



# Department of Pacific Affairs

## Modernising Tradition: Elections, Parties and Land in Fiji

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### Introduction

The occupation, ownership and utilisation of land remain central to Fiji's political economy, with an importance which comes to the fore at elections, including in November 2018. Writing after the 2014 election, Sefanaia Sakai provided an explanation for the recurrence of the politics of land, claiming that:

The use of Taukei [Indigenous Fijian] land insecurity as a political campaign tool has historically contributed to election outcomes. To understand the debate on land issues, it is imperative to understand the cultural perceptions which the Taukei hold about land ... the customary view on land transcends many tangible representations as a purely material resource and includes spiritual and cultural identity. This explains the Taukei's resolve to protect their land from alienation (2015:51).

Sakai did not pursue key aspects of this form of explanation, including why and how does the role of land in identity persist. If identity is not to be regarded simply as a residual affection, steeped in mystique, what are the terms of its reproduction in contemporary Fiji? Which conditions perpetuate insecurity over land and make it especially germane at elections? Nor did Sakai enquire why at the 2014 election two parties — led by Taukei and heavily dependent upon Taukei voter support — could propose distinct, even opposed, directions regarding government policy on land ownership and utilisation. Clearly 'identity' is neither unchanging nor monolithic for the Indigenous population.

These and related questions were thrown into even sharper focus during the 2018 election campaign when the different land policies of the two major parties, the governing FijiFirst led by Prime Minister Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, and the Social Democratic

Liberal Party (SODELPA) led by another former military officer, Sitiveni Rabuka, were again foremost. In 2014 and 2018, the government's policies on land were a central plank in its drive to portray FijiFirst as the standard-bearer of modernity. According to the government, the principal opposition party SODELPA stood for tradition, including in relation to land policy. While the government's strategy appeared to work in 2014 — when it won a convincing electoral majority — this was much less successful in 2018.

In November 2018, FijiFirst lost considerable voter support. The party won around 50 per cent of the total valid vote, down from 59.2 per cent in 2014 ([Fijian Elections Office 2018](#); See also Arms 2015:10; Nanau 2015:22; Sakai 2015:50). Even as the overall proportion of the substantially increased number of registered voters who voted fell, SODELPA lifted its share of the votes cast to over 39 per cent, up from just over 28 per cent at the previous election (Arms 2015; Nanau 2015:22; Sakai 2015:50). Even as the total number of seats in parliament had increased from 50 to 51, FijiFirst's members of parliament were reduced from 32 to 27, while SODELPA increased its representation from 15 to 21. Although its vote share increased, the National Federation Party (NFP) retained the same number of members: three. Further, FijiFirst's reduced support appears to have been substantial among Taukei, parts of the Indigenous population who were so important to its previous success.

The principal focus of this Discussion Paper is the dichotomy framed by the FijiFirst government's representation of itself as modern and SODELPA as the exponent of tradition. The different land policies advocated by the two parties provides the basis for the consideration. In order to interrogate this split between modernity and tradition, it is worthwhile to consider what Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, in their 1967 classic on political development in India, *The*

*Modernity of Tradition*, proposed as a counter to what they regarded as a false dichotomisation. Instead of the view in which ‘modernity has generally been opposed to tradition’, the authors argued that ‘they infiltrate and transform each other’ (1967:3). To accord ‘tradition a higher priority in the study of modernization than has often been the case in previous analyses of it’ (ibid.:10), they elevated the role of contradictions. The authors explained that:

Social change and the new realities it creates arise not only from the impact of objective, exogenous, or revolutionary forces on established systems but also from alternative potentialities within such systems. Marxist theory brilliantly stresses this insight when it emphasizes the creative possibilities of historical contradictions (ibid.:8).

### *Land Policy in Contemporary Fiji*

By 2018, the deficiencies of an unchanging description of Taukei identity, particularly in relation to the attachment to land, had become especially obvious. The two main parties repeatedly emphasised the distinctiveness of their land policies, including on ownership and occupation of land. The FijiFirst party and government continued to pursue the reforms introduced during the period of military rule after the 2006 coup. These reforms had tried to make it easier to concentrate ownership and then lease the land for production as industrial capital (see below). In 2014 and again in 2018, the opposition party SODELPA sought to capitalise on the disquiet that the reforms had raised and campaigned on protecting what had become ‘tradition’: chiefs benefiting from leases, households using their land for self-provisioning and forms of commercialisation (discussed in more detail below). For both elections, the FijiFirst government portrayed itself, on land ownership and utilisation as well as on other matters, as modernisers (Pratibha 2018a); SODELPA thus became the defenders of the past, traditionalists (Ratuva 2015).

Both descriptions are attempts to capture in representative democratic politics the process of constant change which characterises capitalist commercialisation (Fawcett 2015). While the distance between the two main parties is apparent over several matters, the most important difference is in their distinct positions on land tenure and utilisation, neither of which proposes freehold conversion. In excess

of 80 per cent of the country is held as ‘native land’ (Fraenkel 2009:52, 65; Government of Fiji Department of Town and Country Planning n.d.). This colonial form of land tenure was subsequently re-enforced after independence until the post-2006 coup military regime made its changes. The tussle between the major parties became how to modernise and commercialise in order to meet the requirement of continuous economic growth, while dealing with the central contradiction inherent in land’s use.

