



Democracy, power and political culture in the Pacific

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AT THE HEART OF MODERN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES ARE ELECTIONS IN WHICH representatives are chosen to govern on behalf of 'the people' – the body of citizens in whom sovereignty or supreme political power is vested. By their nature, democratic elections are highly competitive and are therefore conducted in an adversarial manner. This gives practical expression to the notion that democracy is, at least in one sense, 'the prosecution of war by other means'.

The provision of peaceful means for the management of conflict brings with it enormous benefits. This is best illustrated by the dismal record of those states where violence rather than voting has been used to determine who holds the reins of government. The record of most Pacific Islands states in managing their political affairs peacefully, however, is a good one – with some notable exceptions. Fiji and Solomon Islands stand out as the most recent problem areas, with armed groups forcing governments out of office in May and June 2000 respectively.

In the wake of these problems, the communiqué from the Thirty-First Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) drew particular attention to the serious implications of the recent strife for regional security and economic development, and urged

The Journal of Pacific Studies, Volume 29, no.1, 2006, 85–107
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support for such political goods as ‘constitutional democracy’ and ‘good governance’ (PIF 2000:2–3). Good governance is generally seen as related closely to democracy, but is not synonymous with it. The mere fact that a democratic system, complete with effective electoral and other political machinery, is in place is no guarantee that good governance will result. And, although democracy is meant to minimise corruption and mismanagement, dishonest and inept politicians are nonetheless regularly elected under democratic systems.¹

The ‘war by other means’ analogy is useful in highlighting that democratic processes are meant to provide an alternative to physical force or coercion in deciding the question of who governs in the name of the people. But it can be misleading if it is taken to imply that there are permanent winners and losers, and that the winners are empowered to do exactly as they please. The powers of governments are constrained by a constitution. Elections, moreover, are obviously periodic, which means that governments hold power for a limited time and, although they may be re-elected in successive elections, there is no tenure for life. A constitution and periodic elections are the foundations on which the democratic doctrine of constitutionalism rests.

The fact that elections are periodic and competitive is meant to ensure the integrity of democratic processes. This implies first, that open political contestation is central to the election process and second, that the various parties to the contest are equally legitimate contenders. As suggested above, there are no guarantees that all will be smooth sailing from then on, but it is the essential basis on which constitutional democracy of the kind apparently supported by the PIF proceeds.

The variety of electoral systems in existence shows clearly that there is no single method or set of rules recognised as embodying best practice in institutionalising ‘peaceful conflict’ through democratic procedures, and this variety is reflected in the range of systems in the Pacific. There is a similarly diverse range of opinion on the comparative merits of each system, which reinforces the general point that there is more than one way to institutionalise democracy, and that its procedures, including election procedures, can be adjusted according to context.



However, it should also be noted that arguments about the importance of context – especially when linked to ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ – sometimes amount to a repudiation of democracy, for, although democracy can indeed be institutionalised in different ways according to context, this does not mean that anything goes. If a particular practice is (apparently) legitimated by local tradition, this does not automatically make it democratic. One purpose of this article is to illustrate some of the tensions between traditionalist conceptions of politics in the Pacific and the institutionalisation of democracy, especially in relation to certain ideas about the place of consensus in Pacific political contexts. The notion of context is embodied in the concept of ‘political culture’ – a term originally used to explain why democracy takes hold more easily in some societies than in others, although it has much wider connotations now.

The first section below looks briefly at the concept of political culture and its development in comparative political science, drawing particular attention to one major problem in its application, namely, the ease with which it can be used to support a highly deterministic approach to the analysis of particular political communities. The second section sketches some of the problems of culturalist approaches to politics, paying special attention to ‘the West/non-West’ dichotomy and some of its consequences for political institutions in the postcolonial Pacific. The third section focuses on democracy and the politics of culture in the contemporary Pacific, drawing examples from three Pacific Islands states to illustrate some of the difficulties raised by concepts such as ‘tradition’ and ‘consensus’, and the inevitable contrasts between political culture(s) in the Pacific and ‘Western’ norms and expectations. A broader purpose of the article is to raise questions and issues about democracy, opposition, political culture, tradition/custom, consensus and dissent, all of which underlie the complex dynamics of electoral processes in the Pacific.

