

*Smart Sanctions, Hollow Gestures,
and Multilateral Sport: New Zealand–Fiji
Relations and the Politics of Professional
Rugby, 1987–2011*

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The emergence of globally focused and market-driven sporting structures since the late 1980s, and specifically the professionalization of rugby union from August 1995, has fundamentally altered the relationship between sport and politics in New Zealand—a country in which rugby, if not as firmly entrenched as it once was, remains the dominant sport. The indecisive, and some would say meaningless, stance of successive New Zealand governments in relation to sporting, especially rugby union, contacts with Fiji following military coups in 1987, 2000, and 2006 is perhaps surprising in view of the close association between rugby and the coup leaders. Hence, this paper traverses the nexus between rugby and political power in Fiji, establishes the context in which it might have been expected that New Zealand governments *should* have pursued strong sanctions, and proffers some explanations as to why they did not. This is in part a comparison of the effectiveness or otherwise of sporting sanctions as a foreign policy tool in different bilateral and multilateral contexts. At issue is the shift after 1995 from bilateral rugby exchanges during the amateur era to the corporate demands of a globally focused professional game with a regular cycle of tournaments in which each host nation was bound by reciprocal obligations determined by the International Rugby Board (IRB). Equally, this paper is an examination of a very public debate, much of it played out in mainstream media, in which the New Zealand government struggled to reconcile popular sporting sentiment with its preferred regional foreign policy outcomes. Here the defining feature is that international sport as a public spectacle, and the specific context of rugby tournaments in which

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Fiji was a very attractive proposition, assumes rather different dimensions than the relatively closed world of high-level diplomatic negotiations involving a select few or economic, travel, and other sanctions that seldom have an easily discernible impact on a broader domestic audience.

This discussion draws on a body of scholarship on sport and international relations that emerged in the early 2000s. While the traditional conception among sporting administrators and supporters that sport and politics are not, or should not, be connected (Richards 1999; Templeton 1998) still holds sufficient sway to make politicians wary of antagonizing it, there is abundant evidence of authoritarian regimes in particular deliberately embracing sport as a component of their diplomacy. Where international relations scholars were traditionally preoccupied with the “high politics” of security, military power, and diplomacy, the conception has broadened to account for globalization and a myriad of interactions between societies, such as via transnational corporations and other non-state actors, including international sports bodies. If sport is not central to the international system, it certainly provides a valuable perspective to understand it (Levermore and Budd 2004, 6–9; Black and Peacock 2013, 708–713). But as Simon Rofe explained, there is an important distinction to be made between “sport-as-diplomacy,” or negotiations that take place during and surrounding sporting occasions such as the Olympics, and the “international diplomacy of sport,” whereby governments utilize sport to pursue policy and national interests (Rofe 2016, 214). What follows is primarily concerned with the latter from the perspective of both Fiji and New Zealand.

The case of South Africa is integral to understanding New Zealand’s responses to Fiji. Beyond an older scholarship that generally rejected the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of statecraft (Nossal 1989, 301–302), and notwithstanding that it is difficult to separate the impact of one type of sanction from a range of pressures for change, it is generally agreed that sporting sanctions were more successful than other kinds against apartheid South Africa. Whereas politicians frequently attempt to draw international sporting triumphs into projections of national identity and unity, the isolation of sports-mad white South Africans from international competition served as a punishment that delegitimized the state, set a precedent for other sanctions, and ultimately became a political liability (Black and Peacock 2013, 712; Black 1999, 213–219, 226–227). New Zealand rugby defied the international trend and continued contact with South Africa to the point where the country as a whole came under severe international

pressure to conform during the 1970s and 1980s (Booth 1998; Richards 1999; Templeton 1998). But the emergence of a democratic South Africa, and its readmission to international sport in the early 1990s, prompted many supporters of the old regime, or at least proponents of the maxim that sport and politics should not mix, to acknowledge that their previous conduct in encouraging sporting contacts had been a mistake. The apology by New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger to South African President Nelson Mandela for the 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand is a case in point (Bolger 1996). While there are fundamental differences of history, political alignments, and scale between the South African and Fijian cases, New Zealand politicians and media frequently drew parallels between the two after the 2000 coup in particular.

RUGBY AND FIJIAN IDENTITY

Rugby union was being played in Fiji by 1884, if not earlier, between British soldiers and members of the Native Constabulary. Europeans initially dominated the game, but by the early twentieth century there were separate club competitions for *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijians). Although the Fiji Rugby Union, formed in 1913, continued under the executive control of European elites and the patronage of British governors until Fiji's independence in 1970, it was clear by the 1930s that the playing strength of rugby resided with *iTaukei* (Collins 2016, 346–349; Dewey 2009, 159–160). Rugby became strongly linked to an *iTaukei* male sense of self and of masculinity as it intersected with kinship obligations, religious faith, and strong belief in chiefly authority. As in many other settings, the game was central to the moral training of the military and to producing elite leadership, both military and political. Army and police teams dominated local competition, and many leading players had strong military connections (Schieder 2012, 26–27). Not well represented on the rugby field, if at all, were Indo-Fijians—descendants of indentured laborers who were later augmented by free migration from India (Cattermole 2008, 99–100). This absence would have a bearing on events at the end of the twentieth century.

Before long, rugby assumed an intercolonial and then international dimension. From 1924, Fiji played regularly against Sāmoa and Tonga. A New Zealand Māori team toured Fiji in 1938, and an entirely *iTaukei* team reciprocated with a tour to New Zealand the following year (Swan 1948, 441–442, 507). Fiji toured New Zealand again in 1951, drew test

series with Australia in 1952 and 1954, and toured Europe for the first time in 1964. From the 1970s, it was evident that Fiji's strength lay in the seven-a-side more than the fifteen-a-side game. Following the inauguration of the Hong Kong Sevens tournament in 1976, Fiji won in 1977, 1978, 1980, and 1984. Given the team's overall pedigree, it was inevitable that the IRB would invite Fiji to the first Rugby World Cup (RWC), held in New Zealand and Australia in May and June 1987—an event that coincided with the first military coup in Fiji (Peatey 2007, 36).

