest to note that Jale was appointed CEO of PSC by Qarase and was married to Emele Duituturaga, the CEO of Ministry of Social Welfare.

Similar acts of defiance against chiefly heads of provincial councils were seen in other provinces. In Ba, former Ba Holdings Chief Executive Officer, Isimeli Bose filed proceedings in court against Ratu Tevita Momoedonu, Chairman of Ba Holdings Ltd. This was over his sacking by the new board (FT 23/9/06) at a shareholders meeting in Vuda in late July

2006. Bose, a former senior minister in the Rabuka government, had earlier shown his displeasure by storming the Rogorogovuda House and damaging property with 20 other men. In Tailevu, Josefa Serulagilagi was elected in May 2009 to chair the Tailevu Provincial Council for the eighth time after being disqualified from being a member of the council in December 2008. He was brought back into the council through a Fijian Affairs Ministry nomination and contested the post of chair against high chiefs Adi Samanunu Cakobau and Ratu Tu'uakitau Cokanauto. Serulagilagi polled 90 percent of the 47 votes (FT 28/5/09). In 2009, after seeing continuing chiefly interference in his roadmap for Fiji, Bainimarama ranted that chiefs should leave politics and drink homebrew under mango trees. He subsequently decommissioned and then abolished the GCC. At the 2014 elections, Ro Teimumu Kepa had to face numerous political salvos - that would appear disrespectful within the traditional framework – from Bainimarama and his Fiji First Party.

After the 2014 elections, Bainimarama's Fiji First Party entered Parliament on an anti-GCC platform whereas Kepa's SODELPA continued its calls for the re-instatement of the GCC. In parliament, Bainimarama has clearly stated that all members would follow decorum and operate as equals. The removal from parliament of Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu for using unacceptable language appeared like an attempt to enforce the idea that no one is exempt from the rules of parliament regardless of traditional Fijian status. The Attorney General, Aiyaz Saiyed Khaiyum's 'aping' Ratu Isoa Tikoca (another chief) in parliament, and Bainimarama's subsequent endorsement of this, could easily be seen as an insult and effrontery within that same framework. However, from the democratic governance perspective, it could be seen as adding 'colour' to parliamentary debate.

Commoner assertions of individual rights and aspirations are clearly being pitted against chiefly authority with greater regularity. This is closely linked to an ever-widening rural-urban divide that continues to shrink the domain of the chief. Figures released at a Lau Provincial Council meeting in Deuba on 17 August 2010 highlighted mass migration to Viti Levu as a major concern as given existing trends, the Lau Group's population would be decimated to 5000 by 2050 (FT 18/8/10). Moreover, the rural-urban divide is now more blurred than ever as more urban dwellers and retirees have begun to increasingly return to their villages and more rural dwellers engage in commercial enterprises. The urban-rural flow comprises two groupings: one that is not immersed in the traditional system that props up the chief, and the other being ex-paid employees who have access to retirement funds and property removing

their reliance on traditional structures for sustenance. Furthermore, access to the internet and social media has greatly enhanced information flow as well as awareness levels among people regardless of geographical location. This has already begun to impact life in rural Fiji. In fact at a Macuata provincial council meeting at Naduri Village in Macuata, newly-installed President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, said that in many provinces many villagers were no longer concerned about the affairs of the council because the council did not have any real value to them anymore (FT 13/11/09). This tendency is also seen in recent exhortations by provincial councils and Roko Tuis calling on people to be prompt with their *solu ni yasana* (provincial levy). The manner in which the Fijian views his traditional obligations and his place within Fijian society is obviously very different from that encountered and fossilized by Governor Gordon in 1875.

## Discussion

This paper has focused on three main sources of seemingly insurmountable, and increasingly expanding, challenges to the chiefly system. In a clear break from protocol, conflicts among chiefs have begun to be played out in the public domain. This has had a damaging effect on the persona of the chief as well as established and expected relations between the chief and, to some extent, between the *vanua* they represent. Secondly, the fact that two of the three paramount chiefly houses are virtually irreconcilably fractured makes it extremely difficult to see a unified, cohesive chiefly system operating within the GCC as was the case when the 'Big Four' held the Fijian polity's allegiance, loyalty and respect. There is no longer any larger-than-life chief in Fiji in the same mould as Ratu Sukuna, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Mara. This has created a leadership void that will be extremely difficult to fill through the traditional structures that worked in the past. Commoner dissent, demands and public defiance of chiefs is potentially the most potent of the challenges faced by the chiefly system. When this is seen in light of demographic movements among the ethnic Fijian community – where not only is there a continuingly increasing flow towards urban centres, but a reciprocal flow of retirees and other employed professionals back to villages – it is not difficult to see that the chiefs traditional positioning within his domain is under threat from within as the relationships within villages have begun to change drastically.

