

The Status of Teachers in Fiji's Emerging Democracy¹

Biman Prasad
Professor of Economics and
Chair of the Oceania Development Network

¹ Keynote Address delivered at the Annual Fiji Teachers Union Convention on 30 April, 2013, at the Khastriya Hall, Suva,

1. Introduction

The President of the Fiji Teachers Union, Mr. Muniappa Gounder
The Honourable Minister for Education, Mr. Filipe Bole
The General Secretary of the Fiji Teachers Union, Mr. Agni Deo Singh
President of the FTU Suva, Branch.
Permanent Secretary of Education, Dr. Brij Lal
Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic corps
Members of the FTU
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

I feel very privileged and honoured to address the members of the Fiji Teachers Union this morning. I have vivid memories of my primary and secondary school days and of my teachers, who were members of the Fiji Teachers Union and Fijian Teachers Association. Memories of little words of encouragement, of learning moral values, of the right to express oneself, the need to respect others rights, the freedom to play, have fun and enjoy school life are just some of those. Opportunities provided to become class, house and school prefects were all very uplifting experiences in the formative years of my life

Today I want to remember those teachers, many of whom are still around, but some who have left us. I want to especially salute all the primary school teachers present here for their dedication and hard-work – you are all doing a great service to our country by teaching our young ones and laying the foundation for their future development. You deserve praise and commendation.

The theme of your convention “The Status of Teachers in Fiji’s Emerging Democracy” is appropriate and timely as we struggle to move towards representative democracy in our country and improve the status of our teachers.

First, let me make some remarks about Fiji’s emerging democracy before I talk about the status of teachers in Fiji.

Democracy in Fiji

The excitement of a new nation being built on the strength of diversity, harmony and shared vision in 1970 was overwhelmingly uplifting for our people and our leaders. In the first decade of independence, we engaged in building our country through development of our economic and social infrastructure. We achieved an average economic growth rate of about 5.5% and we were on a growth trajectory for a long and sustained period of growth and prosperity. However, this growth trajectory was interrupted in 1987, and since then we have continued to struggle and muddle through a poor economy and an unstable democratic path. The abrogation of the 1970 Constitution set us on a path of struggle. We moved away from democratic ideals on which our country was founded when we adopted the discriminatory 1990 Constitution.

The 1997 Constitution which enshrined multiracialism put us back on track, but on May 2000 we fell off the tracks once again. Additionally, the 1997 Constitution was abrogated in 2009 after the military coup of 2006. We now have a new Ghai Draft Constitution and Government 2013 Draft Constitution. The provisions relating to the changes to the new Government draft Constitution requires a 75% majority in parliament and a 75% majority in a national referendum. The change through negotiation based on this requirement appears next to impossible. The only way change might occur is through force in the future. If that happens again, we will slide further into a political quagmire and maintain the vicious circle in this country.

However, we must note and take into account that democracies have not been built overnight. The great democracies of the world went through a process of a virtuous circle. Constitutions were changed peacefully and progressively, and improved through negotiations and discussion, NOT by force. Forced changes do not last. Democracies evolve and move in the right direction through natural process. Force is unnatural to democracy.

Many former colonial countries and now emerging democracies have suffered because they have interrupted the evolutionary process that is important for democracy. They used force, including military coups. They ended up in a worse position than before.

Democracy is not an absolute concept, but it is still an ideal worth aspiring. Democracy no matter, how bad, is often better than autocracy. As Sir Winston Churchill said: "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise.

Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” ([Sir Winston Churchill](#), *Hansard, November 11, 1947 British politician and Prime Minister (1874 - 1965)*).

Any semblance of democracy must be measured through a number of criteria and these should include (1) government’s responsiveness to the popular will and people’s input in whatever decisions are made; (2) respect for human rights and freedom of expression must be upheld at all times and clearly enshrined in the constitution; (3) civil society and media organisations must be respected and supported; (4) the rule of law to be respected in all circumstances, especially when the decision of a court is against the state; (5) free and fair elections, and (6) allowing an effective opposition to exist at all times.

Fiji’s 1970 Constitution had provisions for a review. In fact a review was conducted under the Street Commission, which recommended a move towards a more open and less communal electoral system. Leaders at that time, shirked away from their responsibilities in terms of making those progressive changes. Had they acted boldly, we might have been in a better place as a country today. The leaders after the 1994 General election had more foresight and achieved a change in the 1990 Constitution through dialogue and discussion, an example we should try and emulate.