THE 1987 COUPS AND BEYOND

In April 1987, Dr Timoci Bavadra—an iTaukei, but with majority support from the Indo-Fijian community—led a coalition to general election victory over the Alliance Party of long-serving Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and established Fiji's first majority Indo-Fijian government. Yet, and despite iTaukei political paramountcy being guaranteed under the constitution, Bavadra was forcibly removed from office on 14 May in a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka (Sharpham 2000, 88–109). Surprisingly, in view of the High Court injunction that had prevented the New Zealand All Blacks from touring South Africa two years earlier and the backlash against the rebel Cavaliers team that effectively circumvented that injunction the following year (Templeton 1998, 268–272), there was no sign of any protest against Fiji's participation in the 1987 Rugby World Cup. Rather, there was a sense that the team was a victim of events beyond its control (Peatey 2007, 36–37).

The coup took everyone, including New Zealand's Labour government, by surprise, as it was the first military coup in the South Pacific. Notwithstanding Labour's long tradition of "moral" foreign policy and willingness to condemn breaches of human rights and democracy, including in apartheid South Africa (McKinnon 1993), and although Prime Minister David Lange described the coup as "abhorrent," the government was determined to resolve the matter by constitutional means rather than through trade sanctions or a suggested peacekeeping force (McCraw 2009, 268–269). More to the point, it soon became apparent that other South Pacific states were more inclined to put Indigenous rights above democracy and criticized New Zealand for attempting to impose its own values on a situation it did not understand. At the end of May, New Zealand pragmatically acquiesced to the consensus of the Pacific Islands Forum in not taking any firm position against Fiji. By the time Fiji departed from the Rugby World

Cup on 6 June, the Lange government had retreated from its demand for the reinstatement of the Bavadra government, instead putting its trust in compromise proposals involving constitutional change being developed by Fiji's Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau (McCraw 2009, 270–271).

After a period of inconclusive negotiation, Rabuka staged a second coup on 25 September 1987, deposed the governor-general, and consolidated his own position as Fiji's leader. On 7 October, he declared the country a republic (Sharpham 2000, 131–133). Two months later, Rabuka guided the return of a nominally civilian government, with Ratu Ganilau as president and Ratu Mara as prime minister. While New Zealand was not enamored of the new government, it now tended to concede to the right of Fiji to make its own decisions. Indeed, the National government elected in 1990 took a very pragmatic stance in concluding that restoration of high-level political contact and largely normal relations was in New Zealand's regional strategic interest, even if the Fiji government and the underpinning constitution adopted in 1990 were not ideal due to their emphasis on iTaukei dominance rather than multiracialism (McCraw 2009, 272–279).

In one specific context, the National government's noninterventionist position could be regarded as somewhat inconsistent in that they appeared to acknowledge the long-term power of protest and boycott strategies. Reflecting on the 1981 Springbok rugby tour during a state visit to South Africa in August 1996, Prime Minister Bolger observed: "The tour was a mistake. In the final analysis, New Zealanders came to a more mature appreciation that we could not isolate ourselves—nor pursue our domestic preoccupations—as if we were divorced from a broader responsibility to promote racial equality and good governance elsewhere" (Bolger 1996). In turn, President Mandela noted that protests against the tour and the strength of the wider anti-apartheid campaign were a source of great inspiration to himself and other long-serving prisoners of the apartheid regime: "The sun shone into the dark cells of Robin Island and transformed the oppressive Soweto dungeons of despair into beacons of hope" (South African Consulate 2006).

In the 1990s, there was no evidence that anyone took the struggle and eventual democratic transformation of South Africa as a model to challenge Fiji's appearances at the Rugby World Cup and on the growing international sevens circuit, especially after rugby became openly professional in 1995. The explanation is partly a matter of scale. Unlike South Africa, histories of institutionalized racism in Fiji had not attracted the

opprobrium of the developing world during the era of decolonization. Indeed, the ambivalent reaction of its Pacific neighbors to the 1987 coups confirms that there was no consensus on the Fijian situation among decolonized nations. Further, following Malcolm MacLean's model, there were distinctive features of the sports boycott of South Africa that did not apply to Fiji. First, notwithstanding moments of rugby success and their importance to iTaukei culture, sport as a whole did not then dominate Fijian identity with quite the same scale and intensity as it had with white South African identity or as it would with iTaukei identity in the coming years. Second, there was no boycott call from oppressed groups within Fiji as had been the case in South Africa, and there was no alternative sporting structure in the form of nonracial sporting bodies to leverage protest (MacLean 2014, 1838). Third, as well as sport, the boycott strategy against South Africa gained traction from a variety of economic, political, and sociocultural restrictions that were adhered to by the majority of the international community (MacLean 2010, 79–80). By contrast, Fiji, with a population that only reached eight hundred thousand during the late 1990s, does not produce commodities for global markets or receive any close political scrutiny beyond the Pacific region.

THE 2000 COUP, RUGBY, AND IDENTITY

At the turn of the century, the seeming disconnect between Fijian politics and sport was certainly put to the test. In May 1999, Rabuka's coalition was defeated by an alliance of Indo-Fijian parties led by Mahendra Chaudhry, who became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister. However, on 19 May 2000, after barely a year in office, Chaudhry, his cabinet, and most other members of Parliament were taken hostage in the House of Representatives by a group of civilian gunmen led by iTaukei ethnonationalist George Speight, who insisted that the rights of iTaukei were being oppressed by the Indo-Fijian minority. The president, Ratu Mara, immediately denounced the coup and declared a state of emergency. The following day, the military and police pledged loyalty to him. On 29 May, the military commander, Commodore Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama, believing that Ratu Mara was not handling the situation effectively, declared himself head of an interim military government, established martial law, and revoked the constitution. Although Speight and the military signed an accord on 9 July and the remaining hostages were released four days later, Speight was arrested on 27 July and charged with treason. Rather

than returning the elected Chaudhry government to power, Bainimarama picked iTaukei Laisenia Qarase to lead an interim government. Meanwhile, Fiji had been suspended from the Commonwealth on 7 June due to its abrogation of democracy (Field, Baba, and Nabobo-Baba 2005, 73–113).

