

Polity IV Country Report 2007: Fiji

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2006</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2007</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-3</td> <td>-4</td> <td>-1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>+1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>0</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2006	2007	Change	Polity:	-3	-4	-1	Democ:	0	0	0	Autoc:	3	4	+1	Durable:		0		Tentative:		Yes		
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SCODE	FJI	CCODE	950	Date of Report	1 November 2008																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
1	0	0	2	3	2																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date		4 December 2006		Begin Date		5 December 2006																			
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution		1997																							
Executive(s)		<p>Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama; Chief of the Armed Forces, seized power 5 December 2006, appointed Interim Prime Minister in January 2007</p> <p>President Josefa Iloilo; elected by the Great Council of Chiefs, July 2000; reelected 8 March 2006; reaffirmed by Great Council of Chiefs 22 December 2006 and reappointed by coup leader Commodore Bainimarama in January 2007</p>																							
Legislature		<p>Bicameral:</p> <p>House of Representatives (71 seats; 25 directly elected, 46 elected by ethnic communities: 23 Fijian, 19 Indian, 3 general, 1 Rotuman; most recent elections, 6-13 May 2006)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">United Fiji Party (SDL): 36</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Fiji Labour Party (FLP): 31</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Other parties: 2</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Non-partisans: 2</p> <p>Senate (34 seats; 24 appointed by the President on advice of Council of Chiefs, 9 appointed by President, 1 by Council of Rotuma Island)</p>																							
Judiciary		Supreme Court																							

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Self-Selection (4)

In accordance with the 1997 constitution, Fiji is a modified parliamentary system with two executives: a president, who is Head of State and elected by the Great Council of Chiefs (the traditional authority of the indigenous Fijians), and a Prime Minister, who is Head of Government and is chosen by the majority party or coalition in the elected House of Representatives. While the 1997 Constitution (which came into effect on 27 July 1998) stipulates that the president assume a largely ceremonial role, nonetheless, as the representative of the Grand Council of Chiefs, the presidency is often used by the indigenous Fijians as a point of leverage over the government.

The political system in Fiji has been highly unstable in recent years due to the factional tension between indigenous Fijians and the large ethnic-Indian minority population (c. 43%). Fijian politics has been characterized by a strong indigenization movement since its adoption of an open electoral parliamentary system upon independence in 1970. Trouble first began with the electoral triumph of a Labour-led Indian-dominated government in 1987; this victory prompted two military coups led by Sitiveni Rabuka. Following the coups, Rabuka moved to ensure that the country was ruled by indigenous Melanesians and had enshrined this dominance in a new constitution introduced in 1990. Discontent with the racist nature of this document led to its eventual reform. The new 1997 constitution gave the Indian population greater political power by increasing Indian representation within the legislature and permitting a non-Melanesian Fijian to become Prime Minister. The legislative elections of May 1999 were the first to be held under the new constitution. Rabuka's Fijian Political Party (SVT) was swept from power by a coalition of parties led by the ethnic Indian-dominated Fiji Labour Party (FLP), with the result that Mahendra Chaudhry, 56, leader of the FLP, became Fiji's first ethnic-Indian Prime Minister.

A civilian coup attempt by gunmen led by businessman George Speight stormed Parliament on 19 May 2000, and seized several hostages, including Prime Minister Chaudhry. Ten days later, the Fijian army imposed martial law and suspended the 1997 multi-ethnic constitution. The hostage crisis lasted for 56 days, ending with the gunmen's surrender to military forces. Speight and his collaborators were arrested and charged with treason. Speight pled guilty to treason in February 2002. Despite freeing elected Prime Minister Chaudhry, the army chose to dissolve parliament and set up an interim government led by an ethnic-Fijian, Laisenia Qarase, effectively ousting the elected government of Chaudhry. A Constitutional Review Committee was set up to revise the 1997 Constitution in order to guarantee ethnic-Fijian domination of the government, a core demand of Speight-led coup attempt. Meanwhile, Chaudhry began traveling extensively in an attempt to rally international support for re-instating his government. The military-backed interim government claimed that it would work to restore democracy by September 2002. On 4 November 2000, a mutiny by elite troops resulted in an eight-hour gun battle in the capital city, Suva, which left 11 dead before the army restored control. On 16 November 2000, the Fijian High Court ruled that the Interim Government was unconstitutional. On 1 March 2001, the Court upheld its decision and on 7 March the Qarase government submitted, and President Iloilo accepted, its collective resignation. Upon consultations with the Great Council of Chiefs, President Iloilo reinstated the 1997 Constitution and Chaudhry resumed the office of Prime Minister on 7 March 2001. The president dismissed Chaudhry on 14 March on the grounds that he had lost the confidence of Parliament and appointed Ratu Tevita Momeodonu as caretaker Prime Minister. The new Prime Minister immediately dissolved Parliament and on the following day, 15 March, the president again appointed Qarase as Prime Minister.

