

Democratic transition of power and its implications on tourism growth: Insights from Fiji's 2022 General Election

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Abstract

Tourism, politics, and peace are inextricably linked. As a fragile and sensitive sector, tourism requires peace, stability, safety, and security to thrive. Prior research highlights the necessity of destination safety and security for visitor flows compared to other destination attributes. Among the various triggering factors of political turmoil and instability in developing countries, elections are at the forefront. Developing countries particularly face the challenge of a smooth transition of power in the aftermath of elections. In this respect, Fiji's 2022 general election will go down in history as the first democratic transition of power since its independence in 1970. In this study, we examine the implications of Fiji's first ever peaceful power transition for its tourism growth. Research findings reveal that the democratic transfer of power contributes significantly to Fiji's tourism development by boosting both investors and visitors' confidence, improving international image, and increasing tourists' perceptions of safety and security within the country. The study developed a model that has substantial predictive power with an R^2 value of 0.746 and substantially enriches the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the critical role of peace and security in fostering the growth and development of tourism.

Keywords: Election and Democratic Power Transfer; Fiji Islands; Future Tourism Development; International Image; Investors and Visitors' Confidence; Tourism and Peace

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Introduction

Known as a tropical paradise in the South Pacific and the ‘land of smiles’, the Republic of Fiji is an archipelago consisting of 333 islands (Kundra et al., 2022) with an exclusive economic zone of 1.26 million square kilometres and a population of around 930,000 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023; Fraenkel, 2023; The World Bank, 2023b). Suva is the nation’s capital, and English, Fijian, and Hindi are the major languages spoken, while Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam are its major religions. The country became independent in 1970 after nearly a century of British colonial rule (Firth, 2012, 2015; Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2023). Fiji is an upper-middle-income island economy (Asante et al., 2017; Prasad, et al., 2018) with a GDP per capita of US\$5356.20 (The World Bank, 2022). Following its independence, Fiji embarked on a constitutional democratic government that emulates the Westminster system (Rodd, 2016). However, the country experienced three coups: in 1987, 2000, and 2006, which significantly undermined its overall development progress and tarnished its global image (Firth, 2012; Lal, 2021; Narayan, 2002). As noted by Firth (2012, p.1) “Fiji’s post-colonial journey has been fraught, a promising beginning hobbled by political instability, periodic military coups and stagnant economic growth.” Eventually, the country adopted a parliamentary democracy under the controversial 2013 Constitution. Fiji’s 51-seat unicameral parliament was expanded to 55 seats for the 2022 general election due to the growth of its population (Multinational Observers Group, 2023).

Tourism has evolved gradually to become the country’s leading GDP contributor, major foreign exchange earner, and number one employer (Mafi et al., 2020; Wondirad, 2023). For the past three decades, tourism has been Fiji’s top economic driver as the main source of foreign currency, surpassing the sugarcane industry (Pratt et al., 2016; Wondirad et al., 2024). Fiji’s economy continues to rely on tourism, which accounts for 40% of its GDP (The World Bank, 2023a). Although the COVID-19 pandemic shattered the burgeoning tourism sector for almost two years (2020-2022), with visitor arrivals falling nearly to zero over 2020–2021 (Wondirad, 2023), it successfully re-emerged from the downturn once international restrictions were lifted (Tourism Fiji, 2024).

There is a positive correlation between tourism and the peaceful transition of power (Kundra et al., 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). An election is a fundamental component of democratic systems that enables citizens to participate in the selection of their representatives and leaders (Alesina et al., 2020; Morgenbesser, 2017). Therefore, elections play a crucial role in exercising democratic rights, expressing preferences, abiding by the rule of law, and facilitating the peaceful transfer of power in democratic societies (Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2008). Particularly for a country like Fiji, which is well known for its coup culture (Fraenkel, 2013; Kundra et al., 2021), a non-violent transfer of power from an allegedly authoritarian regime (Firth, 2012; Lal, 2021) to the opposition through the verdict of ballot boxes has profound implications not only for its tourism sector but also for its overall investment climate, economic progress, and global image. Subsequently, the current study aims to:

1. provide a comprehensive analysis of the democratic power transition that ended the 16-year reign of a government that held power in the aftermath of the December 2006 coup,
2. discuss the implications of the December 2022 general election for post-election tourist flows, and
3. analyse how the change of government influences the overall development landscape of the tourism sector going forward.

Literature review

For tourism to thrive, a destination must portray an image of stability, safety, and security to prospective visitors so that tourists feel safe to travel (Hall & Ringer, 2000). The connection between tourism, politics, and stability is adequately substantiated in the extant literature (Burns & Novelli, 2007; Butler & Suntikul, 2017; Hall & Ringer, 2000; Kim, et al., 2007; Perry Hobson & Ko, 1994; Webster & Ivanov, 2013). When compared to other destination features such as environmental quality, availability and quality of facilities, affordability and accessibility, it is safety and security that becomes the most important factor in determining visitors' decision to travel to a certain place (Lee & Thapa, 2017; Moreira & Burns, 2017). Tourists choose to visit a destination when they feel that a place is safe, suggesting the unapparelled importance of safety and security for the development of a successful destination (Athula, 2015; Mohammad, 2014; Valentina, 2015).

While politics impacts tourism and its development trajectory, tourism can also be used as a tool to influence autocratic political regimes through tourist boycotts, travel aversions, and travel warnings (Butler & Suntikul, 2017; Kim et al., 2007). This is because tourism is a powerful mix of cultural, economic, and political phenomena in modern society (Burns & Novelli, 2007; Paik, 2020). On the other hand, the development of sustainable and competitive tourism development requires strong and consistent political support and state machinery to practically implement policies and strategies that boost environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts (Farmaki et al., 2015). Using North Cyprus as a case study, Yasarata et al. (2010) discussed how political bottlenecks hinder the formulation and implementation of sustainable tourism development in small island developing states. Their findings suggest the significance of understanding the intricate links between political systems and power structure in society, and sustainable tourism policy development, planning, and implementation. Tourism development is politically driven in terms of policy decisions, priority areas, and public expenditure allocations (Burns & Novelli, 2007). Put another way, governments that follow the principles of sustainability tend to choose tourism development options that also consider the social and environmental impacts (Dwyer, 2023; Falatoonitoosi et al., 2022) while some governments approve destructive tourism developments for the sake of short-term financial gains (de Haas, 2002; Ruhanen, 2013).