Countries pass through critical junctures. These junctures always provide us an opportunity to make good or bad decisions. Fiji has faced several critical junctures in past. We have not always used these critical junctures to create a virtuous circle of improvement and prosperity. Instead, at every critical juncture, we have gone back into a vicious circle of instability and decline.

In the past, we have heard such phrases as democracy is a “foreign flower”, that we need time to have democracy, that we need good democracy, and so on. Today, we still hear from some of our leaders, religious leaders, businessmen and I can say some academics and teachers as well, that democracy can be postponed. One thing that we have not understood in this country since 1987 is that political instability has led to the gutting of Fiji of skills, investment, economic growth and prosperity.

The link between political instability, democracy and economic growth is an important institutional determinant to explain the differences in growth amongst

countries. There is plenty of evidence in the literature that democracy may be the best form of government when it comes to providing stability and certainty regarding economic policies. Generally speaking, democracy is also good for developing inclusive economic institutions.

Fiji has recorded on average a growth rate of just about 2 percent in the last twenty five years because of continuous political instability and lack of inclusive political and economic institutions. Many similar countries have spectacularly outperformed Fiji, growing at a sustained rate of more than 5 percent in the same period. Fiji has languished in poverty, unemployment, with a declining quality of public services and an increasing loss of talent through migration.

Fiji, saw some of the best talents migrate to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America. The proud record of Fiji's civil service before the 1987 coup was destroyed at all levels, with promotions and appointments generally reserved for indigenous Fijians. The policy of positive discrimination and indigenization of the civil service continued under the subsequent governments and it was most pronounced in the provision of scholarships and educational opportunities.

While the Bainimarama government has put in a lot of effort to improve the performance of the civil service by advocating merit based appointments, it has not been too successful because of the culture of entrenched racism and provincialism that still exists. **We are passing through a critical juncture in our history and this is an opportunity for all of to redefine how we build this country for the future. There are many elements in the government today who continue to paddle the culture of racism and mediocrity despite the governments stated intention. Equally there are some in opposition groups who are pushing for democracy yet they continue to paddle a racist view. It will be tragic if this continues. Now is the time to build an inclusive and a non-racist democratic Fiji.**

2. Democracy in the schools and classrooms

Let me now turn to democracy in schools and class rooms.

None of us as parents would want to send our children to a school where they cannot freely express themselves through debate and discussion as this would be counterproductive to their development.

We all expect our children to do well in the school. Whether, we are rich, poor, literate or illiterate. Parents want their children to stay away from drugs, crime and other social ills. I believe that while we may not have a democratic government

right now, our society dreams of a democracy for its children. We want our children to grow up in a free, open, and transparent democratic framework.

Last year when I spoke at the Fijian Teachers Association annual convention, I talked about the need for creativity and innovation in education and how it can be promoted through democratic teaching and learning.

When we talk about creativity and innovation, we need to be aware of the context and environment in which this can happen. The literature on creativity recognizes the paradox about the process of creativity. One aspect is that it requires both introversion and extroversion. It has been established through research over so many years that a creative person must have autonomy. He or she must be connected to the wider society, both locally and internationally, for ideas. He or she must develop a delicate balance between obedience and disobedience.

Therefore the environment in which our children study can determine whether they become conformist or creative and productive. Teachers have an important role in creating a school environment to fit the different needs of our children so that they can think for themselves and ask questions to enhance their understanding of the issues that affect them and that will matter in their lives. Questions like Why do you think your viewpoint is better than mine? How do we know? What is the evidence? What are the alternatives that will promote a better and engaged learning environment, and in their own way promote democratic values? By creating such a school environment we will avoid creating a **‘nation of sheep’** in the future. **As Gandhi once said “Democracy is not a state in which people act like sheep. Under democracy individual liberty of opinion and action is jealously guarded” Teachers have an important responsibility in this regard.**

Since 1987, we have experienced a culture of fear and favour based on ethnicity. More recently we are increasingly experiencing dictatorial attitudes amongst leaders and managers in all sectors of our society; in the civil service, statutory organisations and in some non-governmental organisations and institutions. It is our responsibility to guard against that kind of environment.