The *mana* of the chief thus continues to lose its lustre at an

increasing rate largely because of its weakening traditional bases within a modernising political-economic environment. The 2013 constitution does not incorporate the GCC within its framework of governance. Thus its political persistence through constitutional provisions is no longer practical. The political rise and fall of Ro Teimumu Kepa has also shown that chiefs cannot expect to lead as a right – they need to earn it. Moreover, electoral provisions of the same constitution make it extremely difficult to attract sizeable votes on traditional Fijian platforms. The inexorable movement of the money economy and education into rural Fiji has had its expected impact on expectations and demands of rural Fijians. Access to information via the internet and the return of educated retirees and employed professionals has further changed both the dynamics and structure of the Fijian village. The promotion of self-help and reward of initiative by the Bainimarama government appears to be gradually removing the automatic 'reliance on government as of right' mentality of the Fijian. An increasing urban Fijian population who share the same conditions of existence as the Indo-Fijian has aligned the orientation towards life of both communities. This has also forged shared understandings and mutual respect that made Bainimarama's bold initiative to call all Fiji citizens, 'Fijian' both fortuitous and timely. This has, in turn, helped deflate the 'Indian threat' argument that helped galvanise Fijian political solidarity around chiefs in the past. Furthermore, the visible reality of life under the Fiji First government, with its continued successes, especially on the economic front, has tended to neutralize fears of threats to Fijian existence.<sup>4</sup>

Routledge wrote that the 'importance (of the traditional) as a cohesive force will continue, giving life and strength to Fijian society in the multi-cultural complexities of the contemporary state' (1985: 221). However, the argument developed here shows that the nature and conditions of existence of the Fijian has undergone tremendous change. The chiefly system has to align itself to the changed circumstances.

Moreover, the 2013 constitution has clearly determined that there is no need for a separate political structure, the GCC, to raise Fijian concerns. The rationale is that it does not supplement, but distort the

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<sup>4</sup> Whether the understanding and the 'weakening' of Indian threat perception is sustainable could only be assessed after a period of existence where the military is no longer a dominant political force in the country. Likewise, whether the rising debt situation is seen as leading to a people and country being indebted, risking loss of control and sovereignty (thus another threat by other countries or other people), is still too early to determine.



democratic framework of governance. However, there is little denying that tradition, which is manifested in the Fijian chiefs and the chiefly system, continues to have a place of importance in Fijian society as in any traditional society. Powles wrote that 'chiefs are recognised by many as the guardians of those values that are essential to the life of a particular group or society' (1997: 333). This is very much the case with Fijian society where individual identity is linked to the *vanua* and at the apex of this sits the *turaga*. Moreover, it can be argued that the chief serves as the symbolic repository of values, customs and practices in the Fijian psyche.

Thus even though the Bainimarama government appears to have accepted the need for the Fijian chiefly system, it needs to remove uncertainties regarding its evolution and the form it will take within the wider system of democratic governance for Fiji. The initiative will need to identify compatibilities and contradictions between the traditional and the modern in the current context, and this will have to be guided by pragmatism.

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## Authors

**Dr. Subhash Appana** is an adjunct lecturer at the Fiji National University (FNU, Fiji). He teaches within the Faculty of Business and Economics and Pacific TAFE at the University of the South Pacific. A respected researcher and political commentator, he has presented a number of papers at noted international conferences. He is attached as a reviewer to a number of conference circuits as well as journals. His research interests and publications span management, economics, governance, indigenous business, education spectrum. email: subhash.appana@usp.ac.fj

**Professor Malcolm Abbott** Associate Professor of Economics at the Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. Email: mabbott@swin.edu.au