Before exploring New Zealand's reactions to these events, it is essential to examine the growing nexus between militarism and rugby in coup-era Fiji and the importance of the game in fostering identity and projecting images of unity. Although Fiji failed to qualify for the 1995 Rugby World Cup and did not reach the quarterfinals in either 1999 or 2003, it continued to enhance its reputation at sevens—reaching the semifinals of the first Rugby World Cup Sevens tournament in 1993 and winning the event in 1997 and 2005, both times in Hong Kong (Rugby World Cup 2017; HSBC World Rugby Cup Sevens Series 2018). Fiji also secured silver medals at the 1998 and 2002 Commonwealth Games (Commonwealth Sport Federation 2020a, 2020b). Fiji was regarded as one of the star attractions when the IRB inaugurated a new World Rugby Sevens Series in late 1999. This consisted of ten tournaments each year in different countries, including Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. During the first season, in which Fiji hosted a tournament in Suva in February 2000, Fiji and New Zealand each won five tournaments, confirming that theirs was the most important rivalry in the game (Starmer-Smith 2000). In parallel with these team successes, and arguably more significant to global rugby as a whole, from the 1980s, individual Fijian players were highly sought after by clubs and provinces in Australasia, the United Kingdom and Europe, and Japan. While it is hard to calculate the number of Fijian players in Australia and New Zealand, where statistics frequently refer only to the total of Pacific players, the best estimate is that five hundred Fijians were contracted overseas by 2006 (Dewey 2008, 87–89). Aside from their dynamism as players, they were also cheaper to contract than players from the traditional rugby powers. The remittance payments many of these players transferred back to families in Fiji also became economically significant. As Niko Besnier and coauthors observed, amid the economic, structural, and social changes in Fiji as a consequence of the coups, “one of the most important means available to young iTaukei men to both demonstrate their masculinity and redeem themselves as useful citizens is playing rugby” (2018, 856–857).

Coup leaders and successive governments sought legitimacy from a close association with rugby and came to see it as key to unity and recon-

ciliation, notwithstanding that the game scarcely embraced Indo-Fijians. Indeed, amid the undermining of chiefly authority and other challenges to social cohesion, the utility of rugby was further enhanced (Schieder 2012, 26). Teresia Teaiwa observed that by the early 2000s the Fiji government was reportedly spending more on rugby than any other sport and regarded it as just as important as peacekeeping for national prestige. She went on to explain that, “as cultural expressions of idealized masculinity, it makes sense that military and rugby institutions would recognize and collaborate on their mutual interests” (Teaiwa 2005, 213). The longstanding association with politics was further reinforced by Ratu Mara serving as president of the Fiji Rugby Union throughout his tenure as prime minister from 1970 to 1987 and again during the 1990s. Successive commanders of the Fiji military later occupied the position (Teaiwa 2005, 213). Fiji’s victory in the 2005 Rugby World Cup Sevens epitomized the centrality of rugby to government objectives toward reconciliation and unity. Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi informed the team that “what is truly inspiring and wonderful, is the way in which your victory has brought all of us together. . . . As you played each game and advanced in the competition, we followed your progress as one. . . . It is my hope and earnest prayer that the happiness and good feelings generated by your win will further national unity. Too often, we hide behind our ethnic origins. Too often, we think too hard to try and understand each other. Today we are all proud Fiji islanders” (quoted in Cattermole 2008, 102–103). Similarly, in his victory speech on the public holiday declared in honor of the team, Prime Minister Qarase told them: “Your triumph becomes ours, your joy was our joy. All our different peoples were as one, sharing in the honour, the achievement and fame you earned for Fiji. We are a nation rejoicing as never before, a nation unified, differences cast aside because of what you have done” (quoted in Cattermole 2008, 103). While there was some evidence of emerging Indo-Fijian support for rugby, it was certainly not on the scale suggested here. Beyond internal considerations, Fiji explicitly used rugby as a “soft power” strategy to try to legitimize the regime internationally. Although this is more difficult to achieve when not actually hosting major sporting events, the success of Fijian teams overseas and of individual Fijian players contracted overseas was still a strong embodiment of the nation (Connell 2018; Guinness and Besnier 2016).

RUGBY AND THE NEW ZEALAND RESPONSE

Immediately following the May 2000 coup, New Zealand's Labour government explicitly referenced South Africa in its response. Prime Minister Helen Clark declared that "Fiji has to be aware that the path it is on of denying the normal democratic rights to a minority because of their race is utterly unacceptable. The last country that had a constitution like that was South Africa, and we know what eventually happened to it" (*Evening Post*, 26 May 2000). Foreign Minister Phil Goff added, "If we're not careful, we're going to end up with a small South Africa in our own back yard. It's completely unacceptable" (*The Press*, 27 May 2000). While the government steered away from economic sanctions that could impact the Fijian population as a whole, its range of "smart sanctions" included cutting military ties, banning those associated with Speight from entering New Zealand, and imposing an initial six month ban on visits by Fijian sports teams (McCraw 2009, 279; *The Press*, 27 May 2000). The first impact of the six-month ban was the cancellation of two matches scheduled for the Fijian rugby team in late June. However, in a portent of complexities to come, the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) rejected a call from the Council of Trade Unions to withdraw the New Zealand team from the upcoming Paris Sevens tournament in which Fiji was also competing. NZRU chairman Murray McCaw said that while the union was sympathetic to concerns over what was happening in Fiji and did not want to see a "democracy destroyed," it was a "totally different thing" to take action in an international sevens tournament hosted in the northern hemisphere (*Evening Post*, 26 May 2000). In mid-June, the *Evening Post* editorialized that the decision to withhold sporting visas was sad but inevitable, adding that "in reality, it will achieve little, but sports-mad Fijians, Speight included, will get the message that what they've done is unacceptable" (*Evening Post*, 14 June 2000). However, this sentiment did not gain global traction, as a small Fijian team competed at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games without the slightest sign of protest.

