

The Immoderate Impact of the Alternative Vote in Fiji and the December 2006 Coup – A Further Rejoinder to Horowitz

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Abstract

Professor Horowitz responds to Fraenkel & Grofman (2007) by caricaturing our position and claiming never to have insisted that the alternative vote system (AV) will inevitably yield pro-moderation outcomes, but then dismisses other alternatives as unworthy of serious consideration. Here we set the record straight, and reiterate that there are at least three distinct types of plausible outcome in four party bipolar settings under AV. There is no a priori reason why the pro-moderation outcome should be deemed the most likely or even probable, as the Fiji debacle clearly shows. We also briefly examine the outcome of Fiji's third election under AV held in May 2006, in which moderates fared even more poorly than they did in 2001. In its wake, in December 2006, Fiji witnessed yet another coup and, a month later, a military-backed interim government was installed in office. Instead of waiting a further five years for the promised moderation-inducing impact of AV, key moderate politicians joined the new administration, hoping in this unconstitutional way to shift Fiji away from the politics of ethnic division.

In his rejoinder to Fraenkel & Grofman (2007), Professor Horowitz now says he has *never* claimed that the alternative vote system (AV) inevitably leads to moderate outcomes and says he speaks 'only of tendencies arising out of its incentive structure' (Horowitz 2007: 14). Conversely, he caricatures our own position as being that 'AV is not conducive to interethnic accommodation in severely divided societies' (Horowitz 2007: 13). In fact, he has regularly relied in the past on a much more deterministic interpretation¹, while we have remained consistently agnostic in theory about whether or not outcomes might favour moderate political parties under AV². In practice, as we have shown using data from Fiji, it has certainly not done so.

¹ We showed in Fraenkel and Grofman (2007: 6-7) via a long sequence of quotes that Professor Horowitz has not always been as guarded in his claim about how certain it is that AV will work to assure ethnic moderation as he now is. Horowitz regards our reading of his earlier writing as 'perverse and idiosyncratic' (Horowitz 2007: 18). Readers may judge those passages for themselves.

² In this response to Horowitz (2007), we avoid repeating points previously made in Fraenkel & Grofman (2004; 2006a; 2006b) and concentrate only on dealing with Horowitz's current (2007) core argument. It seems quite pointless, for example, to respond to his latest critique of our analysis of the 1999 Fiji election which has been quite comprehensively dealt with in Fraenkel & Grofman (2006b) since he pays no attention whatsoever to the points we have already made. Similarly, Horowitz (2007: 17) purports to respond to our 'latest' work, but then does nothing but repeat his earlier objections to our initial models (Horowitz 2004; Fraenkel & Grofman 2004), making no effort to engage with our response to these criticisms (Fraenkel & Grofman 2007: 3-6). Other passages which simply misconstrue what we said also seem undeserving of comment. For example, we did not offer a

In Fraenkel & Grofman (2006a, 2007), we set out three plausible directions for preference transfers under AV in a four party ethnically bipolar setting. 1) In highly polarized circumstances, we might see a centrifugal movement from moderate to radical parties, resulting in defeat for the centrists. 2) In less polarized circumstances, we might expect a centripetal movement from radicals to moderates. 3) Alternatively, we might encounter circumstances where the ethnic dimension becomes less salient, and where other types of cleavage predominate, yielding results that may appear erratic if viewed through a narrowly ethnic lens.

Despite now claiming an agnostic position as regards AV's pro-moderation propensities, Horowitz nevertheless dismisses one scenario as unrealistic; regards another as unlikely, and then essentially says that scenario in which AV yields moderate outcomes is the only one worthy of consideration.

The starkly polarized outcome (scenario one), he claims, rests on 'unlikely assumptions' (Horowitz: 2007: 14) and 'does not square with ethnic politics' (2007: 16). Ethnic parties which claim to be the 'most vigorous and authentic' representatives of their ethnic group, we are told, are not likely to direct voters to cast second preferences for other competitor parties competing for the votes of the same group because, during the campaign, they will have disparaged these as 'less vigorous and authentic representatives' (2007: 15). Maybe so, but this hardly seems the most plausible response, even if we accept that ethnic politics will be conducted in such an undisguised and frank manner. Such would-be 'vigorous and authentic' ethnic parties, under an optional AV system, would probably prefer not to lodge any second preferences at all³. Under compulsory AV, overtly ethnic parties operating in polarized circumstances are most likely to feel constrained not to make alliances across the ethnic divide, and therefore to indicate preferences favouring parties associated with their own ethnic camp.

