

Fiji politics: generational change is neither optional nor easy

by Ro Naulu Mataitini

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Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka attends a groundbreaking ceremony for the New Valley Processing and Cold Chain Facility in Nadi on 8 May 2025

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As Fiji inches toward the 2026 general elections, our nation stands at a pivotal juncture. The question looming over our political future is not merely about policies or party platforms but about identity. Can a country still haunted by the ghosts of its coups and constitutional crises — embodied in the figures who orchestrated them — truly evolve if it remains chained to the architects of its turbulent past?

At the heart of this reckoning is Prime Minister Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka — a man whose life mirrors Fiji's jagged political arc. The same hands that orchestrated two coups in 1987 now position him as a reconciler, a bridge-builder in our fractured democracy. Yet to many, especially our youth who make up over 60% of the population, Rabuka embodies a paradox: a figure of division masquerading as a unifier, a relic of the past steering a nation desperate to move forward.

Fiji's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offers a rare chance to confront this paradox. Modeled after South Africa's post-apartheid process, the TRC's success hinges not only on Rabuka's willingness to surrender to transparency but also on the cooperation of Fiji's entrenched power brokers. At the apex, stands Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the Turaga Tui Cakau (High Chief), whose influence on Rabuka and traditional Vanua Levu's chiefly hierarchies (Vanua) looms large.

Rabuka's acts of reconciliation — accepting apologies, preaching unity — have been politically shrewd but symbolically shallow. They sidestep the elephant in the room: immunity. The constitutional clauses shielding him and others from prosecution for past coups remain intact, mocking Fiji's claims to justice. For the TRC to transcend political theatre, Rabuka must pair radical accountability with strategic diplomacy.

Here's what that courage could look like:

1. Testify, don't obfuscate. Rabuka must detail his role in the 1987 coups before the

TRC—not with vague regret, but with raw honesty about their human toll and democratic vandalism. This would lend credibility to the TRC and signal that no one, not even a Chief, is above the nation’s right to the truth.

2. Tear down the immunity shield. As prime minister, he could lead the charge to scrap coup-related immunity from the constitution. Yes, this risks his own prosecution — but it would dismantle the legal loopholes that incentivize future power grabs.

3. Resign to reignite — but not without a plan. After catalyzing these reforms, Rabuka should step down. Yet his exit must be negotiated. To avoid destabilising the People’s Alliance Party (PAP), he must secure the Tui Cakau’s endorsement of a successor. Only then could he pivot from strongman to statesman, prioritising Fiji’s future over his foothold in power.

Generational change isn’t optional — but it’s far from simple. Fiji’s demographic reality is impossible to ignore. A youth bulge pulses with energy, digital fluency and impatience with the cycles of coup and counter-coup. Yet, the political arena remains dominated by figures like Rabuka, whose careers began with guns, not ballots. The PAP’s deputy party leaders and ranks represent an untapped bridge to this younger electorate. But their rise is eclipsed by Rabuka’s enduring dominance and the “regional kingmakers”, who hold the keys to power.

The danger of clinging to old guard leaders is not just ideological; it is existential. Climate change, economic inequality, and technological disruption demand agile, forward-thinking governance. Yet, Fiji’s political transition must also navigate the ambitions of potential PAP successors and their hunger for power.

Rabuka’s defenders argue that his experience “stabilises” Fiji’s fragile coalition. But stability without justice is stagnation. The 2026 elections will reveal whether Fiji’s democracy values accountability—or still cowers before the ghosts of its past.

To win, any successor must reckon with a “kingmaker role”, a lesson from Ratu Naiqama’s 2001 Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua split that left then Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase perpetually indebted. Today, the Tui Cakau’s loyalty to Rabuka is both an asset and a shackle. A smooth transition requires Rabuka to persuade his High Chief to back a reformist successor — someone who can appeal to both traditionalists and the youth.

Imagine instead a campaign where parties led by a new generation — unshackled from coup baggage but attuned to regional realities — compete on visions for climate resilience, anti-corruption reforms and equitable development. Imagine a PAP rejuvenated by fresh leadership, its legacy reshaped not by Rabuka’s past, but

by his willingness to broker a future that honors both the Vanua and progress.

History will judge Rabuka not by his ability to cling to power but by his courage to relinquish it — and to negotiate the terms of his exit. His final act could be the greatest service to Fiji: using his influence to dismantle the systems that once protected him, while ensuring his successor inherits both the mantle of leadership and the support of Fiji's fractious power blocs.

The TRC is more than a process; it is a mirror. If Rabuka stares into it unflinchingly — and convinces the Turaga Tui Cakau to peer into it alongside him — he might yet see the statesman he longs to be. If he turns away, history will remember him as the man who could not let go.

Vinaka vakalevu, Prime Minister. The nation awaits your next move — and the alliances you must forge to make it matter.

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