

DIVERGENT OUTCOMES FOR DEMOCRACY FROM RECENT ELECTIONS IN FIJI AND THE MALDIVES: ANALYSING THE 2018 ELECTIONS AND ITS AFTERMATH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical background and conduct of recent elections in two small island nations in Asia-Pacific, Fiji and the Maldives. It assesses the situation of democracy prior to elections, and afterwards in 2020–2021. This article seeks to contribute towards filling the gap in literature, with regards to comparative case studies on electoral authoritarianism in small island states. The two nations with dissimilar history, religion, ethnicity and geology, held national elections in 2018. Fiji comprising volcanic and limestone islands with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population is located in the Pacific Ocean. The Maldives with lowest lying coral atolls, and a homogeneous population of one ethnicity and one religion Islam, is located in the Indian Ocean. The elections were conducted under differing circumstances of electoral authoritarian rule in the aftermath of multiparty elections, with repression in the Maldives increasing, and repression in Fiji easing. But the 2018 election results saw a return to transition to democracy in the Maldives. Conversely in Fiji, the electoral authoritarian government was re-elected. Challenges to democracy remained unchanged in both nations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Fiji, Maldives, elections, electoral authoritarianism, democratisation

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, two small island states conducted multiparty authoritarian elections that produced starkly different outcomes. Fiji, located in the South Pacific, with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of approximately 900,000, held their elections in November 2018. The Maldives, located in the Indian Ocean, with an ethnically homogeneous Muslim population of around 400,000, had their presidential elections in September 2018. Both nations were under electoral authoritarian rule—Fiji, in the aftermath of the 2006 military coup; and the Maldives, in the aftermath of the 2012 coup-type event (see the section on the Maldives below). Authoritarianism and a crackdown on rights and freedoms increased in the lead-up to the Maldives 2018 elections. In contrast, authoritarianism appeared to be easing in the lead-up to Fiji’s 2018 elections (Bhim 2020). This was not reflected in the election results: Maldivians used the power of the ballot to usher in a democratic change in government, whereas in Fiji, Bainimarama’s electoral authoritarian government was retained, albeit by a bare majority. This article discusses electoral authoritarianism (see next section for a definition) and examines the key events leading up to the 2018 elections in Fiji and the Maldives, the conduct of the elections, the situations post-election, and the main challenges to democracy in the two countries. The events preceding the elections are highlighted in this article and reveal that they were authoritarian in nature, as the existing conditions did not meet some key requirements for enjoyment of democracy.

It is necessary to examine the conduct of elections in Fiji and the Maldives to ascertain the degree of authoritarianism because increasingly, international organisations are using the holding of multiparty elections to measure a country’s progress in achieving democratic principles (Hyde 2011), including the exercise of key civil and political rights. Free and fair elections in a context of pluralism is an important institutional expression of democracy, yet elections alone are not enough because “it is possible to have formal elections without sustainable democracy. What happens before and after elections is therefore as important as the elections themselves” (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA] 1995: 3). Some third world countries have non-democratic practices but claim to be democracies, by having their elections declared “free and fair” or credible by international observers to benefit from aid and trade from developed Western nations. But merely having elections scrutinised by foreign monitors does not make those elections democratic. Elections that have potential to be democratic are likely to be internationally observed; nonetheless, this creates an impression that

non-observed elections are less likely to be democratic (Hyde 2011). The declaration of some elections as free and fair by international observers can sometimes seem questionable—including the Maldives 2013 presidential elections and Fiji’s 2014 general elections (see Bhim 2019), where in both cases, the executive’s control and manipulation aided the victory of one party. The desire to appease democratic donors probably compelled these two nations to invite election observers.¹

Fiji and the Maldives are examples of two small island states that have followed these trends. Fiji commenced its transition to democracy at independence in 1970 and the Maldives commenced its transition to democracy in 2008, forty-three years after independence. However, authoritarian reversals occurred in both nations—Fiji, in the aftermath of the coups in 1987, 2000 and 2006, and in the Maldives after the 2012 coup-type event.² When juxtaposed against Dahl’s (1998) essential conditions of democracy, it is argued that authoritarian reversals occurred in these states due to a lack of democratic culture (Bhim 2020). Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasised the importance of the political sector and civil society to work together for democratic consolidation. These theories are drawn on to assess the situation of these nations that entered transition to democracy at different times post-independence. This article utilises primary sources such as news media, as well as the author’s fieldwork in Fiji and the Maldives, to analyse the conduct and the aftermath of elections.

AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS

“Authoritarian election” is a term coined by scholars to describe elections where there was indeed multiparty competition, but restrictions in the exercise of key civil and political rights prevented citizens from fully exercising their democratic freedoms. In the lead-up to elections, the candidates may not have been able to compete on a level playing field with the incumbent rulers’ party because the rules of contestation, laws, access to state media, judiciary, and use of security forces, indicate that the space available to actors and for open discussion of issues is not freely available (Schedler 2002; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). The result is a competition skewed in favour of the incumbent, creating a high probability of their victory (Levitsky and Way 2010). The rights of opposition parliamentarians, and their ability to make a significant contribution to policymaking by effective use of parliamentary mechanisms, are severely curtailed in non-democratic situations, turning parliament into

an instrument of the executive, with the opposition unable to challenge government's decisions, change or stop contentious bills, or have a sufficient number of parliamentary sittings. As shown in subsequent sections, both in Fiji and the Maldives, opposition parliamentarians' efforts to make meaningful contributions were restricted in the lead-up to the 2018 elections since their views were either disallowed or disregarded. This is problematic because "one-party states and dictatorships arise where an effective opposition is non-existent" (Lipset 1959: 71). Therefore, the curtailment of the parliamentary opposition is an important indicator that a country is falling short of democratic practices.

Human rights and democracy encompass much more than just the election-day events. In authoritarian states, resources are abused, state institutions and media are controlled, institutions are manipulated, the judiciary may not be independent, and even laws and government activities may curtail citizens' right to vote freely. Citizens could be influenced to cast a vote in favour of the oppressive regime out of fear of reprisal, or violence if the opposition wins (Stolz 2014). Authoritarian elections, albeit restricted, provide spaces for utilisation of rights and freedoms by citizens to usher in democracy. It remains inconclusive whether authoritarian elections are more likely to produce democracy or authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010).

FIJI: BACKGROUND AND LEAD-UP TO FIJI'S 2018 ELECTIONS

Fiji was first settled about 3,500 years ago and had an indigenous Fijian population now known as iTaukei.³ Fiji had aristocratic rule by chiefs and was ceded to Britain in October 1874. From 1879–1916, 60,965 Indians were brought to Fiji (Lal 2012) as indentured labourers to work on sugar cane plantations. The British followed a policy of divide and rule, whereby the iTaukei, Indians, and Europeans lived in separate residential areas, had separate schools, different places of worship and differential career aspirations. Fiji entered the phase of transition to democracy at independence on 10 October 1970. Its multi-ethnic society was not reflected in its military composition, which remained homogeneous comprising a majority of iTaukei Christians.

Paramount chief Ratu Mara, prime minister for seventeen years post-independence, lost the April 1987 elections, triggering the first military coup on 14 May 1987. Led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, the military ousted the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) coalition government of iTaukei Prime Minister

Dr Timoci Bavadra, claiming that it was Indian-dominated. According to Rabuka, the coup resulted from the “cooperation of the most prominent and powerful” iTaukei leaders in Fiji (Rabuka, pers. comm., 20 July 2016). Thus, Fiji’s leaders had failed to utilise democratic methods, including parliamentary process, to solve contentious social and political issues. Such leaders become “... the most dangerous internal threat to democracy” because they “have access to the major means of physical coercion: the military” (Dahl 1998: 149). Fiji did not satisfy Dahl’s essential conditions of democracy because the military was not subservient to Bavadra’s elected government and prominent leaders did not respect democratic electoral outcomes. Instead of consolidating democracy, Fiji regressed into authoritarian rule. From 1992–1999, Rabuka was the elected prime minister of a competitive authoritarian⁴ government, because despite being authoritarian, Rabuka ruled through consultation and thus cannot easily be described as dictatorial. Rabuka nurtured patron-client relations amongst the military and iTaukei political elite. He lost the 1999 elections after adopting a moderate multi-ethnic approach following the 1997 Constitution Review process, which undermined his iTaukei clientele (Lal 2016).