At the October 2000 Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Kiribati, the Clark government decided to take firm action against the Forum's customarily noncritical stance regarding Fiji. With support from Australia, Sāmoa, and Kiribati, New Zealand secured the Forum's agreement to the Biketawa Declaration, which called for the upholding of democracy in the region. By signing, states, including Fiji, committed to "good governance," the "liberty of the individual under the law," and "upholding democratic

processes and institutions which reflect national and local circumstances, including the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government and equal rights for all citizens” (PIFS 2000, 1). The Declaration also established procedures for the Forum in the event of a political crisis in a member state (PIFS 2000; McCraw 2009, 280).

Following the declaration, the next move from the New Zealand government seemed to represent a marked backdown. On 27 November 2000, it was announced that the general sporting ban would be extended beyond the initial six-month period but would also be relaxed to allow Fiji to compete in the Wellington Sevens tournament scheduled for early February 2001. However, administrators traveling with the team would still be banned from entering New Zealand if their names were on a list of those associated with Speight. Foreign Minister Goff said that he had tried to gain support for an international boycott against Fiji, but Australia was the only country prepared to take the same stand: “We weren’t even getting a positive response from South Africa, a country that we thought of all countries might be prepared to back us up. I will take any sensible action that will have an impact within Fiji. What I won’t do is take an action that will only penalise ourselves but will not have an impact within Fiji” (*New Zealand Herald*, 28 Nov 2000). Indeed, other Pacific nations had offered to host the sevens tournament if Fiji was not invited. At her post-cabinet press conference on 27 November, Clark offered a subtle distinction for the modified position: “There is no relaxation whatsoever on bilateral sporting contacts, but this is an international event over which New Zealand has no control” (*New Zealand Herald*, 28 Nov 2000). Shortly afterward, NZRU chief executive David Rutherford reiterated that invitations to the Wellington tournament were issued not by his union but by the IRB. If Wellington were to exclude Fiji, it would risk losing hosting rights to the tournament (*New Zealand Herald*, 28 Nov 2000).

At issue was a fundamental evolution of sport in the two decades following the 1981 Springbok tour. During the amateur era, arrangements between countries for tours were essentially bilateral, although the IRB shaped the laws of the game. Moreover, with relatively low operating costs, rugby was not overly dependent on agreements with third parties for advertising and broadcasting revenue. However, beginning in the 1980s, sport was swept up in a broader embrace of neoliberalism. The corporatization of clubs and governing bodies and the growth of transnational competitions underpinned by lucrative sponsorship and pay televi-

sion deals triggered a dramatic movement of players in search of professional opportunities (Besnier and others 2018, 844–849). Rugby moved cautiously down this path after the 1987 World Cup. The IRB only sanctioned open professionalism in August 1995 when it was clear that it could lose its players to what it considered a rebel rugby competition and rugby league. The resulting broadcasting deal with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation by which the rugby administrators of New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia signed over the rights to their game for US\$555 million over ten years—a deal later renewed on several occasions—financed Super Rugby and an ever-expanding international calendar (FitzSimons 1996, 20–21; Guinness and Besnier 2016, 1116–1118). While these developments did not sit comfortably with some rugby traditionalists (Ryan 2008), they were entirely consistent with the neoliberal economic restructuring of New Zealand under the fourth Labour government from 1984 and the succeeding National government from 1990. What became known as “Rogernomics,” with reference to Labour's Finance Minister Roger Douglas, was characterized by a dramatic reduction in the size and role of the state, corporatization and then privatization of government departments, sale of state assets, deregulation of markets, and dismantling of the welfare system. Although there was some compromise in the approach of the Clark Labour government elected in 1999, there was certainly no reversal of the process (Roper 2005, 175–220). Indeed, we will see shortly that the Clark government was very much alive to the potential of rugby in a corporate world.

In this setting, it was extremely unlikely that the NZRU would have made a unilateral decision to take a stand against the 2000 coup even if it had been so inclined, and it was equally unlikely that the government would have asked it to do so. As MacLean argued, the international sporting market is one “determined by monopsonistic cartels” in that there is only one “buyer” (the IRB) for the “product” of various “sellers” (national rugby unions) (MacLean 2014, 1845). To echo MacLean's account of the Union of European Football Associations' response to calls from within Palestine for teams to boycott the 2013 Under-21 football championship held in Israel, the IRB could determine both the structure of the competition and its participants. He explained, “This means that a unilateral decision by one or a minority of the participating national associations to boycott could have been extremely expensive in that they could have been seen as an unreliable supplier and possibly in violation of membership and competition rules” (MacLean 2014, 1845). It was also likely that influ-

ential clubs and franchises reliant on talented Fijian players would exert considerable pressure on the IRB, and by extension the NZRU, to ensure that there was no disruption to the international rugby marketplace.

There were contrasting Fijian responses to the 2001 Wellington Sevens exemption. On one hand, the Auckland-based Coalition for Democracy in Fiji complained that the decision would dilute the strong message New Zealand had sent to Fiji since the May 2000 coup. Its representative, Nik Naidu, argued that “the one thing that makes Fijians proud is the sevens team and if anything was going to hurt, it would have been this. I don’t understand the double standard” (*New Zealand Herald*, 28 Nov 2000). At the other extreme, various Fijian sports bodies urged their sevens team to boycott Wellington to punish New Zealand for its wider sporting sanctions—an action that would have undoubtedly reduced the prestige and value of the tournament but that also risked Fiji being labeled an unreliable supplier. Fiji Football Association chief executive Jitendra Maharaj claimed that a variety of Fijian athletes had been barred from Pacific-region events that should have been granted the same exemptions as the sevens tournament. He further claimed, with some justification, that the New Zealand government had buckled to pressure from the IRB and to concerns from the NZRU that it would lose substantial revenue if the tournament were moved. Because the Fijian team was the world champion and crucial to the success of the international circuit, Maharaj explained, “for solidarity reasons, they should boycott it and get the IRB to stage the games elsewhere.” With respect to football in particular, Maharaj also suggested that New Zealand’s sanctions had an unfair impact on Indo-Fijians, who dominated that code in Fiji but were not responsible for the political situation (*The Press*, 1 Dec 2000).

