Communication

Why Fijian Ethnonationalism Alone Is Not the Answer:
A Political Anthropology Perspective

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1. Introduction

If one were asked to describe Fiji's postcolonial political history in one word, it would have to be "turbulent." Since 1987, this South Pacific island state has witnessed 3 military coups d'état, a civilian-military putsch followed by a military mutiny, and several constitutional crises. Currently, Fiji is ruled by a military-led government. Coups have featured so prominently in Fiji's recent history that they came to be regarded as accepted, almost legitimate mechanisms of expressing discontent with state politics by Fiji's coup protagonists.

The "coup syndrome" (Fraenkel and Firth, 2009) has been such an overwhelming experience for Fiji that certain community leaders and observers went as far as declaring it a cultural issue. Shortly after Fiji's last military takeover in December 2006, laypersons, politicians and scholars alike were quick to adopt the expression "coup culture," a notion coined by the media, to refer to Fiji's ongoing political instability (e.g. Bainimarama, 2007; Ratuva, n.d.; Tarte, 2009; Wilson, 2011). In this communication, I aim to show that Fiji's political history is not only turbulent, but also extremely "complex." That is to say, the reasons for the political instability are manifold and go far beyond the usual thought-terminating cliché of a continuous conflict between indigenous Fijians ethnonationalists and Fijian citizens of South Asian (Indian) ancestry. While it cannot be denied that the ethnic discourse is important in Fijian politics, "racial"[1] conflicts are not Fiji's

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[1] Discourses of race in Fiji are commonly conflated with an anthropological and sociological understanding of ethnicity and ethnic groups (e.g. Kaplan, 1993). Customs, traditions, and languages serve as the most significant identity markers. It is therefore proposed to talk about ethnic, not racial, divisions.

only problem. They are certainly its most agonizing and discussed concern, however.

2. Fiji's Political Instability—From 1987 until Today

Once described as a model multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society with people of several ethnic, cultural and regional backgrounds living peacefully side by side, Fiji now features prominently in discourses on prospective failed states, the Melanesian arch of instability, indigenous conceptions of nationalisms, and countries governed by the military.

In reality, the country's political instability did not occur overnight but was predictable because it grew and evolved over decades. If one is to believe the media and, to a certain extent, Fijian politicians, military and other community leaders, the country's political instability is the result of ethnic tensions between Fiji's two biggest population groups, indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. These ethnic divisions and tensions are commonly referred to as Fiji's colonial heritage and more importantly, its burden. Fiji's prevailing ethnic tensions led to the military coups of 1987 and the putsch of 2000, events that were perceived mainly as attempts by ethnonationalists to enforce their indigenous Fijian understanding of political and cultural supremacy. When Lt.-Col. Rabuka led his soldiers into Parliament in May 1987 to oust the newly elected multi-ethnic coalition government and staged a second coup only a couple of months later (September 1987), his intentions seemed clear: the coups were meant to protect and restore an ascribed political supremacy, one that indigenous Fijians had lost to what the coup perpetrators claimed was an Indian-dominated Labour government (e.g. Ravuvu, 1991; Scarr, 1988).

Fiji's ethnic tensions contributed to another political upheaval in May 2000 when George Speight, a self-proclaimed champion of indigenous Fijian rights and privileges, and his allies stormed Suva's Parliament complex with intentions of restoring Fijian interests to primacy. Speight and his supporters claimed that these interests had been endangered by the electoral victory of Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first and until now only Indo-Fijian prime minister, and his "Indian-dominated government." It took several weeks of uncertainty before the military and its commander, Josaia Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama, managed to end the crisis.

Even today Fiji has not fully recovered from the events of 1987 and 2000. From late 2000 until December 2006, relations between the Fiji Military Forces and Fiji's leading politicians, led by Laisenia Qarase, remained tense (Ratuva, 2007). The military appointed Qarase caretaker prime minister after the 2000 putsch and entrusted him with the tasks of leading Fiji out of socio-economic crisis and reconciling its disparate communities. The reasons for the frequent clashes between the government and the military were manifold, but ultimately related to Qarase's decision to pursue a controversial political agenda by bringing some leading figures of the 2000

putsch back into politics.

