

## Pacific Dialogue Youth Forum

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### Rethinking democracy in Fiji

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#### Presentation Summary

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The opening speech was given the chairman of Pacific Dialogue Mr. Jone Dakuvula, who thanked Professor Waden Narsey for accepting to take part in the forum. Professor Narsey congratulated Mr. Dakuvula for the Forum and thanked all the attendees for coming, and then, he started his speech.

He's speech focused on three main issues: The elections, the current political system, and the future of Fiji.

#### The elections

Mr Narsey argued that the whole election and the electoral system process was "a shame" and everything was set up for the army to retain power from the ballot post. This system allowed politicians who did not win the minimum required votes to be included in the Government's Cabinet, whereas, other people who got more votes than were left out of the Parliament. If the previous electoral system had been used, then most of the Ministers would not be in government.

The lack of will and incompetence from the other parties was also a major factor. No political party was interested in making sure that the process was free and fair. They had neither records nor videos put in place to verify the results once they have come out; so, this made winning party's victory, in this way, much easier. Lack of accountability demanded by them and the ban on national observers meant that the current Government had no effective domestic opposition to demand the validity of the results, thus making cheating and rigging more common to happen.

The government was very effective and smart with some of the policies that they introduced to attract votes; from their policies on schools, road improvements; decline on unemployment and crime; all of these policies were successful in winning votes and appealing undecided voters to vote for them. This was further encouraged by their technique in remaining voters that they were the only party that could stop another coup attempt and was not an ethno nationalist party, contrasting the opposition. These two factors appealed substantial voters, especially from the Indo-Fijian community. Too, the lack of engagement in politics by the current educated middle class; the young Indians and in lesser extend the Ituakei youth means that they are only interested in voting for parties that can provide them with the stability they are looking for, regardless of, their political views or how autocrat they can be.

In addition, Professor Narsey acknowledges that the current government, irrespective of how dictatorial was during the army's time, is very popular among some communities and even though if the elections had been free and fair, they would still have won them for the following reasons:

- They have wide support from the two main communities. Indo-Fijians voted for them because they did not want another coup and to lose everything again. The fear factor was crucial for them to vote for Fiji First, and also the fact the opposition party (SODELPA), appealed to ethno-nationalism as a way to secure its votes did not help either. This as a result meant that 80% of the Indo-Fijians votes went to Fiji First. The Itukei felt appealed by the government policies as well. This was mainly by the pro-poor policies they have introduced over the years and also because unemployment and crime rates have gone down recently. These achievements and the fact that Fiji is more urbanized and less ethno-centric secured them 40% of their votes from this community.
- Another factor was that the current educated middle class "failed to do their job". Professor Narsey argued that the middle class in all society are the backbone of democracy as their main job is to check and balance the government. This did not happen in Fiji during the elections. The middle class did not turn up massively to have their say in the way the country should be run. They are very happy with the current status quo. The fear coup and their lack of interest in politics are main factors. But the fact that most of them voted for Fiji First even knowing how corrupted and autocrat the government has been in the past is not a good signal for the future of the country.
- In addition to this, the government was very popular among the business people. Most of the mining and audit companies backed them. This was because of the "generous business laws" they have offered to them in the past. And the media decrees also were major factors. The Fiji Sun became a propaganda machine to perpetuate their image, whereas other sources of media criticism were silenced. All of these resulted in a no balanced criticism of the government actions and thus bolstering their image before elections time. Narsey claimed that newspapers are "the parliament of the people" and they are the easiest and best way to communicate with the electorate across the country. By banning the free media, the government silenced people's thoughts as well.
- The last factor has to do with the failures of other political parties. Although most of them had good educated and qualify people to stand for the elections; yet, they had not clear policies on how to address the current issues that the country is facing; on how to engage with the discontent youths and on how to present credible proposals. Also, the fact that they had disagreements among them and their refusal to work together to come with a common platform to fight Fiji First weakened their chances. Most of the votes they received got wasted and some of them (NFP, PDP, and one independent candidate) did not even receive the minimum votes needed to get in to the Parliament, which in the end ,benefited Fiji First as they got most of the spared seats.