The way politics operates might strengthen or weaken progress in tourism development (Ruhanen, 2013). As a result, in many developing countries that experience less democratic rule, tourism development is impacted by politics and poor governance that impede participatory planning, public engagement, and the inclusion of marginalised communities (Wang et al., 2022; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Given that ethnic affiliation remains an important basis for electoral loyalty in Fiji, politicians often leverage such affiliations to accentuate division and public unrest. As several scholars (e.g., Durutalo, 2008; Firth, 2012; Fraenkel, 2019; Lal, 2021; Singh & Lal, 2022) have highlighted, in the post-independence era, there has been one large party that appealed to indigenous Fijians and another party that aligned itself with Indo-Fijians. Political delineation along ethnic and cultural grounds is fertile ground to create more tensions and post-election conflicts within the nation by worsening the already precarious and fragile political atmosphere.

In a study that examines how political coups deter Fiji's tourism development, Kundra et al. (2021) found a strong correlation between tourism and political crises. Literature highlights that the reputation of Fiji as a tourist destination has been affected by political instabilities. Apart from significant drops in visitor numbers, Fiji also experienced negative ramifications in the form of tariff barriers, the cessation of diplomatic ties, and sanctions imposed by Australia, New Zealand, and the

European Union following the 1987, 2000, and 2006 coups (Kundra et al., 2021). In addition, the main cause of the overall economic slowdown in 2018 was a political concern, whereby business confidence started dropping just before the election the same year (Gounder, 2020). A study that examines the political environment of Fiji and its impacts on tourism marketing by Singh (2021) also disclosed the extent to which political upheaval in the country degraded international relations with tourist generating countries. Since past political mayhem have spoiled Fiji's international image, installing a democratically elected government is paramount to improve international relations, reimagine the country, and boost visitors' trust and confidence (Kundra et al., 2021). While Fiji's 2014 election result ended a rule of decrees and enabled Fiji to be reinstated as a member of regional and international forums such as the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum (Lal, 2015) the 2022 general election will go down in history as the first ever democratic transition of power since its independence.

Methodology

Using a mixed-methods research approach, this study develops a deeper understanding of the implications of Fiji's December 2022 general election outcome on its subsequent tourism flows and future tourism development. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the clarity and comprehension of the survey. Then, the survey was further polished for the main data collection. Data was gathered from 100 respondents using the English language via an online (59) and face-to-face (41) survey (Table 1). The survey (Appendix 2) contains both closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents are Fijians, with Australians and New Zealanders constituting 10 and 8 percent of the surveyed population, respectively. The remaining participants (14 percent) are from other countries, including the USA, the UK, Vanuatu, Ethiopia, Canada, and other Pacific Island nations. Of the 68 percent of Fijians, 36 percent of them live abroad but maintain a strong connection as diaspora tourists and have been closely monitoring the 2022 general election. The reason why Fijians dominate as respondents in this study is due to the screening questions included in the survey. Screening questions were introduced to increase the suitability of respondents. Subsequently, to be eligible for the study, respondents either should have travelled to Fiji in the post-election period and have an awareness of the overall election process, or they should have a close connection to Fiji and its political climate, including the 2022 general election.

As far as the gender composition of respondents is concerned, 53 percent are females, and males constitute the remaining 47 percent. Regarding age, the 46+ group dominates with 45 percent, followed by the age category 36–45, comprising 26 percent. On the other hand, the age groups 18–25 and 26–35 consist of 15 and 14 percent, respectively. Forty-one percent of the respondents hold bachelor's degrees, whereas 32 percent hold master's degrees. The remaining, 10 percent have a PhD degree, a post-graduate diploma (9 percent), and a high school certificate (8 percent). In terms of their professional background, respondents are extremely diverse ranging from university professors to farmers and carpenters, pastors, tourism and hospitality professionals, researchers and consultants, project officers, trainers, retired public servants and students among others.

Survey questions focused on the overall process of democratic power transition, the implications of the election outcome on post-election tourist flows, future tourism development, and the expected tourism development policy shifts and priority areas of development in the new administration. We conducted thematic content analysis to analyse qualitative data, whereas multiple linear regression analysis, independent samples t-test, and ANOVA are employed to analyse quantitative data. Two

software programs (SPSS version 28, and QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software, light version) were utilised to facilitate the data analysis process.

Table 1. Demographic profiles of respondents (N =100)

Gender		Highest Level of Education	
Female	53	Secondary school	8
Male	47	Tertiary education	92
Age (Years)		Nationality	
18 - 25	15	Fiji	68
26 - 35	14	Australia	10
36 - 45	26	New Zealand	8
46+	45	USA	4
		UK	4
		Vanuatu	3
		Canada	2
		Tonga	1

While we acknowledge the importance of gathering large volumes of data to increase the precision and representativeness of research findings, scholars argue the possibility of running statistical tests if sample sizes are above 30 satisfying the assumption of normal distribution (Field, 2013; Kothari, 2004). Qualitative data collection was concluded upon saturation, where each additional respondent could no longer yield new information. To further ensure the validity of the results, we additionally used techniques such as peer debriefing, confirmability audits, thick description, extended data immersion, member checks, and probing (Decrop, 1999; Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). All the required diagnostic tests were also conducted to validate the necessary assumptions of multiple regression analysis.

Model establishment

This research strives to model the longer-term implications of the December 14, 2022, general election, and the succeeding peaceful transition of power on Fiji's tourism sector development. Consequently, we formulated a multiple regression model to predict the longer-term implications of the peaceful transition as follows:

$$Y_{FTD} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7 + \beta_8 X_8 \dots \dots \dots \quad (1)$$

Equation 1 presumes that future tourism development in Fiji is the function of several factors such as investors' confidence, visitors' confidence, adherence to the rule of law, the establishment of a transparent and democratic governance system, a positive international image, infrastructural development, and safety and security, among others.

Given that tourism development is dynamic and complex in its nature as it intersects with almost every other sector, we acknowledge that it can also be affected by many other intervening factors. Therefore, it is unlikely to capture future tourism development of the country by only employing the static model presented in equation 1. Introducing an error term (ϵ) into equation 1 helps to rectify this challenge by capturing factors that are not accounted for but will eventually undermine the precision and predictive power of the model (Bogale & Wondirad, 2019; Song & Li, 2008). Subsequently, we operationalised equation 1 as:

$$Y_{FTD} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X1 + \beta_2 X2 + \beta_3 X3 + \beta_4 X4 + \beta_5 X5 + \beta_6 X6 + \beta_7 X7 + \beta_8 X8 + \epsilon \quad \dots \quad (2)$$

Where Y_{FTD} = future tourism development

β_0 = constant (coefficient of intercept), $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5, \beta_6, \beta_7$, and β_8 , are regression coefficients of predicting variables (Table 5).

