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## **Ethnicity, nationality, and the rights of indigeneity: The case of Rotumans in Fiji**

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### **Abstract**

On 13 July 2000, Interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase presented to the Great Council of Chiefs in Fiji a document titled "Blueprint for the protection of Fijian & Rotuman rights and interests, and the advancement of their development," a set of proposals that covered "issues which have been of great concern to Fijians and Rotumans regarding the security of their rights and interests as the indigenous communities in Fiji, and also the advancement and acceleration of their development, so that they can participate on an equitable basis in the progress of our country" (Qarase, 2000). This paper presents an analysis of a challenge to the grouping of Rotumans with Fijians as indigenes under the Blueprint, and Rotuman responses to arguments denying their indigeneity.

### **Keywords**

Rotumans; Fijians; Fiji Indians; indigeneity; race relations; racism

### **Colonial classification of ethnic groups**

Great Britain accepted Fiji as a colony in 1874 in response to the invitation of Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau. Sir Arthur Gordon was appointed governor in June 1875. Gordon established a system of indirect rule and granted autonomy over local affairs to chiefs. He also initiated a policy prohibiting the sale of land, although it could be leased, and he banned the exploitation of Fijians as plantation laborers. This led to the importation of laborers from India to work in the sugarcane fields, beginning in 1879 and continuing until 1916. During that period, around 60,537 Indians arrived in Fiji (Gillion, 1956, p. 139), and although the initial contract was for a five-year period they were given the option of remaining in Fiji. The vast majority chose to stay.

The ethnic composition of Fiji's population was further complicated by the decision of the British government to administer the island of Rotuma, which was ceded to Great Britain in 1881, as part of the Colony of Fiji. Rotuman language and culture are unique, rendering them a

distinctive ethnic group within Fiji. The immigration of significant numbers of Chinese and Polynesians from Tonga and Samoa further enriched, and complicated, the colony's ethnic mix.

Faced with such a heterogeneous population, colonial administrators opted to assign rights and privileges on the basis of race, which at the time was prominent in the anthropological literature as a means of classifying the varieties of humankind. The primary colonial distinction was between Europeans and non-Europeans, with non-Europeans being subdivided, somewhat arbitrarily, by places of origin. One of the first issues to be dealt with was the position of children born to parents when only one of them was European. In Fiji the initial terminology applied to such "mixed bloods" was "half-caste." Initially "half-caste" was a pariah category, emblematic of the breakdown of a proper hierarchy in which Europeans were distinguished conceptually as "civilized," while the rest, to varying degrees, were considered "uncivilized." By the mid-1930s attitudes had changed, however, and the term "half-caste" gave way to the label "part-European," which had distinctly positive connotations. Part-Europeans were placed immediately below Europeans in the reformulated hierarchy, with their European "blood" now considered an advantage. Part-Europeans were given preferential treatment and granted privileges sometimes overlapping with those of Europeans.

Thus the first Fiji census, in 1881, included the following categories: European, Fijian, Indian, Rotuman, Other Pacific Islanders, and Half-Caste. A Chinese category was added in the 1921 census, and the Half-Caste characterization was changed to Part-European in 1936. The resulting classification survived Fiji's independence (in 1970) and remained the basis for the 2007 census (Fiji Government, 1881–2007).

### **Preserving Fijian lands and culture**

As Lisa Humphrey noted in her dissertation, "British discourse on cession was suffused with a sense of moral purpose, an ethos of preserving and defending some version of 'native Fiji'" (2009, p. 112). Gordon and successive British administrators placed a particular interpretation on Fiji's Deed of Cession, which developed into a steadfast doctrine known as the "paramouncy of Fijian interests." The doctrine held that the rights and privileges of Fijians with regard to their customs, heritage, and land are virtually inalienable and should be paramount over any other claims (Lawson, 1991, p. 58).