The stakes were further raised in mid-January 2001 when the Australian government, following from sanctions it had put in place after the May 2000 coup (Gurry 2001, 16), refused to grant visas to the Fijian team to compete in the Brisbane Sevens scheduled for mid-February. In sporting terms, this was perhaps an easier decision for Australia in that rugby union was far from being the dominant football code and public reaction would not generate the intensity evident in New Zealand. In broader terms, the visa refusal was consistent with an enduring Australian view of its Pacific neighborhood as being of special strategic significance, second only to the Australian continent itself. The 2000 coup, alongside upheavals in East Timor and Solomon Islands, had promoted the idea of an “arc of instability” in the region. As Stewart Firth explained, Australia was

therefore determined to work with Pacific countries to restore democracy and “champion good governance and constitutional government as the foundations of Pacific development and security” (2013, 362–363).

In response to the Australian government, the IRB stripped the Brisbane tournament of its official status, and the Australian Rugby Union subsequently canceled it. Goff immediately responded that this action vindicated New Zealand’s “softer stance” on Fiji: “The end result of refusing visas would be not to penalise Fiji but only to penalise New Zealand sports bodies and sporting fans” (*The Dominion*, 16 Jan 2001). Goff and NZRU chairman McCaw also denied that the union had pressured the government to soften its stance. Although Minister for Sport and Recreation Trevor Mallard had met union officials in November 2000, Goff insisted that listening to their viewpoint did not amount to pressure (*Evening Post*, 17 Jan 2001). In retort, a lengthy *New Zealand Herald* editorial published on 17 January typified criticism of the government for sabotaging its own sanctions and leaving Australia isolated. It argued that had New Zealand stood firm with Australia, there would have been less chance of the IRB being willing to withdraw support for both the Brisbane and the Wellington tournaments. Instead, the government had bowed to the NZRU, which had further exacerbated the situation by suggesting that New Zealand’s cohosting of the 2003 Rugby World Cup could be jeopardized if it sided with Australia against Fiji. Yet it was very unlikely that the IRB would take such action given that Australia was the current world champion and New Zealand was usually the most dominant rugby-playing nation. According to the editorial:

It reflects poorly on the Government that the potential for such an impact was countenanced, let alone allowed to influence policy. . . . The Government’s backdown is the more disappointing because it clearly understands the impact of sporting sanctions. Within days of Speight’s putsch, Mr Goff had announced that he expected the rugby union to consider withdrawing invitations to Fijian teams, particularly to sevens competitions. There was considerable insight in that appeal. Sevens rugby is indigenous Fijians’ major sporting passion. To deny their team competition at world tournaments would send the strongest and most symbolic of messages.

The editorial also challenged the government’s claim that it had been unable to gain wider support for sanctions. It questioned why the apathy of others should prompt a backdown by New Zealand on a matter of principle, especially given that Clark had demanded that Pacific Islands

Forum leaders confront Fiji and had threatened to boycott the next Forum meeting if held in Fiji (*New Zealand Herald*, 17 Jan 2001).

Criticism of the New Zealand government intensified when Mallard announced that he would attend the Wellington Sevens but not watch fixtures involving Fiji. As he explained, “This is smart sanctions. Boycotting a brilliant sporting event because there’s one group who come from a country which is currently run by a pack of dogs is not that smart” (*The Dominion*, 3 Feb 2001). However, this stance staggered former Halt All Racist Tours leader John Minto, who recalled Mallard’s strong opposition to the Springbok tour in 1981. While Minto acknowledged differences between the situation in apartheid South Africa and Fiji, he insisted that there were also strong parallels, as neither country had a democratic constitution and both had policies implemented on the basis of race (*The Dominion*, 3 Feb 2001). Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Jim Anderton announced that he would not attend the tournament if Fiji was present, and other ministers pondered the outcome of Mallard’s “see no evil” approach given that a New Zealand–Fiji final was a strong possibility. Commentators also wondered why the sevens problem had not been anticipated when the sporting sanction against Fiji was first put in place. As an editorial in the *Press* put it, “What after all gives Fiji its biggest international sports profile? The obvious answer is rugby sevens. Generally the biggest drawcard at any international sevens tournament is the clash between New Zealand and Fiji. For the sporting boycott to have any real effect, sevens rugby had to be included” (*The Press*, 5 Feb 2001).

Although not rendered explicit, several factors clearly shaped the New Zealand government’s response in early 2001. First, officials well understood the implication of making the NZRU “an unreliable supplier” in that losing the Wellington Sevens tournament would also eliminate an estimated NZ\$8 million injection into the local economy. Moreover, there would be longer-term losses if the tournament were removed from Wellington altogether or if sponsors and broadcasters became nervous as to where else the government may intervene (*The Dominion*, 17 May 2001). Second, it would also alienate generally older and more conservative voters who still adhered to the notion that politics and sport are or should be separate. Notwithstanding the general acceptance of Bolger’s apology to South Africa in 1996, the government was surely mindful that previous sporting interventions had influenced the results of elections. The Norman Kirk Labour government’s breach of an earlier promise by canceling the 1973 Springbok tour to New Zealand was a contributing factor to its