The second coup on 19 May 2000 by members of an elite group of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) was also justified on the premise of trying to prevent dominance of Indians. It ousted the FLP coalition government of Fiji’s first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. The third coup on 5 December 2006, led by RFMF Commander Voreqe Bainimarama, was different because it claimed to eradicate both racism (against Indians) and corruption (Fraenkel and Firth 2009). Bainimarama, an iTaukei, removed iTaukei Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase of the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) party from power. The subsequent eight years of unelected rule by Bainimarama can be characterised as a personalist/military dictatorship (Bhim 2011), whereby personal control occurs when the leader concentrates power and decision-making into their hands (Geddes 1999). After each coup, constitutions were abrogated, the coup supporters received leadership positions, and the regimes eventually returned to multi-party elections.

Bainimarama’s regime conducted multiparty elections in September 2014. The elections had authoritarian traits because the executive was able to manipulate the rules and process of elections to enable the incumbents’ victory (Bhim 2019; Lal 2016). Bainimarama’s reminders about atrocities suffered by Indians following the 2000 coup (Stolz 2014) influenced voters by creating fear of a Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA)⁵ victory, and

that another coup might occur if Bainimarama lost. The executive controlling key appointments to the judiciary, elections office, security forces and state-owned media (Bhim 2015; Fraenkel 2019), meant the playing field was in favour of the incumbent. The elections resulted in the electoral authoritarian government of Prime Minister Bainimarama. Bainimarama retained power after the victory of his party FijiFirst, described as “the product of military power” by Ratuva and Lawson (2016: 2). International monitors tend to scrutinise the vote casting and counting processes only. As such, it was unsurprising when the elections were declared credible by the Multinational Observer Group (MOG 2014). A Concerned Citizens for Credible Elections (CCCE 2014) project carried out a voter perception survey and also found the 2014 elections credible. These declarations legitimised Bainimarama’s rule. The 2014 elections moved Fiji towards democracy by enabling Bainimarama’s personalist/military dictatorship to transition to an electoral autocratic government.

Optimism amongst civil society on Fiji’s return to parliamentary rule in September 2014 dissipated as the government’s actions conveyed authoritarianism, albeit in a democratic parliamentary setting. Key government portfolios remained under Bainimarama and the Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum,⁶ and several government positions were retained by military personnel. As a result, they maintained a significant amount of control post-2014 elections. This concentration of power, combined with the retention of the repressive decrees promulgated after the abrogation of Fiji’s 1997 constitution in April 2009 (Bhim 2011), suggests that despite having multiparty elections, Fiji fell short of democracy, which requires exercise of key civil and political rights including freedom of expression and the media, independent judiciary, parliament (IDEA 1995), and neutral security forces to enable government accountability. Hence, the regime type after the 2014 elections in Fiji could more accurately be described as an electoral autocracy.

The government’s actions after the 2014 elections made it difficult for the opposition to play an effective role in parliament. For instance, the Public Accounts Committee chairman, National Federation Party⁷ (NFP) leader Professor Biman Prasad’s scrutiny of the auditor general’s reports for 2006–2014 made the government uncomfortable. The government reacted by changing the parliamentary standing orders so the position could be taken by any parliamentarian rather than the opposition (Narayan and Naikaso 2016). Government whip Ashneel Sudhakar became the new chair, creating serious doubts about proper scrutiny of government finances.

Another concern was the suspension of three opposition members of parliament (MPs) as it curtailed the parliamentary opposition's independence: SODELPA's Ratu Isoa Tikoca for listing Muslim officials in senior government positions, NFP President Ro Tupou Draunidalo⁸ for calling a government MP a fool—both suspended in 2016 until the end of their terms; and SODELPA's Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu suspended for two years in 2015 for allegedly using an offensive word against the speaker outside parliament (Round 2016; see Kumar 2017). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) expressed concern at the suspensions and recommended lifting them (IPU 2016). Additionally, key bills were rushed through parliament disallowing meaningful contributions from the opposition.

The militarisation of politics continued in the lead-up to the 2018 general election. The former RFMF chief of staff Jioji Konrote,⁹ became the first Rotuman¹⁰ appointed president in November 2015. In June 2016, Rear Admiral Viliame Naupoto, a loyalist to Bainimarama, was appointed commander of the RFMF. After police commissioner Ben Groenewald (of South African nationality) resigned in November 2015, citing interference in policing by the military, RFMF land force commander Colonel Sitiveni Qiliho was appointed police commissioner¹¹ (*ABC News* 2015). These new appointments retained the military's control.