Political culture in the study of comparative politics

The end of the Cold War, which brought with it some sudden and dramatic transfigurations of states and nations, is also said to have sparked off nothing less than a renaissance in the study of political culture (Brint 1991:1). This contrasts with the view that political culture has been in a long and persistent decline as a political science paradigm since at least the 1970s. In this view,



although there is little dispute that the question of values is important to analysis, rationalist models have come to predominate due to their allegedly superior empirical rigour: 'As a consequence, political culture has become a residual category, something that everyone knows is important but is referred to only to fill in the gaps that remain after harder analysis' (Wilson 1992:2–3; see also Brands 1988:130). This reflects a persistent scepticism that political culture is a useful or even valid concept, despite its having made a return in the post–Cold War period (Diamond 1994:1; see also Wilson 2000:246). Notwithstanding the scepticism, 'sensitivity to context' has been promoted as a highly desirable quality in both theory and practice since the 1950s, with the concept of political culture touted as a 'political scientific manifestation of this virtue' (Welch 1993:74).

The dominant understanding of political culture that has informed comparative political studies for the past thirty years was first set out explicitly by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their work on the idea of 'civic culture'. Their main interests were the social structures and practices that sustain democratic politics, especially in light of the development of fascism and communism in the inter-war years in Europe, which had shaken the 'faith of the Enlightenment in the inevitable triumph of human reason and liberty' and 'raised serious doubts about the inevitability of democracy in the West' (Almond & Verba 1989 (1965):1, 3–4). In addition, believing that the study of political development in the 'new nations' of the decolonising Third World required analysis of more than the formal institutions of democracy, they looked at the difficulties of nurturing a political culture consistent with the democratic model of a participatory state:

... the ways in which political elites make decisions, their norms and attitudes, as well as the norms and attitudes of the ordinary citizen, his relationship to government and to his fellow citizens – are subtler cultural components. They have the diffuse properties of belief systems or of codes of personal relations, which the anthropologists tell us spread only with great difficulty. (ibid.:3–4)

The political culture school took the discipline of political science beyond legal–institutional studies, which was narrowly focused mostly on the formal apparatus of states and governments. Political culture studies therefore gave



greater recognition to the now commonplace view that formal institutions, such as constitutions, political parties, universal suffrage and elective legislatures, are as much a feature of non-democratic regimes as they are of democratic ones. Furthermore, the collapse of many barely emergent forms of democratic government in former colonies highlighted the inadequacy of institutional approaches in accounting for the factors that determined success or failure. Political culture scholars turned instead to an assessment of how the subjective dimensions of human political behaviour influence or determine certain outcomes, particularly with respect to democratic stability. The concept of political culture as developed by Almond and Verba was therefore 'a leading token of the "behavioural revolution" in political science' (Welch 1993:64).

Despite a diversity of interpretations, conflicting definitions, critical assessments and periodic stagnations in research, as well as the persistent scepticism mentioned earlier, the concept of political culture as envisaged by Almond and Verba has survived, more or less in the form of conventional wisdom. Larry Diamond claims that the 'pioneering political culture work of the 1960s blazed important trails in articulating our understanding of what political culture is and how it is structured' and, further, that its conceptual foundations have 'weathered well the test of experience' (Diamond 1994:7). He also claims that 'only a crude stereotype of political culture theory sees in it a causal determinism' (in that political culture more or less determines both political structures and political behaviour), and that the elements of political culture remain fairly impervious to change over time (*ibid.*:2). However, a recent textbook on comparative politics (the genre in which we are most likely to find the concept of political culture used) states that:

To a political scientist, as to an anthropologist or a sociologist, a 'culture' is the entire pattern of behaviour of a given society ... therefore, individual behaviour within that society will in some sense be determined by that culture, and [political behaviour] is no exception. (Calvert 2002:107)

The opening lines of Lucian Pye's work on Asia also provide a clear example of just how deterministic a political culture approach can be:



Throughout Asia today the drama of politics is being played out by leaders and followers whose roles are largely prescribed by culturally determined concepts about the nature of power ... Briefly put, my thesis is that political power is extraordinarily sensitive to cultural nuances, and that, therefore, cultural variations are decisive in determining the course of political development. (Pye 1985:vii)

Pye explicitly acknowledges his debt to the pioneering work on political culture carried out by Almond and others. He dismisses criticisms that 'the [political culture] concept opens the way to fuzzy thinking and sloppy explanations' and also those that 'denounce it for being too deterministic' (ibid.:19–20). Pye also rejects what he regards as the blind application of Western (and especially American) universalist models for understanding how political power operates in other contexts. This may seem a refreshing change, but the extent to which Pye embraces cultural relativism and determinism is no less problematic, especially with respect to his dichotomous construction of the categories 'Asia' and 'the West'. These two opposing categories have been central to the so-called Asian values debate in recent years. Any scholar of the Pacific who has followed this debate over the past decade or so cannot fail to have noticed the very close parallels with debates about the 'Pacific Way', which have entailed a similar dichotomous construction of 'the Pacific' and 'the West'.