While rural land has long been important for households to secure consumption needs, commercialisation of these needs has increasingly also meant off-farm employment in waged and salaried occupations (Knapman 1987:26–47; Overton 1989:20–53). Utilisation of land has often been individualised without a formal change in the terms of occupation, which is purported to be communal through a landowning unit, most commonly a *mataqali* (Taukei clan landowning group) or *tokatoka* (family unit). More and more households have opposed and/or avoided the efforts of chiefs and other heads of landholding units to impose collaborative labour requirements to instead focus their labour on household consumption needs.

As this study argues, with increased commercialisation of households and major population movement into urban areas, a reverse process is also under way. This reverse process has added another layer to the importance of land for households, the idea of Taukei identity and to representative politics. Urbanisation and the uncertainty of income-earning employment in cities and towns is re-emphasising the importance of ownership and utilisation of rural smallholdings. The continuing commercialisation of rural land is also being driven by urban dwellers in their search for income and assets to meet current and future needs. Maintaining the capacity to farm ‘traditionally’-held land is becoming more, not less, critical for households threatened by unemployment, impoverishment and the absence of substantial social welfare nets (Boyer 2018).

As this paper shows, the contradiction between accumulation and need appeared prominently in the land policies of the two main parties, underpinning the distinction between modernity and tradition used to differentiate the parties’ platforms. Part 1 of this paper explains two descriptions central to the argument: capitalism and contradiction. Part 2 details the most important features of the 2018 election campaign,

viewed largely through the lens of the main opposing parties' descriptions of the country's political economy. Within the framework of what I have previously described as a reformed militarised democracy (MacWilliam 2001, 2015, 2016; Carnegie and Tarte 2018), FijiFirst, SODELPA and the NFP presented similar but different descriptions of the past and visions of the future.

Part 3 describes how after 2013, the two principal parties, FijiFirst and SODELPA, were in part shaped by the distinct possibilities offered for land policy. As the party of government, FijiFirst had to represent capital in general as well as particular capitals (MacWilliam 2015). The reluctance to invest in agriculture — illustrated by major firms avoiding this field of investment entirely, including Fijian Holdings (Annual Reports 2006–2018) — needed to be overcome if the limited growth in agricultural production was to be changed. Having introduced major land reforms during the period of military rule, the government which contested the 2014 elections as FijiFirst was identified with, and defended, those reforms. Simultaneously, however, it could not be associated with measures that increased the land area held under freehold tenure. To do so would require a frontal assault on tradition which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to implement by a government and party dependent after 2013 on popular support at elections.

The direction on land reform chosen by the military government and followed by its party successor FijiFirst opened space for opposition, which was immediately represented in party terms by SODELPA, once the 2013 constitution provided for a shift to electoral and parliamentary politics. At the 2014 election, one difficulty for SODELPA was that it appeared as a party of chiefs who opposed land reform because it threatened their commercial and ideological interests as formal heads of landowning units. By 2018, as SODELPA became less dominated by the extreme conservatives within it, the party placed renewed emphasis on land as the basis of household consumption needs, while trying to reconcile this with declining chiefly authority (MacWilliam 2016). This was done in part by opposing the government's attempts to concentrate the landed form of property rights. Defence of tradition was presented as the preferred route to development. SODELPA tried to reconcile chiefly standing and accumulation by returning to an earlier form of rental distribution,

with household labour attached to land, including that which had become un- or under-utilised (Cowen and Shenton 1996). Juggling of this contradictory position is demonstrated by reference to changes made in the party's manifesto between the two elections.

SODELPA's presentation of tradition captured the increasing insecurity and impoverishment faced by many of the Indigenous population. Commercialisation and rapid fluctuations in economic conditions made indigenes ever more dependent upon rural land holdings — the reverse process by which urban dwellers attempted to secure existence by a renewed attention to rural household production — and increased the importance of government policies stressing historical forms of attachment. Part 4 of this paper illustrates the process through the experiences of three people for whom it is critical to maintain and/or re-emphasise their rural ties with increased household production on land held under customary tenure.

### Part 1: Capitalism and contradiction

Capitalism is a continuing process of accumulation, what is termed 'value in motion'. For this reason, there is no fully capitalist mode of production, nor one form of accumulation (Banaji 1977, 2011). Instead, there is a continuous process involving a range of forms of production occurring in a multitude of locations (households attached to smallholdings, plantations, factories, sporting competitions and so on). Central to the continuous process is 'primitive [or] primary accumulation'. First described by Karl Marx (1979: 873–940) as 'so-called primitive accumulation', the reference was to the supposed origins of capital as portrayed by others, when the agricultural population was expropriated from land to form a landless proletariat. This phase was also facilitated by the earliest forms of colonisation, including by European imperial powers, when indigenous populations were forced off land, often in especially brutal campaigns of conquest.

However, as it is now understood (Perelman 2000), primary accumulation refers to the various forms of accumulation which operate to transform other human productive activities into labour subsumed by capital. The process by which people continue to be stripped of capacities for self-provisioning is central to accumulation (of capital). Primary accumulation operates as a continuous process dissolving non-

capitalist existence. For example, companies producing take-away food and childcare have proliferated as parents have been pressed into wage labour with ever longer working hours which preclude home preparation of meals and child-rearing. As shown below, in Fiji this includes transforming rural smallholding and urban household production and consumption to conform to the demands of accumulation.