Fiji thus has been going through a cycle of coups, authoritarian rule and return to electoral parliamentary rule post-1987. After each coup, former parliamentarians, politicians, chiefs and other elites joined illegitimate regimes, revealing an apparent lack of commitment to democratic values, and by extension, a failure to regard democratic institutions as the key means to resolve political crises and social issues, which is an essential requirement for democratic consolidation according to Dahl (1998) and Linz and Stepan (1996). Although Fiji returned to electoral rule in 2014, the parliament was restricted and not performing its requisite role in a democracy.

FIJI'S 2018 GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

The 2018 Fiji elections were conducted under Bainimarama's electoral autocratic government. Although Fiji ostensibly returned to parliamentary rule in 2014, institutions such as the state media, security forces, and the judiciary,¹² appeared to lack impartiality due to prosecution of opposition figures discussed in this section. Repressive decrees such as the 2010 Media Decree¹³ and the Public Order Act¹⁴ amended in 2014, remained in force

(Bhim 2015). The impact of restrictions is explored below to demonstrate that the elections were not fully democratic, but had authoritarian attributes.

Despite the existence of competition in the lead-up to Fiji's 2018 elections, people were still fearful due to repression by the government, according to Jone Dakuvula, head of the Pacific Dialogue, "They don't express themselves freely. Government is very restricting. The public service is cowed through reforms" (pers. comm., 9 August 2016). In a similar vein, opposition leader Professor Biman Prasad (pers. comm., 28 July 2016) described the government and civil service as having "...a culture of servility and sycophancy, there's fear, there's no transparency, there's no separation of powers". Prasad highlighted that government restricted civil society organisations (CSOs) from participating in elections activities and were not allowed to observe the national elections. Another CSO leader recalled the difficulties they encountered from government, as the electoral decree restricted civil society's election-related work, especially if they were funded by foreign governments (pers. comm., 4 August 2016).

Shamima Ali, the coordinator of Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, stated that CSOs had to refrain from criticising the government:

CSOs are self-censoring what they say. There is suppression of activism. There is negotiating with government to get things done. I don't think CSOs have been under so much duress as in the last 10 years or so....The ordinary civil servants are so scared of losing their jobs and being demoted because they don't have recourse to a tribunal. (pers. comm., 23 July 2016)

Not only were CSOs restricted in their advocacy, after the 2014 elections, parliament was not considered open to views of CSOs:

CSOs are operating under a climate of fear and feel restricted. They try to play safe. They don't make much criticism in the media against the government. The attorney general has powers to restrict or strike out CSOs who are registered as a not-for-profit company. Parliament is a sham. You make submissions and it has no impact on the government. (Dakuvula, pers. comm., 9 August 2016)

Parliament was further gagged through the government's decision to have fewer parliamentary sessions, as after September 2016, the next session was scheduled for February 2017 (Professor Biman Prasad, pers. comm., 28 July 2016). Prasad highlighted that due to the Public Order decree, political parties had to apply for permits to have simple meetings, and that "...all the laws

under which they [government] operated as a military regime [are] still in place”.

The government delayed the 2018 elections without any credible reason (Ewart 2018). Before announcing elections, President Konrote’s term was extended for another three years. Konrote dissolved parliament on 30 September 2018 and announced elections would be conducted on 14 November (Bolanavanua 2018). Parliament’s dissolution had little impact on Bainimarama’s political party FijiFirst, whose ministers continued government activities and received free campaign publicity.

Constant allegations of two-man rule—that only two men control Fiji’s government: Prime Minister Bainimarama and attorney general Khaiyum—were made by former senior soldier Pio Tikoduadua who had joined the opposition NFP. After failing to become FijiFirst’s nominee for elections, former supporter Alivereti Nabulivou derided FijiFirst as being controlled by two people (Fraenkel 2019). Akin to 2014, handouts, including free bus fares, textbooks, fee waivers for schoolchildren, housing grants, childbirth benefits, and subsidies for water and electricity bills, were promoted by FijiFirst, and infrastructure developments publicised. Flood relief worth FJ\$123 million had been distributed in April 2014, following cyclones Josi and Keni (Fraenkel 2019). A flurry of activities to complete major road projects, such as the Suva-Nausori road upgrade, commenced in the lead-up to elections.