It has been noted that 'early Western anthropologists often celebrated the "Pacific Way" and emphasised the reciprocal and consensual nature of Pacific Island peoples and the societies of which they were part' (Murray & Storey 2003:219). Another study, citing a wide range of literature, also notes the extent to which it is believed that 'political life in the Pacific is guided by a consensual mood' but also suggests that 'the ideal of consensus may be exaggerated in texts about Pacific politics' (Anckar 2000:60). This suggests that romantic stereotypes about harmony and consensus in Pacific politics, which are just as 'Orientalist' as a negative stereotypical construction, have served as the basis of at least some constructions of 'political culture'.

In the following discussion I look at some of these ideas in more detail, paying particular attention not so much to political culture as a framework for political behaviour as to the politics *of* culture as a dynamic process of



contestation and negotiation in the contemporary Pacific, especially as it pertains to democracy, in general, and the issues of legitimacy raised by electoral competition, in particular. As an essential background, we should first recall the general political milieu within which democracy became the most valued form of political rule in the post–World War II period, and how this was played out in the decolonising world.

Democracy and decolonisation

‘Democracy’ is not simply a word that describes in straightforward or neutral terms a particular form of political rule – namely, rule by the people – and a set of institutions designed to support this form and give it practical expression. Democracy as a concept has itself become highly politicised. This is because it is open to endless disputation, not simply about its true meaning, but also about the way in which it should be institutionalised in practice. It is with respect to the latter that debates about the particularity or specificity of cultural contexts are especially relevant, as we shall see below.

Arguments about the meaning of democracy and its practical institutionalisation have a very long history, but for present purposes the relevant period commences with the defeat of fascism in World War II. It is often noted that the defeat of this ideology – which was explicitly and avowedly anti-democratic – led to a world in which everyone pronounced themselves to be democrats (Sartori 1987:3). In addition to liberal democrats, located largely (although not exclusively) in that part of the world known as the West, both communist leaders and right-wing authoritarians usually claimed to be democrats as well, albeit of a different stripe. This is the context in which the philosopher WB Gallie first described democracy as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956).

A second factor contributing to the essential contestability of democracy and the proliferation of adjectival qualifiers (such as ‘guided’, ‘organic’ and ‘presidential’) in the post-war period was the phenomenon of decolonisation and the making of sovereign states, which obviously required national governments of their own. The process of decolonisation was accompanied by the language of democratic self-determination, and there was a strong assumption that the governments of the new states would be constructed on



a democratic basis. The major colonial powers – Great Britain and France – were by then democracies themselves, and the principles on which the newly formed United Nations was founded reflected a widespread democratic mood in international politics. But the acquisition of statehood by former colonial entities from Africa to the Pacific raised new difficulties for the application of what were, after all, very Eurocentric conceptions of democracy in contexts that were culturally, politically and economically quite different and that clearly required sensitivity to context.

Intellectual approaches to these issues in the post-war period tended to draw on the anthropological concept of cultural relativism, which had emerged in the early twentieth century, particularly within American cultural anthropology, and which came to inform the approach taken by UNESCO to virtually all matters pertaining to culture in non-Western or indigenous settings. In the development of a normative doctrine of cultural relativism, major emphasis was placed on the social or cultural determinants of human behaviour, and biological and psychological factors were almost completely excluded. Culture was viewed as a unified and self-bounded realm of phenomena rigidly differentiated from other factors (Horigan 1988:18). Derek Freeman – who later became better known for his controversial denunciation of Margaret Mead's research findings in relation to Sâmoa – noted that this doctrine became as extreme as that of the hereditarians before it:

It was expressed in the formula *omnis cultura ex cultura*, which, in asserting that cultural phenomena can be understood only in terms of other cultural phenomena, was predicated on the existence of an unbridgeable chasm between biology and cultural anthropology, and so inexorably involved an absolute cultural determinism. (quoted in Horigan loc. cit.)

The extent to which anthropology's disciplinary interests are vested in 'characterising exotic otherness' through the emphasis on 'Difference-with-a-capital-D' has been emphasised by another well-known and controversial anthropologist working in the Pacific, Roger Keesing. He argued that in symbolist/interpretive modes of anthropology radical alterity remains an essential requirement for showing that conceptions of personhood, emotions, agency, gender and the body are culturally constructed. Difference, Keesing



says, must be demonstrated and celebrated, and ‘cultures’ must still be put in separate compartments and depicted in essentialist terms (Keesing 1990:47). The political culture concept discussed above was significantly influenced by these developments in cultural anthropology. Cultural ‘difference’ could of course be taken to distinguish communities at any level but whereas anthropologists had typically been concerned with small-scale communities, political scientists focused on the larger nation-state and its political institutions. Political cultures were therefore described largely in national terms, for example, ‘Japanese’ political culture and ‘Australian’ political culture.