Of primary concern to early colonial administrators was the preservation of the Fijians' rights to land in the face of European settlers and a rising tide of Indian laborers. Thus in 1880 they established a Native Lands Commission to create a legal framework for indigenous Fijian ownership of land. The commission reversed a portion of pre-cession land alienation and established "inalienable" communal ownership of 85 percent of the land in Fiji for native Fijians.

It was in part this commitment to preserving the "Fijian way of life" that led to the importation of Indian labor to Fiji; the colonial administrators saw it as a way of maintaining the economic viability of the colony while not disrupting Fijian village life by using Fijian labor. Fijians were to be protected in their villages and nurtured toward civilization, reflecting the colonial regime's social evolutionary perspective (Humphrey, 2009, p. 24, note 9). Although by 1945 Indo-Fijians outnumbered indigenous Fijians, they were essentially excluded from this evolutionary perspective, resulting in a sharp differentiation in the treatment of the two groups. As the Indian population grew over time, Europeans and prominent Fijians alike came to see them as a potential threat to indigenous Fijian control of their own destiny. Colonial attitudes clearly favored Fijians; Indians were excluded from many clubs, social activities, political consultations, and so on, to which Fijians were welcomed by colonial officials. In response to the tension between Fijian and Indo-Fijian interests, racial considerations came to dominate politics in Fiji, and at independence the political institutions created by the 1970 Constitution were racially constituted favoring the interests of indigenous Fijians.

The constitution's preamble begins with phrasing that distinguishes Fiji and Rotuma, by virtue of their respective deeds of cession, from later immigrants:

Whereas on 10th October 1874 Cakobau, styled Tui Viti and Vunivalu, and other High Chiefs signified their loyalty to Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria and their dedication to God and to the rule of law by the solemn agreement known as the Deed of Cession made and concluded by them of the one part and Sir Hercules George Robert Robinson, the representative of Her Majesty, of the other part:

And Whereas in November 1879 the Chiefs of Rotuma similarly signified adherence to such principles by the Deed of Rotuma Cession:

And Whereas many persons of all races and creeds have come from divers

countries and have desired peace and prosperity under the precepts and principles of such Cessions: . . . (Constitution of Fiji, 1970, p. 22)

### **Political turmoil: A succession of coups**

Tensions between Fijian partisans and Indo-Fijians came to a head following the election defeat of Ratu Kamisese Mara's ruling Alliance Party by a Labour/National Federation Party coalition led by Dr. Timoci Bavadra in April 1987. Perceiving the new government as Indian-dominated, a series of protests by Fijian partisans led to a military coup by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, who suspended the constitution and appointed himself commander in chief. Land, perhaps the most emotional issue in Fijian politics, was the rallying point for Fijian groups who had distrusted the Bavadra government; they were galvanized into action by leaders of the Taukei Movement, which was dedicated to maintaining Fijian landownership and keeping Fijians in key positions of power and influence in all spheres: government, civil service, business.<sup>1</sup> *Taukei* translates roughly as "people of the land"; supporters of the movement were essentially making a claim to privilege based on their indigenous status.

In December 1987 Rabuka dismissed the interim government and installed a twenty-one-member cabinet, drawn mostly from Alliance politicians. Ratu Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau was appointed president, with Ratu Mara as prime minister. The new administration promulgated a revised constitution in 1990 as a decree that ensured Fijians of a permanent parliamentary majority by increasing the number of seats allocated to them. This constitution also reserved key state offices for Fijians and granted them many other privileges denied Indo-Fijians. It abrogated the 1970 Constitution on the grounds that it "was inadequate to give protection to the interests of the indigenous Fijian people, their values, traditions, customs, way of life and economic well being" (Constitution of Fiji, 1990, p. 498).

Fiji did not prosper under this new regime, however. As Yash Ghai noted, "The consequences of this Constitution were disastrous: rampant corruption, decline in economic growth, outflow of talent and capital, and a general sense of alienation. Divisions within the indigenous community sharpened as the Indo-Fijians were sidelined" (2008, p. 37).