Scenario three is dismissed by Horowitz as 'not worthy of much attention', but oddly so.⁴ If, as he claims, even 'vigorous and authentic' ethnic parties are more likely to strike deals with parties representing other ethnic groups than with those from their own camp that they have claimed to be the 'less vigorous and authentic', this will generate accords over preferences that do not appear to follow a purist ethnic logic.⁵

'comparison of AV and STV' in Northern Ireland, as Horowitz misleadingly asserts (Horowitz 2007: 19), but rather made reference to the Northern Irish (and Sri Lankan) data only to show that harder-line preference rankings (or even electoral abstention) are more likely than the milder type of preference ranking Horowitz presupposes.

³ This was the case with the extremist Nationalist Vanua Lavo Tako Party in Fiji's 1999 election, which approached the Supervisor of Elections asking to omit lodging any preferences at all, but was told that to do so would be electoral suicide (given that only parties lodging preferences acquire a symbol above-the-line on ballot papers and 95% or so of votes are cast 'above-the-line').

⁴ 'In severely divided societies, such competing lines of cleavage are not likely to trump the ethnic cleavage. If they do, then the conflict is unlikely to be dangerous enough to require any electoral engineering. AV has not been recommended for such societies' (Horowitz 2007: 16). Fiji at least in 1997 was just such a society, as the inter-ethnic coalitions at the 1999 election clearly showed, and it is also the only country in the world to have adopted an electoral system inspired by Horowitz's theories (For details, see Fraenkel & Grofman 2006a: 631-633).

⁵ For example, in Fiji only the fringe parties follow Horowitz's suggested campaign strategies of claiming to be the most 'vigorous and authentic' representatives of the group from which they drew

But the more likely reason for scenario three type outcomes is the presence of multiple alternative lines of political division. Even in deeply divided societies, politics is often nuanced and conflicting dimensions overlay or interact with ethnicity as sources of party loyalty. In such contexts, heroic claims to know just how politicians or parties will react in the presence of alternative institutional arrangements are likely to come to grief, as they did most strikingly in Fiji.

In our work on Fiji, we find one election, in 1999, that most corresponded to scenario 3, and two elections, in 2001 and 2006, that most closely matched scenario 1, but none that realised the claimed moderation-inducing propensities of AV (scenario 2). Such an outcome is certainly possible, but it is no more (or less) likely than either of the other two scenarios. Horowitz has acknowledged that the 2001 Fiji election provides no support for his theory, but says this was due to an ‘extraordinary display of Fijian unity’ that led to the disappearance of ‘subethnic frictions reflected in party politics’ (Horowitz 2006: 659). As we have shown (Fraenkel & Grofman 2006b: 665), this was not so extraordinary for Fiji, where strongly bipolar voting patterns were in fact the norm during 1970-87.⁶ At the most recent elections in Fiji, held in May 2006, voting was even more strongly polarized along ethnic lines than it was in 2001. The mainstream Fijian party obtained 81% of the first preference ethnic Fijian vote, while the main Indian-backed party received 82% of the Fiji Indian vote. Preference transfers tended to ‘hollow out the centre’ and the moderate parties fared even more poorly than they had done at the preceding elections in 2001. They proved unable to gain a single Fijian communal, Indian communal or open seat.⁷

Seven months after the May 2006 polls, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) staged yet another coup on December 5th 2006⁸. This was not a coup of the type familiar in Fiji, entailing indigenous nationalists seizing power in the wake of electoral victories by parties predominantly supported by the country’s Fiji Indian citizens (as in 1987 and 2000). Instead, the 2006 coup was undertaken by a military commander in the name of anti-corruption, multi-racialism and ‘good governance’. It entailed the overthrow of an indigenous Fijian-led government that had, in contrast to its earlier 2001-7 term in office, followed the country’s (Lijphartian) constitutional rules requiring inter-ethnic power-sharing in cabinet.⁹

This latest twist in Fiji’s turbulent post-independence history casts further light on our debate with Horowitz over the issue of whether or not the AV electoral system is likely to yield pro-moderation outcomes. A month after the military coup, a military-backed interim cabinet was formed, with the RFMF commander Frank Bainimarama assuming the position of Prime Minister. The new government featured prominently

most support. Mainstream parties tend to rely on more subtle appeals to their target groups, often centred rather on policies that are widely construed to favour their core voters.

⁶ By contrast, the 1999 Fiji election offered a unique opportunity, but one which – owing to the poor 1997 choice of electoral system – generated outcomes that contributed to political instability.

⁷ The only constituencies where moderates made any headway were the general communal constituencies, where those other than the ethnic Fijians and Fiji Indians vote.

⁸ For an analysis of Fiji’s 2006 coup, see Fraenkel (2007).