Scholars in both political science and anthropology (and in other disciplines for that matter) also began to speak, even more generally, of the West and the non-West as entities. The West, in particular, has often been assumed to possess ‘a culture’. However, whatever coherence it possesses has been acquired by virtue of its assumed contrast with non-Western culture(s). The ‘Difference’ between the West and its non-Western others also translates readily into the category of political culture.² A common application of the political culture concept has therefore been to denote a dichotomous division between Western and non-Western communities. This dichotomy has been translated into another important division – that between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Generally speaking, this division is between those who ‘belong’ to the cultural group in question and those who do not. In more specific terms, the outsiders are usually Westerners (academics, journalists, bureaucrats and experts or professionals of various kinds from Europe, North America, Australia or New Zealand). The category of insider *seems* straightforward – members are usually the natives, the locals, the indigenous. This category, however, is highly contentious. Apart from the fact that indigenous communities are far from unitary in political, social and economic terms, dissident insiders may be treated as ‘too Westernised’ or as traitors to their own traditions and therefore tarred with the brush of *inauthenticity* (see Lawson 1996:164–66).

In the decolonising Pacific, the newly independent island states adopted most of the trappings of representative democracy as part of a formal written constitution that established the basic political structures of the state. Although it is commonly said that former colonial powers *imposed* constitutions crafted after their own, it was rarely the case that something like a Westminster model



was simply forced on the new states without due regard for local particularities or without extensive consultation. The same can be said about the larger states bordering the western Pacific, namely, Australia and New Zealand. As former British colonies, both adopted a basic parliamentary model but with numerous adaptations that reflected their local political conditions and that made their political institutions quite distinct. Thus, although Australia and New Zealand were largely settler societies, this did not mean that the institutions adopted at independence were simply carbon copies of the Westminster system.

The new Pacific Islands states, however, were obviously quite different from Australia and New Zealand. Although some contained substantial immigrant populations, they were not settler societies. Moreover, indigenous political leaders had sometimes played a much more active role in colonial government and administration. This was clearly the case in Fiji, where chiefs were prominent in the Fijian Administration (originally called the Native Administration) and were appointed to the Legislative Council from 1904, and in Tonga, which was a British protectorate rather than a colony, where most government functions remained in the hands of the Tongan monarch and the aristocracy. However, the idea that ordinary ("commoner") people without traditional chiefly status should be able to vote or otherwise participate actively in politics – especially in the new realm of national politics – was slow to develop.

In Fiji, legislation enfranchising indigenous commoners – along with women from all ethnic groups – was not introduced until 1960, just ten years before independence (although this was a decade ahead of Switzerland as far as women were concerned). This contrasted with the voting rights given to all adult Indo-Fijian males from 1929. Today, all adult citizens in Fiji have ostensibly equal voting rights, but they are not equally represented. Rather, indigenous Fijians are privileged under a system that retains important elements of communalism. In Tonga, constitutional reforms in the nineteenth century saw the arbitrary power of local chiefs curbed through the introduction of basic rule-of-law principles. But while petty chiefs lost much of their power, the monarch and a select aristocracy acquired a highly privileged constitutional position. All adult Tongans have the franchise, and all adult males have had it since 1875 – remarkable in comparison with many European countries – but



representatives elected by commoners have always been a minority in the Tongan parliament. In Sâmoa (formerly Western Samoa) the establishment of the National Legislative Assembly in 1948 increased opportunities for political participation at a national level, but suffrage was limited to the *matai* (roughly meaning ‘chiefs’). This system remained in place at independence in 1962³ and it was not until 1990 that universal adult suffrage was finally introduced. Candidacy, however, remains a *matai* privilege.

European colonialism had a profound impact on economy, society and politics in the Pacific Islands. And, although Tonga was not formally colonised, the present monarchical system (and the political privileges of the aristocracy) owe a great deal to nineteenth century British influences. Decolonisation saw the entrenchment of the European sovereign state system together with constitutional government. To say that the former colonial powers ‘bequeathed’ democratic systems, however, is misleading. Colonial governments were themselves clearly undemocratic. In addition, colonial powers found it useful to preserve ‘tradition’ – usually in a rather authoritarian form – as part of the structure of the colonial state. Nonetheless, by the time of their independence, elective representation had been practised on a significant scale in many parts of the Pacific. The legitimacy of systems of democratic elective representation in the post-independence era, however, was always going to have to compete with the superior legitimacy claimed for entrenched systems of traditional political privilege, systems that also had significant (although never total) popular support. The legitimacy of the latter depended at least in part on the political role played by the culture concept.