In a later period of capitalism's advance, during the 19th century when the idea of development was joined with liberal imperialism, forcible separation of populations from land was not the only process at work. Some colonial regimes, including those of Britain and France, deliberately employed what Charles Bettelheim has termed 'conservation-dissolution' (1972:297–299). That is, as capitalism advanced by dissolving other 'modes of production and [the] subsumption of their agents to capitalist production relations' (ibid.:297), it also restructured (partly dissolved) and subordinated those non-capitalist modes to the predominant capitalist relations. The appearance of conservation of other modes exists as dissolution occurs.

This process of conservation-dissolution was central to the advance of global capitalism, including in the Bengal Delta of India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Ali 2018). Bruce Knapman (1987) has described how once the British administration came to power in Fiji, it took a number of decisive steps which advanced colonial capitalist development. The initial largely spontaneous process by which European settlers as owner-occupiers acquired land for plantations was stopped and, instead, large companies were encouraged to produce agricultural and other goods for export. These firms also stimulated imports of commodities, including consumer goods, which were manufactured in overseas factories.

In Fiji, liberal imperialism's concern for native interests meant devising policy which advanced capitalism without separating Indigenous populations from their land. Importing indentured workers from India to work plantations under industrial capital could be combined with specific terms for maintaining Taukei households on smallholdings. Where there was no prior uniform Indigenous form of land ownership and occupation, policy was invented to consolidate a multitude of previous bases into one, which joined chiefly authority with household occupation. In this manner, tradition was formulated with landholding units, primarily descent groups (*mataqali*), at the centre

of the process, which advanced capitalism while also maintaining order (Fawcett 2015).

By the 1970s Fiji 'joined a "moving company" of fifty-eight other countries which had stepped on to the world's growth escalator and by 1970 had reduced their farm populations from 70 to under 50 per cent' (Knapman 1987:1).

In case there is any temptation to use the latter figure of the size of rural populations for a claim that even at independence there remained two coexisting modes of production, Knapman's more important points about colonial capitalist development are worth citing. First, although there were policies 'aimed at protecting the noncapitalist sector' (1987:5), these were not to inhibit plantation expansion which also ensured trade growth and in turn government revenues. For plantations and the mills constructed to process cane into sugar, capitalist centralisation and concentration of production would hold. The Australian firm Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), which extended operations to Fiji in 1882, came to embody the apex of the process by which small enterprises were displaced by a large capitalist firm (ibid.:9–25).

Secondly, Knapman emphasises that:

From the beginning of colonial rule, government policy on indigenous commercial development aimed at a controlled and gentle integration of Fijians into the world capitalist economy through cash-cropping in Fijian-owned land ... contrary to some opinion ... a static dualism of noncapitalist and capitalist sectors was never planned (ibid.:26).

This liberal developmentalism had a parallel in post-World War II Papua New Guinea under an Australian administration (MacWilliam 2013, 2019). However, in both countries the spontaneous process of accumulation, the major driver of capitalism, constantly threatened to undercut colonial intentions. Conservation faced dissolution on a continuous basis: the case studies in Part 4 of this paper provide contemporary illustration of the effects of accumulation upon three Taukei whose attachment to the land is capitalised.

If accumulation is one constant in capitalism, another is its contradictory nature. Capitalism is a contradiction-driven social form and the first or primary contradiction is that between the forces and relations of production. Accumulation propels the constant revolutionising of the production of commodities, increasing what is termed 'economic

growth'. This growth occurs on the basis of not only revolutionising *the means* by which production occurs (machinery, labour skills and so on) but also *the relations* of production, most apparent in the forms taken by the classes of capital and labour. The contradiction arises out of the distinct purposes for which capitalist production occurs. Accumulation, the first and most powerful purpose, is to constantly be extended through the second, the subsumption and subordination of labour, human needs and capacities. As much as accumulation may lead to increased living standards for those who labour, this is always relative to the wealth accumulated by capitalists out of the total social product. As more and more wealth is created, inequality — absolute and relative impoverishment — increases. This trend is now of global concern and a range of ameliorative measures, such as taxation increases for owners of substantial wealth, are being debated internationally. However, as the characteristics arise out of the principal contradiction central to capitalism, they can only be mediated and not resolved when capitalism persists.

What Rudolph and Hoeber Rudolph refer to as the 'creative possibilities of historical contradictions' (1967:8) is, in the case of Fiji, how the primary contradiction between the forces and relations of production appears and is mediated. Most importantly, this is evident in the forms by which labour is joined to another means of production — land — thus becoming a major basis for reproducing consumption by many, particularly Indigenous, households. The preferred direction of the FijiFirst government, discussed below, is for land use and ownership to be centralised and concentrated through long leases. Existing *mataqali* members are to receive rents and become landless, ripe for employment as wage workers or to languish as a relative surplus population, unemployed or underemployed and impoverished. The large holdings would operate under industrial methods, owned by firms. This policy direction is distinct from both the occasionally fashionable, deeply ideological proposal that freehold titles be created (Chand and Duncan 1997), and the election policy of SODELPA (Manifesto 2018). The latter aimed to reassert chiefly authority and also resecure Indigenous households to smallholdings where family labour processes would engage in self-provisioning, so-called subsistence farming and production of marketed crops.

Both alternatives, while not resolving the contradiction between the forces and relations of production under capitalism, aim to mediate this constant condition in distinct ways, while extending accumulation. At the same time, these policy directions try to create conditions, including security of ownership and occupation as the property rights central to capitalism, that have been responsible for much of the instability and disorder present in post-colonial Fiji.