General dissatisfaction with the 1990 Constitution and declining prosperity led to the formation of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission, which fashioned the Constitution of 1997. It contained a preamble clearly distinguishing Fijians and Rotumans as indigenous:

RECALLING the events in our history that have made us what we are, especially the settlement of these islands by the ancestors of the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman people; the arrival of forebears of subsequent settlers, including Pacific Islanders, Europeans, Indians and Chinese... (Constitution of Fiji, 1997)

It also included a section that formalized Fijian and Rotuman interests under Article 21, "Protection and Enhancement of Fijian and Rotuman Interests." It specified:

Parliament shall, with the object of promoting and safeguarding the economic, social, educational, cultural, traditional and other interests of the Fijian and Rotuman people, enact laws for those objects and shall direct the Government to adopt any programme or activity for the attainment of the said objects and the Government shall duly comply with such directions. (quoted in Hannum, 1993, p. 201)

The provision specifically mentioned "scholarships, training privileges or other special facilities provided by Government" and "assisting Fijians and Rotumans to venture into business."

Under the provisions of the 1997 Constitution, ethnic Fijians relinquished their guaranteed majority in the House of Representatives and their monopoly on the office of prime minister; in return, their ownership of most of the land was written into the constitution. Their rights were also protected by institutionalizing the Great Council of Chiefs, which retained its power to elect the president and 14 of the 32 Senators (Wikipedia, 2009). Chapter 2, section 6 (Compact) of the document included the following provision:

(k) affirmative action and social justice programs to secure effective equality of access to opportunities, amenities or services for the Fijian and Rotuman people, as well as for other communities, for women as well as men, and for all

disadvantaged citizens or groups, are based on an allocation of resources broadly acceptable to all communities. (Constitution of Fiji, 1997)

In chapter 13, section 186 (Customary Laws and Customary Rights), the 1997 constitution also included a provision that “the Parliament must have regard to the customs, traditions, usages, values and aspirations of the Fijian and Rotuman people.”

In a historic election, the Indo-Fijian leader of the Fiji Labour Party, Mahendra Chaudhry, defeated Sitiveni Rabuka and became Fiji’s first Indo-Fijian prime minister on 19 May 1999. Chaudhry’s election inflamed the passions of hard-line Fiji nationalists, who lent support to a coup on 19 May 2000. This coup was led by George Speight, a businessman who had been declared bankrupt following the cancellation of several contracts by the Chaudhry government. As president, Ratu Mara denounced the coup, declared a state of emergency, and assumed executive authority. However, Mara resigned a few days later and Commodore Josia Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama announced that he had taken over the government. Bainimarama declared martial law and abrogated the constitution on 30 May; he appointed an interim government with Laisenia Qarase as prime minister.

### **Blueprint to advance indigenous rights and interests**

On 13 July 2000, Qarase presented to the Great Council of Chiefs in Fiji a document titled “Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian & Rotuman Rights and Interests, and the Advancement of Their Development.” It consisted of a set of proposals that covered “issues which have been of great concern to Fijians and Rotumans regarding the security of their rights and interests as the indigenous communities in Fiji, and also the advancement and acceleration of their development, so that they can participate on an equitable basis in the progress of our country” (Qarase, 2000b).

The blueprint included a proposal for the preparation of a ten-year plan for Fijian and Rotuman development. The ten-year plan was touted as a “broad vision for all indigenous Fijian and Rotuman and for our country as a whole” and was expected to play “an important role” in bringing “greater unity to Fijians and Rotumans.”