Democracy and the politics of culture in the contemporary Pacific

Arguments supporting the privileging of some sectors of the population in political representation and political office have been common in the three countries mentioned above, Fiji, Tonga and Sâmoa. Many of the problems they have experienced arise from the tension between ‘traditional’ leadership and democratic practices, at least to the extent that they have been constructed in opposition to each other. Fiji, Tonga and Sâmoa are among the Pacific states best known for the tension between traditional chiefly leadership and democratic processes (which in the case of Fiji has been complicated by ethnic cleavages).



Similar problems may exist elsewhere, but the discussion here is limited to these three polities.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that here, I use the terms tradition/traditional (usually rendered as *kastom* in Melanesia) with caution. One reason is that if a certain practice or institution is described as traditional in the Pacific it usually implies that it has its origins in the precolonial or at least the pre-European past, and is therefore authentically indigenous, as opposed to introduced and therefore less legitimate.⁴ However, many practices and institutions that are promoted as traditional have their origins in the colonial period. Fiji's *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* (Great Council of Chiefs), instituted by Fiji's first substantive governor, is one; the constitutional structure underpinning the Tongan political system is another; and in Sâmoa the Land and Titles Court and all the practices associated with it are clearly based on introduced structures. Even the *matai* system itself is said to have developed since the adoption of Christianity (Schoeffel & Turner 2003:9). And yet all are regarded as embodying authentic Pacific traditions as opposed to practices influenced by European (and sometimes other) cultural and political traditions. It is especially interesting that Christianity is also now regarded as very much part of the Pacific Way, even though it is just as alien in its origins as democracy is assumed to be. But whereas democratic institutions and practices tended to undermine existing structures of political privilege, the institutions fallaciously regarded as traditional, as well as many of the Christian churches, supported them. And this is why they have not been targeted for criticism in the same way, let alone denounced, by traditionalists as foreign imports.

'Tradition' is a close relative of the culture concept and the two are often used synonymously or interchangeably. There is a fairly substantial body of critical literature on the politics of culture and/or tradition in the Pacific and much of the ground is therefore well worn, at least in academic circles. However, the debate is ongoing, and it remains particularly important in issues concerning elections and the legitimacy of both candidates and office holders. Its importance for the present discussion lies partly in the implicit opposition of *consensus*, as the ideal of the Pacific Way of doing politics, to the *dis*sensus that accompanies elections, which is characterised as not simply undesirable but as somehow un-Pacific. This tends to undermine not just the role of



opposition parties in the political process, but the whole idea of political opposition per se.

A report on parliamentary democracy in the Pacific Islands in 1999, following a meeting of Pacific Island politicians, exemplifies the ambivalence about the idea of political opposition:

The animated discussion in the session on the role of the opposition in parliamentary democracies revealed that many Pacific cultures did not comprehend the nature of that aspect of parliaments. The participants recognised that a robust opposition was vital to the success of a healthy democracy, but the ordinary people had great difficulty in understanding this. A large part of the difficulty here lay in the fact that in many Pacific cultures, business is conducted in a consensual manner, and often, especially in Polynesia, leadership was the prerogative of chiefs. Even legitimate criticism of the policies of political leaders of chiefly background was seen as disrespectful not only to the person concerned but also to the region, group, tribe or clan that he or she represented. (Centre for Democratic Institutions 1999:3)

The report does not provide details on exactly who said what, but the alleged problems of political opposition are raised on virtually every occasion that democracy is discussed. Apart from the familiar emphasis in the quotation above on consensus politics, note particularly that while the conference participants apparently agreed that opposition is important, they considered that 'ordinary people' do not understand it, thus shifting the blame for problems from leaders to followers. A different report, however, emanating from the same institution, points out that since independence, 'A whole new generation of Islanders has grown up knowing only the democratic process as the form of government' and, in a later passage, that 'Elections in the Pacific are robustly contested affairs ...' (Rich 2002:4). Both observations suggest that 'ordinary people' in the contemporary period are not entirely without the experience or resources to cope with competitive politics.

Another relatively recent report on democracy in the Pacific also highlights the perceived tensions between political opposition and Pacific ideals:



Given the very different cultural and historical settings in which the Westminster system evolved, it is not surprising that difficulties have been experienced in transplanting it to Pacific environments. Problems have arisen with the fundamental Westminster division between government and opposition ... This confrontational approach clashes with the Pacific ideal (seldom achieved in practice at the national level) of consensus decision making. (Henderson 2002:6)

But the author goes on to say that:

Deviations from the Westminster system to promote unity may create a whole new series of problems ... The greater the emphasis on consensus, the less vigilance of government that opposition MPs ideally should maintain. The Westminster system gives the parliamentary opposition the job of keeping the government honest ... Governments ... require an effective Opposition to make accountability work. (loc. cit.)