Teachers unions must promote a culture of meritocracy and performance when it comes to promotions within the school system. Our societies and communities which run schools continue to perpetuate the ethnic dimensions in the school system. Here, I wish to congratulate Minister Filipe Bole and the Bainimarama government for at least symbolically removing the ethnic dimensions in the naming of the schools and introducing zoning of the schools. If we want quality,

creativity and innovation in education we need to move towards a culture and identity of excellence in our teachers and students.

Creativity and innovation also require a free and democratic environment. School administrators, teachers and students need that academic freedom to articulate different views, engage in free discourse, and debate important issues affecting the country and those beyond the national borders.

So what can teachers do to facilitate and educate our children so that when they grow up, they understand the expectations of living in a democratic society? Within the existing structure, teachers can encourage more democratic values amongst students. For example, schools should have elections for school prefects, including head prefects. This will help students at an early age to understand the process of elections and of the value of choosing their own leaders.

3. Status of teachers

Let me now make some remarks on the status of teachers. Classroom is an important democratic space. Teachers play a crucial role in the cultivation of democratic imagination.

Like every country, Fiji operates its educational system in a way that is defined and underpinned by international and normative principles. The World Declaration on Education for all (EFA) emphasizes the role of the teachers and in our current context it is very relevant to make reference to it. I quote

“The preeminent role of teachers as well as of other educational personnel in providing quality basic education needs to be recognized and developed to optimize their contribution. This must entail measures to respect teachers’ trade union rights and professional freedoms, and to improve their working conditions and status, notably in respect to their recruitment, initial and in-service training, remuneration and career development possibilities, as well as to allow teachers to fulfill their aspirations, social obligations and ethical responsibilities” (World conference on Education For All: Framework for Action, 5-9 March, 1990, Jomtien, Thailand, article 1.6, Para 33, pp.58)

The way in which we perceive the status of teachers depends on a combination of factors and it is relative. The 1996 ILO/ UNESCO defined the status of teachers as follows and I quote

“The expression ‘status’ as used in relation to teachers means both the standing or regard accorded to them, as evidenced by the level of appreciation of the importance of their function and of their competence in performing it, and the working conditions, remuneration and other material benefits accorded to them relative to other professional groups”

In Fiji we can safely say that as a country we have been able to continuously improve our educational objectives, policies, programmes, curricula, text books, physical infrastructure and generally improved facilities for our children. However, teachers remain the single most important factor in determining the quality of teaching. The ability to attract highly motivated, skilled and committed individuals and retaining them in the profession is absolutely vital for improving the quality of education in the increasingly challenging global environment.

The question we need to ask is: are we doing enough to attract and retain skilled and motivated teachers? I think we can accept that the academic and professional status of our teachers is good but there is a need for improvement. We need to move towards a degree requirement for all teachers, whether primary or secondary. This will enhance their academic and professional status.

Secondly, the social status of teachers is also important. The social status of teachers in Fiji in the 1970s and 1980s was very high. There was public recognition and acceptance of teachers as leaders and leading opinion makers in society. They were respected by students and communities alike as promoting moral and ethical standards in society. That status is less evident today, and it may be because of the erosion of professional pride and professional commitment. It is also due to the deteriorating moral and ethical standards amongst some of our teachers. And parents must also take some responsibility in not helping enhance the status of teachers by not meeting their obligations for the provision of quality education. The Fiji Teachers Union and the Fijian Teachers Association must also take some responsibility for the decline in the social status of the teachers.

Thirdly, the economic status of teachers is also very important. While the pay in some categories of the civil service is commensurate with teachers’ pay, they do not commensurate with the expected role and commitment expected from the teachers. **In 2012, the starting salary of primary school teachers was \$13,504, which was less than the annual wage of electricians and plumbers. This means that the starting salary of primary school teachers close to the poverty line income of about \$10,000 per year. This does not contribute to the status of the primary school teachers, and can be remedied only by an increase in salary. I understand that the 2003 Job Review Exercise has not been implemented for**

teachers. We need to raise the status of teachers by recruiting high performing graduates and training them and paying them more. Indeed, it has been established that in countries such as Korea, Singapore and Finland, teaching is considered a high status job.

