

Dealing with Perceptions and Prejudices
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I write in response to the article by USP academic Dr. Vijay Naidu- *Heading for the scrap heap of history? The consequences of the coup for the Fiji Labour Movement* - in the recently released book: *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji* (ed. Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij Lal).

Despite its title, Vijay Naidu's piece provides little analysis of the impact of the 2006 military takeover on the Fiji labour movement. It appears to be more a pretence for launching a virulent attack on Mahendra Chaudhry and his leadership of the Fiji Labour Party when, in fact, the FLP has been quite distinct from the labour movement in Fiji since 1992, at the very least.

It is a well documented fact that the FLP was launched by the FTUC in 1985 as a political response to the anti-worker policies of the Alliance Government in particular, the wage freeze imposed in Budget 1985. However, from 1992 onwards there has been little interaction between the FLP and the FTUC.

In fact, from May 1992 to 1999, trade unionists with strong links to the National Federation Party were in influential positions within the FTUC.

Vijay Naidu's sweeping, and rather naive, generalisations about the labour movement's links with the Fiji Labour Party are based on his personal prejudices rather than facts - quite unbecoming of an academic of his stature. He claims for instance: "*Chaudhry's road to success has been accompanied by divisions in just about every organisation and movement that he has been involved in. The trade union movement is now deeply divided between those who support Chaudhry and those who do not.*" (P240/241)

What utter rubbish! I was assistant national secretary of the FTUC from 1975 and its national secretary (1988-1992). In that time the FTUC was a strong and unified body, and an outspoken advocate and protector of workers' rights and the interests of the poor and the needy. Likewise, the Fiji Labour Party and the National Farmers Union (NFU) have continued strong and unified through four coups and accompanying adversities, steadfastly and courageously upholding the interests of the farmers and the people of Fiji.

Vijay Naidu also distorts NFU history to make Chaudhry appear the ogre. The so-called “tussle between Chaudhry’s men and NFP supporters” that he refers to, was created by the NFP. The National Farmers Union had alone championed the farmers’ cause in the critical period after the 1987 coups when an oppressive, military backed government attempted to impose a grossly unfair Kermode Sugar Master Award on the cane farmers. It was the FLP and the NFU that provided leadership in the growers’ struggle for justice.

Understandably, in the Growers Council elections that followed in March 1992, NFU made a clean sweep of the cane belt winning 36 of the 38 Council seats. In the national polls, two months later, the FLP grabbed all 13 rural parliamentary seats with the exception of that held by NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy, after just two weeks of campaigning.

Shocked by this humiliating rebuff, NFP spawned the Fiji Cane Growers Association to try and get back its lost support in the cane belt. Even then, NFU continues to maintain overwhelming support and has won every Sugar Cane Growers Council election since 1992. So, who should take the blame for breaking the hard won unity of cane farmers just for the sake of political expediency?

My strength as a leader comes not from “absolute control” as Naidu claims but from devoted service to the people, and standing up for their rights and interests in times of adversity (as a trade unionist and a politician from 1987 coups onwards). The respect and support that I have received among the grassroots was not handed to me on a platter – every bit of it has been earned through gruelling toil and sincere service and dedication to the cause of the people I serve.

This is something my detractors who tend to become visible largely at election times only, do not seem to understand. This is why, neither Tupeni Baba nor Krishna Datt ever posed any serious challenge to my leadership at the grassroots level. They simply did not enjoy the confidence of the people to be able to claim leadership at the national level.

Vijay Naidu and those of his ilk, should be told that strong leadership is not something to be denounced. It is absolutely essential for the unity and success of any political party or organisation. FLP owes its success precisely to its strong leadership and its steadfast adherence to the Party’s founding principles. The demise of the once powerful National Federation Party is

ample testimony to what happens when an organisation is allowed to be wrecked by internal bickering, dissent and naked struggle for power.

Even the current split in the trade union movement is conveniently blamed on Chaudhry. But, as before, no supporting evidence has been advanced to back this preposterous claim. Vijay Naidu says that *“The primary reason for the split and the formation of the second umbrella organisation was the close connection between the FLP and the FTUC leadership”*. The break-away FICTU group was formed years after I ceased to play any role in the trade union movement. If Naidu were to do proper research, he would find that the split owes its existence largely to personality differences and a power struggle within the trade union movement - though the different political affiliations of the leading personalities may have made it more acute.

Again, erroneously, Naidu claims that in 2004 FLP and FTUC “sought to wrestle control of the leadership of two key trade unions from FICTU – referring to a contest for the posts of secretaries of the Bank Employees Union and Fiji Post and Telecommunications Employees Association. It is true that two of the candidates, Ganesh Chand and Daniel Urai were FLP Members of Parliament but the party played no role in their bid to vie for the posts.

