

The Rabuka government: a first-third assessment

by Sadhana Sen

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Photo Credit: (Fiji Parliament)

Ice hockey is, almost uniquely, a game played over three thirds. You won't find much ice hockey in tropical Fiji, but its speed and brutality certainly find parallels in the world of Fijian politics. The Sitiveni Rabuka government is now through one-third of its term. How is it going?

Let's start with the positives.

First, the survival of the government is itself a positive. Managing the relationships between the Prime Minister's People's Alliance Party (PAP) and its partners the National Federation Party (NFP), with five seats, and the "Kingmakers", the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), with three seats, has not been easy, especially given the coalition's majority of just one. While the conservative PAP and NFP share a broad policy platform, SODELPA fought the election on a largely pro-I'Taukei or indigenous platform.

The coalition survived its most serious challenge just last month when the education minister from the swing party SODELPA was banished to the backbenches, officially for "**insubordination and disobedience**". SODELPA threatened to withdraw its support for the government but, when the education portfolio was assigned to SODELPA Party Leader and Deputy PM Bill Gavoka, stayed on.

The new government has been positive for parliamentary democracy with debates delivering quite thorough scrutiny of government policies and laws, and issues of concern to citizens. The new opposition minus coup-leader and former prime minister Frank Bainimarama and his controversial deputy Aiyaz Khaiyum (both of whom have resigned and are facing various criminal charges) is seemingly working collegially, almost in a bi-partisan manner, in parliamentary discussions, avoiding the acrimony of previous years.

Second, within the government's first hundred days a draconian **media decree was removed**, paving the way for the re-emergence of a free media. The government

has resumed advertising in the Fiji Times – which the previous government effectively boycotted. While the political leanings of the various media outlets creep in occasionally, the media is now on the whole free to present its news and analysis in a critical fashion. That's a major achievement.

Gone too are the petty harassments of the previous government. The University of the South Pacific is once again receiving funding from its host government and its vice-chancellor has had his freedom of movement restored. Academics and citizens alike are free to engage in political analysis and commentary, and under their own names.

Third, on the economic front, the new government has taken bold measures on fiscal policy and debt sustainability, including raising the GST rate from 10% to 15%.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the military has largely stayed on the sidelines, despite its past predilection for coups and its official “guardian” role now under section 131 of the constitution. It remains to be seen how the [appointment of a former military man](#) and minor chief as chair of the restored Great Council of Chiefs plays out.

The negatives for this government are really about what it has not been able to achieve, as well as the danger it faces of falling into the same poor governance habits as the previous Fiji First government.

First, while tourism has shown strong recovery, out-migration — temporary and permanent — continues to be the preferred option for many Fijians. The new government has made it easier for immigrants to enter Fiji to fill skill gaps, which is good, but the ultimate aim has to be to create a Fiji that all citizens want to live in. That can only be achieved with better health care, educational and employment opportunities, assured property rights, and a greater sense that the country does indeed have a bright future.

Second, independence of the judiciary was a matter of concern under the previous administration. A judicial revamp is under way but restoring faith in the legal and judicial system will take some time yet.

Third, in the later years of the Fiji First government there was much outcry against various Fiji First excesses, in particular appointments that reflected cronyism. The Coalition has attempted to be more inclusive and conciliatory than Fiji First was, honouring most civil service appointments and contracts signed under the previous government. However, the Rabuka government has also drawn on its networks and supporters to fill leadership positions in government departments, statutory boards and diplomatic missions, with some appointments not necessarily based on merit.

Fourth, male dominance of politics continues, with little effort to address the poor representation of women in leadership. The ruling PAP's removal on 5 March of its sole female cabinet minister, the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, Linda Tabuya, from the Deputy Leader position for an alleged sex and drug scandal smacks of hypocrisy.

Party Secretary Usaia Waqatairewa said in a press statement, "The People's Executive Council particularly considered the severe and likely irreparable damage and disrepute that the scandal and the allegations surrounding it had brought to the party's image and reputation". Given Rabuka's blemished record, and the many rumours surrounding him, such a tough call in the case of Tabuya, even if she showed poor judgement, is a bunch of patriarchal pots calling a kettle black.

Fifth, Fiji's border security has again been in the headlines with the seizure of more than four tons of methamphetamine with a value of over **FJ\$2million** in Nadi, in relation to which 13 people have **been charged**. While much of this was reportedly destined for the Australian and New Zealand markets, there are numerous reports of police corruption in connection with drug movements, and **increased drug use** locally, including among school children.

The honeymoon period for the Rabuka government is now certainly over. The governing coalition formed in order to end the 16-year rule of Bainimarama and Khaiyum. The further those two recede into history, the harder it will be to hold the coalition together. That said, the longer that democracy operates normally in Fiji, the better for all. It is still early days in the post-Bainimarama period, and many of the biggest challenges lie ahead. The few gains made in the first third of this term need to be consolidated in the next two, with better governance and leadership.

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