

Fiji Methodist Church and Military Regime

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August is the month of the *Bose ko Viti*, the Fiji Methodist Church's annual conference. Since the first such meeting in 1838, the event has become an important pilgrimage for the Protestant faithful, who count amongst their number a majority of the indigenous Fijians. This year the Church and the military backed interim regime of strongman Commodore Bainimarama are heading for a show down. The regime with its Public Emergency Regulation Decree in place sees the Methodist conference as a focal point for dissidents and critics of its dictatorial rule. The regime's spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni has called for the resignation and banning of two of the Church's pro nationalist and Christian fundamentalist clergymen from the conference. The event is to be held in Lomanikoro, Rewa, the seat of the Marama Roko Tui Dreketi Ro Teimumu Kepa who heads the Burebasaga confederacy.

In Fiji, unlike in most western democratic states, the majority of Fijians do not accept a separation of church and state. The State, the Church and the *Vanua* (the people) as well as the land are interlinked in traditional and cultural cosmology.

In a ceremony marked by a mixture of traditional and Christian mysticism at the annual Methodist conference held at Suva's centenary church on the 27th August of 2008, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the *Tui Cakau*, descendant of one of the signatories of Fiji's cession to Great Britain, presented a whales tooth (*tabua*) to the more than 700 assembled clergymen from around the country.

The heads of Fiji's three traditional confederacies had come to register their concerns about the plight of indigenous Fijians since the 5 December 2006 military coup. They called on the country's largest Christian church to unite with the *Vanua*.

The chiefs, Ratu Epenisa Cakobau, Ro Teimumu Kepa and Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu stand at the hierarchical apex of the Fijian traditional polity, representing respectively the *matanitu* of the *Kubuna*, *Burebasaga* and *Tovata* confederacies.

Ratu Naiqama in his presentation address to the Methodist Church President Reverend Laisiasa Ratabacaca and the conference said, "*Sega ni rawa ni 'ada duadua na vanua...e*

sega ni rawa ni 'ada duadua na lotu. E rawa ga ni da cakacaka vata, veilomani (the vanua and the church can not work alone, they have to work together in unity).”

This proposed harmonizing of the Lotu, Vanua and *Matanitu* as recounted by Ratu Naiqama’s words is the indelible legacy of Methodism to the Fijians as a people. Ratu Naiqama and Ro Teimumu are Roman Catholics and were cabinet ministers in the deposed SDL coalition government. However their positions as high chiefs in their confederacies was a Methodist design of entrenching the three *Turaga bale’s* and their *matanitu’s* as the three traditional political order of unity for Fijians. This design is encapsulated in the Methodist missionary motto of “Fear God and Honour the King”.

The Methodist Church has also resisted the formation of a fourth confederacy in Fiji. Attempts after the 1987 and 2000 coups to form a fourth *Yasayasa vaka Ra* confederacy by the economically powerful chiefs of the western province’s have been unsuccessful. A new challenge to the Church and Vanua has been the cult-like New Methodist breakaway group backed by the Commissioner of Police Esala Teleni.

Since the abrogation of the constitution on 10th April 2009 by a senile President who was acting in full cahoots with the military, the issues that underpinned the December 2006 coup have morphed in strange and unpredictable ways. In a surprising twist the interim Prime Minister Bainimarama on the 28th July 2009 in the midst of the Methodist Church vs Interim Regime standoff regarding the Annual Methodist Conference in Rewa announced the much welcomed retirement of the President Ratu Josefa Iloilo with effect 31st July 2009.

The core question has to do with Fijian identity. Ratu Naiqama’s address at the 2008 conference goes to the heart of the present impasse between the Vanua and the Church on one side and the illegal regime on the other. As the Somosomo high chief further stated, “E sega ni vakatarai me rogoci na domoi keimami. E da sa kalawaci. “Na kamunaga sa i tatau ni veigauna sa tu mai liu. “Me lomani na vanua ko Viti – na vanua ko Kubuna, Burebasaga kei Tovata. “Keimami sa sega sega sara ni duavata, au kuria....sega sega sara ni duavata kei na vakanananu e suguraki mai oqo.”(Our voices have been muted by the regime. We have been disrespected. This whale’s tooth is our bond for our united future. Look with favour on Fiji- the Vanua of Kubuna, Burebasaga and Tovata. We never never

agreed, I repeat, never never agreed with the idea or people's charter that has been thrust upon us). After the ceremony, Church general secretary Reverend Tuikilakila Waqairatu, later told reporters that the church stood as one with the vanua. "The Great Council of Chiefs is suspended. The only voice in society now to raise issues of the Fijian people is the Church," he said.

The arrest and the laying of charges against the Marama Roko Tui Dreketi Ro Teimumu Kepa, the President and General Secretary of the Methodist Church and other top hierarchy ministers on Friday 24th July 2009 for breaching the Public Emergency Regulation decree augurs trouble in August . The mind games continue as both sides spin doctor's crank up their propaganda machines in an effort to capture the hearts and souls of the faithful.

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