New elections were held on 28 August-7 September 2001 under the terms of the 1997 Constitution. Qarase's United Fiji Party (SDL) won a plurality of seats in the parliament. The SDL subsequently formed a ruling coalition with the Conservative Alliance Party (CAP) and Qarase was selected as the prime minister of the new government. The elections were reported by Commonwealth and EU monitors to be peaceful and generally free and fair, despite complaints of fraud by Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and fears of new violence between ethnic Fijian and Indian communities. Chaudhry, whose party gained 38% of the vote, demanded that it should be given 38% of seats in the new government, as the constitution prescribed. Qarase rejected this demand saying that such a partnership in the Cabinet would be unworkable. Chaudhry immediately mounted a challenge to the constitutionality of the new

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

government. Chaudhry also refused to nominate the eight senators assigned to the parliamentary opposition until the Court had ruled on the composition of the government but was finally forced to accept the role of opposition leader in August 2002. In October 2002, the new parliament was opened and the president called upon it “to protect the country from the pain and trauma of another nationalist coup.” Prime Minister Qarase vowed to draw up a new constitution that would favor indigenous Fijians.

On 18 July 2003, Chief Justice Daniel Fatiaki announced that the Supreme Court had ruled that the exclusion of members of former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry’s Fiji Labour Party (FLP) from the Cabinet was unconstitutional. Qarase and Chaudhry subsequently clashed over the number of portfolios assigned to the FLP; Qarase offered 14, while Chaudhry demanded 17. The Supreme Court rendered an ambiguous ruling on the dispute. On 24 November 2004, Chaudhry announced that the FLP was withdrawing from fruitless negotiations with the government concerning the composition of the Cabinet and vowed to fulfill the role of opposition party.

During the second half of 2005 the head of Fiji’s military, Frank Bainimarama, threatened to remove the country’s government if it pushed a bill aimed at granting amnesty to those involved in the 2000 coup. Support for the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill has mainly come from the ethnic Fijian community through the Great Council of Chiefs. This powerful indigenous body, which appoints the president and vice-president as well as nearly one-half of the Senate, actively lobbied for the release of coup leader George Speight throughout the year. Amidst growing concerns of an impending military coup, in early 2006 Prime Minister Qarase agreed to delay the legislation. However, after his reelection in May 2006, Qarase moved forward with his plans to promote the bill. After threatening to stage a military coup if he proceeded in pushing this legislation, in October 2006 Prime Minister Qarase tried – and failed -- to relieve Commodore Bainimarama of his military command.

On 5 December 2006, Commodore Bainimarama staged a bloodless coup against the Fijian-dominated Qarase government. Bainimarama, an ethnic Fijian, opposed the ethnic-based policies of the Qarase government, including its decision to offer clemency to those individuals behind the 2000 coup and the subsequent attacks on the Indo-Fijian population that occurred in its wake. The December 2006 coup was aimed at correcting the ethnic imbalances that had been created by the three previous coups and dismantling chiefly dominance and political corruption within government. In November 2007 Bainimarama pledged to return the country to civilian rule by no later than the first quarter of 2009.

Executive Constraints: Slight Limitations (2)

Up until the December 2006 coup, the power of the Prime Minister had been limited by both the influence of tribal chiefs, who exerted their power through the office of the President, and the “oversight” function exercised by the armed forces. The judiciary was largely independent and had often acted to restrain or reverse the ethnic-preference policies and maneuverings of the indigenous-Fijian governments. With the December 2006 coup, however, the military has gained direct executive authority within the country. The armed forces, led by Commodore Bainimarama, appoints all leadership positions within the government and directs all policymaking. Under pressure from tribal chiefs, however, Bainimarama transferred nominal power back to the president of Fiji, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, in January 2007. The power of the President, nonetheless, remains largely ceremonial in nature.

