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### 'Democracy disabled due to uninformed citizenry'



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## Disclaimer

Note: the views expressed in this presentation are the views of the author, Mosmi Bhim.

These views do not reflect the views of the organisation, Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF) where she is employed.

## 5 Dec '06 Coup in Fiji



## Democracy in Fiji

- **This presentation is based on a research & policy paper - to be submitted for publication**
- Democracy in Fiji has been top-down whereby politicians, professionals & CSOs advocated against coups rather than the grassroots
- Ethno-nationalists saw democracy as foreign flower but some now support elections
- 5 Dec 2006 coup in Fiji – difficult moral (divisive) questions for ethno-nationalists & former democracy advocates

## Elections & coups

- Elections fought on emotional appeals
- Why lack of protest against coups?
- Priority needs for basic services & infrastructure, contributes to uninformed citizenry & good leaders
- An enlightened citizenry & economic, social & cultural rights is essential for democracy

## Colonisation & democracy

- Introduced by colonisers, Christianisation
- Some Fijians protested, subjugated
- 1874 – Indian indentured workers for sugar
- Indo-Fijian descendents struggled for rights, 1921 strike for better wages, 1929 - common roll
- Indo-Fijians received franchise but Fijian leaders chosen by Great Council of Chiefs

## Fijian struggle for democracy

- Democracy & anti-colonial struggle yet to occur
- Vijay Mishra, Satish Chand – coups symbolising the cycles of struggles for democracy by Fijians, each cycle bringing the country closer to democracy
- If anti-colonial struggle is necessary for true realisation of democracy, then ordinary Fijians have yet to undergo a revolution to realise their rights

## Elections as democratic expression



2001 & 2006 election results similar  
Manipulation of cultural, ethnic, religious and traditional differences resulted in ethnically polarised voting for SDL & FLP  
Reformed and new-ideas politicians lost  
Grassroots appear capable of articulating economic & welfare needs only  
Poor leadership located in middle-class

## NGO coup protests

- A group of academics, activists and lawyers emerged protesting against coups after 1987
- Rights-based NGOs gave organised response against 2000-coup hostage crisis through NGO Coalition on Human Rights
- CSOs such as workers & teachers unions tend to refrain from coup protests

## Perceived discord in NGOCHR

- Post 5 Dec '06 coup – lack of media release by NGOCHR
- Activists tortured at army camp on Christmas eve, 2006
- FHRC Director Shameem's paper justifying coup
- Some NGOs supported Bainimarama's pro-poor agenda
- New activists accused of political party support
- A few NGOs took non-engagement stance

## NGOCHR

- NGOCHR were united on two issues:
  - opposed illegal overthrow of government
  - opposed human rights violations
- Thus, the NGOCHR has been successful in its functions as a human rights coalition.
- However, human rights NGOs cannot spearhead a movement for return to democracy as they wouldn't have sufficient resources, since this activity falls outside their core activities

## Disunity evades opportunity

- Charter process failed to receive NGOCHR support
- Lack of independent donors, participating NGOs criticised
- Authoritarianism increased after Charter team disbanded
- 10 April 2009 Constitution abrogation and imposition of Emergency Regulations severely constrained human rights & curtailed hopes of any new movements

## Movements

Post 5 Dec '06, two movements created:-

- Coalition for Democracy and Peace
  - created a few days after '06 coup. Good concept that recognised that a wide variety of concerned individuals & organisations need to join & have a united voice for return of democracy. But lack of long-term plan, vision & leadership saw its demise in less than a month
- Movement for Democracy
  - Created in Dec '08. It restricted membership to selected NGOs, unions & political parties. Bias towards deposed political party & animosity to those with different ideologies, prevented membership from wide group of people & CSOs

## Why did they fail?

- NGOs isolated fighting for democracy ideals everyone wants to enjoy. Ordinary citizens failed to protest. Qarase's supporters failed to protest during his house arrest. Economic needs prioritised over civil and political ideals – IG promised services.
- Need for a new movement with simple objective, inclusive, people from any political, social or other background should be free to join. Vision, inspired leadership
- Eg. India, South Africa, America

## NGOs, people 4 democracy



## Infrastructure & Democracy

- Fiji in a phase of modernity where the infrastructure is still being built. Eg. Naitasiri, Tailevu, Ra, Savusavu, Labasa, Nagado. Roads, water, electricity is lacking in many rural areas. Semi-subsistence lifestyles. Radio in vernacular language – widest reach
- Institutional structures of democracy are not able to function as in West. Infrastructure not there
- Uninformed citizenry cannot hold govt to account
- West – industrialisation & revolutions for civil & political rights

## Question of rights

- 1945 Charter of UN rightly highlights the realisation of civil & political rights is interdependent on economic, social & cultural rights being adequately met
- Better economic life can free people to think of democracy as their survival is not dependent on whose in power
- Fiji's budget inadequate for large infrastructure projects. Big roads, water & bridge projects funded through EU, ADB or other
- Thus, adequate infrastructure will be a while

## Conclusion

- Democracy failed to work in Fiji because its still undergoing modernisation. Protests against coups & political activities have emanated largely from middle-class. Infrastructure & communications need to be harnessed for better informed citizenry so grassroots can act for democracy.
- Alison Lazarus: "For the people to govern, the people need to remain engaged. The citizen has to stay vigilant to her own needs & hold government accountable for delivery."

## Conclusion

- New movement is needed with visionary leader, open to anyone to join, across political, ethnic, social, religious, CSO & personal divides
- Jose Ramos-Horta and Mahatma Gandhi's example reveal the importance of being open to be free to talk to everyone with different beliefs, so the struggle for democracy can be successful. Because democracy is everyone's responsibility & right.
- Grassroots people are more likely to support & join a democracy movement if the leadership is inspirational and can bridge divides