ϵ = is the error term.

After all the necessary assumptions were met and the above model in equation 2 was operationalised, we ran the multiple linear regression analysis using SPSS (version 28) to generate regression coefficients, the constant, and the model summary.

Results and findings

One of the objectives of the study was to examine whether the smooth transition of power following Fiji's 2022 general election contributes to the current growth of tourist arrivals in the country. Subsequently, 70 percent of the respondents perceive that the smooth transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government has contributed to the growth of post-election tourism. Respondents also perceive that the implication of the democratic transfer of power in accordance with the rule of law will have more significant positive implications for the growth and development of Fiji's tourism in the future, as 82 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement: *the democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government will have a positive impact on Fiji's future tourism development*. Findings reveal that this is due to the multiple implications of the election outcome in terms of its role in boosting investors' confidence ($\bar{x} = 3.99$), increasing visitors' confidence ($\bar{x} = 3.98$), improving Fiji's international image as a safe and peaceful tourist destination ($\bar{x} = 4.03$), and triggering favourable and concrete policy changes for a more sustainable, resilient, and competitive tourism sector ($\bar{x} = 4.54$). Results of the independent sample t-test show no significant difference based on gender regarding the positive impacts of the democratic transition of power for the current tourism flow (female, $\bar{x} = 3.92$, male, $\bar{x} = 3.86$, $df = 96$, $p = .087$) and future tourism development (female, $\bar{x} = 4.04$, male, $\bar{x} = 4.34$, $df = 96$, $p = .80$). This possibly demonstrates the vital importance of peace and security regardless of gender (Chauhan & Khanna, 2009; Muturi, 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2020).

Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA results demonstrate a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) among different age groups regarding the role of the peaceful transfer of power in post-election tourism growth in Fiji (Table 2). Compared to the age groups of 18–25 ($\bar{x} = 3.15$) and 26–35 ($\bar{x} = 3.71$), respondents in the age clusters of 36–45 ($\bar{x} = 4.33$) and 46⁺ ($\bar{x} = 4.12$) are more optimistic. Similarly, a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) was found among the age groups as far as the implication of the peaceful transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government on future tourism development in the country. Specifically, respondents within the age categories 36–45 and 46⁺ show more positive sentiment with mean values of ($\bar{x} = 4.42$ and 4.40 , respectively) compared to respondents within the 18–25 and 26–35 age groups who scored mean values of ($\bar{x} = 3.78$ and 3.89 , respectively). Nevertheless, there was no statistically significant difference among respondents depending on their educational status, occupation, or nationality regarding the contributions of the peaceful transfer of power for post-election tourism growth and future tourism development. This might also suggest the importance of peace in the aftermath of elections for

tourism to thrive, irrespective of differences in sociodemographics.

Table 2. ANOVA Test results

Factors	Age groups with respective mean (\bar{x}) values				df	F	p-value
	18–25 (N= 15)	26–35 (N= 14)	36–45 (N= 26)	46+ (N= 45)			
1 Democratic transfer of power and the growth of post-election tourism	3.15	3.71	4.33	4.12	99	5.083	.003
2 Democratic transfer of power and future tourism development	3.78	3.89	4.42	4.40	99	3.544	.017

Authors' survey (2023)

Results of multiple regression analysis

Diagnostic tests

To ensure that the model fits the dataset with the required regression assumptions, relevant diagnostic tests and residual analyses were conducted prior to performing the regression analysis. Assumptions include the nature of variables (ratio variables), tests of normality, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity (equal variance), linearity of relationships, and the independence of residuals. Both the Skewness and Kurtosis values are less than the corresponding standard error (Table 3) validating homoscedasticity (equality of variances). Moreover, since the p values of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov^a and Shapiro-Wilk are > 0.05 , tests of normality suggest that there is no evidence of any significant deviation from normality for the residuals (Table 4). The value of tolerance in all cases of the predictor variables is also > 0.1 , while the value of VIF is < 10 , indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem between two or more of the independent variables. All predicting variables engaged in the regression analysis are ratio variables and the histogram, P-P, and Q-Q plots (Appendix 1) verify that the data set is normally distributed.

Table 3. Skewness and Kurtosis values with corresponding standard error

		Statistic	Std. Error
Standardised Residual	Skewness	.160	.241
	Kurtosis	.996	.478

Authors' survey (2023)

Table 4. Tests of normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov^a and Shapiro-Wilk tests)

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	p-value	Statistic	df	p-value
Standardised Residual	.078	100	.140	.983	100	.246

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Authors' survey (2023)

Coefficients of regression

Table 5 presents the coefficients of regression analysis along with their respective standard errors,

t-values, p-values, values of tolerance, and VIF. Coefficient values imply both the strength and direction of predictor variables effects on the outcome variable (future tourism development). As can be seen in Table 5, the outcome variable is positively and significantly influenced by four of the predicting variables ($p < .05$, 95% confidence interval). Accordingly, peaceful transition of power and investors' confidence ($b = .554$, $p < .001$), peaceful transition of power and image improvement ($b = .228$, $p < .05$), peaceful transition of power and visitors' confidence ($b = .247$, $p < .05$), and peaceful transition of power and perception of safety ($b = .166$, $p < .05$) exhibit a positive and significant impact on the dependent variable. In addition, one predicting variable (degree of transparency in the election process scored the lowest mean value ($\bar{x} = 3.30$) and influences the dependent variable negatively ($b = -.136$, $p < .1$, at a 90% confidence interval). This signifies that respondents are concerned about the transparency of Fiji's 2022 general election. Moreover, there is no strong evidence to suggest that the perceptions of freeness and fairness in the election process has a significant impact of future tourism development ($b = .036$, $p > .05$) and Fiji's 2022 election has a significant impact in abolishing coup culture ($b = .013$, $p > .05$) and restoring democratic rule ($b = .098$, $p > .05$). Given this is the first time a peaceful transition of power has taken place in a country branded by successive coups, it could be premature to make conclusive judgments regarding the contribution of the 2022 general election and its outcomes to democratic practices and abolition of coup culture at this stage.