In April 2007 President Bainimarama further consolidated power as he sacked the Great Council of Chiefs and suspends all future meetings of this group after the Chiefs refused to endorse his government and his nomination for vice president. In February 2008 Bainimarama appointed himself chairman of this body. Traditionally, the Great Council had been in charge of appointing the president, the vice president and nearly one half of the members of the upper house of parliament. Bainimarama has made known his desire to fundamentally weaken the powers of this body. The Great Council of Chiefs is not to be confused with the House of Chiefs, a larger body which includes all hereditary chiefs, although the two bodies have overlapped to a considerable extent. The Great Council was established in the 1997 constitution but it actually pre-dates the constitution by many years, having been established by the British as an advisory body in 1876. Up until the 2006 coup, it was considered almost mandatory for the government to consult and secure the approval of the Council before making major changes to the constitution, although nothing in the constitution required it to do so. In May 2008 Bainimarama indicated that future changes to the electoral system may include the direct election of the president and the vice president, thus eliminating the main role of the Great Council of Chiefs.

Political Participation: Authoritarian-Guided Liberalization (3)

Despite the holding of new elections and the establishment of a new government in the wake of the 2000 coup, the political situation in Fiji remained highly unstable. The Qarase government clearly favored a Malaysian-style indigenous preference system that sought to institutionalize Fijian control of government policymaking without formally disenfranchising the ethnic-Indian community. Under this system of governance, the Indo-Fijian opposition was allowed to voice its interests but was not permitted to decide policy. Not surprisingly, Fijian politics remained emotionally charged and strongly divided. The fact that Qarase's United Fiji Party (SDL) formed a ruling coalition with the Conservative Alliance Party (CAP) is emblematic of the ethnic tensions that pervaded politics in the wake of the 2000 coup. The CAP is the party banner under which the leader of the May 2000 events, George Speight, ran and was elected to parliament in the 2001 general elections. Although he was not allowed to assume office (Speight's brother won the seat in a by-election) and eventually pleaded guilty to treason (in February 2002), Speight continued to stand as a popular, national symbol of the ambivalence surrounding the indigenization issue. Speight was originally sentenced to death but his sentence was immediately commuted to life in prison by the Prime Minister. With the formation of a SDL-CAP coalition, Prime Minister Qarase found himself to be under considerable pressure not to move too far toward reconciliation with the Indo-Fijian FLP.

The fact that no Indo-Fijians were included in the original Qarase government was strong evidence of its disposition to restrict Indo-Fijian influence in politics. In May 2005, Prime Minister Qarase introduced a Reconciliation, Tolerance, and Unity bill in the legislature that proposed a general amnesty for "politically motivated crimes" in connection with the 2000 coup. The bill was opposed by the FLP, the Fiji Law Society, human rights groups, and the armed forces; however, it was endorsed by the Great Council of Chiefs on 28 July 2005. In preparation for impending 2006 elections, five Fijian nationalist parties (SDL, CAMV, SVT, NVTL, and PNP) announced in August 2005 the formation of a Grand Coalition Initiative Group to ensure indigenous control of the government. In response, the opposition FLP signed a coalition agreement with the United People's Party in October 2005. In September 2005, members of the Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo (NVTL) party revealed that the 2000 coup had been planned by the NVTL and that George Speight had been recruited as spokesman for the coup only days before the event took place. They claimed, however, that Speight seized the opportunity and tried to exert personal control over the event to gain power.

Unlike the three previous coups in this country, the 2006 coup was largely embraced by many Indo-Fijians who disliked the ethnic-based nature of the Qarase government. However, since the Qarase government was voted into office by 80% of ethno-Fijians, many in the indigenous community felt robbed of their democratic choice by the coup. According to Commodore Bainimarama, the 2006 coup was aimed at bringing about accountability and transparency in government and establishing inter-ethnic tolerance.