

BOOK REVIEWS SECTION

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Ratuva, S. and Lawson, S (Eds.) (2016). *The people have spoken: The 2014 elections in Fiji*. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press. 282pp. ISBN: 978-1-7604-6001-3. AUD\$45.00.

Small states are much more likely to be democratic than large ones but the Pacific island state of Fiji, which experienced military coups in 1987, 2001 and 2006, has long been an exception to this global trend. What makes the Fiji case especially interesting, however, is that despite the prevailing ‘coup culture’, democracy invariably returns to the islands. Stephanie Lawson and Steve Ratuva’s book *The people have spoken* provides a timely analysis of Fiji’s first election since the 2006 coup with contributions from a wide array of fields. As the title suggests, the people of Fiji spoke at the ballot box and handed the incumbent military ruler turned Fiji First Party (FFP) leader, Voreqe Frank Bainimarama, a landslide victory. In capturing the issues, events and trends that emerged in 2014, the book also sheds important light on the post-colonial history of this small state.

The September 2014 elections introduced significant ‘firsts’ to Fiji’s politics due to the significant changes in the new 2013 constitution. The voting age has been reduced from 21 to 18 and voting is now based on the Open List Proportional (OLP) system with the principle of ‘one-person, one-vote and one value’. One consequence is that the 2013 constitution has fundamentally moved away from the chiefly influence and the previous communal electoral system. For the first time, the traditional chiefs whose power was institutionalised through the Great Council of Chiefs have been totally removed from the formal political process. The implications of the above are thoroughly analysed by the book contributors.

The book begins with Steven Ratuva’s analysis of the elections held Fiji under the three electoral systems respectively – first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, Alternative Voting (AV) system and the OLP - exemplifies the causes and consequences of electoral engineering in this ethnically diverse nation. While elections under the FPTP and the AV system reinvigorated ethnic configurations, the 2014 elections under the OLP system to a large extent appears to have reversed that trend and ‘Fiji’s culture has shifted away from ethnic polarity towards moderation’ (p. 38). Brij Lal’s analysis of the Fiji Indian voting shift from traditionally ethnic based parties to moderate FFP is a vindication of this change. However, as Ratuva contends, whether this trend will continue remains to be seen with the next election the real test.

Fiji’s politics since independence has revolved around three core pillars – chiefs, land and religion – which provided a sense of identity and cohesiveness to the indigenous Fijians (Taukei). For better or worse, these pillars were shaken in the 2014 elections. The influence of the chiefs who held significant leverage in the past, as Stephanie Lawson’s chapter illustrates, was undermined by the 2006 coup and their marginalisation was reinforced by the 2014 elections. Consequently, the issue of land, which traditionally played a pivotal role in Fiji politics through the chiefly influence, as Sefania Sakai points out, gained less traction with Taukei voters. Similarly, the Methodist Church, which has the largest number of Taukei members and played significant role in the previous coups, according to Lynda Newland, was sidelined by the military regime and hence could not assert much influence over its followers. While the three pillars may have held a chord with the elder Taukei voters who mostly voted

for the right leaning Social Liberal Democratic Party (SODELPA), Patrick Vakaoti's chapter demonstrates that the young voters played a significant role in the FFP victory as the majority were attracted by a campaign based on development and 'bread and butter' issues (p. 9).

The book highlights some disturbing impositions by the military regime leading up to the 2014 elections that ultimately favoured the FFP. David Robbie's chapter laments on the barriers to the freedom of information provisions within the 2013 constitution, the draconian media blackout law, and specifically the limitations within the 2010 Media Industry Development Decree. According to Robbie, the sheer enforcement of this decree meant Fiji could 'hardly claim to have a truly free and fair media' (p. 83). Apart from the media, the Bainimarama military regime's new electoral laws became problematic to the established political parties, such as SODELPA, which according to Pio Tabaiwalu favoured the FFP. The benefits of incumbency included the Attorney General and the secretary-general of the FFP being the Minister for Elections, and the regimes sympathisers holding key positions such as the Supervisor of Elections. In such a climate the odds were stacked against SODELPA and the other established parties, including the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party. Despite this disadvantage, Scott McWilliam argues that SODELPA's own strategy of clinging to the old guard contributed to its poor election performance. Perhaps this is a wakeup call for next elections for the SODELPA management which is now led by a former coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka.

While the environment leading to the 2014 elections were questionable, the conduct of the 2014 election was judged as free and fair by the international community as Leonard Chan, a member of Multinational Observer Group explains in his chapter. Much of this is attributed to the key role-played by the Fijian Electoral Commission which is recounted by Electoral Commissioner Alisi Daurewa in her chapter.

Fiji's 2014 election was a momentous occasion as democracy returned to the country after a lapse of eight years. Overall, the contributors of this book do a wonderful job of reviewing the 2014 elections from a variety of perspectives. This book is thus both an important source of information to the students, academics and practitioners working on strengthening Fiji's democracy but also a timely analysis of the longer term trends that have shaped Fiji's post-colonial history.

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