On 5 December 2006, Fiji's latest military coup d'état happened. Bainimarama claimed that this action was a clean-up campaign against Fijian ethnonationalism, nepotism, and corruption, one that aimed "to remove [the] coup culture and to commit to democracy and the rule of law" (Bainimarama, 2007). Again, it seemed that Fiji's ethnic problem stood at the heart of Fiji's "coup culture," serving to justify a takeover that, in the words of the coup perpetrators, was not exactly a coup but rather an act of good governance staged in the name of a nation building. Indeed the military takeover of 2006 was somehow different. Whereas the coup of 1987 and the putsch of 2000 had a clear reactionary tenor, the self-proclaimed clean-up campaign of 2006 seemed reform-oriented. The Bainimarama regime has initiated various policies such as the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress to strengthen Fiji's project of nation-building in the wake of this coup. Moreover, soon after the takeover, the interim government announced its intention to introduce a revised constitution and to hold elections by 2009. If Bainimarama's words, which have been his political landmark since December 2006, are to be trusted, the 2006 military takeover had the potential to change Fiji's political history. Thus far, however, the plans for reform have not materialized into any significant changes. On the contrary, the 2006 military takeover has left many people in Fiji disillusioned because none of the promised constitutional or electoral reforms has been implemented and the military government maintains a strong grip on the lives of its citizens (Schieder, 2010: 205–215). Although the Bainimarama government introduced a constitutional commission early in March 2012 and recently restated its previous commitment to hold elections in 2014, critics such as Mosmi Bhim claim that "the authoritarian military regime has become [...] a 'personalist' regime" (2011: 1).

What went wrong? One possible answer to this question acknowledges the fact that the fight for and against indigenous Fijian rights and privileges is not Fiji's only political divide and that ethnic differences in Fiji are highly politicized by leading members of the country's political, religious, and economic elite. Ethnicity (ethnic identity) is rather a convenient pretext for what I perceive to be a complex, multi-layered, socio-political conflict driven by the ability of Fiji's coup protagonists to wrap the existing political complexity in a primarily ethnic, or ethnonational, discourse. In the words of Fiji's former Prime Minister Dr. Timoci Bavadra, who was ousted in 1987: "Race is used to manipulate the people of Fiji for purely selfish purposes" (Bain and Baba, 1990: 311).

3. Ethnonationalist Politics—A Convenient (Historical) Context

Even now, Fiji's political instability is considered a negative effect of its multi-ethnic

society. Following the model Furnivall established for Indonesia in 1948, Fiji has often been described as a plural society, shaped by its colonial legacy and torn apart by smoldering racism, ethnic conflicts, and militant Fijian ethnonationalism (e.g. Fraenkel, 2006: 73).

The roots of indigenous Fijian nationalism can be traced back to the country's colonial period. Fiji became a British crown colony in 1874. The colony's first Governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, implemented a political agenda that aimed to make Fiji a model colony that contrasted positively with other European overseas territories. Gordon's first decision was to make Fijian communally-owned land inalienable. In consequence, to this date land rights and acquisition are highly politicized issues in Fiji as almost 87% of land is communally owned by indigenous Fijians and some 30% of the population depends on land-leasing. The second strategy adopted to protect indigenous Fijian rights was to introduce a system of indirect rule that relied heavily on eastern Fijian chiefs. This in turn led to the establishment of a new class of colonial (eastern) Fijian leaders who dominated Fiji's political landscape until the influence of these *turage bale* (paramount chiefs) ultimately vanished through their Pyrrhic victory in the late 1980s with the political rise of Rabuka (e.g. Howard, 1991; Lawson, 1991). The third action taken was to import laborers from the Indian subcontinent to Fiji as a workforce for the newly established colonial plantation economy. This eventually led to the growth of a bi-polar ethnic society in Fiji, with indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians making up more than 90% of Fiji's population and forming two population groups almost equal in size until the 1990s.[2]

Unlike Fijians, Indo-Fijians did not profit from the colonial system of indirect rule. Thus the origins of the imbalance in ascribed political rights and privileges can be traced back to British colonialism. Within the colonial context, moreover, the powerful but never formally codified doctrine of the primacy of Fijian interests emerged to ensure that the rights and privileges of Fiji's indigenous inhabitants would always prevail. While the initial purpose of the doctrine was to protect indigenous Fijians from European exploitation, it was gradually employed by Fijian and European elites alike to counter any Indo-Fijian struggle for social, political, or economic equality (Lawson, 2004). It thus became a powerful tool for Fijian politicians and coup protagonists and was used to maintain their vision of Fijian society, which Kelly (1988) has described as "the Pacific Romance." Additionally, it served as an excuse for the coup protagonists of 1987, 2000, and 2006 to safeguard their own rights and privileges.