Their decision to contest those posts were purely personal, not endorsed by the Party.

The 2006 Multi Party Cabinet

Naidu’s claim that I turned “hostile” towards the 2006 multi-party Cabinet because I feared being sidelined by Datt’s rising “image of a national statesman” is baseless. The Multi-Party concept was under threat from Qarase’s persistent refusal to consult with the FLP leadership on policies of national importance such as the imposition of 15% VAT in Budget 2007, the Bill to grant amnesty to George Speight and his cohorts in prison, and the Qoliqoli and Indigenous Lands Tribunal Bills.

The Labour Party was certainly not in Cabinet merely to rubber stamp and give legitimacy to the SDL Party’s ethno-nationalistic and anti-people policies which we had vigorously opposed during Mr Qarase’s previous tenure.

FLP went into the multi-party Cabinet with the intention of making a positive contribution to good governance and to enhance the concept of government in partnership. FLP Ministers were expected to adhere to Party

principles, and its social and national policies that have given the FLP its distinctive character in national politics. Krishna Datt and a few others were becoming increasingly estranged from the Party as they began to put self-interest ahead of the people-oriented policies of the FLP.

Prime Minister Qarase's refusal to consult with the FLP and allow us our rightful say in policy making had put severe stress on the multi-party Cabinet. FLP could not be part of a government that brought untold hardship to the ordinary people with the imposition of a 15% VAT; and Labour's withdrawal after the Budget session of Parliament would have been inevitable, had the 5 December 2006 military takeover not occurred.

It should be noted that the hike in VAT along with the imposition of higher Customs Duty on a wide range of food and consumer items in Budget 2007 was a result of the SDL government's gross mismanagement of State finances, its burgeoning deficit and ballooning debt levels. More specifically, the increase in VAT to 15% was to cater for a grossly irresponsible and vote-buying agreement with the public sector unions on the eve of the 2006 general elections, for pay increases back dated to 2003! Implementing the promised increment, would have cost the State \$130 million at a time when it was severely cash-strapped.

These are issues that a well-researched academic approach to the apparent failure of the 2006 Multi-Party Cabinet should have highlighted instead of claims made merely on the jaundiced perceptions and prejudices of the writer.

The 2006 Coup:

I had never said that the 2006 army takeover of government was "warranted", as Naidu claims. The FLP, itself a victim of two coups, is against coups or any extra constitutional takeover of government and we promptly denounced the events of December 2006 as such.

We did believe that the Qarase government was taking the nation through a course that was divisive, disastrous and that would eventually have led to bankruptcy and a failed State. This disaster had to be averted but through constitutional means.

What I am on record as saying is that Laisenia Qarase had had ample warning of threats by the army to take over the government. After all, the army had been publicly and openly voicing these threats for more than a

year. He brought the disaster on himself by refusing to listen to reason, or failing to move to avert the crisis.

Sugar Industry Reforms:

It is not surprising that my (pre-December 2006) statements on sugar industry reforms have been deliberately misconstrued and distorted to evoke a picture of inconsistency by those with close affinity to the National Federation Party.

Anyone with even a modicum of knowledge of the industry knew that it had been allowed to disintegrate to a situation that made reforms vital, if the industry were to survive.

My criticism was not of the reform in itself but the manner in which it was being implemented. The modernisation and upgrading of the four sugar mills were critical components of the reform programme, yet in 2006 this essential project was already two years behind target due to government's dilly-dallying tactics.

Cane cultivation had fallen to critical levels from a peak of 4 million tonnes in 1999/2000 to about 2.4m tonnes by 2006. Thus, a crop rehabilitation programme was absolutely vital for reforms to be successful yet nothing was being done to assist and encourage farmers to increase yield, bring lost cane farms back into production or to find an amicable solution to the issue of expiring land leases. A cane target of 4 million tonnes in three years was virtually impossible unless these fundamentals were first set right.

When I took over the Sugar Ministry in 2007, we took steps to deal with the problems besetting the industry. A whole package of support structures and incentives was offered to increase yield and boost cane farming, upgrade and maintain industry infrastructure and financially assist ailing industry institutions. Cabinet had agreed to certain measures to deal with the land problem one of which was to increase rent in line with the demands of landowners from 6% of UCV to 10%. The increase, however, was subsidised by government so that farmers would not have to bear the brunt of the hike.

Reforms designed to revitalise the sugar industry were set rolling on the back of these incentives and support measures. Success was guaranteed as long as the package was adhered to in totality.

