



Fiji Country Report: April 2023

Colonized by the British in 1874, Fiji became [home to over 60,000 indentured laborers](#) transported from India to work on colonial sugarcane plantations. [Even after their labor contracts expired, most Indian workers chose to remain in Fiji.](#) Indo-Fijians now [comprise 43% of the island's population, with indigenous Fijians constituting 51%.](#) While Indo-Fijians [have higher economic](#) status, [82% of Fiji's agricultural land is owned by the indigenous population,](#) which is entitled to legal protections. Recently, [laws amending land rights have led to large-scale demonstrations](#) and [the arrests of opposition leaders.](#)

From Independence in 1970 to 1987, the Fijian government was led by the indigenous leader Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. [In 1987 a multiracial coalition headed by an indigenous Fijian, Dr. Timoci Bavadra replaced Mara.](#) The coalition aimed to promote ethnic equality. Protests named the ["Taukei Movement" erupted](#) across the country advocating an ethnocentric policy favoring indigenous Fijians. [Lieut. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka, an indigenous Fijian, initiated two consecutive military coups](#) to restore absolute political control to the "indigenous Fijian Race." Rabuka's coups [ousted the previous government and enacted laws to](#) suppress the rights of Indo-Fijians. [200 people were injured in the resulting protests.](#) There was a mass exodus of Indo-Fijians from Fiji. [The percentage of Indo-Fijians living in Fiji dropped to 32%.](#) Over [5,000 left annually.](#)

Rabuka's military government in 1990 rewrote Fiji's 1970 constitution to favor indigenous Fijians, ensuring their political dominance over other ethnic groups through race-based [parliamentary seat requirements, changes to land policy, and amendments granting Fijian-led government branches unchecked privileges.](#)

In 1999, Mahendra Chaudhry, an Indo-Fijian, became the country's first nonindigenous prime minister. In 2000, a group of armed ethnic Fijians led by the businessman [George Speight began the nation's third coup, taking Chaudhry and 50 government officials hostage.](#) Fijians [flooded the streets in protest, looting shops and shutting down local schools.](#) A civilian interim government was appointed that did ["not accept Indo-Fijians as citizens with equal rights."](#)

The nation faced its fourth coup in 2006. [Concerned by the ongoing suppression of Indo-Fijian rights,](#) Army Chief and Indo-Fijian [Frank Bainimarama seized government control, declaring himself president.](#) Bainimarama's government imposed censorship measures through [emergency decrees](#) and legislation such as [the Public Order Act and Media Industry Development Act, curtailing freedom of expression.](#) Hefty charges were levied against [media outlets](#) and [journalists.](#) In 2013, Bainimarama imposed a fourth constitution that eliminated [the parliament's unelected Upper House, and the hereditary Council of Chiefs which had been criticized for granting special privileges to favored ethnic groups.](#) Bainimarama's party prevailed again in the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Fiji's most recent general election resulted in a parliamentary deadlock, with no party holding a majority of seats. There was widespread political unrest. A [rise in ethnic violence drove the government to deploy the military to "maintain order."](#) [Rambuka was narrowly declared victorious, returning as prime minister for a second time,](#) putting an end to Bainimarama's 16 years in office. Bainimarama has publicly insulted Rambuka, and he faces [criminal charges for Abuse of Office.](#)

Due to the nation's history of ethnic division, political discrimination, and race-based nationalism, Genocide Watch considers Fiji to be at **Stage 1: Classification, Stage 3: Discrimination, Stage 6: Polarization, and Stage 8: Persecution**
Genocide Watch recommends that:

- Fiji should establish an independent commission to resolve land disputes and to broker land use agreements to address ethnic tensions, mass displacement, urban sprawl, and "squatter settlements."
- Fiji should amend its 2013 constitution to include a Bill of Rights with explicit protections for freedom of expression, association, and assembly, including for those who criticize the government.
- Fiji should restructure its parliamentary boundaries and seats to proportionally represent all ethnicities.
- Fiji should continue its funding and support for the University of the South Pacific.