

Fiji: different country, different era

Undercurrents of racial and political tension surface in this mixture of centralised and third-world economy

John Bishop

You're on Fiji time now, the receptionist told me when I arrived at my resort hotel. She might have added that it was a different era as well as a different pace of life.

Modern Fiji is a curious mixture of the centralised economy and the struggling third world, with the baubles of western affluence on display as prizes, coupled with an undercurrent of racial and political tension.

Along the road to the resort, I see a farmer walking behind two oxen pulling a traditional plough, while the multi-coloured Pepsi sign proclaims the virtues of its product and underneath announces the name of the local school.

On television, there is the patriotic collage of faces, races and activities so loved by tele-

vision programmers seeking to identify their station with their nation. The news is *One National News* on Fiji One, the one, if we hadn't already got the point.

All the items in the first segment of the one hour news show most nights were about the government. The presentation was reminiscent of 1970s TVNZ. The pictures were boring. Clips from ministers and other authority fig-

ures went on at length. Questions and short segments of voiceover merely broke up the official monologue. There were no pieces to cam from the reporters, no analysis or comment. The official opposition was hardly ever mentioned and Indians were practically invisible in the political stories and hardly seen in the rest of the bulletins either.

In a revealing episode, a

group of Fijian landowners had closed an Indian school and evicted the teachers and pupils. It was the latest move in a long running dispute between the landowners and the Ministry of Education. The pictures showed an empty school. The clips had the head Fijian, speaking in Fijian with subtitles. Nothing from the school, the teachers, the pupils, the local community, or from the ministry. The next

morning the three local papers offered no more explanation or balance.

In another story the chair of Netball Fiji, Alice Tabete, announced the resignation of the team's Australian coach, Megan Simpson. "The reason for her resignation is personal reasons," as if that were an explanation.

Within a day it emerged that Netball Fiji hadn't raised the sponsorship money it had expected to and also that (according to the reputable *Fiji Times*) Simpson's \$100,000 a year salary took up 95% of the organisation's budget.

In a distinct throwback to New Zealand in the 1970s, sponsors get a 200% tax write off on their sponsorship dollars. This tax concession is due to expire, and sporting organisations were forecasting doom if it wasn't renewed.

The advertising too is an odd mixture; there's a strong emphasis on western consumer goods, like cellphones, but the astonished housewife still discovers how white her whites can be by adding some miracle substance.

In Fiji, there is price control on basic commodities, which are also zero rated for VAT. The Prices and Incomes Board approved rises in the price of flour and sharps (milled rice). The consumer council complained about a lack of time for poor families to adjust, while the opposition leader Mike Beddoes wanted welfare vouchers issued to cover the price increase.

At the resort the Fijians were in charge, and Indians did the cooking while Yoshimi from Japan was learning how to meet and greet guests in the main restaurant. Behind the resort the upper middle class houses were gated in a security conscious third world way.

Nearby, Le Café advised it was under Swiss management, but the Indian waitress wore a T short advertising across her chest that she was armed and dangerous. Zurich had to be notified of my order for grilled fish, judging by the delay.

In Singatoka, a restaurant proclaimed that it was Fijian owned and operated. Why was that worth saying? Was it a political statement – that Fijians could run things? A warning to tourists? Or maybe it was just a nationalistic statement, in the same way as Australian companies often proclaim that they are proudly Australian owned.

Last year when I was here, the papers were full of heat about the bill providing amnesty for most of the coup plotters (except George Speight who is still in jail). Rabuka was storming around like a frustrated Idi Amin. One year on, the bill still hasn't been passed but the heat has come down. Still I left Fiji with a strong sense of the fragility of the economy and its political stability.

■ John Bishop visited Fiji at his own expense