Although this report criticises some of the attitudes and practices resulting from the emphasis on consensus politics as undermining the proper functions of opposition in a democracy, the general stereotype of Pacific politics as consensual remains unchallenged.

A recent study of 'consent versus dissent' in Sâmoa by Elise Huffer and Asofou So'ó, however, challenges the consensus stereotype. Although consensus is often highly valued (with some exceptions), which discourages the expression of dissent at very localised levels in Sâmoa (i.e. in family and village spheres), its operation at the national level is almost non-existent. At this level, it is an ideal that rarely finds expression in practice, while dissent, although scarcely acknowledged, 'permeates public life' (Huffer & So'ó 2003:300). Moreover, referring to the distinction between what is traditional (in the pre-European contact sense) and what has emerged as the product of inter-cultural contact, Tuimaleali'ifano, a Sâmoan historian, suggests that the Sâmoan ideal of consensus may be traced to a period when many Sâmoans felt the need to unite in opposition to European power and influence. Tuimaleali'ifano argues that in the period before European contact there was 'a tradition of dissent among major political lineages'. Furthermore, there appears to have been a balance of power 'that acknowledged the legitimacy of the *itu malo* (winning or



governing side) over the *itu vavai* (losing side), until the latter could wrestle power and in turn become the *itu malo*' (quoted in Huffer & So'o 2003:294). If this is the case, then the parallel with ideas about government and opposition and the peaceful alternation of government in a democratic system is striking. On the other hand, pre-contact Sâmoan society had its share of warfare. Indeed, there is evidence pointing to endemic sporadic warfare in this period. And the main reason for the establishment of the Land and Titles Commission (now the Land and Titles Court) in the early twentieth century was 'the peaceful resolution of disputes that would otherwise have escalated into violence' (Meleisea 1987:22). This illustrates precisely how rule of law procedures represent the prosecution of war by other means.

Among Tongans, skirmishes and outright warfare were scarcely unknown in the precontact period either, but the arrival of Europeans, bringing with them both Christianity and weapons vastly more lethal than anything available in the islands, saw the proliferation of organised violence. This was for reasons that had much to do with political centralisation as well as with rivalry between different Christian sects. Subsequently, Christianised chiefs gained the upper hand under the leadership of Tâufa'âhau, who established a monarchy with a landed aristocracy under a formal constitution that owed a great deal to the Hawaiian constitution as well as to the British (see Lawson 1996:88–90). These institutions did not actually accord with the pre-existing system, but rather with political expedience demanded by the circumstances of the mid-nineteenth century. The system in place today is nonetheless regarded as traditional and therefore legitimate. But it is far from democratic, as indicated above.

Lack of democratic accountability in Tonga, and the resulting public perception of corruption in government, has seen, since the 1970s, the growth of a strong pro-democracy movement now styled the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement. Associated political parties were very slow to develop but in April 2005, a month after general elections, the People's Democratic Party was officially formed. Following these elections, the Prime Minister appointed two of the nine people's representatives, as well two nobles' representatives, as cabinet ministers. This was in response to concerted political agitation by the pro-democracy movement for reform of the legislature, although the democratisation called for had been much more



extensive. The principal proposal had been to move the nine noble members of parliament to an upper house, with a new lower House of Commons containing twenty-one fully elected members. King Tāufa'āhau Tupou IV is reported to have opposed the move, claiming that his people were not ready for it.⁵

The government in Tonga has also been in a long-running battle with critical Tongan media and there have been numerous court cases, many of them defamation suits brought by the government against long-time pro-democracy leader 'Akilisi Pohiva and others involved in the movement. In 2003 *Taimi o Tonga (Times of Tonga)*, an independent newspaper (published in Auckland by a Tongan and delivered to Tonga), was banned in Tonga by the government. The courts subsequently overturned the ban, which prompted the government to introduce a constitutional amendment simply to get rid of troublesome newspapers altogether. A demonstration of 5,000 people in the capital – huge in Tongan terms – failed to influence the authorities. Public unrest increased dramatically over other issues, with up to 10,000 in 2005 demonstrating against the government in support of public service pay increases for lower-paid workers. More generally, while the monarchy has been an object of popular veneration in the past, deeply respected and at times almost beyond criticism, the King has now come under increasing pressure to render himself – or at least the institutions that he commands – more accountable to the public.⁶

It is important to note that the impetus for reform, and most criticisms of the present system, come from within Tonga itself, with expatriate Tongans also playing a role. External criticism from countries like Australia and New Zealand, however, rankles deeply with the establishment. The King's youngest son and Tongan prime minister from January 2000 to February 2006,⁷ Prince 'Ulukālala Lavaka Ata, responded to external criticism of the Tongan government's stance on the *Taimi o Tonga* issue by delivering a familiar condemnation of outsiders who do not 'understand' Tongan politics and society. Addressing Westerners at large, who, he said, wanted to impose their (democratic) values on Tonga, he stated, 'You don't see things as a Tongan ... You see things as a Westerner. So it's very hard for you to understand' (quoted in Wagner 2003:3).