Other factual inaccuracies:

1. Krishna Datt was not a Cabinet Minister in 2000 as Naidu asserts. After the experience of 1987, Datt preferred not to take on a Ministry in 1999. A year later, when he finally thought it was safe enough to opt for a ministerial portfolio, the 2000 coup took place.
2. Poseci Bune can hardly be seen as a so-called “beneficiary” of the 2006 military intervention
3. James Raman was never President of the NFU or played any close role in the union. The NFU was set up through the ground work of Dr Timoci Bavadra and Mahendra Chaudhry, albeit with FTUC backing.
4. Naidu claims that “*Persons opposed to Chaudhry’s style of leadership and to his approach to issues facing the party and/or the country have been removed from the party and from the FTUC, the National Farmers Union and the Sugar Cane Growers Council*”. Typically, not one shred of evidence has been provided to substantiate this preposterous claim. In his notes he refers to Jaganath Sami’s ouster as CEO of the Growers Council – but this was done through a Presidential Decree as part of the “clean up campaign” at the time. There were serious questions surrounding Sami’s tenure in office, including the fact that proper procedures had been flouted in his reappointment.
5. Felix Anthony and Daniel Urai were appointed to the board of the FNPF by virtue of their positions in FTUC as national secretary and National President respectively, and not because they were “Chaudhry loyalists” as he claims. In fact, they had been denied their rightful place on the FNPF board as workers’ representatives by the ousted Qarase government
6. Naidu wrongly claims that Wages Councils have been suspended. They are still functional and doing good work under the chairmanship of Father Kevin Barr.

If wage levels for ordinary workers are abysmally low today then I certainly should not be blamed for it. This is so in the private and unorganised sectors of the workforce. Public service employees on the other hand, enjoyed a huge trade union membership rate with strong unions which were able to negotiate attractive salary and working conditions for them.

I along with other colleagues in the public sector unions, fought hard to establish and maintain the negotiating strength of the civil service unions. My involvement spanned some three decades with the public service trade unions, and the results obtained during that period bear testimony to this fact.

Likewise, the Bank Employees and workers in the statutory bodies were able to make commendable gains in their pay and working conditions. But workers in the private sector mainly in the manufacturing, retail and wholesale and the TFC industries remain exploited to this day because of weak union leadership in these sectors and the sheer reluctance of these leaders to spare time and effort to organise workers in these industries because of the difficulties it posed.

For academics like Vijay Naidu it may take a lifetime to come to grips with the realities of the situation. Regrettably, even if they were to understand it, their prejudices and emotions would be too overpowering to get them to admit the truth.

There are a few other preposterous claims made by Naidu such as:

- I have worked against the FLP manifesto on the poor. The truth is that the FLP has been a strong advocate of the rights and interests of the poor since its inception – and continues to do so.

My record as Prime Minister and Finance Minister 1999/2000 and Finance Minister 2007/2008 bears testimony to my profound sympathy for the plight of the underprivileged and downtrodden in society. Besides, how could I have gone against FLP manifestos when I myself have been the architect of policy platforms

- That FLP's support is dwindling under my leadership etc. Once again, this is not borne out by facts.
- Vijay Naidu says in the “last two decades FLP has gone through several episodes of dissension and crisis”, each one ending with the departure of those “who stand up to Chaudhry”. It's a naïve comment and Naidu ought to know better.

First of all, let me say that FLP is a robust political party based on democratic principles. All Party officials are elected. All policy matters are

discussed at the Party's Management Board and National Council meetings. Members are free, indeed, encouraged to voice their opinions and raise objections at these meetings.

However, FLP, like any other political party or organisation has rules which must be adhered to if the Party is to remain strong and united. The Fiji Labour Party has had its share of dissensions and those who have broken Party rules have, rightly, faced disciplinary action.

Dr Tupeni Baba, for instance, made a bid for leadership but lacked support and left to form his own political party. As for the dissension created over Senate seats in 2006, Vijay Naidu is voicing hearsay without bothering to do his own research on what really led to the fracas.

The point I wish to make here is that FLP's record speaks for itself. The impression created by Naidu is of a party wrecked by internal dissension, a dictatorial leadership that has failed the poor and has undermined its own party manifesto.

Nothing can be further from the truth, Our record shows a political party that in the past 24 years has grown from strength to strength. In fact, FLP is the only political party that has survived the traumas of the past two decades and still remains a viable force in politics. It has unshakeable grassroots support and this has been evident in the FLP's impressive electoral victories.

FLP has remained true to its principles - it is a party known for its integrity, and its steadfast support and sympathy for the workers, the farmers, the poor and the downtrodden of society. We maintain that the Fiji Labour Party would have won the last two elections (2001 and 2006) hands down, as in 1999, had we not been victims of massive electoral fraud and vote rigging... that is the strength of our support amongst the people.

Finally, writers who deliberately choose to forsake facts to dwell on fantasy should be wary of the damage they do to their own credibility!