## Part 2: Growth, impoverishment and uncertainty—the 2018 election campaign

The official government position released before the 2018 election was that under its auspices, Fiji's economy was undergoing an unprecedented period of growth as a capitalist economy. As the FijiFirst party's manifesto for the 2014 election claimed (FijiFirst 2014:8), this growth had begun in the five years from 2009 to 2013 when a military regime, headed by the subsequent leader of FijiFirst, was in power. Speaking to parliament eight months before the 2018 election, the Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum claimed that:

Madam Speaker, the Fijian economy is on track to realise its ninth consecutive year of economic growth in 2018 — unprecedented in Fijian post-independence history, Madam Speaker. The economy, on average, has grown by more than 4 per cent in the last five years, excluding the 0.4 per cent GDP growth in 2016 post *TC* (Tropical Cyclone) *Winston*. Madam Speaker, with this buoyant performance in our economy, nominal GDP per person in 2017 stood at over \$12,000, almost doubling from \$6,419 in 2006. This is the highest ever we have seen in our history. Even real GDP per capita reached its highest ever level at around \$8,000 last year (*Fiji Sun* 10/3/18).

Unsurprisingly, the FijiFirst manifesto published later in 2018 repeated this promising picture of economic growth, extending it further in two pages headed 'FijiFirst Delivers Results' (Manifesto 2018:4–5). The manifesto proclaimed that the country had the lowest unemployment rate in 20 years, the lowest tax rates ever, with Fijians earning below FJ\$30,000 not having to pay income tax and receiving major improvements in access to 'quality free education' and electricity. High foreign reserves, reduced government debt as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP),

an operating budget surplus and all-time-high tourism visitor numbers extended the picture of a healthy economy undergoing substantial growth. Electors were left in no doubt that all this was due to the government's actions — actions which had produced living standards that were the highest ever (*ibid.*:9).

Essential for the government's direction was a determined rejection of the past:

Old politics still threaten our progress. Sometimes they are disguised as trendy but unrealistic concepts; other times they play on extreme notions that only benefit one group. Either way, they stem from the old destructive mindset.

FijiFirst rejects the idea of returning to the upheaval and chaos of the past. To some people consistency in governance may not be exciting, but most of us have lived through the challenging times and are not easily deceived by those who use fear and falsehoods to achieve their selfish ends. We must keep moving forward together (Manifesto 2018:10).

The emphasis on togetherness was a constant refrain in the document, encapsulated by the slogan 'Only together will we continue to succeed' (*ibid.*:15). The party's objectives were summarised as a mission 'to build a just and fair society where the benefits of progress include everyone' (*ibid.*:18–19).

The main opposition parties, SODELPA and the NFP, sought to provide another picture of the country under Prime Minister Bainimarama and FijiFirst's leadership. Even where the opposition agreed with some of the government's claims, including on the long-run growth picture presented by the government (NFP Manifesto 2018:5), the other features of the political economy were stressed. SODELPA emphasised the need for 'sustainable and equitable distribution of economic growth' and 'meaningful employment opportunities for all' (Manifesto 2018:10–12). The NFP pointed out that while the economy had indeed grown over the last 12 years, 'wages have not grown with the economy' (Manifesto 2018:5).

This contested picture highlights how all sides try to deal with the contradiction between accumulation and need discussed above. While all Fiji governments remain underpinned by military power (MacWilliam 2015; Carnegie and Tarte 2018), the introduction of elections has given added importance to this contradiction, which affects the capacity of parties

to gain popular support. Against the government's portrayal of post-2009 growth, since the early 1980s at least, several other features of Fiji's economy stand out. Economic growth has been on a roller-coaster between spurts of rapid growth and sharp declines, particularly after the political upheaval associated with coups and the overthrow of elected governments (Barr 1990; Chand 2009, 2015; Narsey 2008, 2012; Prasad 2013). Between 1970 and 2012, the average GDP growth rate of 2.9 per cent masks the decline from 6.5 per cent in the 1970s, to 0.8, 3.2 and 1.1 per cent in the next three decades respectively (Prasad 2013). Even as a degree of political certainty returned after the 2006 takeover and then the 2014 election, GDP growth fluctuated between negatives in 2007 and 2009, with positives in the other years, but at still below the 43-year average cited above (*ibid.*). Even when growth occurred, however, it did little to conceal other long-term trends.

Around 80 per cent of the population, and about the same proportion of voters, is now located on one island, Viti Levu, with movement out of other islands including Vanua Levu and the Lau Group a prominent feature. Some 40 to 50 per cent of the total population lives in the Central Division, with the Suva-centred urban conurbation its focus (Delaibatiki 2017). The movement is as true of the Taukei population as other peoples, even when the reasons for migration may differ. Personal safety, a stagnant sugar industry, inability to reproduce consumption at socially necessary levels of need and the perceived attractiveness of urban life all play their part. (A measure of the widespread change in socially necessary consumption has been the very rapid expansion in the ownership and use of electronic equipment. For the 2018 election, the Fijian Elections Office introduced an internet application upon which results were available for mobile phone and tablet users.) One consequence of this internal and external migration is the growth in substantial parcels of land left un- or under-utilised in the areas from which populations have moved.

A corollary of this movement is an increase in squatter settlements around major urban areas, especially Suva, Nadi and Lautoka on Viti Levu. Migration to urban and peri-urban areas occurred as unemployment and underemployment increased (Bryant-Tokelau 1995, 2012). By one assessment, with little or no growth between 2009 and 2012 in agriculture and forestry, during the latter year 33 per cent of the labour force was under-employed and the 15–19 age

group was ‘particularly extremely under-employed (they are idle some 60% of their [potential] working time)’ (Prasad 2013).