defeat by the National Party in 1975. Conversely, the troubled National government won the 1981 election on the back of its decision to allow the Springbok tour to go ahead (Templeton 1998, 98–116, 202–203). Further, the fact that the pipeline of talented Fijian players to New Zealand amateur and professional rugby continued unabated and unquestioned throughout this period reinforced the top-down nature of New Zealand's diplomatic challenge to Fiji as opposed to the groundswell of opinion that had shaped responses to South Africa. Third, although the IRB had made reassuring statements to the contrary in 2001 (*Evening Post*, 15 Jan 2001; *Waikato Times*, 16 Jan 2001), Mallard's approach was undoubtedly shaped by concern that New Zealand could lose cohosting rights with Australia for the 2003 Rugby World Cup, or perhaps that it could lose sole hosting rights if the IRB rebuffed Australia following its stronger stance over Fiji. Aside from the obvious risk to electoral support with an election due in late 2002, the economic value of such an event was considerable. When the joint bid to host was originally launched in May 1997 for what was claimed to be the third most important sporting tournament in the world after the Olympic Games and the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup, then Minister for Sport and Recreation Murray McCully declared, "The spin-off for this country could be huge, with the linkages between sport and tourism having the potential to deliver substantial economic benefits for New Zealanders. The Government will be looking to harvest those opportunities and lend greater support to similar initiatives through into the next millennium" (McCully 1997). Subsequently, during 2000 the NZRU had enlisted support from the IRB to resist Australian attempts to take a greater share of the cohosting arrangement. By 2001, Mallard was also surely wary of further exacerbating the deteriorating relationship between the NZRU and the Australian Rugby Union over financial arrangements and projections for the World Cup—an impasse that ultimately led to New Zealand being stripped of cohosting rights in April 2002 (*New Zealand Herald*, 24 July 2002).

These considerations point to a fundamental difference between sporting and other kinds of sanctions: sporting sanctions frequently require sacrifice from all parties involved, whereas diplomatic, military, travel, and other sanctions, such as asset freezes, tend only to impact those being targeted. Economic sanctions may certainly deny local producers export opportunities with and local consumers desired commodities from the country being sanctioned, but invariably there are alternative markets and commodities available. On one level, when athletes are excluded from

multilateral competition, such as the expulsion of South Africa from the Olympics, sporting sanctions are similar in that the refusal to compete with teams and individuals obviously disadvantages the targeted country's athletes and denies its sporting public, while leaving other countries free to compete. However, on the other side of such sanctions, and especially when the sanction is extended to a refusal to allow a team or individual to compete in one's own country or when that refusal triggers a forfeit of hosting rights for a tournament, there are always consequences for local sportspeople and the local sporting public, who are deprived of opportunities to play or watch. In this context, there are no alternative commodities—there is only one very successful Fijian sevens team.

NEW ZEALAND'S CONTRADICTIONARY RESPONSE TO THE 2006 FIJI COUP

Further immediate controversy over the Wellington Sevens was averted during the early 2000s, as New Zealand's relationship with Fiji improved after the restoration of democracy following elections in August 2001. The government lifted most sanctions, excluding the visa ban on Speight and his associates, and the Commonwealth reinstated Fiji in December 2001. The conviction and imprisonment of Speight for treason also helped to smooth the situation (*New Zealand Herald*, 22 Dec 2001).

But acrimony over Speight's coup remained strong in Fiji after 2000, and relations between the military and the Qarase government were generally uneasy. Among many controversies was the government's promotion of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, which proposed amnesty to some of those involved in the 2000 coup—a move that did not sit well with Bainimarama, who believed that Speight's supporters had tried to assassinate him. In late 2006, New Zealand endeavored to resolve these tensions, but without success. On 5 December 2006, Bainimarama staged another coup to remove the Qarase government from office, and on 5 January 2007, he became prime minister (McCraw 2009, 281–282; Fraenkel 2013, 335–336). If there had been any lingering doubt as to the centrality of rugby to Fijian politics, it was set aside when the coup, initially planned for 1 December, was postponed until 5 December to accommodate the Ratu Sukuna Bowl rugby match between the police and the army—one of the most important sporting fixtures in Fiji (Schieder 2012, 24).

In response to the coup, Clark declared that the coup leaders “must cease their disgraceful acts and restore the legitimately elected Govern-

ment or suffer the consequences” (*New Zealand Herald*, 7 Dec 2006). New Zealand again severed military ties, suspended development aid and Fiji’s participation in New Zealand’s seasonal employment scheme, banned all ministerial-level political contact, and issued a travel ban to New Zealand for all Fiji military personnel and for sports teams. But this time, a specific exception was made for international tournaments such as the Wellington Sevens and for the requirement that the Junior All Blacks play in Fiji as part of the multilateral Pacific Nations Cup (Clark 2006). Foreign Minister Winston Peters warned that Fiji, and particularly the military, should be in no doubt that New Zealand would take these steps “and maintain them for as long as it takes to return democracy to Fiji” (*The Press*, 7 Dec 2006).

Several commentators were quick to highlight the seeming contradiction between this response and that toward the Zimbabwe cricket team a year earlier when the government effectively forced the cancellation of a tour by refusing to issue visas. It eventually accepted a claim from New Zealand Cricket for some of its lost revenue as a consequence (*New Zealand Herald*, 6 July 2005; Cricinfo Staff 2006). *The Press* described the exemption for the Fijian team, and therefore the refusal of the government to challenge the IRB, as “nonsense.” There was a clear precedent to deny visas. As the editorial explained, “Cricket was Mugabe’s first love, just as rugby is to Bainimarama. Here’s a man who put a coup on hold to attend a rugby match. One can imagine Mugabe doing something equally absurd to watch his team play.” The difference, it seemed, was that the economic benefit from the rugby sevens was much greater than that from a Zimbabwe cricket tour. One therefore had to ask, “What price democracy?” (*The Press*, 11 Dec 2006). *The Manawatu Standard* asked, “Is New Zealand serious about having a leadership role in the Pacific or not? This wobbly stance when it comes to a sevens rugby tournament within a kilometre of the Beehive doesn’t suggest we are a confident nation. So how bad would the coup have to get in Fiji before its sevens team is no longer welcome?” (*Manawatu Standard*, 13 Dec 2006). These sentiments were reinforced when the Fijians arrived in Wellington at the end of January with their player-coach, Waisale Serevi, declaring that “being allowed to come and play here is a boost for the people back in Fiji. They all love the rugby sevens and are all waiting at home for this weekend to begin.” He specifically thanked Prime Minister Clark and the New Zealand embassy in Fiji for granting the team visas, adding that the sevens team wanted to promote Fiji in a positive way and lift some of the negativ-

ity that had surrounded the country since the December coup (*Dominion Post*, 30 Jan 2007).