By contrast, in Fiji there is a tendency to characterize teaching as an easy job, with short hours and long holidays. However, I know that many successful and dedicated teachers in this country work long hours with little pay. Recently, President Obama, speaking about teachers, said: “In South Korea, teachers are known as nation builders and I think it’s time we treated our teachers with the same level of respect.” In Fiji, we need to ask the same set of questions: do we treat our teachers with respect? Are we providing them the tools and the environment for them to achieve the status they deserve in our society? Are they paid well? Do our rural schools have the same facilities and provisions for our teachers and students? Are our Ministry of Education senior officials supporting the work of teachers and administrators? Are they fair? Do they deal with their concerns expeditiously?

The status of teachers has also been affected negatively in an environment of political instability and uncertainty. This has been the case since 1987 and there is no end in sight as yet. Many experienced teachers and school administrators had to leave the service abruptly to migrate as a result of the discrimination they perceived in the civil service. Teacher training, remuneration and working conditions remain static and have hardly improved over the last twenty-five years. To make matters worse, the Bainimarama government implemented an ill-conceived retirement policy, which effectively shuts out productive and experienced teachers after the age of 55. This policy has now been included in the draft Constitution, and will thus commit all future governments to retire teachers at 55. This can surely be questioned: retirement age is a policy matter and NOT a constitutional matter.

4. Role of Teacher Trade Unions in a democracy

Let me now make few remarks about the role of trades unions in safeguarding the rights of workers which includes teachers as well. The decree restricting trade union rights is a regressive move and it is not in the long-term interest of workers or democracy. The government should remove those and other restrictions on the trade unions in the country. It is unfortunate that the Bainimarama government has engaged in an unnecessary process of union bashing. Additionally, the provisions

in the political party decree and now included in the Government 2013 draft Constitution are thoroughly undemocratic features.

The Fiji Teachers Union has a proud history and has been led by prominent teachers who became effective politicians. The FTU has been a good training ground for leaders and indeed over the years they have produced many good leaders including our friend Mr. Krishna Datt. I know that FTU runs a very successful credit union and a medical insurance scheme and this is commendable. I do, however, feel that many of your members are now shying away from community leadership roles and active engagement. This is a role that they should accept. Communities are expecting a great deal from you.

Union movement world-wide is faced with dwindling memberships and it is becoming more difficult to organise and attract members. Members of unions are increasingly demanding returns to their membership. They are demanding better rights, wages, salaries and working conditions, and unions are finding it difficult to provide these. The changing structure of the economy from agriculture and manufacturing to services is also a factor. Service workers are mobile, often on short contracts, and are reluctant to join unions. However, the good news is that unions in some part of the world are adapting to these new challenges. They are seeing their union members as customers. They are providing more services to their members. The union movement in Fiji must look at some of the new business models to see how they can adapt to the changing times.

Let me also say that while some trade unions and their leaders have not always been principled, this should not be used to penalize the whole union movement. At this point I want to make this call again and say that the Union movement in Fiji must unite. Leaders have to set aside their differences now and work towards a common goal of restoring democracy and worker's rights in this country. Some union leaders have made terrible mistakes in this country by pursuing their personal agendas and compromising their principles after the 2006 coup. This is a critical juncture for the union movement and they can either waste this opportunity or grab this opportunity to unite. If they don't unite now, they are unlikely to unite in the future. Even, after we have a democratically elected government, unions are likely to remain weak and fragmented. This is the time to do so - and this time will pass sooner than later.

5. Concluding Comments

There is no doubt that the aspirations of all Fijians are generally the same. Whether we like the Bainimarama government or not, whether we are aligned to his government or not, whether one is a soldier, civilian, Christian, Hindu or Muslim, rich or poor, we all want peace, prosperity and freedom. It is generally believed that “a successful nation has three attributes: politically it is free and democratic, economically it is prosperous and equitable; and socially, it is peaceful and cohesive”². We are at a juncture in our history where our economic, social and political problems have become chronic and are no longer temporary. Our economic problems have become structural not cyclical. We have a deteriorating infrastructure, and lack investment and confidence, all of which adds up to poor economic growth.