The Fiji Electoral Commission (FEC) chair Chen Bunn Young, with its four members were not reappointed to oversee the 2018 elections. They unsuccessfully took court action against the Supervisor of Elections for disallowing two nominees to contest in 2014 (Loga 2014). New FEC members and new chair Suresh Chandra were appointed in February 2017, in a seemingly non-transparent manner (*Radio New Zealand [RNZ]* 2017). Leaders of opposition political parties SODELPA, NFP, FLP, Unity Fiji and Freedom Alliance Party, expressed a lack of confidence in the FEC and the Supervisor of Elections Mohammed Saneem, but agreed to contest the 2018 elections (Naqelevuki 2018). Saneem, employed in the Attorney General’s ministry prior to the 2014 elections, remained the supervisor for the 2018 elections.

Similar to events in 2014, the state-sponsored newspaper *Fiji Sun*, continued its unabashed advocacy of FijiFirst, while media freedom remained curtailed through the 2010 Media Decree and media engaged in self-censorship to avoid penalties. *Fiji Sun* ridiculed the opposition with articles such as, “Beware of fake news”, with the subtitles “Opposition fantasy not facts” and “No transparency past govts”.¹⁵ In these front-page articles, the Managing

Editor News Jyoti Prabha chastised the opposition parliamentary leaders' criticisms of government finances and excessive per diems for overseas travels (Prabha 2018). In support of the FijiFirst government, another article by the Managing Editor for Training, Nemani Delaibatiki (2018) linked Fiji's secular state status to the 2013 constitution. Conversely, victimisation of independent media continued with the *Fiji Times* editor Fred Wesley, publisher Frank Arts, and letter writer to its iTaukei language newspaper *Nai Lalakai*, Josaia Waqabaca, charged with inciting communal antagonism in August 2016 for a letter Waqabaca wrote on 27 April 2016 that was critical of Muslims (Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions 2016). The charge was later changed to sedition. In May 2018, the three were acquitted after a unanimous non-guilty opinion by assessors (Cava 2018). This raises questions whether they should have been charged at all, or if their prosecution was orchestrated to intimidate the media.

The 2018 polls could not be contested by former prime ministers Chaudhry and Qarase, as their twelve-months convictions prior to the 2014 elections disqualified them from contesting elections for eight years. Again, in the lead-up to the 2018 elections, a few opposition candidates were prosecuted. SODELPA MP Mosese Bulitavu and United Freedom Party President Jagath Karunaratne were convicted in March 2018 (Talei 2018a) for spray-painting seditious words six years earlier in August 2011, disqualifying them from contesting elections. Five months later, their two-years-and five-months sentences were set aside in August 2018 by the High Court (Savike 2018a). Attorney General Khaiyum launched cases against lawyers aligned to the FLP, Aman Ravindra-Singh and Rajendra Chaudhry,¹⁶ for social media commentary critical of Bainimarama and Khaiyum. Rabuka, SODELPA's leader for the 2018 elections, exonerated by the Magistrates Court for failing to declare assets, income, and liabilities, was re-acquitted two days prior to elections on 12 November, during the blackout period (Talei 2018b). The acquittal's timing potentially disadvantaged Rabuka as he received the second highest number of votes: 77,040 (16.96%) (*Fijivillage* 2018) in the 2018 elections. SODELPA also received the second highest number of votes amounting to about 40% (Fijian Elections Office 2019). These results raise questions whether SODELPA's votes were affected by the blackout period, which prevented the party from informing their supporters about Rabuka's exoneration.

Bainimarama and Khaiyum appeared confident during the 2014 election campaign, but in 2018, Bainimarama's confidence seemed rattled by coup-maker Rabuka contesting the polls. Coup perpetrator Maciu Navakasua¹⁷

stated at the FijiFirst campaign meeting in Ra in November 2018, that Bainimarama had no involvement in the 2000 coup and that it was instigated by elite iTaukei, corrupt businessmen and failed politicians (Cabenatabua 2018). Bainimarama tried to win the trust of the iTaukei by explaining that he executed the 2006 coup because the racism against Indians during the 1987 and 2000 coups was strongly alive in the deposed SDL government (Danford 2018). Bainimarama explained that Sayed-Khaiyum was his friend and denied the country was run by Muslims. However, SODELPA’s greatly increased share of votes (see Table 1) indicate that his confession failed to win the trust of the bulk of iTaukei.

