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Fiji's Vote for Change

By Dr Anne-Marie Schleich

SYNOPSIS

The recent elections in Fiji resulted in the first democratic transition since 2014 after three opposition parties narrowly voted for a pro-western coalition government with Sitiveni Rabuka as the new prime minister. The election outcome also has geopolitical implications considering the growing US-China confrontation in the Pacific and the renewed US re-engagement in the South Pacific with a focus on Fiji.

COMMENTARY

After a continuous 16 years of Josaia "Frank" Bainimarama at the helm of Fiji's government, Fijian voters were ready for change. A tripartite coalition was formed between the People's Alliance, National Federation Party and SODELPA after Bainimarama's Fiji First party lost its majority. The new prime minister is the colourful previous opposition leader Sitiveni Rabuka, a long-time rival of Bainimarama, and – like him – also a previous military coup leader and prime minister. Last year, Rabuka founded his own party, People's Alliance, after being ousted as the leader of SODELPA. Fijian party politics can be treacherous and complex affairs reflecting old allegiances and past political fights.

A Slim Majority for the Opposition

On 14 December, some 690,000 Fijians went to the polls for the third general election since the last military coup in 2006 which was led by incumbent prime minister Bainimarama. With only a turnout of 52 per cent of voters, this was the lowest participation since 2014. During the election campaign the opposition accused the government of intimidating and oppressing political opponents.

Over the last two elections, Bainimarama's Fiji First had gradually lost its voter appeal achieving only 42.5 per cent with 26 parliamentary seats this time, not enough to form

a government. The strongly Christian based and anti-China social democratic party SODELPA with only 3 parliamentary seats joined two other opposition parties, People's Alliance and National Federation Party. The new government was elected with a razor thin majority of 28 to 27 parliamentary votes. New opposition leader Bainimarama now claims the peaceful democratic transition as his political "legacy".

Election Focus: Inflation, Poverty, Ethnic issues

Fiji, with a population of about 900,000 and a per capita income of US\$5,000 had suffered badly during the COVID-19 pandemic because of its strong dependency on tourism. Its GDP contracted by 7.1 per cent in 2020 and its fiscal deficit rose to 13.7 per cent in 2020/21. Major donors such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) supported the government's recovery policies and stimulus packages. Unemployment, especially among youth, is high and with the present high inflation, some Fijians are experiencing poverty. Major election issues were inflation, poverty, high national debt, ethnic tensions between Polynesian Fijians and the Indian-Fijian minority as well as rising violence against women, a topic propagated by the female candidates of five opposition parties.

Fiji as Regional Power

Fiji is an influential regional leader and has wielded considerable clout in the regional governing body of the Pacific, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). After Bainimarama's second military coup in 2006, political and economic sanctions were imposed on Fiji by a number of Western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, US and the EU and its PIF membership was suspended in 2009.

In defiance, Bainimarama turned to China for political and economic support. With China's technical and financial assistance, Fiji also founded the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013 as a rival forum to the PIF to "better serve the development needs" of Pacific nations. However, ever since legitimising Bainimarama's rule through parliamentary elections in 2014 and the subsequent readmission of Fiji to the PIF, Fiji turned more pro-western.

The new competition in the Pacific region between the US and its allies Australia and New Zealand on the one hand and China on the other, has turned Fiji into an important regional power broker. Fiji also became the seat of many regional bodies such as the PIF Secretariat, the University of the South Pacific and numerous international agencies and has proven its international commitment as a long-time major contributor to UN peacekeeping forces.

In the last few years, Fiji raised its international profile and became a strong UN climate advocate criticising its Australian neighbour of being a climate laggard. Ex-prime minister Bainimarama tweeted after meeting Australian foreign minister Penny Wong in June: "Our main concern isn't geopolitics, it's climate change". Fiji's presidency of the climate conference COP 23 in Bonn in 2017 was a highlight of the Pacific Islands global climate engagement and established his reputation as the leading Pacific climate voice.

Bainimarama's chairmanship of the PIF in 2021/22 was filled with high political drama

in the region. He successfully managed the regional tensions after the withdrawal from the PIF of one member country, Kiribati, as well as the signing of a controversial security treaty between the Solomon Islands and China in April. Bainimarama also navigated the 16 PIF member countries through the passing of PIF's 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy which focuses on the Pacific's development needs.

US-China Geopolitics: US and Australia Courting Fiji

With the growing US-China confrontation in the Pacific, the US recently started a strong re-engagement in the South Pacific after the surprise of the Solomon-China treaty which it feared would threaten America's traditional strategic dominance in the region. In the last decades, the US had neglected the South Pacific. Apart from its traditional ties with the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, it had closed most embassies in the South Pacific and reduced its aid programmes. USTRade with the South Pacific states has been minimal.

Fiji has now become the main focal point of the US geopolitical strategy. After many decades of absence of high-level visits, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Fiji in February and President Joe Biden signed a US-Pacific Partnership Agreement with twelve Pacific countries in Washington, D.C. The US and Fiji also strengthened security ties by signing a landmark defence and security agreement in August. This was followed in October by a US-Fiji trade and investment agreement (TIFA). Fiji has also joined the new 14-member US economic initiative Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

To counter Chinese engagements in the region, Australia too has intensified its relations with the Pacific island countries and substantially increased its aid to them, tightened its previously unambitious climate policy and vowed to work together with the Pacific Island countries on a more equal footing. While China has been giving large amounts of grants, Australia remains the biggest aid donor to Fiji. Both countries recently concluded a Status of Forces agreement. Together, they have been redeveloping the Disaster and Humanitarian Relief Blackrock Camp for the Fijian Armed forces.

So far, Fiji has been carefully navigating its political and economic relations with China, the US, Australia and New Zealand. It is not that close to China anymore, as the international media often portray it. And the political powerbroker SODELPA indicated that it wants Fiji to closely align with Australian and New Zealand foreign policies.

It remains to be seen whether the new coalition government, sworn in on December 24, is durable and stable. However, one can be sure that Fijians as well as their regional neighbours and major powers will be watching the developments of the next few months very closely.

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