In their campaigns and party manifestos, SODELPA and NFP sought to capture key dimensions of this different picture of Fiji, while also emphasising the objectives of economic growth and national unity. In short, all the main parties as well as the minor ones were united by a capitalist democratic vision for Fiji; where there was disagreement it was largely between liberalism and conservatism as the means for handling the uncertainty associated with the process of accumulation (Fawcett 2015). Unlike the government, which emphasised growth, SODELPA and NFP stressed inequality, poverty, unemployment and underemployment. Both promised major increases in the minimum wage and improvements in employment conditions. The NFP commitment to a FJ\$5 per hour for wage workers (Manifesto 2018), compared to SODELPA’s FJ\$4 (Manifesto 2018:12) and the government’s support for nothing more than a regular review of wages (FijiFirst 2018:22), made the NFP a welcome target for the government, including through its newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*.

The attack against proposals to raise minimum wages and improve employment conditions followed predictable lines. It was conducted in almost identical terms by the Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (Pratibha 2018b) and Fijian Holdings Limited’s chief executive officer Nouzab Fareed (Pratibha 2018c). Proposed increases in minimum wages and greater employment security were derided as unaffordable and incommensurate with private sector practices. In the week before the election, the *Fiji Sun* conducted an unrelenting campaign against the NFP and its leader on this and related issues (see, for one instance among a number, Pratibha 2018d). The attacks made it clear that the government saw the NFP as its main rival for important sections of voters when SODELPA was making inroads into areas where FijiFirst had done particularly well in 2014.

Attacking SODELPA was in some respects harder for the government, given that party’s leadership and supporter bases among the Taukei population. Nevertheless, while SODELPA also focused upon unemployment and ‘workers’ rights’, the main focus of the government’s attacks was on the political and personal history of SODELPA’s leader Rabuka

(Pratibha 2018e; Gaunavinaka 2018). In the last days of the campaign attention shifted to a court case involving Rabuka who was charged with acting contrary to sections of the Political Parties Act. These sections related to the requirement for all candidates to provide information regarding their personal finances, assets and liabilities. The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) had laid the charges, then appealed to the High Court when a lower court dismissed them. On the eve of the November 14 election, Chief Justice Anthony Gates dismissed the appeal on the grounds that FICAC had failed to prove the essential elements of the case. The decision, announced during the two-day period when election campaigning was suspended and advertising banned, was greeted by a large crowd outside the court and carried on national radio, TV, social media and in the press. *The Fiji Times* led with the outcome on its front page under the banner ‘Rabuka Free High Court dismisses appeal against former PM’ and then carried a more detailed account on an inside page (Cava 13/11/2018). The *Fiji Sun* was less enthusiastic, signalling the recognition of the enormous propaganda boost Rabuka and SODELPA had received less than 24 hours before the polls opened (Talei 13/11/2018).

The attacks on Rabuka also indicated how the internal dynamics of SODELPA had changed between the elections, with its previous chiefly leadership increasingly marginalised. Although Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu and Ro Teimumu Kepa still held important party and parliamentary positions, their authority had waned in an organisation being taken over by the next generation as well as being professionalised.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, as votes received were announced, the numbers for Lalabalavu and Kepa respectively provided an indication of the declining significance of chiefly authority in SODELPA — and the electorate more generally. The former had been allocated a suburban Suva area in which to campaign where his *mana* (standing, aura) among migrants from Cakaudrove on Vanua Levu, Northern Division might have been expected to have some influence. Instead, he received insufficient votes to be elected on his own account. Lalabalavu finished 20th of the 21 SODELPA members elected to parliament once votes were redistributed from more successful SODELPA candidates. These included Rabuka, who outpolled Kepa by over 60,000 votes, and Lynda Tabuya, the second-highest vote winner among the SODELPA candidates. In Rewa,

a peri-urban area proximate to Suva, Kepa attained fewer votes in 2018 than she had done in 2014 as leader of SODELPA. As the *Fiji Sun's* lead political writer Nemani Delaibatiki trumpeted three days after the election, the result marked the 'end of an era (which) is fast approaching' for the two paramount chiefs (Delaibatiki 2018a, 2018b). So far, there has been little comment or research on the internal organisational changes in SODELPA which made it a far more effective electoral machine than previously. These changes allowed SODELPA to fight the election on terms which did not make the party's land policy a mere mirror image of chiefly influence or demands, a subject to which this paper now turns.

### Part 3: Differences over land policy

Underlying the tussles between FijiFirst and SODELPA were their differences over how the principal contradiction between land and the institutions that governed its ownership, occupation and use should be mediated. Centralise and concentrate land under leases which encourage large holdings operated as industrial capital or reassert chiefly authority and reattach households to smallholdings; the divide was clear even as both contenders re-emphasised capitalism's growth objective. To understand why land policy became particularly critical at both elections, it is necessary to recall events during the period of military rule between 2006 and the 2014 election. The laws governing land at the centre of disputes during the election campaigns in 2014 and 2018 were imposed by a deeply authoritarian regime with no assessment, either through parliament or elections, of the extent of popular consent for the changes. For instance, after the 2018 election, protests erupted over the development of housing on land recently converted to ten-year leasehold at Tamavua village on Suva's outskirts. The law enabling the conversion was a product of military rule. The institution that sanctioned the conversion, the iTaukei Land Trust Board, was also a government-reformed and dominated institution, previously the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) (Vakasuwaqa 2018; Kumar 2018).