Bainimarama’s fear-mongering campaign, reminding Indians of past post-coup atrocities, gave FijiFirst the majority of Indian votes (Cabenatabua 2018), which combined with advantages of incumbency, allowed Bainimarama to win by a bare majority. The public’s perception of his benevolence towards Indo-Fijians and poor aided his victory.

Table 1: Results for the 2018 Fiji elections by political party

Political party	Percentage of votes
FijiFirst	50.02
SODELPA	39.85
NFP	7.38
Unity Fiji	1.52
Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality (HOPE)	0.62
FLP	0.62

Source: Fijivillage (2018).

The votes cast numbered 458,532 out of a total of 637,527 registered voters at 2,173 polling stations. Bainimarama polled 167,732 (36.92%) votes. The \$1,000 registration fee for candidates and having the whole country as a single constituency made contesting elections an expensive exercise. This encouraged election candidates to being from upper and/or middle-class families who could afford the fee and campaigning costs, thus, favouring elites acquiring political power.

Similar to 2014, an MOG monitored the elections while a domestic observer group was not allowed to observe by the Minister for Elections, and the participation of civil society was restricted. The MOG (2018) found the 2018 elections transparent and credible, and that the process “advanced electoral democracy in Fiji” (6). However, it recommended allowing party identification on ballots, transparency of the FEC, and regulating conduct of public officials

during elections (*ibid.*). The 2018 MOG reiterated the recommendations by the 2014 MOG to ease restrictions on civil society; review harsh penalties limiting the media's reporting; and allow non-partisan domestic observers, which Bainimarama's government had failed to implement. Nevertheless, the MOG, recognising the elections as credible, aided Fiji's government to secure Western donor assistance.¹⁸

Compared to the 2014 election, civil society, restricted through decrees, played a lesser role in 2018 when Bainimarama's FijiFirst again won with a slim majority. CSOs and academics held very few elections-related public discussions and could not conduct systematic elections education or long-term media advocacy. In contrast, the return to parliamentary rule in 2014 had rejuvenated political parties thus making the political environment freer. This meant the FijiFirst encountered tougher competition in 2018. An anomaly of 76,750 votes cast in the Eastern Division, which had only 26,034 registered voters, were among several issues highlighted by academics and opposition MPs (Tarai 2018). These were dismissed by the Fijian Elections Office. Analysts acknowledged that Bainimarama's victory was probably in part achieved through repression of the media and dissent by CSOs, including the unions and churches (O'Sullivan 2018).

In short, in a heterogeneous multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting, Fiji's 2018 elections were administered by a militarised government and conducted under repressive laws that remained since the 2014 elections. The media was still under strain, albeit less than during the 2014 elections. Opposition members faced suspension from parliament and were victimised through court cases, but not convicted. However, the government appeared fearful of sanctions if the polls were not classified credible. Some opposition politicians' convictions were reversed in the lead-up to elections. This slightly liberalised context, and the existence of a parliament since 2014, albeit restricted, allowed for better campaigning and reach of the opposition which created the real possibility of FijiFirst losing in 2018. FijiFirst received the largest share of positive media coverage from five of the six daily media organisations (Singh and Lal 2022), undoubtedly aiding their victory. The "rock star" phenomenon of visibility, familiarity and relevance (Ratuva 2016: 35), won votes for Bainimarama in the 2014 elections, and also the 2018 election. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was freer, allowing the opposition to gain a stronger foothold than the 2014 election. FijiFirst's 2018 slim victory was less due to handouts, and more due to the high number of votes by Indo-Fijian voters who were made to feel afraid for their safety (Cabentabua 2018) if the opposition SODELPA won. Although the 2018 election was more

competitive as it was freer than the 2014 election, it was not fully democratic due to laws restricting freedoms, state control over the media and judiciary, and fear of another military coup.