Table 5. Coefficients of regression analysis

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
		Std. Error				
1 (Constant)	.817	.404		.046*		
2 peaceful transition of power and investors' confidence	.496	.088	.554	<.001*	.269	3.717
3 peaceful transition of power and visitors' confidence	.220	.097	.247	.026*	.219	4.574
4 abolition of coup culture following the peaceful transition of power	.011	.055	.013	.844	.649	1.541
5 the restoration of democratic rule after 2022 general election	.083	.058	.098	.153	.565	1.769
6 peaceful transition of power and image improvement	.190	.079	.228	.018*	.288	3.476
7 peaceful transition of power and perception of safety	.156	.072	.166	.032*	.451	2.216
8 degree of transparency in the election process	-.099	.059	-.136	.097	.397	2.518
9 degree of freeness and fairness in the election process	.027	.058	.036	.647	.412	2.427

a. Dependent variable: Future tourism development

Authors' survey (2023)

Research findings suggest that the democratic transfer of power in line with the rule of law contributes to Fiji's future tourism development by improving investors and visitors' confidence, ameliorating Fiji's international image as a safe and politically stable country. With an adjusted R^2 value of 0.746 (Table 6) the model developed in this study has substantial predictive power. This also corresponds with the qualitative results (Figure 1), where key priority areas for tourism development, including product diversification, community engagement, paradigm shift in development approach (sustainable tourism development), increased focus to locally owned and

operated tourism businesses, domestic tourism, infrastructure development, policy reviews (tourism development policy, foreign direct investment policy, and land use policy), and source market diversification, particularly attracting high yield tourists were recommended. The circumstance created because of the smooth transition of power makes it possible for the current government to formulate and implement policies that are believed to be crucial in advancing tourism development in the country. The priority areas identified in this research inform pertinent stakeholders where to focus to build a resilient and competitive tourism sector in the years to come.

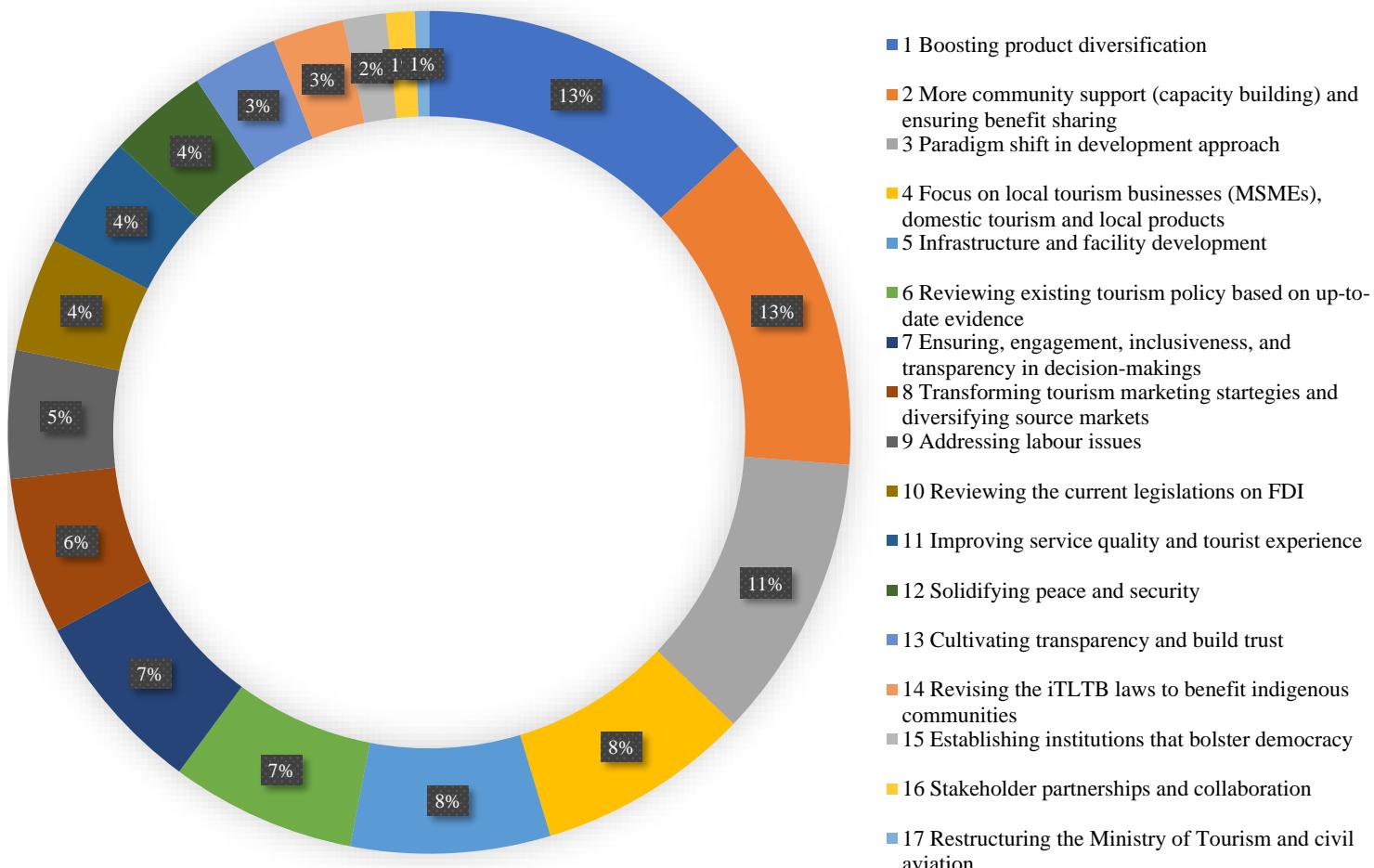
Table 6. Model summary

Model Summary ^b					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	.877	.769	.746	.45828	29.549	10	89	<.001	2.206

Authors' survey (2023)

- Predictors: (Constant), peaceful transition of power and investors' confidence, peaceful transition of power and visitors' confidence, willingness to concede with election outcomes, the feeling of democratic rule, peaceful transition of power and image improvement, peaceful transition of power and perception of safety, degree of transparency in the election process, degree of freeness and fairness in the election process,
- Dependent Variable: Future tourism development

Figure 1. Priority areas for a sustainable, competitive, and resilient tourism sector moving forward (Authors' plot, 2023)



Discussion

Overall, Fiji's 2022 general election was credible without major irregularities (Multinational Observer Group, 2023). However, some minor issues were observed. The occurrence of a technical glitch on the evening of December 14, 2022, with the Fiji Election Office results app (a digital publication platform employed for official tallying of votes) was, for instance, one of the irregularities. The technical malfunction resulted in erroneous provisional results being displayed on the app, which raised concerns. Although the issue was promptly rectified, it created a negative perception, and our findings reinforced this by revealing a negative coefficient regarding the transparency of the election process. The incident has raised a red flag and significantly compromised public trust. Qualitative data also demonstrates that most key informants reported discontent regarding the transparency of the overall election process. This highlights the need to improve the transparency, fairness, and freeness of future elections.