In 2010, the military government changed the leases and licenses regulations of the Native Land Act in a manner that directly attacked a principal source of chiefly incomes, in the name of addressing inequality and promoting inclusiveness (Sakai 2015:55). No longer would chiefs collect the largest slice of revenues

paid to the NLTB from land leased by cane farmers, tourist resort owners and other commercial operations. Instead, there would in future be equal distribution of lease monies to all *mataqali* members.

Two years later, and subsequently as a result of new measures contained within the 2013 constitution, the attack on chiefly power went even further with the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). The demise of the GCC had considerable significance for the changes the government made to land law, as under the also-abolished 1997 constitution, the GCC had been in a powerful position to stop changes to the terms of land use. With the 2006 abrogation of the previous constitution, and even before the imposition of the 2013 constitution, there were no barriers to the military government adopting its preferred reforms.

Another major change, which had important consequences for the inter-party tussle at both elections, was the 2010 introduction of a Land Use Decree, which Sakai described as providing 'a policy framework that aims to facilitate productivity of idle native and crown land' (2015:57). The decree provided for unused native land to be leased to the Land Bank, providing 60 per cent of the members of a *mataqali* concurred. Such leases could be for a period up to 99 years, which critics argued effectively meant permanent alienation. With the land now in the control of the Land Bank, the government had responsibility to find investors who would become sub-lessees to 'develop the land according to the provision in the lease agreement' (ibid.). That is, without converting customary or native land title to freehold, the military government had imposed changes to laws and governing institutions that would enable centralisation and concentration of this important means of production. Under lease terms, *mataqali* members would be unable to reproduce consumption either through self-provisioning or selling produce grown through applying their labour to the land. They would instead become rentiers, entitled to shares of the rents received for leasing the land, part of the growing relative surplus population: underemployed or unemployed — and effectively landless.

These changes did not seem to have much damaging effect for the government in the 2014 election, with the government gaining in popularity by undercutting the chiefs and otherwise emphasising personal security. By 2018, however, the militarily-imposed land laws were once again at the electoral

fore and SODELPA was in a much stronger position to capture the opposition to the changes (see below).

For the recent 2018 election, the ruling FijiFirst party's manifesto was distributed widely in print and through electronic means. As 'a national movement dedicated to the service of our nation and to the advancement of the well-being of our people', the party described itself as having three components to its mission. Following the first objective of building 'a just, fair and progressive society in which all Fijians benefit', the party aimed to 'successfully govern and transform Fiji into a modern nation-state' (FijiFirst 2018).

This statement was a repeat of that presented in the party's 2014 manifesto, prepared for the first election held in Fiji after an eight-year interregnum following the 2006 coup. In that manifesto, FijiFirst 'reaffirms its ideals to successfully govern and transform Fiji into a modern nation-state and cement its position as the preeminent Pacific island nation' (FijiFirst 2014:4). Central to both the successful electoral campaigns by the party and its leadership was the repeated emphasis on their modern vision in comparison to that of their opponents.

On land, there was to be no back-tracking to conditions before the military government-imposed changes. The transformation of Taukei households into rentiers would continue. Instead, in partial acknowledgement of the objections raised to the changes, there would be 'a new law early next year (that is, 2019) to establish an Independent Lands Tribunal'. This tribunal would be tasked with ensuring that:

all grievances in relation to the release or occupation of iTaukei land and State Land are dealt with efficiently and fairly. FijiFirst will, through the Tribunal ensure that grievances of iTaukei landowning units are effectively addressed and that they are able to obtain a fair and equitable return for the leasing or occupation of their lands (FijiFirst Manifesto 2018:9).

In 2014, other central tenets of the 2013 constitution, framed and adopted during the period of military rule headed by Commander Bainimarama, were the targets of the SODELPA opposition. Foremost of those targets was SODELPA's position on the place of religion in the 2013 constitution (Ryle 2015; Weir 2015). During the run-up to the 2018 election, continuing public wrangling within SODELPA (Lal 2015), including over the importance of Christianity

compared to secularism in the national constitution, assisted with the government's portrayal of the party as stuck in the past. Also helpful to the government was the election in June 2015 of one of the country's most controversial conservative figures, Ratu Lalabaluva, to the party's presidency. Even more helpful was the reversal of the position of the former head of the Conservative Alliance-Matanitua Vanua (CAMV) Party. Naiqama was widely regarded as epitomising the fundamentalist Christian nationalist position and also nominated for the 2018 elections.

As much as religion maintained a looming presence in the election campaign, it was over land policy that the distance between the protagonists was greatest. Even as SODELPA's internal modernisers succeeded in removing any mention of religion from the party's 2018 manifesto, the manifesto repeated the previous emphasis on the need to constitutionally restore 'Indigenous Rights'. In 2014 this had meant a prolonged diatribe on the 'Land Rights of Indigenous Fijians' (SODELPA 2014:43–47). By 2018, after the comprehensive defeat of 2014, the SODELPA manifesto had been extensively revised, clearly designed to present this party too as the epitome of modernity. Gone was the lengthy statement of what needed to be done to rewrite the 2013 constitution, in a manifesto more suited to the party leadership of Rabuka. Instead, the party's attachment to Indigenous rights appeared prominently at the outset with reference to 'the aspiration of the Taukei on their human rights as stipulated under the UN Declaration and ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous Rights' (SODELPA 2018:2). By promising a review of all laws that undermine rights of native Fijians and promising compensation for all unjust dispossessions, including those of the colonial period, except 'for future public purpose' (ibid.: 9), the party tried to make itself a smaller target for the government keen to portray SODELPA as the past and itself as the future. However, the ambiguities in SODELPA's position, representative of all Taukei but also encumbered by its chiefly past, was regularly on display. Less than one month before the election, SODELPA's leader Rabuka promised to reinstitute the GCC and re-install the previous procedure for paying lease moneys with chiefs allocated a larger share according to 'responsibilities' (Narayan 2018).