In the aftermath of the 2018 polls, an elections petition case questioning the results was withdrawn by the opposition parties as the judges refused to allow them to present key witnesses (Savike 2018b). Since the 2018 election, Australia and other Western powers softened their stance towards Bainimarama's government. Recognising Bainimarama as Fiji's legitimately elected leader, they have been bolstering its military with aid and training for the security forces. This includes Australia making a long-term commitment in 2018 to redeveloping the Blackrock¹⁹ facility in Nadi, Fiji, into a regional hub for police and military peacekeeping training and pre-deployment preparation (Naigulevu 2018). Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Fiji in January 2019 and launched the Fiji-Australia *Vuvale*²⁰ partnership (DFAT 2019). In 2019, the democratic Western nations Australia, New Zealand and United States committed to support Fiji's military with training. Previous demands for the military to withdraw from civilian governance and to stop participating in coups and related treasonous acts are no longer voiced.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 increased the need for donor aid from democratic nations. But despite acceptance of aid during COVID-19, the FijiFirst government continued with its penchant for repression of freedom of expression and targeting of opposition politicians. In February 2021, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific, Professor Pal Ahluwalia, and his wife Sandra Price, were deported by the Fiji government. Later, the Fiji government claimed they had breached the Immigration Act, but did not provide specific incidents that resulted in such breach (Narayan 2021). During the second wave of the COVID-19 delta-variant outbreak in Fiji in 2021, opposition political leaders²¹ were detained by police in July-August, for expressing concerns about the controversial iTaukei Land Trust Bill No. 17 under which lessees would no longer require approval from the iTaukei Land Trust Board for activities such as sub-leasing and mortgaging (Ratuva 2021). Despite widespread criticism of the bill and lack of consultation with landowners and the public, the bill was passed through parliament as a budget consequential bill in August. These are examples of government's actions whereby "well-meaning actions and words by citizens are securitised and considered a threat" to justify harsh actions by the security forces (Ratuva 2021). Such actions by the government are authoritarian in nature, and do not resonate with democratic values of rule of law, consultation and freedom of expression. The above incidents infer that the regime type in the aftermath of Fiji's 2018 multiparty elections had features of electoral authoritarianism.

THE MALDIVES: BACKGROUND AND LEAD-UP TO THE MALDIVES 2018 ELECTIONS

The Maldives is an archipelago of atoll islands in the Indian Ocean settled by migrants from South India about 1,500 years ago. It became a Muslim nation in 1153. The Maldives had monarchical rule by Sultanates. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the Maldives had to defend itself from invasions by the Portuguese and the Malabars of India (Luithui and Phadnis 1985; Ellis 1998). The Maldives became a British protectorate in 1887. It was a self-administered nation. Britain only controlled foreign affairs and defence and applied indirect rule through the Sultanate. After independence in 1965, the Maldives continued the practice from colonial times where one person from an elite or monarchical family was chosen by the *Majlis* (parliament) for the position of president, and that name was endorsed by the population in a referendum. As there was no oversight from the colonial authority or monarchy over the President, the Maldives became a dictatorship. The first post-independence president, Ibrahim Nasir, descended from a monarchical family and ruled as a dictator till 1978. His successor, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, descended from a noble family and ruled as a personalist dictator from 1978–2008. The Maldives was not a plural society as political parties were not allowed. This meant authoritarian control was not vested in a party but a person, in a one-man dictatorship.

Gayoom was pressured to implement reforms for democratisation in the mid-2000s for several reasons. These included international donors' preference for democracy following the end of the Cold War, pressure from educated Maldivians, and need for aid in the wake of devastation from the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The transition to democracy commenced with the Maldives' first multiparty elections in 2008. The Maldivian Democratic Party's (MDP)²² Mohamed Nasheed became the first democratically elected President. Nasheed's government faced challenges from loyalists to the previous dictator in the judiciary, armed forces, business and politics. Nasheed's efforts to implement democratic reforms and prosecute corruption were hampered by opposition politicians who portrayed Nasheed as an enemy of Islam (Bhim 2020). Nasheed resigned under duress in the coup-type event of 7 February 2012, following a mutiny by police and weeks of demonstrations; later he said he was forced out in a coup (*BBC News* 2015a). Thus, the Maldives' political leaders became the most dangerous internal threat to democracy through, as Dahl (1998) argues, their ability to influence "the major means of physical coercion: the military and the police" (149). The Vice-President Mohamed Waheed became President and led the country till the 2013 elections.

