

Eroding trust in Fiji politics: lessons of 2025 and beyond

by Shailendra B. Singh

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Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs Chairman Ratu Viliame Seruvakula and Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka

Photo Credit: Fiji Government

“You want a friend in Washington? Get a dog.” Although made in an American context, this observation by President Harry S. Truman has universal appeal. It highlights the unpredictable and treacherous nature of politics, whether it’s the chameleon-like antics of politicians or the fickleness of voters. The precariousness of politics was felt most acutely in Suva as recently as October 2025.

Few anticipated that two of Fiji’s three deputy prime ministers, elected with much fanfare in December 2022, would be forced to resign over allegations of failure of ministerial integrity. The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption is an autonomous body, at least constitutionally, but Biman Prasad and Manoa Kamikamica’s indictments still sparked speculation about political conspiracies and high-level skulduggery. This political earthquake was far removed from the euphoria of the People’s Alliance Coalition election victory over the FijiFirst Government — on the promise of a fresh start.

Led by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, the People’s Alliance Party’s partnership with the National Federation Party and the Social Democratic Liberal Party secured electoral victory on a show of unity and a set of vote-winning pledges: cost-of-living relief, curbing government wastage and greater media freedom. Restoring media freedom was relatively straightforward, perhaps because it was cost-free, and it was implemented almost immediately through the repeal of the draconian Media Industry Development Act. Other pledges — such as addressing the national debt and the budget deficit — proved far more difficult, in part because of global economic conditions, as did the challenge of resisting the urge to increase parliamentary salaries, which went up by 130–138%. Additional benefits were thrown in for good measure: tax-free vehicle purchases for cabinet ministers, increased overseas travel allowances for the prime minister and president, and non-taxable duty allowances, business-class travel, and enhanced life insurance coverage for MPs.

In comparison to other jurisdictions, the salary increases may not, in themselves, be

unreasonable. The core problem, as noted by some observers, is that Parliament should not be determining its own benefits. The approval of the benefits also stunned many because of the Coalition's longstanding criticism of FijiFirst over pay levels, and its pre-election pledges to slash them.

Moreover, there were questions of affordability given Fiji's ballooning debt and deficit situation, which the Coalition had pledged to address as part of its plan to eliminate what it considered were the excesses of the previous FijiFirst Government. Increasing parliamentary benefits seemed an odd way of honouring those commitments. There is also the question of whether taxpayers are getting what they are paying for. But perhaps the increase in benefits should not have been entirely surprising, since such outcomes are often consistent with the realities of politics in Fiji, and elsewhere. So much so that Wales, for example, is considering becoming the world's [first country to introduce laws](#) that would mean politicians could lose their jobs for deliberate lying during election campaigns.

Fijian voters, who may be disillusioned, are not entirely powerless. With elections scheduled for next year, they may well turn the tables on their representatives by springing a few surprises of their own at the ballot box. Governance, after all, is a shared responsibility between the government and the governed. Voters usually get the government they vote for, and recent experiences would be a reminder of the importance of informed participation in politics, and the prudent use of voting power.

Especially when, as a nation, Fiji has a long and arguably worsening experience with unfulfilled or broken promises, whether by politicians or coup leaders.

Fiji's coup culture and its fallout are a reminder of the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

The 1987 and 2000 coups were carried out by political and military elites claiming to represent indigenous iTaukei interests, while the 2006 coup was justified on the grounds of good governance, equality and national unity. It is safe to assume that none of these utopian promises have fully materialised. The country appears more divided than ever, and too many people still remain trapped in poverty. According to [World Bank estimates](#), of the roughly 258,000 people (29.9%) in poverty, about 75% are iTaukei, which underscores how ordinary communities bear the costs of elite power struggles rather than benefit from them.

Coup instigators' rhetoric is one thing, but what is more troubling is that our elected leaders increasingly seem unbothered by going back on their word — even by their own low standards of keeping election promises. Granted, structural pressures typical of a young, transitional democracy like Fiji can make reforms around debt

and budget deficits quite complex and difficult to achieve.

However, successive governments are failing even when it comes to basic good governance policies and practices, which are often the pillars of sustainable development.

As part of its self-proclaimed “clean-up campaign”, the ousted FijiFirst Government promised many things, including merit-based appointments to boards and other government positions.

Instead, **appointments were frequently made** on the basis of offspring, as at the Fiji Sports Council; siblings, as at the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation; and in-laws and cronies in various other institutions.

This was rightly criticised ad nauseam by the Coalition when in opposition, with the promise to address it once in power. But has the Coalition honoured its word, or are we just seeing more of the same?

Some observers have argued that under the FijiFirst Government, appointments made in the name of merit had disproportionately marginalised iTaukei representation in certain areas. Against this backdrop, the Coalition’s approach to appointments has been described by some as a form of “rebalancing” by prioritising iTaukei candidates. The concern now being raised is whether the pendulum may have swung too far in the other direction, and whether appointments continue to be made largely based on family ties, clanship, kinship and friendship.

These questions are not just about due process: appointments to key positions also shape the country’s long-term progress and development. In this context, merit should not become an afterthought, nor should appointments result in any form of blatant exclusion, as both can undermine confidence in the system, with the risk of exacerbating Fiji’s brain drain dilemma across all ethnicities, including among qualified iTaukei.

This possibility was **obliquely raised recently** by none other than the Chair of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) Ratu Viliame Seruvakula who stated that Fiji needed other races to progress. “If every other race left Fiji, we’d be doing exactly what we were doing to cause more pain to the country.”

As Truman noted, politics can be a dirty game. To make politics cleaner, politicians must be accountable, with a longer-term vision for the country. One way to make politicians take voters seriously is to punish them at the polls if they fail to keep their promises.

This is the path to a healthier, performance-based political system that facilitates development — driven by the fear of and respect for the voter’s power. This depends not only on politicians, but also on an engaged, ethical and informed electorate that votes on issues, rather than on the basis of race, religion, party or personality.

As the country entered 2026, Prime Minister Rabuka offered a welcoming and constructive **New Year’s message**, emphasising teamwork, unity and inclusiveness: “Fijians must work together with faith, hope, and shared responsibility to overcome challenges and build a stronger, united nation.”

The prime minister reminded the country that the Coalition Government was elected on a “promise of integrity, inclusion and reform”. Since these virtues were the Coalition’s mantra and its winning formula in the 2022 elections, the government would do well to apply this thinking consistently in its day-to-day decisions and long-term vision for the country.

The bottom line, as alluded to by the GCC chair, is that indigenous leadership now plays a central role in shaping Fiji’s political direction. With that power comes a duty to build a country that works for future generations of iTaukei while also ensuring that ethnic minorities continue to feel included and valued as equal stakeholders in a shared future.

Disclosures:

The views expressed are those of the author only.

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