If we take Fiji's colonial history into consideration, it becomes obvious why it is commonly argued that the 1987 coup and the putsch of 2000 were motivated by an ethnonationalist agenda

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[2]   According to an official census released in 2007, Fiji's total population of currently 837,321 inhabitants is comprised of 475,739 indigenous Fijians and 313,798 Indo-Fijians, with the remaining 47,784 being of other ethnic origins such as Rotuman, European, part-European, other Pacific Islanders, and Chinese.

and why even the ongoing clean-up campaign of the Bainimarama regime relies heavily on rhetoric that emphasizes ethnic divisions. Nevertheless, this explanation alone is not adequate to describe Fiji's ongoing political instability. On the contrary, it not only creates a limited picture of Fiji's complex political landscape; it also offers, as I argue, a convenient way for Fiji's political elites to distract attention from the other forces behind Fiji's coup syndrome.

4. Looking beyond Ethnic Tensions and Indigenous Fijian Nationalism

If Fiji's political status quo is taken into account, it becomes clear that there are visible contradictions between the rhetoric of the current government, which promotes a Fiji free of racism, corruption, and despotism, and its actual political actions. One important reason for this obvious gap between political rhetoric and action lies in the fact that politics in Fiji do not revolve around ethnic issues alone—that the government would need to tackle many more social and economic problems if it were truly to end Fiji's "coup culture."

For example, some scholars rightly blame class divisions in Fiji's multi-ethnic society for the coup of 1987 (Sutherland, 1992) or the events of 2000 (Halapua, 2003). Modern Fijian society, especially in its urban setting, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the implications of social, economic, and political divisions that do not align with ethnic distinctions. They date back to European influences in Fiji's pre-colonial past and especially to Fiji's colonial period, which witnessed the growth of a colonial capitalist economy and an influential Fijian chiefly middle class that collaborated closely with the colonial administration and offered new mechanisms of upward social mobility beyond traditional birth rights through education and employment in the civil service. It comes as no surprise, then, that Fiji's coups were also propelled by socio-economic interests of the existing or hopeful economic elite.

Other scholars argue that Fiji's socio-political instability is mainly, but not only, a product of numerous intra-ethnic political frictions within the Fijian and the Indo-Fijian communities (e.g. Durutalo, 2005; Mückler, 2002; Tuimaleali'ifano, 2000) or refer to the complexity of Fiji's political landscape (e.g. Lal, 1992). Fiji's intra-ethnic political conflicts are based predominantly on regional, religious, and economic factors. During my fieldwork—in Fiji's capital, Suva, the town of Sigatoka, the chiefly island of Bau, and Fiji's old colonial capital, Levuka—I became increasingly aware of the fact that Fijians as well as Indo-Fijians form rather heterogeneous communities and that their identities as social groups and the ethnic sentiments and loyalties underpinning their ethnic agendas fluctuate in intensity. There are, for example, numerous social, political and linguistic differences between Fijians of west and east Fiji, as well as between inhabitants of the coastal areas and the hinterland of Fiji's main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua

Levu. These differences date back to Fiji's precolonial and colonial past (cf. Kaplan, 1993; Nicole, 2011; Sahlins, 2004); they are occasionally foregrounded in everyday contexts but become especially prominent during political decision-making processes such as regional and general elections. For example, Fijians from the south-eastern parts of Viti Levu often refer to Fijians from the Lau Islands and eastern Vanua Levu as part-Tongans, given those areas' close cultural and historical inter-connectedness with the archipelago of Tonga. Fijians from the eastern parts of the archipelago often refer to the people of central Fiji and, by extension, western Fijians as *kai colo*, an expression connoting nudity, heathenism, and cannibalism, to indicate the supposed moral and cultural inferiority of western Fijians and the mountain tribes (*kai colo*) compared to those Fijians who have been influenced by Christian values and ideologies since the arrival of European missionaries in the beginning of the 19th century (cf. Durutalo, 1986: 13).