While the main parties each emphasised the need to raise agricultural production, SODELPA's manifesto

attempted to place this objective in a broader, popular context. The party's manifesto noted both the declining importance of sugar, the country's main agricultural export, and the continuing importance of land for food security. While the agricultural sector's significance for GDP had declined between 1995 and 2016 from 16 to 6 per cent, the SODELPA manifesto stressed that 'more than 50% of our people continue to depend upon agriculture as their main source of income and livelihood' (2018:14). To depend upon agriculture for income and other forms of consumption, including ceremonies and symbolism, is to have the capacities for self-provisioning *and* production for sale. As Sakai noted, a Tebbutt opinion poll (of 1047 registered voters) taken in August 2014, a month before the first post-coup general election, 'showed that 74% and 16% ... considered land issues as very important and quite important respectively' (2015:54). With the continuing increase in commercialised consumption by households, there are good reasons to believe that the importance of land did not decline between elections.

Instead, by 2018 concern for the effect of the land reforms had grown in the popular mind. Once lease monies had been redistributed from chiefs to all *mataqali* members this equalising reform measure became less important in households faced with wage stagnation and increased costs of living. What was described for the 2014 election as 'the remorseless power of incumbency' (Fraenkel 2015) could now appear as a tired government in a country where 'change is coming' (NFP 2018) and with a 'leadership that listens' for a country 'at a crossroads' (SODELPA 2018). Incumbency had become a diminished, if still consequential, power.

#### Part 4: Land's continuing importance and the Taukei voter

This section presents three instances of the continuing — even growing — importance of land for Taukei households. These personal stories highlight the continuity of the primary contradiction outlined in Part 1. With a major proportion of the country's population concentrated in the urban conurbation around Suva and a further substantial number living in the Nadi-Lautoka-Ba corridor on north-western Viti Levu (Delaibatiki 2017), the forms which urbanisation has taken for many people affects their concerns over land policy. While census classifications may locate people

as rural or urban, consider the following instances which show a greater complexity to such identifications and which bear upon the description of people as Taukei, wedded to tradition.

#### *Savenaca Goneva*

The first case appeared in the local press during the 2018 election (Nai 2018). A Taukei man, Savenaca Goneva, has been working for 15 years as a supermarket stacker in Nadi and commutes daily to work from Nagado village in Ba province, north-west of the city. This is cost-effective because he has 'a plantation' where he grows vegetables and root crops. With five people, including three children with their associated schooling expenses to support, farming provides fresh food as well as sociability for the family. Goneva is cited as doing 'the groceries shopping because it is convenient ... [and can be done in Nadi: author] when I finish work on Fridays' (ibid.).

In important respects, there is nothing particularly notable in this case which illustrates a well-known continuity while re-emphasising the material conditions under which one Taukei family's attachment to land is reproduced. As other earlier studies have shown (Overton 1989), joining wage employment with household self-provisioning by people who live close to major urban centres and commercial activities (including tourist resorts), is not new but a long-term feature of the country's political economy. However, the next two case studies give the phenomenon of coupling wage employment with occupation of smallholdings a contemporary twist, linking more recent effects of commercialisation with the salience of land's availability for electoral politics<sup>2</sup>

#### *Meri*

Meri is a woman in her late fifties who has lived and worked in Suva for more than thirty years. For a major part of this period, Meri was employed as a domestic servant working for European expatriates on contract at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Wages from this work, supplemented by her husband's income as a soldier in the Fiji military, made it possible to pay rent, food and other essentials while raising five children to secondary school level.

However, over the last decade Meri's life has taken a different trajectory. European staff numbers at USP have declined substantially and academics recruited

from Asia either do not hire domestic servants or pay considerably lower wages. Her husband lost his job with the military and returned to his village in Tailevu, in north-eastern Viti Levu and proximate to Suva. There he has enough land to grow food crops and manage livestock for self-provisioning and sale. Without wage employment in Suva, Meri has been forced to move on a regular basis between locations in town, where her adult children now live, and her husband's village home. She occasionally visits a part of Eastern Division where she was born and raised and retains some land rights. Meri now produces food crops on her husband's land, which she sells beside the road that runs from the village into Suva. She also sells second-hand clothing, collected from Australia, and is trying to establish an additional source of income by selling phone cards.

Before the 2014 election, Meri was briefly attracted to FijiFirst because of its proposals on income support, schooling, transportation and general costs of living assistance. During the election campaign, she switched and voted for SODELPA in response to its claims that FijiFirst's land policy threatened the 'traditional' terms of occupation. At that stage her adult children, the majority of whom were voting for other parties, mocked their mother's reasoning, as she had shown little previous attraction to village life and farming more specifically. However, what the children did not recognise was that Meri was anticipating losing her wage work at USP and would have to look for alternative sources of income. Between 2014 and 2018, Meri moved to live more consistently in her husband's village home. There she cultivates vegetables, helps with his commercial farming and comes to Suva less often. Travelling between Suva and the rural village also meets emotional needs, to be with children, grandchildren and friends met during her years in the city. Urban life also provides a point of departure for visits to Australia where one sister lives and where consignments of second-hand clothing can be assembled for transmission to Fiji for subsequent sale. Phone cards are also cheaper to buy in Suva and can be sold for a margin in the village.