FIJI AND THE 2011 RUGBY WORLD CUP

There is a familiar explanation for the stance of the government toward Fijian rugby during 2006–2007 and in the following years. In May 2005, the NZRU and the government launched an ultimately successful joint bid to the IRB for sole hosting of the 2011 Rugby World Cup. Mallard claimed that “in New Zealand rugby is more than just a sport. It has helped shape the character of our nation. It inspires us at home and on the world stage. But perhaps most importantly, our passion for rugby and sport is part of being kiwi, and being proud to be kiwi” (Mallard 2005). But what really underpinned this clichéd summary was an initial assessment of the economic impact of the tournament, in terms of GDP and tax revenue, in the vicinity of NZ\$500 million (Mallard 2005). This estimate increased to NZ\$700 million by 2011 for a tournament that came to be regarded as a very successful initiative in sport diplomacy (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2012). As Anthony Deos concluded, “In the case of the RWC 2011 in New Zealand, the government realized such potential and worked alongside business, tourism, sport and civil society networks to showcase New Zealand, highlight its unique culture, art, history and values to influence opinions of international leaders and foreign publics” (2014, 1183). In sum, there was a great deal at stake for any government that antagonized the IRB and the rugby public over Fiji.

Against this background, the relationship with Fiji deteriorated further during 2007. In April, New Zealand High Commissioner Michael Green received a warning after making a public speech criticizing the lack of democracy in Fiji. In June, he was expelled. The last straw for Bainimarama reportedly came when the Fiji Rugby Union gave Green, rather than him, a VIP seat at Suva Stadium to watch the Junior All Blacks play Fiji. Bainimarama apparently accused the union of doing the country a disservice by hosting “the enemy of the day” (*Dominion Post*, 15 June 2007; *New Zealand Herald*, 17 June 2007). New Zealand responded to the expulsion by extending the visa ban to senior officials appointed by the military regime and to their immediate families (*Dominion Post*, 3 July 2007).

In due course, the New Zealand government was exposed to further criticism for its apparent inconsistency over sport. In October 2007, a

visa was refused for one of the Fijian football team's goalkeepers, Simone Tamanisau, because his partner's father was a military policeman. In response, FIFA, the governing body of world football, called off a World Cup qualifying fixture that was to be played in Auckland between New Zealand and Fiji. In labeling the FIFA response as "unjust," Foreign Minister Peters insisted that New Zealand's sanction against those with connections to the Fiji military overrode the exemption that had been granted to the Fijian football team as a whole for its participation in a multilateral tournament: "All countries retain the right to exclude individuals in accordance with their immigration policy. Sporting bodies do not determine those policies. New Zealand has processed this matter in accordance with its immigration policy. It is Fiji which has chosen to make this matter political" (*Dominion Post*, 13 Oct 2007). Peters was also mindful that the president of the Fiji Football Association, Dr Muhammad Shams-Ud-Dean Sahu Khan, was reportedly a supporter of the military regime and known for his political involvement (*Dominion Post*, 13 Oct 2007). While Fiji lobbied FIFA to be awarded points for winning the fixture, and while New Zealand football authorities expressed concern at the loss of revenue from the cancellation and any subsequent failure to qualify for the World Cup, FIFA was ultimately prepared to compromise. The fixture was initially rescheduled to be played in neutral Sāmoa, but it was eventually moved to Fiji, where the New Zealand team played without any evident comment from the New Zealand government (*Sunday Star Times*, 14 Oct 2007).

A second incident came a month later when the Fijian sevens team requested transit visas to pass through New Zealand on their way to a tournament in Dubai but then withdrew their applications when advised they would be unsuccessful. At the same time, they lodged applications to attend the Wellington Sevens in February 2008, and these were duly accepted (*Dominion Post*, 23 Nov 2007). New Zealand was prepared to host Fiji to satisfy its lucrative international sporting obligations, but not to help it in other contexts. In a familiar pattern, once the immediate intensity of the coup had receded, there was seemingly no reaction to the presence of Fiji at the Wellington Sevens during the next few years.

In early 2009, Fiji was plunged into a deeper constitutional crisis. When the Great Council of Chiefs refused to recognize his government, Bainimarama sacked them, but he reconvened the body ten months later with himself as chairman. He then promised elections for late 2009 before postponing them until 2010 on the grounds that further electoral and consti-

tutional reforms were needed. In April 2009, Fiji's Appeals Court ruled the 2006 coup and subsequent military regime to be illegal and directed President Ratu Josefa Iloilo to appoint a new prime minister. Instead, he repealed the constitution, dismissed the judges, and reappointed Bainimarama as interim prime minister, with a promise that elections would be held by September 2014. Consequently, Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum in May and from the Commonwealth in September 2009 (Fraenkel 2009; Markovic 2009).

The National government that succeeded Labour at the end of 2008 made it clear that nothing would change in New Zealand's approach to Fiji, although Prime Minister John Key did acknowledge the inconsistency of the situation with regard to sport. On one hand, the government publicly stated that it did not want another cricket tour to Zimbabwe. In mid-2009, Key declared, "We don't support that regime. We don't support what is happening in that country and we don't want to give a signal that we do" (*New Zealand Herald*, 2 June 2009). The tour was eventually postponed for a year and did not in fact take place until November 2011. However, no comment was made on the Junior All Blacks again playing Pacific Nations Cup fixtures in Fiji. Key said that while New Zealand had reduced its sporting contact with Fiji since the 2006 coup, it had never completely stopped, "and on that basis we'll continue to play sport against them" (*New Zealand Herald*, 2 June 2009). In early 2010, it was reported that Foreign Minister McCully had met his Fijian counterpart, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, in Nadi for two days of discussions. McCully and Bainimarama had also agreed "in principle" to meet during the Hong Kong Sevens tournament in an effort to improve relations (McCully 2010; *New Zealand Herald*, 24 Feb 2010).