The exclusion of commoners from a share of effective political power, as well as the gagging of critical voices, is generally justified by reference to Tonga's 'own' cultural values. But if this is so, why do the majority of Tongans seem not to share them? In addition, the dismissal of external critics as cultural imperialists who do not understand (i.e. agree with) Tongan political culture, as interpreted by the elite, is entirely self-serving. And if anything is patronising towards Tongan people, it is surely the King's assertion that they are 'not ready' (i.e. not sufficiently mature) for democracy. It is evident that there is a fundamental hostility to democracy among Tonga's established political leaders. In the past, 'tradition' has served as a construct against which democracy has been portrayed as essentially inauthentic. But this tactic has proved unsustainable in the face of agitation for change and is likely to weaken further in the face of continuing pressure for political reform. All this, combined with the fact that the people's representatives have until recently played no part in government, means that the type of electoral system under which they are chosen is, for the time being, the least of the problems for democracy reformers.

The authoritarian attitude adopted by the Tongan elite, however, does seem to accord with long-standing custom and, to that extent, is a part of Tonga's political culture. As I have discussed elsewhere, the old political order in Tonga was characterised by unquestioning obedience (*faka'apa'apa*) of commoners to the authority of chiefs (Lawson 1996). And whereas the village *fono* (council) in Sâmoa was indeed a place where extensive discussion took place until a consensus was reached, in Tonga it was never more than a meeting at which instructions were issued by chiefs to those below them (ibid.:85). Whatever consensus existed was not reached after an inclusive process of deliberation. Traditional authoritarianism has therefore fed into contemporary political culture but it is increasingly at odds with what ordinary people seem to want in the way of political representation and accountability. Tonga's current political culture clearly contains some very strong tensions and contradictions, thus illustrating the inherent dynamism of culture (political or otherwise).

The politics of tradition in Fiji has turned in recent years from a defence of elite (chiefly) privilege to a brand of populist indigenous nationalism, which



targets Indo-Fijians as a threat to indigenous interests. However, to read Fiji's political troubles as due simply to the ethnic divide would be a serious mistake, for contemporary indigenous nationalism masks any number of significant tensions and contradictions (see Lawson 1991, 1996, 2004).

On the more general subject of democracy, in a speech at the opening of the Roundtable of Heads of Government of Commonwealth Pacific Island Countries on Challenges of Democracy in the Pacific in 2002, the Fijian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Kaliopate Tavola, listed problems with the implementation of democracy in the Pacific (clearly with Fiji uppermost in mind), and finished by emphasising the high social and political value of conformity and consensus in the Pacific. The following is composed of short extracts from the speech, highlighting what have come to be the most familiar arguments *against* the suitability of democracy in Pacific contexts:

The British model of democracy evolved over time to what it is today. It had the luxury of time and an old prior institutional order that did not hamper such evolution ... In the Pacific, democracy has not had time to evolve sufficiently ... More importantly, the passage of democracy in the Pacific is occurring, unlike in the British model, within a cultural, social and historical framework inclusive of its value system, which does not offer a natural setting for such a concept ... The hierarchical traditional structure, for example, that prevails in parts of the Pacific does not readily succumb or reconcile itself to the democratic principles of equality and liberty ... In historical terms, therefore, the relative passage of democracy through the Pacific, as compared to the long evolutionary period in Britain and the revolutionary pathway in the US, can only be regarded as rudimentary ... Finally, how can the 'Westminster' parliamentary democratic model, premised on an adversarial configuration, promote unity in a society that is deeply divided and which is grappling with national reconciliation after the schisms of its recent past? How can this be so, especially in a traditional society that places great value on conformity and consensus? (Tavola 2002)