Despite irregularities, the success of the 2022 general election in changing the administration, provides a profound opportunity for Fiji to strengthen its electoral system and transform its institutions for democratic practices. As noted by Pohle-Anderson (2022), Fiji's general election marks a crucial milestone for its fragile democracy and lays the foundation for the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another. Respondents perceive that the smooth transition of power positively impacts the tourism sector and the investment climate. Alesina et al. (2020) highlighted that reform in important sectors such as finance, trade, structural, investment, and labour market that follow elections help boost investment and thereby economic growth in many developing countries. The findings of the current study reinforce this as the election outcome received the highest coefficient for boosting investors' confidence. Given investors' always search for a politically stable and peaceful country for their long-term investment endeavours, it is plausible that Fiji's 2022 general election, and the subsequent peaceful transition of power, play a profound role in improving the investment climate, which is key to attracting more foreign direct investment.

The following excerpt is the opinion of one of the informants that resonates with the views of other participants:

A peaceful transition of power can instil confidence in foreign investors, potentially leading to increased FDI in the tourism sector. This can result in the development of new resorts, hotels, and other infrastructure.

In recent months, several hotel and resort construction projects have commenced which seem to confirm the strong investor confidence that has emerged since the 2022 election. For instance, in July 2023, Radisson Hotel Group reported that it was building a 250-room resort in Naisoso Island, which is scheduled to operate in the first quarter of 2026 (Hogan, 2023). Furthermore, Fiji Airways and Richmond Ltd., a company owned by Bank of the South Pacific, launched the construction of a 190-room luxury resort in August 2023 (Nasiko, 2023). Upon completion, this \$200 million resort is set to deliver tourists with authentic Fijian hospitality (Nasiko, 2023). In the short- and medium-term, Fiji needs 4,000–5,000 rooms to satisfy Fiji Airways expansion plans, highlighting the urgent need for more investment in this area (Chand, 2023; Fiji One News, 2023). As highlighted by Investment Fiji chairwoman Jenny Seeto, close to 5000 rooms are in the pipeline, including some well-known brands that have not been to Fiji before (The Fiji Times, 2023). Moreover, a \$5 billion tourism investment in Fiji has been confirmed by three Middle Eastern families in late September 2023 (Kotoisuva, 2023).

Recently, Starlink, a satellite-based internet service by Elon Musk's SpaceX, also entered Fiji to invest in ICT and thereby improve connectivity, which has been a pressing challenge in the country (Pratap, 2023a). This in turn creates opportunities for potential investors to consider underdeveloped remote areas for more investment. In its 2023 Investment Climate Statement, the US Department of State also underlined that foreign direct investment is expected to spike in Fiji due to the peaceful transition of power through the December 2022 election (US Department of State, 2023). Research findings suggest the need to carry out more concrete reforms in areas such as investment, land, labour, and infrastructure development to take advantage of the transition and fully harness Fiji's immense tourism potential. The recent progress in investment and unilateral and multilateral development validates the significance of the peaceful transition of power.

Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) exhibit statistically significant differences within respondents based on age groups. While respondents aged 36 and above are optimistic regarding the smooth transition of power and future tourism development, the young generation (18–35 years of age) scored lower mean values, suggesting that this group of respondents are concerned about the future. That may be the reason why young people in Fiji are currently leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad, leading to a loss of skilled human labour. This is alarming, as this puts Fiji's tourism sector in jeopardy by draining its trained and experienced human capital. According to recent data from the Ministry of Finance, more than 80,000 Fijians migrated in the last 18 months alone, highlighting the seriousness of the problem (Ravuwai, 2024). As the International Trade Union Confederation (2009) noted, after the military took over in Fiji, the situation for youth has worsened. This is a significant issue for Fiji as people under 40 comprise 70 percent of its population (Shaw, 2023). Thus, in collaboration with other stakeholders, the government should address this issue and enable the youth to recultivate hope by effectively engaging and empowering them, creating more job opportunities at home, and ensuring decent working conditions as much as possible.

Research findings help us understand the central role Fiji's 2022 general election, and the democratic transfer of power, had in improving the country's international image, which in turn contributed to post-election tourism flows. As can be seen in Figure 2, inbound tourist arrivals have been consistently above projections since January 2023. Tourism remains the backbone of Fiji's economy, contributing 40% of the country's GDP (The World Bank, 2023a; Wondirad, 2023). The 2022 general election and the consequent peaceful power transition from the Fiji First administration to the current coalition government have conveyed a crucial message to visitors: feel safe and secure, feel free to move around in the country, and it boosts their confidence in the country's adherence to the rule of law. In this regard a participant stated that:

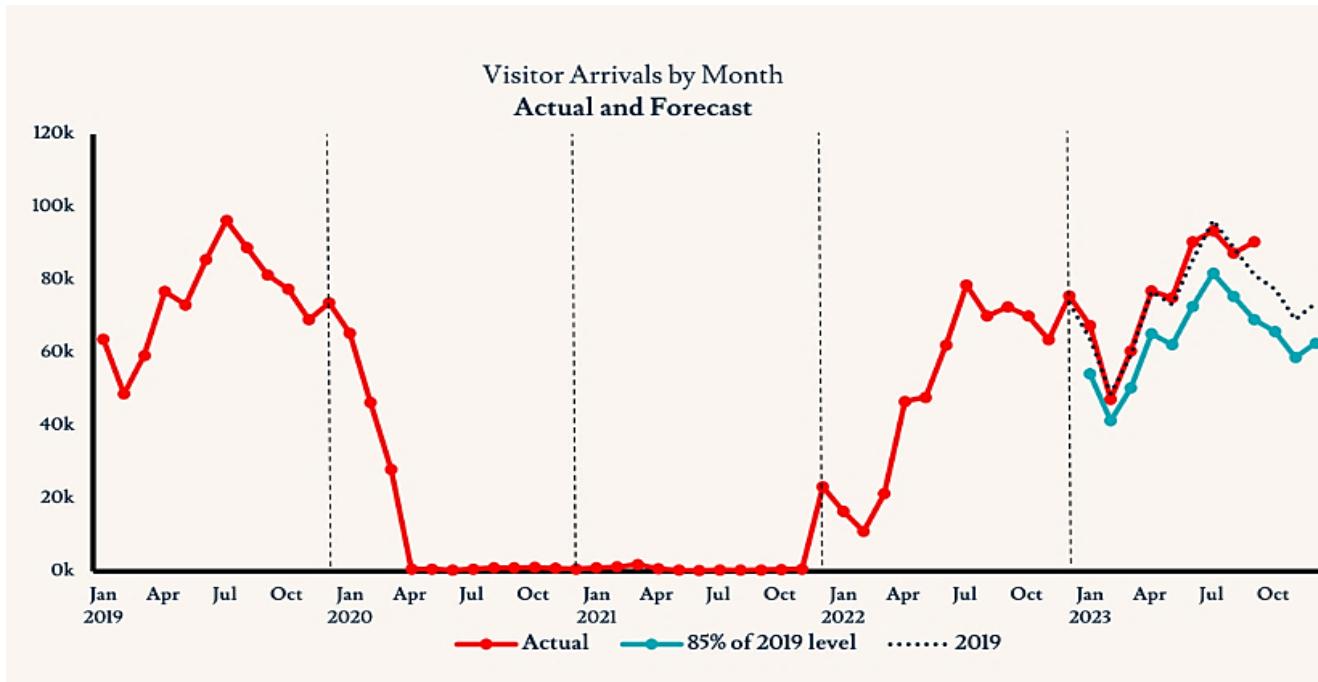
Democracy and peace with political stability have and will improve visitor numbers to Fiji. Many overseas tourists, especially tourists with kids, will be happy to take their children to destinations that are safe and peaceful.

Recent data from Tourism Fiji (2024) reveals that in 2023, Fiji received 929,740 international tourists, surpassing 2019 arrivals by four percent. Although there are several contributing factors (e.g., robust global marketing efforts, success in managing the COVID-19 crisis, the elimination of COVID-19 restrictions in major tourist-generating regions), research findings suggest the positive impacts of the smooth transition of power following the 2022 general election to the current growth of tourist arrivals. The following excerpt underlines the opinion of an informant in this respect:

In my opinion, the peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition following December's 2022 election is pivotal in terms of eliminating anxiety among the international community and sending a positive signal regarding the safety and stability of Fiji. Such images normally help international tourists build confidence to travel to certain destinations since peace and security are their top priorities.

While Australia and New Zealand remain the leading tourist-sending countries, recent data shows a substantial influx of tourists from countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, and Japan (Naikaso, 2023; Pratap, 2023b). Further, tourist arrivals to the island nation are increasing in the months of October and November, which are typically considered low seasons for tourism. This highlights a bright future as long as the country maintains its safety and security and strengthens its commitment to develop a clean, green, socially inclusive, and competitive tourism sector.

Figure 2. Tourist arrivals to Fiji between Jan 2019 and October 2023 (Tourism Fiji, 2023)



Moreover, the smooth transition stimulates various reforms and policy changes that expedite tourism development and helps instil the seeds of democracy, rule of law, and accountability. In this regard, more is expected from the current coalition government to meet public expectations and the expectations of the international community to further progress the development of tourism while taking the principles of sustainability and community engagement into account. As part of its policy review, the Fiji Government recently announced that from mid-November 2023, business visitors from the 105 visa-exempt countries will be able to enter the country and obtain visas on arrival (Daucakacaka, 2023). This policy change is crucial for the sector in terms of boosting tourist arrivals, and encouraging skilled foreign nationals to fill short-term labour shortages in the tourism, hospitality, and other sectors in the country created by migration and labour mobility schemes (Gibson & Bailey, 2021). Fiji lost more than 12,000 workers to overseas employment in just the first nine months of 2023, while over 22,000 Fijians left the country in 2022 for the same reason (Raqio, 2023).

Additionally, in the 2023 Fiji tourism investment prospectus, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Mr. Viliame Gavoka, highlighted the inclinations of the current coalition government in formulating pro-investment policies to attract investment opportunities in the tourism sector (Tourism Fiji, 2023). In the light of continued growth in tourist arrivals, the current government is keen to promote further investment opportunities in various tourism areas such as accommodation, adventure tourism, sport, and medical tourism, educational tourism, as well as event-related tourism. As noted by Fiji's Consulate General and Trade Commission for Australia and New Zealand (2023) tourism in the country has been rebounding strongly, and its future is promising due to a new, investor-friendly government. Participants in this study also stress the necessity of tourism product diversification to attract and cater to a wide range of tourist segments and thereby boost tourism receipts and the resilience of the sector. In this respect, Fiji has a broad range of product offerings, including ecotourism, village tourism, cultural and historical tourism, trekking, hiking, mountain climbing, culinary tourism, agro-tourism among others beyond the traditional 3Ss (sea, sand, and sun). Furthermore, to meet the increasing flight demand, Fiji Airways received its fourth A350, and bookings to July 2024 are 35 percent ahead of 2019 levels (Gebicki, 2023). The government is also in the process of upgrading Nadi airport to effectively respond to the growing airline traffic.

The World Bank, through its 'Fiji Tourism Development Program in Vanua Levu' project, allocated \$447 million over a ten-year period, which should bring wide-ranging benefits beyond the tourism sector and contribute to the socio-economic progress and sustainability of the region (Waqairadovu, 2023). This project will benefit 60,000 Fijians through the creation of new jobs and tourism infrastructure investment (The World Bank, 2023a). This is another indication of trust developed by international donor organisations, as Fiji has smoothly transitioned through the ballot box. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Fiji's delegation held productive sessions in Marrakesh, Morocco, in October 2023, with Fiji demonstrating a clear reform agenda geared towards ensuring the country's macro-fiscal stability in the coming years (Azeemah, 2023). Recently the Australian government announced its commitment to help Fiji's national development under the renewed and elevated Vuuale partnership (7NEWS Australia, 2023). Because of this partnership, Fiji will be included as a pilot country for the new streamlined Australian visa application service, which will enable Fijians to enter Australia easily (7NEWS Australia, 2023). Australia will also strengthen its support in other critical areas such as cyber security, labour mobility, infrastructure, climate change, and regional security (7NEWS Australia, 2023). Fiji has also just signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that eliminates entry visa requirements where passport holders from either nation enter freely into the territory of the other for a maximum of 90 days (Radinibaravi, 2023). Since the current political climate creates an opportunity for overall progress, it is suggested that the government should work more on cultivating transparency and promoting broader public engagement on critical issues that enhance citizens' livelihoods and international image through a series of policy reviews and reforms.