On the eve of the Rugby World Cup, and amid rumors of renewed pressure from the IRB, there was an element of compromise from McCully. In mid-July 2011, Fiji named a preliminary thirty-five-man squad from which its thirty-man World Cup squad would be chosen. This included Leone Nakarawa, a Fiji military officer. McCully immediately stated that there would be no exemption for Nakarawa: "We've been very clear that those to whom the individual sanctions apply will not be given exemptions on this occasion. I was advised that the Fijian management had assured us that all of those whose names were being submitted [for the World Cup] would comply with our requirements, and I've had no advice to the contrary yet" (*New Zealand Herald*, 16 Jul 2011). Fiji subsequently omitted Nakarawa from the team that traveled to Dunedin for a pre-World Cup

test match against the All Blacks. But on 18 August, the Fiji Rugby Union announced that it had asked for an easing of the travel ban for Nakarawa, as the Fijian team was weakened by injuries (*New Zealand Herald*, 19 Aug 2011). The following day, New Zealand agreed to grant a temporary visa and to process this with haste prior to the beginning of the World Cup on 9 September. McCully said the government wanted to give incentives for Fijians to part ways with the military regime and had learned that Nakarawa had resigned and been discharged from the Fiji military, adding that he had been likely to leave anyway, as he had received lucrative contract offers from European rugby clubs. As Key remarked, “he’s not going back to the military after the Rugby World Cup, presuming he performs all right” (*Dominion Post*, 22 Aug 2011). In response, Green Party MP Keith Locke was extremely skeptical of the granting of a visa so soon after the military discharge: “I think we shouldn’t accept that dodge and it isn’t consistent with Murray McCully’s previous strong stand against any military person coming here. How can we credibly hold the line in terms of sanctions if we allow a person to one day be a member of the military, the next day not be, and be a member of the World Cup team? Once you’ve opened the floodgates, as it were, by allowing one person to use this Fijian sidestep, then others could do the same thing.” He warned that Nakarawa could easily rejoin the military when he returned to Fiji (*New Zealand Herald*, 19 Aug 2011). Within days, the government returned to business as usual when Fiji Rugby Union chairman Colonel Mosese Tokoitoga and another official with military connections were immediately refused visas for the World Cup (*New Zealand Herald*, 29 Aug 2011).

As Locke and others had predicted, it became apparent in November that Nakarawa had indeed returned to the military after the World Cup when he was named as a player for the army team in the annual Ratu Sukuna Bowl. Pro-democracy blog Fiji Coupfourpointfive responded, “As we warned when McCully revealed Nakarawa had been granted the visa, the regime has made a fool of New Zealand” (Fiji Coupfourpointfive 2011; *The Press*, 10 Nov 2011).

CONCLUSION

As Fiji moved toward the restoration of democracy during 2012–2013, relations with New Zealand again improved markedly, no doubt helped by the decision of the Fiji Rugby Union not to attempt to select Nakarawa and other players with military connections for the Wellington Sev-

ens. With an election in Fiji confirmed for September 2014, New Zealand lifted travel sanctions in April that year, defense ties resumed in early 2015, and Prime Minister Key visited Suva in June 2016 (Fraenkel 2015; *The Press*, 1 April 2014; *New Zealand Herald*, 30 Jan 2015; *Dominion Post*, 31 May 2016).

While the normalizing of relations was obviously a good outcome in the specific case of Fiji, it has provided no concrete solution to the broader issues outlined earlier. At no stage did successive New Zealand governments develop a coherent strategy around sporting sanctions that reconciled the desire to punish the Fijian regime with the demands of market-driven and multilateral, as opposed to bilateral, sports tournament structures and the economic imperatives that underpin them. The specter of being identified as an unreliable supplier in a global market has tempered responses and will continue to do so. The enduring risk of governments being punished at the ballot box by voters less convinced of the link between sport and politics is surely enhanced for a constituency weaned on the media-manufactured spectacle of regular tournaments, such as the World Cup, that are also lucrative contributors to the national economy.

Future political analysis of the Pacific region ought to pay more attention to sport. There is no guarantee that issues with Fiji will not resurface. The disproportionate Pacific presence in global professional competitions is also unlikely to diminish, with all that this entails for local remittance economies, constructions of masculinity, and conceptions of national and regional identities. That accusations of “colonialist” exploitation of Pacific rugby players by New Zealand and Australia in particular, and their sustained refusal to support a Pacific team in the Super Rugby competition, have periodically been raised at the Pacific Islands Forum and in other discussions between Pacific leaders is ample indication of what is at stake (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 Aug 2003, 25 Aug 2008, 2 March 2019; *The Guardian*, 17 Nov 2020). At the same time, there is a growing pattern of Australian investment in Pacific sport as part of its soft power strategy in the region, not least as a counter to a similar strategy by China (Reuters, 31 Jan 2019; *The Diplomat*, 22 Feb 2020). In sum, sport continues to offer a dynamic lens on a myriad of diplomatic relationships and agendas within Oceania but also globally.

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Abstract

This article traces the response of the New Zealand government to successive military coups in Fiji in 1987, 2000, and 2006 in the specific context of rugby contacts between the two countries and the strong nexus between rugby and political power in Fiji. It argues that the emergence of market-driven and globally focused sporting structures over the last three decades has fundamentally altered the relationship between sport and politics in New Zealand and the nature of sanctions it is willing to deploy—especially when compared with earlier debates over bilateral contact with apartheid South Africa.

KEYWORDS: New Zealand, Fiji, coups, rugby, sporting sanctions