The rationale for the Blueprint is incorporated into a background statement:

Indigenous Fijians and Rotumans make up more than 51% of the total population of the Fiji Islands, and their numbers, according to the 1996 Census, are continuing to grow at 1.8% per annum compared to the national population growth rate of 0.8%. They also comprise the majority landowning communities in Fiji, with customary proprietary rights to more than 83% of all land in the country, together with associated traditional fishing rights, or qoliqoli. Given the above, anything that affects them must affect the nation. Ensuring the paramountcy of their interests and their equitable participation in all aspects of life in Fiji is thus a pre-condition for the achievement of long term peace, stability and sustainable development in the country. What is needed is an enabling environment to facilitate the achievement of these objectives. This is what this Blueprint seeks to provide. It is to enable indigenous Fijians and Rotumans to fully exercise their rights of self-determination within the unitary State of the Republic of the Fiji Islands. It is to safeguard the paramountcy of their interests in our multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. And it is to improve and enhance opportunities, amenities and services for Fijians and Rotumans in their development and participation. (Qarase, 2000b)

In an address to the United Nations General Assembly on 16 September 2000, Qarase reaffirmed that Rotumans are indigenous to Fiji. He grouped Rotumans and Fijians together along several dimensions, contrasting them either explicitly or implicitly with the Fiji-Indian population. For example, he reiterated that Fijians and Rotumans make up nearly 52 percent of the population, while the Indian community comprises only 43 percent; that Fijians and Rotumans own almost 84 percent of the land in Fiji, while the majority of tenant leaseholders are Indians; that the vast majority of Fijians and Rotumans are Christian, while members of the Indian community are mostly Hindus or Muslims. Regarding cultural values, Qarase drew attention to chiefly traditions in both Rotuma and Fiji, and the commitment to “reciprocal obligations of loyalty, obedience, and of sharing with, and caring for, each other, and everyone in the community,” implicitly making a contrast with Indian individuality and entrepreneurship (Qarase, 2000a; quoted in V. Lal, 2000a, p. 7). Fijians and Rotumans were also portrayed by the interim prime minister as having the lowest levels of household income and lagging “well behind

the other communities in almost every aspect of life in a rapidly expanding market based economy” (Qarase, 2000a; quoted in V. Lal, 2000a, p. 7).

Qarase’s explanation for why it was important to secure the paramountcy of Fijian and Rotuman interests in Fiji made reference to the political events of 1999 and 2000 in Fiji:

The crux of our political crisis in Fiji is that indigenous Fijian and Rotuman communities felt threatened by certain policies which the non-indigenous leadership of the Peoples Coalition Government had implemented following their decisive victory in our National Elections in May 1999.

It was this fear and anxiety about their future as the world’s only indigenous Fijian and Rotuman community of just over 420,000 people that led to mass demonstrations and ultimately the Coup d’etat on May 19th this year.

(Qarase, 2000a; quoted in V. Lal, 2000b, p. 4)

### **The Challenge to Rotumans’ Indigeneity**

That Rotumans should be grouped with Fijians as indigenes under the Blueprint was challenged by Victor Lal, a self-described “political analyst residing in Oxford,” in a two-part opinion piece published in the *Fiji Daily Post* in December 2000:

The Rotumans are ... being increasingly portrayed as endangered indigenous peoples of Fiji, who need to be protected from the politically demanding and economically superior Indo-Fijian community. The Interim government and some vocal Fijian racial supremacists have not only elevated the Rotumans as equals of the Fijians but have accorded them superior rights over the Indo-Fijians: all under the banner of indigenous rights. But historical facts suggest evidence to the contrary. The Rotumans are not indigenous to Fiji but are merely an ethnic group in our multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious country. The time has arrived for the Rotumans and their Fijian supporters to stop projecting the Rotumans as indigenous peoples of Fiji whom [*sic*] deserve a special place above and over other Fijian races....

Like their counterparts—the Indo-Fijian, Chinese, European, and other Pacific Islanders whose ancestral homes are in India, China, England, Australasia and Pacific Islands respectively—the Rotumans are from Rotuma, a relatively remote island located four hundred sixty-five kilometres north of the northernmost island in the Fiji group. A fertile volcanic island of forty-three square kilometres surrounded by a fringing coral reef and a number of offshore islets, Rotuma is divided into seven districts, and each headed by a titled chief. Rotuma has been politically affiliated with Fiji for more than a century, first as a British colony and since 1970 as part of the independent nation. Rotuma's people who have Fiji citizenship are, however, culturally and linguistically distinct, having strong historic relationships with Tonga, Samoa, and other Polynesian islands rather than with the Fijians. (V. Lal, 2000a, p. 6)

Lal was clearly committed to making a case for the rights of Fiji-Indians, and attempted to do so by discrediting any Rotuman claims to indigeneity, or equal political status with indigenous Fijians. Thus he argued for Indians' greater longevity in the Fijian polity, while discussing their cultural similarities and differences:

Rotuma only accidentally became a part of colonial Fiji in 1881.