A number of the views expressed here by Tavola are based on false premises – especially that democracy evolved in Britain within a cultural, social and historical framework that provided a 'natural' setting for its emergence. British society has been as hierarchical as many of those in the Pacific – and a great deal more so than some. Moreover, absolutist theories of the state are



as European as theories of representative democracy – although neither is exclusive to Europe. Tavola's final point highlights the ever-present theme of Pacific consensual politics in contrast with the adversarial character of the Westminster system. The main points of Tavola's speech would be monotonously familiar to anyone who has studied the speeches of Fiji's conservative political leaders (many of them Oxford-educated), beginning with the speeches of the Bauan chief, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna (who apparently drew much of his information from the conservative and anti-democratic English jurist and historian, Sir Henry Maine), followed by those of his successor, the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, paramount chief of Lau, and various other traditionalist leaders. High chiefly status is no longer an essential qualification for political office in Fiji, but the distaste for democracy that has characterised conservative political speeches for decades, and pervades those of contemporary nationalists like Tavola, remains evident. Democracy, of course, has often been viewed as a significant threat to the paramount status of indigenous Fijians over immigrant Indo-Fijians, and warnings about this danger have usually accompanied appeals to tradition to justify limits on democratic institutions and practices. In the final analysis, however, it can scarcely be said that it is democracy that has wrought the damage in Fiji; rather, the damage has been caused by the resort to force that is its very antithesis.

Conclusion

I have discussed a number of issues to do with the relationship between democracy, political culture and the politics of culture. These issues are clearly important for the analysis of electoral systems whose principles of democratic competition, as we have seen, are often said to conflict with traditional political culture in the Pacific Islands (while in Fiji they are portrayed as a threat to indigenous paramountcy as well). A significant part of the problem turns on the legitimacy of political opposition and the role it plays in promoting dissent and criticism. In the cases mentioned above, a particular version of political culture has been promoted by political elites – a version emphasising values such as conformity and consensus and claiming that these values, as part of longstanding tradition in the countries concerned, preclude the kind of give-and-take politics associated with competitive and adversarial electioneering.⁸



And although most Pacific leaders pay endless lip-service to the need for democracy and good governance, as evidenced in many speeches and communiqués, the mantra of consensus politics as the authentic expression of Pacific Way politics nonetheless continues to undermine their basic principles.

In a study of legitimacy and the interpretation of democratic ideas in the context of political power, Katherine Fierlbeck argues that one of the fundamental attractions of democracy is that it allows for the diffusion of power within a relatively ordered social environment. It follows that if certain actors (such as a political elite) insist that only *they* have the ability to define what is or is not open for collective decision-making – for example, the protection of certain cultural traits – democracy cannot effectively diffuse power and therefore becomes ‘a meaningless reflection of its original purpose’ (Fierlbeck 1998:2). It is for this reason that democracy, while flexible enough to accommodate different styles of institutionalisation according to context, cannot mean all things to all people. To call a form of government democratic means that it is attuned to the primary normative principle that sovereign political power should be vested ultimately in ordinary people (see Lawson 1998). If this principle is denied, then elections, regardless of the technicalities of the voting system, serve little point except, perhaps, as a superficial performance of electoral democracy. Competitive, adversarial electoral systems are, for all the faults we might find with them, the principal means of giving practical expression to this normative principle. If the particular political culture of a country is said to be incompatible with the primary normative principle of democracy, but its leaders claim that democratic development is important, then it is perhaps time for them to think about how the political culture can be changed, rather than returning again and again to the more essentialist and determinist views of culture and its role in politics that have characterised conservative discourses to date.

Notes

This paper was presented at a conference on 'Political Culture, Representation and Electoral Systems in the South Pacific', University of the South Pacific, Emalus Campus, Port Vila, 10–12 July 2004. I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on this article.

- ¹ An article in February 2002 on the election of corrupt politicians in Solomon Islands illustrates the point (Field 2002; see also Crocombe 2001:512–41 and Centre for Democratic Institutions 1999:3).
- ² A rival concept is North/South – a division that is at least as simplistic and problematic.
- ³ It is sometimes argued that the *matasi*-only provisions were endorsed in a plebiscite at the time. This is true in a technical sense. However, the questions put at the referendum on the constitution simply asked the voter whether the constitution as a whole should be adopted and whether Western Samoa should become an independent state on the basis of that constitution (see Davidson 1967:404; Lawson 1996:137).
- ⁴ This is of course a highly complex matter. For further details see Lawson (1996).
- ⁵ See <www.pacificislands.cc/pm42002/pmdefault.php?urlarticleid=0033> (viewed 12 June 2004).
- ⁶ The details of political unrest in Tonga over the past year or so cannot be dealt with at length here. Fairly reliable, up-to-date reporting on daily issues may be found in *Matangi Tonga online* <www.matangitonga.to>.
- ⁷ His resignation in February 2006 came after two years marked by considerable pressure from leading pro-democracy figures, and sporadic, largely unprecedented public protests.
- ⁸ These arguments tend to ignore, in any case, the fact that an over-arching consensus on the desirability of tolerating dissent characterises most well-functioning, stable democracies. Given this, one could argue that a consensus on dissent is actually a prerequisite for political stability.

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