If the political implications of Fiji's intra-ethnic heterogeneity and the class divisions that criss-cross its inter-ethnic divisions are taken into consideration, it is possible to engage critically with the political strategies of Fiji's coup protagonists, which are generally described as pro- or anti-ethnonationalist. In other words, we will understand the full complexity of Fiji's political instability only if we carefully question and challenge the political importance of primordial ethnic identities. However, while intra-ethnic and class divisions certainly shape Fiji's unstable political climate, they can hardly be called independent prime movers in themselves, nor do they counter the driving force of inter-ethnic tension in Fiji's politics.

In sum, my fieldwork observations do not support the idea that Fiji is a typical plural society. It appears that Fijians and Indo-Fijians experience themselves only in specific contexts as exclusive and homogeneous ethnic groups and that intra-ethnic and class interests occasionally bridge inter-ethnic divisions and help to overcome ethnic stereotyping and prejudices. The existing contextuality of social relations in Fiji has multiple political implications. Most importantly, it helps us understand that ethnic conflicts in Fiji and their particular political connotations are articulated by coup protagonists promoting specific political agendas. This leads to two important conclusions. First, under certain circumstances, Fiji's inter-ethnic conflicts are less ethnic than they might appear, because cultural (ethnic) differences are occasionally manipulated by Fiji's coup protagonists to hide or obscure other aspects of Fiji's coup syndrome, such as the regional, religious, class, and even private interests introduced in this section. Second, my fieldwork led me to the conclusion that the social divisions responsible for Fiji's political instability are ultimately linked to one another through what I believe is the key to a better understanding of Fiji's "coup culture": human agency.

5. Concluding Remarks: What about Agency?

I have identified the main social categories and forces that contribute to Fiji's coup syndrome. But one question remains: how exactly should we understand the complex and at times seemingly contradictory interplay between the inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, and class divisions that cause Fiji's political instability?

I believe the key is to shift the focus of analysis from socio-political systems, divisions, and institutions to political actors, fully acknowledging their agency and their ability to navigate Fiji's political instability in order to gain, regain, or maintain political power and influence. I believe that this perspective—we could call it the perspective of a political anthropologist as it highlights the actual social behavior, thoughts, and actions of human beings—offers an explanation for the many complexities and contradictions inherent in Fiji's political landscape. Fiji's "coup culture" can hardly be understood by limiting Fijian politics to the uncertainties and differences between chieftainship and democracy, indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian cultures, or traditional and modern socio-economic values. On the contrary, it is human agency that offers Fiji's coup protagonists numerous, occasionally innovative political strategies and justifications for their political actions.[3] Accordingly, they develop numerous social roles in order to achieve their political goals. Brison (2007) rightly argues that in postcolonial Fiji social roles and, by extension, social identities shaped by local discourses of power are not fixed, but changeable and hybrid. Ethnic, intra-ethnic, and class divisions alone cannot explain Fiji's complex political problems. It is the way in which they are used and articulated by political actors for their political aims that make them important. Approaches that ignore human agency simply fail to acknowledge the ability of Fiji's political actors to navigate political discourse and action. Thus the concept of agency reconciles manifold centrifugal forces into a complex yet at times adamant political whole underlying Fiji's coup syndrome.

Especially since the turn of the century, Fiji's coup syndrome has attracted attention from political analysts, political economists, sociologists, and historians. However, a political anthropological approach that focuses on the agency of certain individual and collective social actors in their capacity as political agents not only enriches our understanding of local political discourses, but also ultimately contributes to a better understanding of the enigma of inter-ethnic

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3   The importance of human agency in Fijian politics, its dialogical relationship with political power, and its influence on the country's colonial and postcolonial history have been discussed by anthropologists such as Kaplan (1995), Kelly and Kaplan (2001), and Rutz (1995). However, these accounts locate political agency in Fijian politics almost exclusively on one side or the other of the divide between ethnonationalism and civic nationalism. My perspective, on the other hand, highlights a more dialogical relationship between what has previously been described as diametrically opposed political ideologies.

conflict, which very often reveals more about quarrels for resources, status, and political power than about the supposed inability of different ethnicities to cohabit peacefully.

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