Conclusion and implications

In Fiji's politically charged atmosphere, national election periods are historically characterised as risky and precarious (Singh, 2022). In the context of Fiji's 2022 general election uncertainties were also evident, particularly given that the results of the election led to a parliamentary impasse since no political party was able to obtain an absolute majority (Crisis24, 2022). Political instability has had negative impacts on Fiji's tourism sector by tarnishing its international image, creating an uncertain political and economic atmosphere, and impacting business and investment opportunities

(Prasad, 2012; Singh, 2021). Political instabilities due to periodic military coups have stifled economic progress and strained diplomatic relationships (Firth, 2012). Therefore, Fiji's post-independence period has been characterised as sluggish and unstable, with political instability seen as a main deterrent factor precluding the country from attaining its full potential (Kundra et al., 2022; Mahadevan, 2009).

Our model, which explained 75% of the dependent variable, also demonstrates the profound implications of the democratic transition of power in Fiji for its future tourism development. While the 2022 general election succeeded in transferring power to the opposition, moving forward, instilling democratic culture, and consolidating the values of adhering to the rule of law in the country are crucial. The current coalition government must strengthen cohesion within itself and the public and be mindful, especially on fundamental issues such as constitutional revisions or land and property rights and ownership. Such matters necessitate rigorous and extended engagement to achieve universal public consensus and comprehension. Furthermore, since labour migration has become a chronic challenge, relevant industry stakeholders must develop a plan that guides the nation's ability to maintain the operational performance of its own tourism sector by striking a proper balance between employee migration and the functioning of the sector. In collaboration with funding organisations, the government must work strenuously on youth capacity development schemes (e.g., training programs on small business development and management, entrepreneurship, product development, financial management), facilitation of access to finance, and the creation of an enabling environment for the younger generations. Such interventions will give the youth a renewed sense of hope and enable them to significantly contribute to the nation's overall development.

Research findings offer important implications in terms of comprehending the impacts of the smooth transition of power on the tourism sector, and the overall development of the nation. It also identifies priority areas for intervention by the government and other relevant stakeholders to take advantage of Fiji's enormous tourism potential and political stability. As one of the first scientific research studies to examine the wide-ranging implications of the 2022 general election, this study urges greater discussions and public dialogue as well as further investigation in this area.

In conclusion, Fiji as a nation now controls its own destiny and having determined its future through the ballot box, it is incumbent on this government to steer the efforts and advance the country towards a brighter future. That calls for a visionary, progressive, and committed government that puts all the necessary infrastructure and systems in place to propel national development. Moving forward, Fiji's success is heavily dependent on its political stability and social cohesion. To this end, the coalition government's primary duties should focus on fostering trust, reconciliation, and cohesion within the coalition and the general public, ensuring broad-based community engagement and equitable sharing of economic benefits, developing consensus on critical policy areas, and improving the executive capabilities of various government wings. The opposition party shall be constructive as well, always putting the national interest at the forefront to realise a politically stable, economically prosperous, and socially inclusive Fiji.

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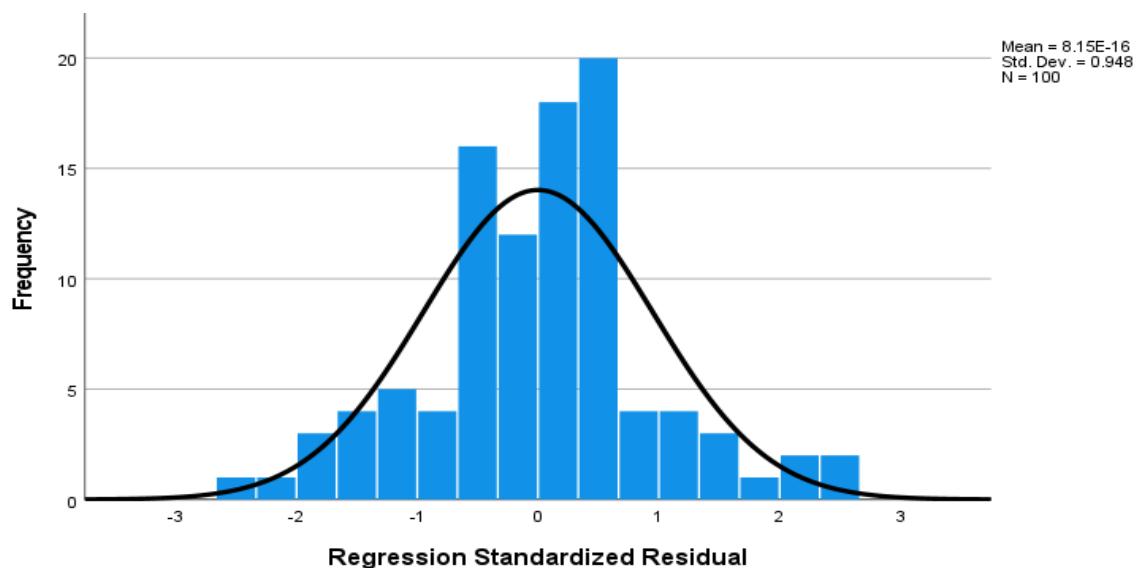
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Appendix 1 - Histogram, P-P and Q-Q plots