The indentured forebears of the Indo-Fijian community were already beginning to build the current prosperity of Fiji as far back as 1879. They not only created the modern cash economy from which the Rotumans are benefiting but also shielded the indigenous Fijians from some of the detrimental aspects of the process of modernization, enabling them to develop at their own pace. The Indo-Fijians came in a “slave ship” from India and not “a sailing ship” from Rotuma. In fact, the ancestors of the Indo-Fijians resembled more the Fijians of the past and the present: they had lived in nucleated villages before coming to Fiji, had their own traditional lifestyles, and like the Fijian chief and commoners, had their own hierarchical social structure, that of Brahmins (upper caste) or charmars (lower castes).

But the harshness of the indenture system and the receding memory of India created a “new Indian” in Fiji, as seen in their descendants—the Indo-Fijians. As Interim Prime Minister rightly told the UN but without explaining the causes of fragmentation and differences: “Indigenous Fijians and Rotumans have a hierarchical social structure ... With our Indian and other communities, people are much more individually based. There is, therefore, greater consciousness and emphasis on one’s individual rights and freedoms—the right to equality, the importance of education, success in one’s professional life, security of property rights.” ...

As the Indo Fijian community remains “marooned” in Fiji, the Rotumans and their leaders must acknowledge that they are merely equal citizens of Fiji and not indigenous peoples of Fiji. They have no right to forcibly gorge into the wealth of the nation and expect the Indo Fijians to wait for the crumbs from their masters’ table the supposedly indigenous Rotumans of Fiji....

The Rotumans and their Fijian supporters do not need an Einstein to calculate which year comes first: 1879 or 1881. (V. Lal, 2000b, p. 4)

In a 2005 opinion piece in the same newspaper, Lal addressed the politics of land leases in a similar vein:

On what grounds can a Rotuman claim to have a say in the decision-making process on the issue of land leases in the country. Forget about reaping benefits, scholarships, grants, business licences, taxi permits, housing, jobs, education etc, etc as “indigenous people of Fiji.” ...

The Rotumans neither are signatories to the Deed of Cession nor featured in any of the debates during the formation of the Native Land Trust Board in the 1940s....

One has to stretch his or her logic to accept that a Rotuman has more rights to land on the mainland of Fiji, than the late centenarian Bechu Prasad, who died without owning the piece of land, which he had toiled on for a century in Nadi. For that matter, why should a newly arrived Rotuman to mainland Fiji have

more land and special rights, than a descendant of a Solomon Islander, who has lived in Suva for over 70 years? (V. Lal, 2005, p. 5)

Lal went on to establish the credentials of his forebears and family members as people who have contributed to Fiji's development. "My family members have contributed through blood, toil and tears, to make what Fiji is today," he wrote, decrying the second-class citizenship imposed on non-Fijians in deference to Rotumans, "whose rights were suddenly enshrined in the 1997 Constitution as reflected in the preamble when it refers to the indigenous Fijians and Rotuman people" (V. Lal, 2005, p. 5).

In yet another Fiji newspaper article, Lal elaborated his argument against Rotuman indigeneity on historical and political grounds:

As for the Rotumans, they have no historical right to squeeze out the non-Fijians on the contestable basis of indigeneity. During the London constitutional talks in 1970, as British colonial office records clearly show, it was the Indo-Fijian delegation that persuaded their Fijian political contemporaries to give the Rotumans a separate seat in Parliament. For Ratu Edward Cakobau, a high chief, had felt that the Rotumans should be treated like any other minority in Fiji. In other words, he was saying that the Rotumans were not natives and, therefore, were not entitled to special treatment. Rotuman chiefs ceded their island to Great Britain on 13 May 1881 through a separate Deed of Cession, and not through the 1874 Fijian Deed of Cession. It was enjoined [*sic*] by the British to Fiji for administrative purposes.

