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# The Politics of Fiji

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## Introduction

Fiji sits at the crossroads of Melanesia and Polynesia, a nation known for its natural beauty, diverse cultures, and—less visibly to visitors—its complex and dynamic political landscape. As an archipelago in the South Pacific, Fiji's politics have long fascinated scholars, observers, and its own citizens, owing to a history marked by constitutional experimentation, ethnic tensions, and recurring military interventions. “The Politics of Fiji: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Fiji” seeks to provide readers with a clear, accessible, and comprehensive exploration of how power operates, how governments are formed, and why Fiji's political system works the way it does.

Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1970, Fiji's political journey has been anything but straightforward. The legacies of colonial rule, the deliberate structuring of ethnic identities, and periodic constitutional reforms have all left indelible marks on governance and citizenship in Fiji. While the aspiration of a stable, inclusive democracy has persisted, the country has experienced numerous challenges, including no fewer than four coups d'état and frequent shifts between military and civilian rule. These events have repeatedly reshaped national institutions and left deep scars on Fijian society.

A defining feature of Fijian politics is the persistent interplay between ethnicity and power. Fiji's demography—characterized by the significant presence of indigenous iTaukei Fijians and Indo-Fijians, alongside other minority groups—has shaped electoral rules, party alignments, and public policies. Political competition, debates around land ownership, and arguments over representation often reflect, and at times amplify, ethnic cleavages. At the same time, there have been powerful movements, both official and grassroots, pushing for reconciliation, greater unity, and more equitable participation by all communities.

This book is structured to guide readers through the major institutions, actors, and pivotal events that have defined Fijian politics. Chapters examine the historical foundations of the modern state, the roles and powers of the executive, legislature, and judiciary, the operation of electoral systems, and the vibrant if sometimes fractious world of Fijian political parties. Special attention is also given to the coups that have interrupted democratic rule, their causes, and their profound impacts on Fijian society and governance. Beyond examining national-level politics, the book investigates how local government, the media, and civil society shape everyday political life.

In recent years, Fiji has seen important shifts, with new political coalitions, the revision

of legal frameworks, and attempts at overcoming the conflicts of the past. The 2022 general elections, for example, marked a significant turning point, ending a prolonged period of single-party dominance and ushering in a new era of coalition politics. These developments highlight the adaptability and resilience of Fiji's institutions and people—and point to both the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Ultimately, “The Politics of Fiji” is intended as both an introduction for newcomers and a resource for those looking to deepen their understanding of the country's unique political journey. By outlining key structures, chronicling pivotal moments, and examining the ongoing evolution of Fijian democracy, this book aims to foster a nuanced appreciation of the complexities—and possibilities—of politics in Fiji.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Foundations of Fijian Politics

Long before the arrival of European explorers and, later, the British colonial administration, the islands that make up modern Fiji were home to complex and dynamic societies with their own distinct political structures. These were not unified under a single kingdom or state, but rather comprised a network of competing and cooperating chiefdoms and confederacies. Understanding these pre-colonial arrangements is crucial, as they laid some of the foundational elements that would continue to influence Fijian politics for centuries, even after the imposition of colonial rule.

Life in pre-colonial Fiji was organized around intricate social hierarchies deeply connected to kinship ties. The basic unit of society was the *mataqali*, or clan, which were part of larger groupings known as *yavusa* and *vanua*. These units were interconnected through a web of alliances and rivalries, where both bloodlines and political maneuvering played significant roles. Leadership rested with chiefs, often referred to as *ratu*, who held considerable authority within their domain. This wasn't always a gentle form of governance; some accounts describe a system where chiefs wielded absolute power over commoners, a contrast to leadership structures in some other parts of Melanesia where influence was earned through achievement and redistribution.

The political landscape was fluid and often volatile. Heads of powerful families sought to expand their influence through conquest and strategic alliances. Treachery was not uncommon, and allegiances could shift rapidly. This often resulted in conflicts, sometimes even between closely related chiefdoms. Warfare was a significant feature of the era, with communities vying for dominance. By the 19th century, powerful chiefly confederacies had emerged, particularly in eastern Fiji, leading to a period of intense competition and frequent skirmishes.

Despite the lack of a unified political entity, a distinct Fijian culture existed, setting the islands apart from their neighbors. This culture was shaped by a blend of Melanesian and Polynesian influences, creating a unique societal structure. The introduction of tools and weapons through early trade with Europeans, while not initially leading to direct political control, did contribute to a period of heightened activity, sometimes referred to as a "golden age," where confederations were formed and wars were fought on a larger scale than before.

Early European contact was sporadic, beginning with Abel Tasman in 1643 and later Captain Cook in 1774. However, sustained European presence, including missionaries, traders, and settlers, became more significant in the 19th century. These new arrivals

brought with them Christianity and Western customs, which gradually began to alter the existing social fabric. Missionaries, in particular, aimed to change Fijian society, and their efforts, sometimes supported by Tongan allies, contributed to the eventual decline of practices like cannibalism and tribal warfare in areas where they gained influence.

The increasing number of European settlers, particularly from the mid-19th century onwards, added another layer of complexity to the political environment. Drawn by the potential for profit, initially from cotton during the American Civil War and later sugar, these settlers desired stability, secure land ownership, and a reliable labor force. Their presence often led to disputes over land and power, exacerbating existing tensions between Fijian communities and the newcomers. Attempts by European settlers and some chiefs to establish centralized governments proved unstable, often hampered by internal divisions and the continued independence of some Fijian groups, particularly in the interior of the larger islands.

The rivalries between dominant Fijian chiefs eventually culminated in significant conflicts. A notable example was the prolonged war between the chiefs of Bau, led by Ratu Seru Cakobau, and those of Rewa. This period of intense internal conflict, coupled with increasing external pressures and rising debt, ultimately set the stage for a dramatic shift in the political landscape, paving the way for British intervention and the colonial era. The intricate web of pre-colonial alliances, rivalries, and social structures, while not a unified political system in the modern sense, formed the bedrock upon which the subsequent colonial and post-independence political systems would be built and, at times, challenged.

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