⁹ Even before the coup, strains had been evident in the multi-party cabinet, with the nine Fiji Labour Party (FLP) ministers split down the middle over the issue of whether to support the 2007 budget. Those that backed the budget were threatened with expulsion from the FLP, and those that did not faced the possibility of losing their ministerial portfolios.

moderate Fijian politicians who had been defeated at the 2006 polls¹⁰. Deposed 1999-2000 Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry became Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister in that government. Those who Horowitz depicts as ‘moderates’ were unprepared to wait yet another term in the hope that AV would work against the ethno-nationalist parties and instead chose to assume office in an unconstitutional administration¹¹. This was also an event that showed that alliances between odd bedfellows, of the kind Horowitz deems unlikely, quite regularly disrupt those anticipated types of behaviour that are presupposed by unidimensional electoral engineering theories.

Now we turn to a different objection raised by Horowitz. Horowitz argues, again rather oddly, that ‘neither political party coordination nor strategic voting plays any part in [our] analysis’ (2007: 13, 16). In fact, party strategy lies at the core of our emphasis on the possibility of non-single-peaked preference rankings (rendering possible scenario 3 type outcomes). Our empirical analysis has focussed centrally on party-controlled *above-the-line* party ranking of preferences in Fiji’s open constituencies, and the way these gave expression to alternative coalition building strategies¹². Party strategy, such as efforts to build alliances around an ‘ins versus outs’ cleavage, is one route to the promotion of non-single peaked preference rankings, although other factors may have similar effects.

In Fiji in 1999, we showed that the party official-controlled transfer of preference votes from the *Veitokani ni Lewenivanua Vakaristo* (VLV) to the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) gave the latter five open seats, enabling the FLP to secure an absolute majority in parliament (Fraenkel & Grofman 2006a: 642). Yet the VLV was a hard-line ethnic nationalist Fijian party which opposed the 1997 constitution and wanted to turn Fiji into a Christian state, whereas the FLP was a largely Hindu and Muslim-backed leftist party. The exchange of preferences between these parties was due to their common desire to oust the incumbent *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* government. Far from proving a robust ‘coalition of conviction’, the VLV-FLP alliance proved highly precarious. When the FLP was dislodged in a coup in May 2000, supporters of the VLV, together with those other parties which had engaged in preference-sharing deals with the FLP, were prominent amongst the coup-supporters. In other words, Fiji’s 1999 election was critically influenced by the type of preference transfers Horowitz deems ‘not worthy of much attention’.

Our work has dealt exclusively with the issue of the usage of AV in deeply divided societies. We have offered no conclusions about the merits or otherwise of AV in other contexts, such as the ‘instant runoff’ proposals under discussion in the USA, the

¹⁰ The key moderate Fijian politicians who entered the new cabinet were Ratu Epeli Ganilau, leader of the National Alliance Party of Fiji (NAPF), which had failed to secure a single seat in May 2006. Several other failed NAPF candidates took ministerial portfolios, as did other moderates such as former Speaker of the House, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and the United Peoples Party’s Bernadette Rounds Ganilau.

¹¹ Horowitz claims that Mahendra Chaudhry is a politician who ‘came late to interethnic coalition politics as a result of AV’ (Horowitz 2007: 20). This seems a rather exalted electoral determinist claim, particularly given Mr Chaudhry’s latest interethnic coalition!

¹² For further details about how this worked see Fraenkel & Grofman (2006a:632) and for the empirical data, see Fraenkel & Grofman (2006a: 639).

alternative vote in Australia, or limited preferential voting in Papua New Guinea¹³. Throughout, we have emphasised the importance of context, and the way identical electoral systems may work in strikingly different ways in distinct situations. Heroic proposals to mitigate ethnic conflict via changes in electoral system design which are insensitive to local circumstances are likely to prove disastrous, as they were in Fiji. The better approach in Fiji would have been to adopt a proportional representation system, thus eliminating the strong electoral pressures towards ‘ethnic unity’ that have proved characteristic of the operation of all majoritarian systems in that country.

End.

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¹³ Horowitz claims ‘abundant’ evidence of conflict mitigation in Papua New Guinea under optional preferential voting prior to independence (2007: 21). Since Papua New Guinea has recently adopted a compulsory AV system (called locally ‘limited preferential voting’) and faces its first general election under the new system in June 2007, we can happily settle on this as a rewarding test of our respective positions. Although for very different reasons to those outlined in our investigation of the Fiji debacle, we are sceptical that PNG’s new system will differ substantially in its effects on ethnic accommodation as compared to the plurality system it is replacing. Here, fortunately, time will tell.