The Rotumans are, from historical records, not indigenous to the country. And therefore have no right to stand in the front queue for handouts in the Blueprint. It is definitely unconstitutional to treat them otherwise. (V. Lal, 2006a, p. 7)

### **A Rotuman Response**

George Konrote, a prominent Rotuman who had served as force commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, and later as Fiji's high commissioner to Australia,

published a response to Lal's assertions, in the *Fiji Times*. At the time he was Rotuma's elected representative to Fiji's Parliament. Konrote chose to challenge Lal's assertion that Rotuma's association with Fiji was an accident of history, derivative from Britain's decision to incorporate Rotuma into the Colony of Fiji for administrative purposes.

Konrote based his argument on a dispatch from High Commissioner Sir Arthur Gordon to the Colonial Office in Whitehall that reported on a 12–16 December 1879 visit to Rotuma following the Rotuman chiefs' petition for cession to Great Britain. The dispatch included the following statement:

At all these meetings the most eager desire was expressed for a favourable answer to the petition addressed to Her Majesty by the chiefs and the people, and I have no doubt of the sincerity and unanimity of their desire to be incorporated in the Colony of Fiji. Their motives are indeed very obvious and natural, and I believe them to be quite right in supposing the step to be the only one which will assure them domestic peace, and freedom from vexatious interference on the part of strangers. (Fiji Archives, 1879; quoted in Konrote, 2006)

The acceptance of the petition by Queen Victoria confirmed the formal incorporation of Rotuma as part of the Colony of Fiji, Konrote noted. The preamble of Fiji's constitution "clearly reflects and legalises the wishes of our chiefs and forefathers that we should share a common destiny with our Fijian brethren as indigenous people and one nation," according to Konrote. He went on to extol the many contributions of Rotumans to nation building over the years. "We have been 'punching well above our weight'," Konrote wrote. Interestingly, though, he went on to say, "but [we] do not wish to claim any credit for our contribution to society nor do we expect any special favours from any quarters." Thus it seems that Konrote was not so much interested in defending Rotumans' special entitlement under the blueprint, but that he was offended by Lal's denial of Rotuma as an integral part of Fiji. The emotion behind Konrote's response is evident in his statement, "As Rotuma's newly elected Parliamentary representative I believe it is incumbent upon me to denounce Mr Lal's baseless and uncalled-for vitriolic and vindictive attacks against my chiefs and people and correct his racist views and knowledge of our special relationship of Viti kei Rotuma" (Konrote, 2006).

With regard to the issue of native lands, Konrote denied Rotuman interest: “We have no intention of interfering or being dragged into the ALTA-NLTA [Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act; Native Lands Trust Act] land lease debate nor do we wish ‘to poke our noses into why and for how long an Indian farmer should be allowed to remain on native Fijian land on the mainland,’ as Mr Lal asserts” (Konrote, 2006).

### **Further Debate**

From our point of view, Lal’s denial of Rotuman indigeneity appears both misguided and counterproductive. While he made a strong case for the contributions of Indo-Fijians to Fijian society, and the injustice of treating them as second-class citizens, he both convoluted the logic of his argument and ended up insulting the Rotumans with offensive language and insinuations.

