

## Short Summary

### Navigating Troubled Waters:

### The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

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## Chapter 2: Ernst, Manfred: Ecumenism in Fiji: Restless Winds and Shifting Sands

In order to understand current developments, the chapter gives an overview on the history of Fiji first.

The Republic of Fiji geographically belongs to the Melanesian archipelago. Due to its central location as well as its economic and political importance, it is considered the “hub” of the Pacific. The current (growing) population size amounts to approximately 837,271 people (2014). Culturally, however, the indigenous *iTaukei* share more with the Polynesian people of the Pacific, as the first people to reach Fiji around 3000 years ago from western Melanesia were the Lapita who are thought to have settled down in Western Polynesia as well.

Christianity was introduced to the country by the London Missionary Society in 1830 for the first time, marking a time of increasing British settlement that culminated in Fiji being ceded to Britain in 1874. Suva became Fiji’s capital in 1882. In order to both increase productivity in the agricultural sector and to spare the indigenous population the unfamiliarly hard work, the British colonial government allowed 60,945 Indian labourers to immigrate into the country between 1879 and 1916. This multicultural constituency has created continuing conflict until today. The current constitution, however, guarantees every Fijian citizen equal rights in the country.

The political history of Fiji has mainly been shaped by five coups between 1987 and 2006. After achieving independence, privileges of the indigenous Fiji’s and structural negligence of Indo-Fijians endured in the new constitution. However, the Indo-Fijian population continued to grow, resulting in the first general election victory of the Fiji Labour Party in 1987. This triggered a military coup on May 14, 1987, in whose course negotiations for a new

constitution and government were being taken up. But due to results unsatisfying to him, military colonel and Methodist lay preacher Sitiveni Rabuka staged his second coup on September 25. Despite of universal international measures of rejection, a discriminatory constitution that ensured an indigenous Fijian majority in both parliament and government was introduced in 1990 and was not abolished before 1997.

On May 19, 2000, the election of the first prime minister of Indian descent led to the third coup. Demonstrations and the violent taking of prime minister Chaudhry as hostage finally resulted in a military government led by commander Frank Bainimarama and the second expulsion of Fiji from the Commonwealth.

But when democracy was restored in 2001 and a new prime Minister had been elected, troubles didn't cease. Contrarily, ongoing tensions between Prime Minister Qarase and head of the military Bainimarama led to a fourth coup in 2006. Centre of the discussion was the harsh discriminatory policy by the government through which indigenous Fijians were structurally neglected. Even though Bainimarama had originally supported the 2001 coup, he grew increasingly suspicious of the Fijian Nationalists and decided to intervene on December 5, 2006. When the Fijian court of appeals judged this coup to be illegal in 2009, President Iloilo overrode the court's authority and reappointed Bainimarama as interim prime minister. Relations between the government and both the international community and the Methodist church remained tense. On September 17, 2014, Bainimarama and his Fiji First party gained an almost 60% majority in the first election since the new constitution had been introduced, with support from both indigenous and Indo-Fijians. Compared to the one after the 2009 dispute, the constituency of the new government remained largely unchanged. These five coups in 29 years have not only caused the emigration of 25,020 Indo-Fijians between 1996 and 2007, but also a general uncertainty among Indo-Fijians. The change in Fiji's ethnic composition clearly shows that the fear of indigenous Fijians to become a minority in their own country has been counteracted against by the coups – after actually having been a minority in 1966, the indigenous Fijians have constituted 57% of the population in 2007.

The chapter furthermore deals with the historical developments of churches and ecumenism in Fiji since the 1980s. Fiji has mainly been dominated by the Methodist Church.

Nevertheless, there are two events that have shaped the religious landscape remarkably since Christianity was introduced to the country: The migration of Indian labourers by which Islam and Hinduism have been introduced to the country, and the emergence of new forms of Christianity. The latter has gained special importance over the past few decades: Today, almost every major religion or denomination suffers under a growth in member numbers that lies below the overall average population growth. Newer religious groups, however, are growing in both absolute and relative numbers. The chapter indicates that this growth mainly takes place at the expense of the Methodist Church. Still, in 2007, the Methodist church with 34,7% of the total population made up a total majority within the Christian part (65,2%) of the population. Other dominating religious groups included Hindi (27,7%), Roman Catholics (9,1%), Moslems (6,3%), and Assemblies of God (5,7%).

During the foundational period of ecumenism, the Fiji Council of Churches (FCC) was founded in 1964. Its objectives mainly aimed for greater unity and dialogue between different religions and denominations as well as increased fulfilment of an actively Christian, sustainable and just society. The establishment of several institutions that would help reach those goals but also emphasized the needs of common people in particular led to a positive image of the FCC. Apart from four founding churches, several other denominations joined the FCC during the following years.