Our growth rate in the last 25 years has been poor but, especially in the last 7 years, it has been dismal. The average growth rate has been only 0.6 percent of GDP and with this level of growth we can hardly achieve acceptable levels of services and facilities for our people and generate enough jobs for them. Formal sector employment has not grown in the last six years. Much of the employment created has been mainly in the informal sector. Indeed, close to 40% of those employed are in the informal sector, where wages are very low. While the 2013 budget has increased the tax threshold, it is not going to address the concerns of those employed in the informal sector and in some of the lower paid private sectors. The failure of the wages council to address the appropriate wage rise for those workers in these sectors will continue to keep many families in the poverty trap. Indeed, the immediate prospect for employment looks bleak. The National Employment Centre (NEC) data show that since 2010 a total of 26,000 unemployed persons have registered but only a small number – around 1,400 - have been able to secure full time employment. More challenging is the high level of youth unemployment. 12,000 out of the total of 26,000 are between the age of 15-24 and of these more than 6,000 are females.

Some estimates suggest that probably 18-20 thousand women have left being full-time housewives to try and make ends meet within the households. Additionally, we see more and more underemployment where people are idle and working for few hours. Wages and salaries have not risen much in the last six years and, if we take inflation into account, real incomes of most households have deteriorated. The incidence of national poverty has increased and it is definitely more than 31% in 2008-2009. Some estimates now put that to 45% and it could be approaching 50%.

² See Gurucharan Dass (2002) “The Elephant Paradigm”; Penguin Books.

While it makes sense for government to borrow to finance infrastructure it should be careful about the total national debt, which has increased from \$2 billion in 2006 to more than \$4 billion in 2012.

What we need more than ever is a national and collective leadership to address the chronic problem of low growth, low employment, low confidence levels and low investment. This can come through inclusive political and economic institutions for all our people and these can be achieved through inclusive political dialogue.

In a recent paper I said the following and I think I was very generous:

In the area of economic policy, the Bainimarama government has done some 'cleaning up'. This includes dismantling the telecom monopoly and not pandering to powerful indigenous Fijian interest in land and other natural resources, and also dealing firmly with powerful business interests. On the negative side, the overall thrust of looking inward to consider import-substitution strategies may be a regressive step.

Commodore Frank Bainimarama, notwithstanding the many controversial decisions on issues since the military coup of 2006, has the best chance as a Fijian leader to leave a legacy of good economic and political institutions for the future generations. Commodore Bainimarama and his government is probably at a stage where it needs support and probably better advice on its strategy in moving the process of building confidence and national reconciliation in a sustainable manner. It is also incumbent on Commodore Bainimarama to deal with the issue of the Fiji military – its size, its role in future and how to prevent more coups.

However, it is now extremely disappointing to see the twists and turns with respect to the planned adoption of the new Constitution and the proposed elections. Any Constitution and Election imposed against the will of the people will not be sustainable. The Bainimarama government can leave a legacy if it adopts a principled approach towards the formulation of the new Constitution and provides an environment for free and fair elections in 2014. It is not too late for the government to form a Constituent Assembly to debate both the Ghai draft and the Government 2013 Draft and arrive at Constitution which could have broad support in the country. However, if we continue with the twists and turns and do not adopt an inclusive and transparent process to implement a new constitution and have free and fair elections, we will not be able to restore confidence in this country in the short to medium term. Our economic woes are likely to continue.

As far as our teachers are concerned they deserve courtesy, respect and dignity. They are a powerful force for nation building. They must be rewarded accordingly and their salary structure should be reviewed so that their economic status is further improved. Teachers, however, must also play their part. More than ever, we need teachers who can be passionate about teaching, providing community leadership, and encouraging creativity and innovation amongst our children.

While the Ministry of Education has undertaken some commendable reforms and policy intervention, senior officials working with teachers and school administrators must ensure that they are efficient, that they are compassionate, that they understand the concerns of teachers and deal with their problems in an amicable and collegial manner. Additionally, they must ensure that the reforms are adequately resourced.

Our children are our future and we all have a responsibility to support them so that they grow up to become good citizens. I will leave you with the thoughts of Nelson Mandela (as quoted in Reginald McKnight's *Wisdom of the African World*, New World Library, 1996.

"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another"

I thank you for the invitation once again and wish you all the best in your deliberations in the next few days. It is a pleasure to declare your convention open.