Logically, Lal made the mistake of confounding ethnicity with nationhood. The logic is simple enough: Rotumans are indigenous to Rotuma; Rotuma is part of the nation of Fiji; therefore Rotumans are indigenes within the nation of Fiji. The situation of Rotumans is clearly different in this regard from other Pacific Islanders, and from the Chinese, European, and Indo-Fijian residents of Fiji. How Rotuma came to be part of the nation of Fiji is not relevant to the question of their populations’ indigeneity, nor are their respective contributions to Fiji’s economy. A parallel situation exists in the United States vis-à-vis ethnic Hawaiians. American Indians are indigenous to the US mainland, and when Hawai‘i was made a state in 1959 the indigenous Hawaiians became indigenes within the United States, as did Alaska natives when Alaska was admitted to the union.<sup>2</sup>

Lal responded to our pointing this out (on a posting to the Rotuma Forum on the Rotuma Web site) in the following manner:

I still cannot understand how Rotumans could claim that they are indigenous to Fiji, and therefore had every right to join the Fijians, as the Prime Minister seemed to be suggesting at the United Nations in 2000, to beatup Indo-Fijians and burn and loot Suva with George Speight.

If Alan Howard’s analogy with Hawaii and Alaska is to be accepted, the Indo-Fijians could equally argue that once they renounced any claims to Indian or

British citizenship in London in 1970, and opted to become Fiji citizens, than [*sic*] they also became indigenous to Fiji. (V. Lal, 2006b)

Lal's mention of burning and looting is in reference to the riots that occurred in conjunction with the coup of 2000, during which a number of Fiji-Indian-owned businesses were attacked. While Lal alleged Rotuman involvement in the riots, we are unaware of any evidence to suggest that was the case to any significant degree. What really seems to have irked Lal, however, is his perception that Rotumans failed to speak out against the treatment of Fiji-Indians:

I sincerely hope aggrieved Rotumans will treat the whole issue in the context of widespread racism against the Indo-Fijians in the name of indigenous rights, and whether Rotumans want to go down that road with the Fijians in snuffing Indo-Fijians from the map of Fiji. So far, neither individual Rotumans nor the Rotuma Council of Chiefs have expressed dissenting opinion on the treatment of Indo-Fijians in the country, many of whom have no physical, familial or economic ties with India. (V. Lal, 2006b)

In his response to Konrote's article (also published in the *Fiji Times*), Lal made this point more directly:

What I merely stated in those articles was that the Rotumans and their chiefs, whose islands had been joined to Fiji for administrative purposes, should have distanced themselves from the naked racism that was being practised by some misguided Fijian racists, and also perpetuated in the Constitution. (V. Lal, 2006c)

Further on in his response to Konrote, Lal posed the question of what had prompted him to open the debate on Rotuman indigeneity, and answered it in this way:

The germ of the idea was planted into me by some very prominent Fijian chiefs in the Great Council of Chiefs who were not happy with the inclusion of the Rotumans into the Affirmative Action blueprint.

The same chiefs again want to know if the Rotumans will be included in the Qoliqoli Bill?

Second, it was the speech of Laisenia Qarase, as Interim Prime Minister to the UN General Assembly in 2000, where he had once again justified the violence and bloodshed of the 2000 coup in the name of Fijian and Rotuman indigenous rights.

It was in response to that statement that I set out in 2000 to challenge the Rotumans right to burn, loot, assault, and rob the Indo-Fijians of their economic, social, political and religious rights on the mainland of Fiji.

I felt the Rotumans, like the Fijians, had no right to join in the orgy of destruction in the name of indigenous rights. (V. Lal, 2006c)

## **Analysis**

There is a degree of irony in Lal's assault on Rotuman indigeneity, insofar as their indigeneity has never been a significant issue, as such, for Rotumans. Rotuma's relationship with Fiji has been complex from the very inception of its incorporation into the Colony of Fiji under British rule (see Howard and Rensel, 2007a, 2007b). Rotumans on the island have always striven to maintain a degree of autonomy from Fiji proper, even as a constant stream were emigrating to Fiji's main islands; at present more than three-quarters of the Rotuman population in Fiji resides away from Rotuma. A good many of the younger Rotumans have never been to Rotuma, and are less than fluent in the language.