However with the military coup of 1987, the FCC experienced a slow but certain decline. The involvement of two leaders of the MCFR in the coup jarred the population's trust in the FCC as advocates for social equity and unity. Even though many promising attempts were undertaken to revive the Council's activities after 2000, the political unrests that followed have retarded that process intrinsically. The FCC held very good relations with the government of Prime Minister Qarase (2001-2006) and several further efforts to revitalise inter-church relationships were undertaken, culminating in the formation of yet another inter-church body, the Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji (ACCF), in 2001. The chapter indicates that the aim of the very close cooperation between the ACCF and the government followed a strong political purpose, namely to create "an indigenous Fijian government". Unfortunately, this period of revival – regardless of the dubiousness of the racist policy of the SDL government – took an end when the Methodist Church openly and sharply criticised Bainimarama's coup in 2006. This did not only eliminate governmental support for both FCC and ACCF, which made ACCF basically disappear in public perception, but also divided the FCC from its inside. The results were declining activities and projects, a "silent death". It has not been until recently that the FCC could anew experience a revival, this time on behalf of the Ecumenical Centre for Research and Advocacy (ECREA), a body that evolved out of a sub-organisation of the FCC in 2001. Additionally, theological differences and the fact that there are several umbrella organisations all interacting with regional and global networks show the vast differences among Fijian Churches. Author of the chapter Manfred Ernst states that "the turning point for ecumenical cooperation in Fiji undoubtedly [was] the military coups in 1987". He also stresses the impact of the following coups.

The chapter provides an analysis of field research. Basis are interviews with members of Christian churches.

Different personal understandings of ecumenism are shown here: Apart from answers referring to generally held interpretation, ancient Greek origins and meanings of the term "ecumenism" as well as the Gospel of John, a majority of interview partners emphasizes the need to include diverse religions and denominations in an atmosphere of dialogue, to focus on similarities instead of differences. This is considered especially important in sight of the several threatening social issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: The chapter clearly shows an understanding of globalisation, climate change, all forms of inequality etc. as major challenges that should be addressed by the churches but in fact are not. A call for the church to provide a safe environment and simultaneously raise its voice can be evaluated, together

with certain disapproval of “nationalistic and narrow political outlook”. Instead, it is advised to commonly focus on shared concerns about social issues. This will facilitate addressing these problems, whereas “dwell[ing] on doctrinal issues” is more likely to exacerbate it.

Regarding successes and failures of Ecumenism, failures clearly dominate in the perception of the interviewees. Despite of many success in the rather distant past, especially the establishment of the three ecumenical institutions (Pacific Conference of Churches, Pacific Theological College, and South Pacific Association of Theological Schools), pacific ecumenism is apparently struggling with different problems regarding cooperation, joint-action, and financing. The chapter indicates that there is a lack of cohesion, connections, and leadership within PCC. Additionally, the fact that “too many member churches do not pay their annual membership fees” creates a strong dependency on church partners overseas that threatens the ongoing existence certain ecumenical bodies. The chapter even states that “there is real danger that PTC and PCC may have to cease their operations in the near future”.

The chapter also provides perspectives on ecumenism’s future.

It gives two main reasons for the decline of ecumenical cooperation: a lack of support for the development of member churches that derived from a “refocus on theology”, and the rise of multiple new religious groups. The rise of competitive attitudes by which some smaller churches seek to defeat the established ones is even named as possible ultimate trigger for the break of unity between pacific churches.

Critiques regarding ecumenism often refer to PCC. A lack of communication, cooperation and enthusiasm is criticized most frequently here. The chapter indicates that there is a general lack of commitment to the idea of ecumenism that concerns all parts of PCC, which leads to a lack of dialogue both within PCC and between the different local and regional bodies. But still, the interview partners emphasize the need of a strong ecumenical spirit for the region in order to be able to face the huge challenges more effectively, simultaneously affirming that they see many changes for a revival of ecumenism. Key factor could be ecumenical formation and education. PTC, despite its problems in financing, is considered to have been “quite successful” in educating church leaders – mainly due to the strong spirit of intercultural and interdenominational dialogue as well as the strong bonds within community life. These bonds create relationships which last even beyond students actual study time at PTC. Other interview partners stress the need to make use of the unique possibilities for a strong ecumenism in the Pacific. More dialogue within churches as well as a “more dialogical approach to government leaders” is suggested as possible action tools. This part of the chapter particularly emphasizes the need of a cooperative and purposeful attitude within the ecumenical movement that is driven by genuine commitment to the ideas and ideals of ecumenism.

The conclusions and recommendations of the chapter outline the author Manfred Ernst’s views about the main problems and possible solutions regarding ecumenism in Fiji.

It emphasizes the need of strong leadership which has always been crucial for a flourishing

spirit of ecumenism. It stresses the complexity of the ecumenical landscape in Fiji that is created by the interaction of multiple regional and local ecumenical institutions in Suva. These organisations are seen to be threatened by insufficient funding by both internal and external partners. Regarding PCC, FCC and PTC, the chapter recognizes different, structural problems that are all considered to reach so deep that the main recommendation is to organize main assemblies that discuss the future of these bodies. It proposes closer cooperation among the ecumenical institutions. In special regards to FCC, it is proposed to extend the capacities of the body in order to make shared worship, shared policy recommendations, shared visions and increased cooperation possible. The concluding chapter also emphasizes the need for churches to include “social, economic and political developments” in their thematic orientation. The chapter generally recommends to ensure an appropriate education and formation for future leadership and increased efforts to curb ineffectiveness in the work of boards and committees that influence decision-making. In a nutshell, the chapter points out the relevance of overcoming the lack of commitment to ecumenism, the structural problems in all ecumenical bodies, and the need to agree cooperatively on shared visions that concern the common people.

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