In short, Meri's situation is a case of reverse migration, straddling urban and rural locations, made necessary by unemployment and insecurity in meeting consumption needs as she becomes older. SODELPA's policies on securing land for households was a major determinant of her voting preferences, even though

she had a history of denouncing chiefs as rapacious and unrepresentative. She had also left the Methodist Church, long associated with chiefly rule (Ryle 2015; Weir 2015), having become a devoted member of one of the new Christian denominations which have proliferated in Fiji.

### Josefa

The third case used to illustrate the argument regarding the continuing importance of land as the Taukei population is commercialised and urbanised is that of Josefa. He is a migrant to Suva from the Lau Group in eastern Fiji, one among many who have left an area of the country that has been subject to depopulation, in part because of land shortages for many. In the 2014 elections, less than 5 per cent of the country's voting population was based in the Eastern Division. Now in his late thirties, Josefa came to Suva for work and stayed once he married a woman from eastern Viti Levu who has regular employment in a semi-managerial position. Through his father, who remains in Lau, he has sufficient land to have already planted many sandalwood trees, known locally as *yasi* (Baoa 2011), and a few agarwood trees. The former are several years old and Josefa has purchased more seedlings in the expectation that he will increase the area of plantings. The Fiji Development Bank has approved a substantial loan for the expansion, but Josefa is hesitant about getting into debt for a crop the price of which he knows is determined internationally and which fluctuates considerably. Josefa is also mindful of the fact that the tree takes up to 20 years before becoming harvestable.

For five years he was employed by an international supermarket chain in Suva but left because he could not arrange annual leave at the most suitable time to go back to Lau to work on his tree plantings. He drives a taxi which, combined with his wife's wages, provides enough income for them to rent accommodation, meet other living expenses in Suva and remit money to Lau. These remittances pay for his father's upkeep of the sandalwood plantings, as well as the purchase of more seedlings which cost a few dollars each. Driving taxis for others allows Josefa to take time off when needed to return home for farm extension, maintenance and related work. (Seedlings are best planted out over the months from November to March, when rainfall is most reliable.) Straddling between wage employment

and growing sandalwood on land held under customary tenure makes Josefa suspicious about any proposals for reforming land titling, particularly when he is counting on the trees maturing to provide income to deal with uncertainties of urban life and post-wage employment. At both elections, SODELPA's emphasis upon securing 'traditional' land tenure arrangements appealed to Josefa. Although he owns land through his lineage in Lau, he is currently non-committal about returning to a rural residence for retirement. Income insecurity in Suva and the maturing of his trees has made the SODELPA attachment even stronger.

As each of these case studies indicates, for particular Taukei, it is land as a means of consumption for households and individuals that is at the centre of a continuing attachment to their inherited land. As a principal target for the two main political parties, devising land policies that meet this need is difficult when each aim to govern a capitalist state with accumulation as the foremost consideration. When continuing commercialisation of need drives the uncertainty that households face, promoting further economic growth means trying to meet the contradiction between accumulation and need with distinct, competing policies over land. The 2018 election neatly illustrates why, as a contradiction, this cannot be resolved, but will continue to be a major driver of Fiji's political economy for the foreseeable future, including for any subsequent elections.

## Conclusion

As this paper has argued, while the importance of land and land policy appears to illustrate the difference between modernity and tradition, things are not so simple. The FijiFirst government portrayed its preferred direction, including on land policy, as the epitome of modernity. In as much as land policy was a driver of voter preferences, the party's election victory in 2018 could appear to represent a triumph of a modern vision over outdated tradition.

SODELPA, by comparison, appealed for a return to the past, at least in land policy, reversing the direction taken by the military government between 2006 and 2013. While trying to soften the party's image as the defender of chiefly privilege, which was pronounced at the previous election, SODELPA nevertheless advocated a return to land laws that emphasised Indigenous rights, unequal distribution of land rents

in favour of chiefly priorities and what appeared as communal rather than individual ownership. Although the party lost the election, it gained a considerably improved share of the popular vote, probably mostly among Taukei voters. By this outcome, tradition might appear to be on the ascendancy, threatening modernity (Delaibatiki 2018c).

However, as the case studies outlined in Part 4 suggest, both the main parties must grapple with how tradition and modernity 'infiltrate and transform each other' (Rudolph and Hoeber Rudolph 1967:3). Their different land policies, designed to deal with the effects of continuing commercialisation while gaining electoral support, show how the principal contradiction between accumulation and need was at the centre of an electoral tussle. It is also a contradiction which will remain embedded in Fiji's political economy, even as the labels 'traditional' and 'modern' continue to be used to portray its 'creative possibilities' (ibid.:8).

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## Endnotes

1. Information on the internal organisational changes and electoral strategies employed by SODELPA was supplied by a key party activist, who must remain anonymous, and then compared with publicly available information to assess its validity.
2. The names of the two people who provided information for these case studies have been changed to maintain their anonymity. I have known Meri for many years and

followed her changing circumstances over a lengthy period. Josefa is the given name for a taxi driver I met while in Suva during the recent election who generously gave his time for a lengthy, detailed interview. I checked his account with other informants who are aware of similar instances of the reverse process described in Josefa's case.

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