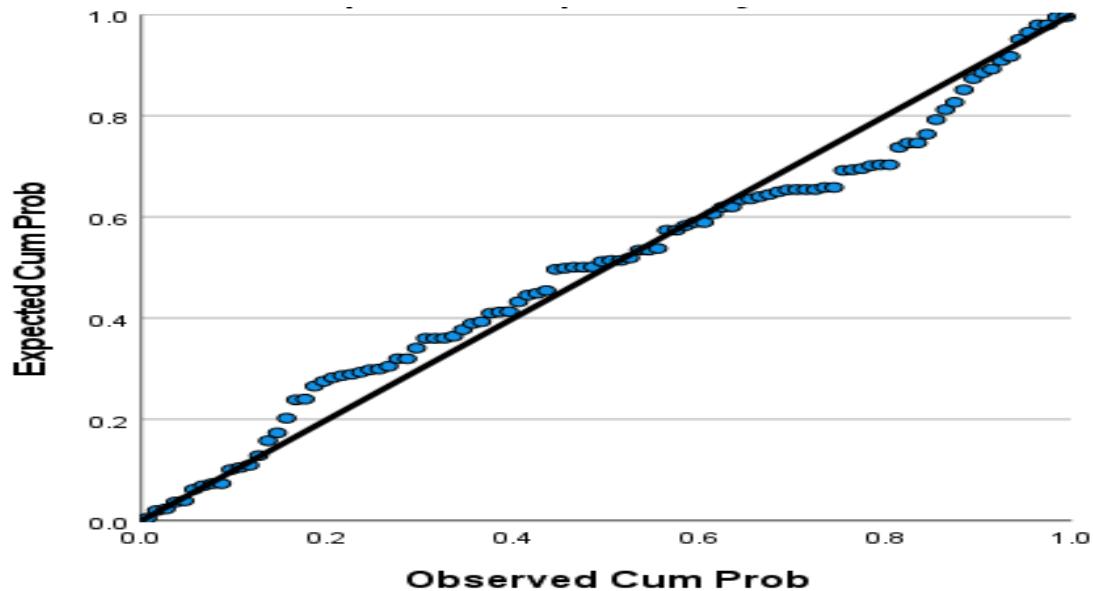
Histogram

Dependent variable: Future tourism development

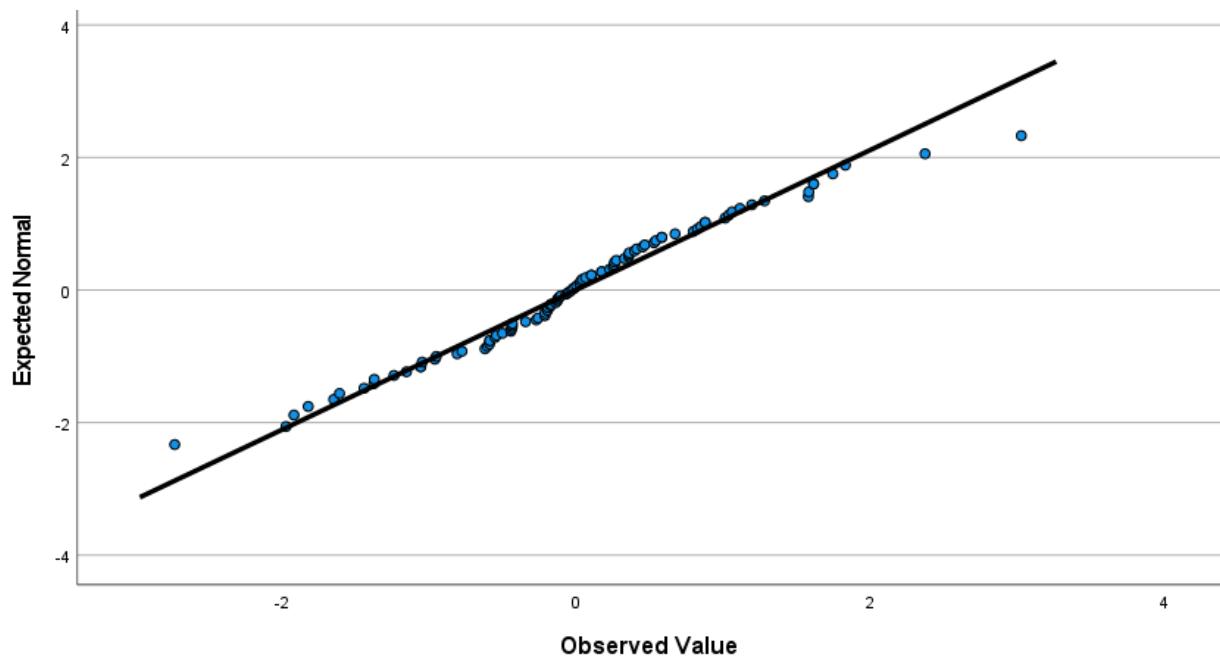


Normal P-P plot of regression standardised residual

Dependent variable: Future tourism development



Normal Q-Q plot of standardised residual



Appendix 2 - Survey

Dear participant,

Ni Sa Bula Vinaka and Greetings!

This short survey aims to make a rapid assessment of Fiji's first democratic transition of power and its impact on post-2022 election tourism flow.

The survey might take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Your participation is extremely important to arrive at a more accurate, comprehensive, and conclusive assessment. We assure you in advance that your privacy will be strictly concealed and the responses you provide will be treated in strict confidentiality and be used solely for academic purposes.

If you need further information about this survey, please feel free to contact the researchers.

Thank you very much in advance.

Survey questions

1. I believe the overall process of the December 2022 general election was transparent enough.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

2. I believe that the overall process of the December 2022 general election was free and fair.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

3. I expected the outcome to be that the ruling party (Fiji First) would lose

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. I had a concern regarding the smooth (democratic) transition of power after the election results were announced.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. I think that democracy has been restored after the 2022 general election.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

6. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government plays an important role in the growth of post-election tourism.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

7. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government plays a crucial role in terms of improving the international image of Fiji as a peaceful country.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

8. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government plays a positive role in annihilating (abolishing) coup culture in Fiji.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government plays a monumental role in boosting visitors' confidence in Fiji.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government has a significant role in boosting investor's confidence in Fiji.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. The democratic transfer of power from the Fiji First-led government to the current coalition government will have a positive impact in Fiji's future tourism development

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. I would like to see more policy changes that promote local communities' engagement in the tourism sector.

- I strongly disagree
- I disagree
- Neither disagree nor agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

13. In your opinion, what are the implications of the peaceful power transition for: a) the current tourist flow; b) the overall tourism sector (in terms of policy shifts and foreign direct investment)? Moreover, which areas of tourism development should be a priority for the coalition government?

14. Gender

- Female
- Male
- Neutral

15. Age

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46+

16. Educational status

- High-school complete
- Post-graduate diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Ph.D. degree

17. Occupation

18. Nationality

-End-

Thank you very much once again for your insights, and the time you spent in filling this survey!

Note:

The survey has also been shared online via the following link.

<https://s.surveyplanet.com/sa2in1rs>