Narsey claims that these electoral defeats were easily predicted. Since the beginning of the campaign, no party had a clear vision on what they were going to do if they won the elections, and in addition to this, they were ill prepared and advised on the best ways to capitalise their chances to win the elections.

### **The current political system**

Professor Narsey claimed that during the military time, the government became more autocratic and statist. Most of the decrees passed by them were aimed at curbing dissidents and any other voice that they saw as a possible threat to their rule. The army created a political system in which civic society could not flourish and people were living in constant fear of expressing their views as they were afraid of possible reprisals. This environment has allowed the following things to occur:

- Lack of accountability and transparency: During the army time, the Hansard system was abolished. This has reduced accountability and transparency from the government as they cannot be accountable any longer from their wrong doings and failed promises. Furthermore, this has led to a culture of irresponsible and immaturity from politicians where they are allowed to use demagoguery words and insult members of the opposition without taking into account the effects of these actions on the national level.
- Decline on Ituakei culture Government decrees on the ban of using national languages have negative effects on the Ituakei culture. No political parties are allowed to use Fijian names or speak Fijian in the Parliament, something which is only happening in this Parliament, which according to him is a kind of “dictatorial democracy”. Fijians should be able to use their language in the Parliament as other people around the world do and if the government refuses to allow this, then they should boycott this until they are allowed to do so. He stated that this in the long term was not good for the Fijian culture and Fiji as a whole. The reason behind this is because their culture would die out soon. This statement was based on the fact that old people are more aware of losing their culture than youths. Youths are exposed to a huge influence of external cultures from Hollywood and Bollywood and this has negative effects in their native languages and traditions as they embrace the foreign one as better at the expenses of their own one.
- Corruption: for the last eight years the government has been expending huge amount of money without releasing where they are getting it from. In addition to this, massive amount of borrowing from external partners means that “national sovereignty” might have been compromised for their own good. All of these and the fact that the government has not made public their financial books over the last 3years means that people are not really aware of the current economic situation in Fiji. All of these have led to drastic surge in corruption as a result. Politicians have been paying themselves massive amount of money whereas current salaries have been kept either flat or down due to deflation. This has put Fiji in a very fragile situation and is undermining its ability to sustain itself in the long term.
- No leaders: The government was able to consolidate his power because there was no a strong voice to challenge them. Most of the educated people are reluctant to express their views and are satisfy with conformity, the few brave dissidents were either forced to go in exile or threaten for life. This has led the army and the current government with free hands to run the country as

they please. Narsey argued that in the long time the effects on the country would be catastrophic in terms of democracy and good governance.

## **The future for Fiji**

The threats from the new partners:

Professor Narsey stated his worry with the new partners Fiji has chosen to trade with. He argued that the previous partners from Australia and New Zealand, although were very bad in some ways, at least, they were people who most Fijians were familiar with and could fight back if they did something wrong to them. The new ones are from East Asia, especially China, and are quite powerful and used to bribe governments across the world; from Africa to Asia. They are also bringing along negative activities with them, from human trafficking to human rights abuses. These activities, although not new in Fiji, are things that Fijians can fight because they do not know how powerful these partners are and what they are capable of.

Political instability:

Professor Narsey argued that the political future in Fiji is quite unstable. There reasons behind this are; brain drain; lack of political engagement from the upcoming youths, and lack of alternative from the current political leaders meaning that the country is lacking the vision needed to succeed in the future. Fijians need to be more active and engage more on current political affairs, and current leaders need to play their part in making this possible. If they fail to do this, then the upcoming generation will be ill prepared to deal with the future problems that the country might have to face.

After Professor Narsey finished his talk, this was followed by a mini break with a lunch included. And then discussion followed in which people were asked to express their views on the speech.

During the discussion time, people who felt that they wanted to contribute were given a chance. Patricia Kailola, from PDL, expressed her concerns on the lack of transparency with the General Attorney's book and youth's disengagement with politics. Mr. Ivan went further and argued that the reason behind the President being so authoritarian was because the opposition was "too weak and nice" to them, and people in Fiji did not know the meaning of "real democracy"

Professor Narsey complained that the government used their military rule to change the Constitution in 2013, something which was illegal because only an elected parliament can do so and there was no a legal framework for it to happen during the army's rule, which according to him, means that the previous Constitution is still legal.