The issue of autonomy has resulted in a heated debate among Rotumans. On one side are those who would prefer that Rotuma sever political ties with Fiji entirely and become an independent nation. They argue that the Rotuman chiefs ceded the island to Great Britain, not to Fiji, and that when Fiji was declared a republic following the coups of 1987 and expelled from the Commonwealth, Rotuma's political ties to Fiji were effectively nullified. On the other side of the debate are those Rotumans, like George Konrote, who argue that Rotuma is very much an integral part of Fiji and that it is much better off than it would be if it were an independent

nation. In between are a large group of moderates who would like to see Rotuma remain part of Fiji, but with a greater degree of autonomy for governance on the island. The debate has spilled across national boundaries, with Rotumans in Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere taking sides on the issue (see discussion on the Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, regarding independence).

Although the case for considering Rotumans to be indigenes within the Fiji polity is clearcut, Rotumans as a people have never asked for special entitlements, even though some on the island have often complained about what they perceive as neglect by the central government. It is in this light that we see Konrote's response to Lal. Konrote is not so much concerned with defending Rotumans' indigeneity and entitlement under the blueprint as he is with making a case for Rotuma's integration with Fiji. In fact, we do not believe that there is much impetus among Rotumans in Fiji for special entitlement. Rotumans as a whole are overrepresented in the professions and higher-salaried occupations, and we have never heard them claim to be an underprivileged minority. They are also tangential to the opposition that Fijians have delineated between themselves and the Fiji-Indians. Given this background, Lal's attack on Rotuman indigeneity appears to be off the mark if he was trying to mount an argument for a policy of universal justice that would be fair to Fiji-Indians. Through his articles, not only did he alienate a whole population of potential allies in the quest for equal rights, but he also (inadvertently we are sure) gave impetus to Fijian claims for special treatment on the grounds of their indigeneity. In this regard, his argument had the effect of legitimizing indigeneity as a basis for claims to privileged treatment, with the issue being reduced to which groups can be considered indigenes.

Subsequent events in Fiji have rendered the issue of indigeneity moot. Commodore Bainimarama took control of the government via a military coup on 6 December 2006. He has championed a new vision of Fiji, outlined in "A People's Charter For Change & Progress/Yavutu Ni Veisau Kei Na Toso Ki Liu," which, if adopted, would be a legal framework to complement the Constitution of the Republic of the Fiji Islands. It would establish compulsory guidelines for government policy in future. The overall objective of the People's Charter is stated as: "To rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally-vibrant and united, well-governed, truly democratic nation that seeks progress, and prosperity through merit-based equality of opportunity, and peace" (2007, p. 4). The charter further states that, to move forward, "Fiji must now evolve a political, social and governance framework that, eventually, will be truly democratic,

accountable, inclusive, equitable, non-racial and which unifies Fiji's diverse communities as a nation." A program of "major political, institutional, social, and economic reforms" must address "such social issues as growing inequality and poverty, and also race-based divisiveness between and within the major communities" (People's Charter, 2007, pp. 5–6).

The People's Charter would therefore completely nullify the previous government's blueprint; it would not only remove entitlements based on race and ethnicity, but would also alter representation in Parliament so that it would be based on proportional representation—an electoral system based on equal suffrage, "one person, one vote, equal value," rather than one based on race and ethnicity (Wikipedia, 2008). Under this system Rotumans would lose their representation in Parliament. However, according to media reports (see, e.g., Fiji Times Online 2008), the response of Rotumans on the home island to the People's Charter was overwhelmingly positive, in large measure because of the interim government's commitment to invest in Rotuma's development. Indeed, the government has allocated more than 20 million Fijian dollars for the development of Rotuma during the next five years (Radio Fiji, 2009).

Given the current volatility of Fiji's political circumstances, how issues of indigeneity will play out in Fiji's future remains an open question.

## Notes

1. This is not to suggest that racial tensions were the main cause of the coup, only that they served to rationalize the actions of the coup leaders. See Ewins, 1992; B Lal, 1998.
2. Regarding the Hawaiian case, see Schacter and Funk, this volume.

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