The September–November 2013 presidential elections in the Maldives had characteristics of authoritarian elections. The police obstructed the work of an independent Elections Commission and the judiciary interfered by issuing numerous judgements to nullify or delay election dates, which favoured the coalition of the former dictator Gayoom’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and Jumhooree Party (JP), and worked against Nasheed’s MDP (Naseem 2015; Bhim 2019). The Commonwealth and European Union international observers’ reports expressed concerns at discrepancies and at the judiciary’s interference in the polls (The Commonwealth 2013; European Union 2014). Nonetheless, the elections were deemed credible based on narrow parameters of assessing the polling and counting processes.

With the 2013 election resulting in the PPM’s Abdulla Yameen, half-brother of Gayoom, becoming president, the Maldives reverted to electoral authoritarianism. Similar to the 2013 presidential election, Yameen’s PPM party won the 2014 *Majlis* (parliamentary) election through a coalition of JP and Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) party. Yameen’s government was an electoral autocracy, as the leader amassed authoritarian power despite coming to power through multi-party elections.

Yameen’s government used its majority to manipulate parliament in various ways to pass legislation. It obstructed parliament by eliminating opposition leaders through detentions, convictions, fines or threats of incarceration, leading to key political figures living in exile to avoid imprisonment (Naseem 2015). Yameen’s government also utilised the judiciary to weaken opposition. For instance, Nasheed was arrested in February 2015, detained, charged with terrorism, not allowed a lawyer, and sentenced on 13 March 2015 (Robinson 2015). Nasheed was jailed for thirteen years under anti-terror laws (*BBC News* 2015b).

Several other opposition members were prosecuted under Yameen. In 2016, Adhaalath Party leader Sheikh Imran Abdulla was jailed for twelve years for allegedly inciting violence during the 2015 May Day protests²³ (*Maldives Independent* 2017). Yameen’s former coalition partner Gasim, was sentenced in absentia to three years imprisonment for attempted bribery in 2017 (*ibid.*). The opposition regarded Gasim’s conviction as part of actions to victimise the opposition, which had gained a majority in parliament the previous month, due to defections from the ruling party (*ibid.*). Other opposition figures jailed under Yameen include two former defence ministers, a ruling party lawmaker, a former vice-president, a senior military officer, and a magistrate, while thirteen other opposition MPs were on trial (*Maldives Independent* 2017). Convictions of more than a year automatically disqualified MPs from holding

seats and raised questions about the independence of the Maldives judiciary (ibid.). When MPs were going to vote to impeach speaker Abdulla Maseeh over allegations of corruption and rights abuses, soldiers locked parliament doors on Yameen's orders and dragged out opposition parliamentarians trying to enter (Rasheed 2017). The IPU (Reliefweb 2017) expressed concern over manhandling of parliamentarians by police and soldiers and stripping of seats from seven ruling party parliamentarians. The IPU identified thirty-three cases pending against twenty-one opposition parliamentarians as "part of a deliberate attempt to silence the opposition" (Reliefweb 2017).

To avoid prosecution, many high-profile Maldivians were living in self-exile. Those self-exiled in Sri Lanka included²⁴ former elections commission chair Fuwad Thowfeek, senior MDP members Ahmed Naseem and Hamid Ghafoor, and independent MP Ahmed Mahloof who was jailed under Yameen. To avoid incarceration, after leaving Maldives for medical treatment, Nasheed received political asylum in Britain and Gasim in Germany (Shaahunaz 2018). Former vice-president Mohamed Jameel and JP's new president Ali Waheed also moved abroad (ibid.). Controversially, laws were amended in June 2018 to bar people living in asylum and/or with foreign citizenry to stand in elections for ten years (ibid.).

In the lead-up to 2018 polls, Yameen's government pressured government employees to support his party. Fuwad Thowfeek, sacked in 2014 from the position of head of the Maldives Elections Commission (MEC) for criticising the government, disclosed:

People holding civil service or senior positions in government companies told me they were informed to become a member of the ruling party PPM or resign...When people stop following what Yameen wants them to do, that person is taken to jail and framed for anything...²⁵ I heard all people belonging to independent institutions, civil service and government companies are required to attend PPM functions which have a strict attendance register. (pers. comm., 23 November 2017)

Furthermore, government threatened CSOs with dissolution, criminal cases or prosecution, stated Ahmed Tholal, senior human rights project coordinator at Transparency Maldives (TM):

We faced physical threats and intimidation by non-state actors supported or empowered by the state with their impunity. The civic space in the country was quite fragile, quite limited. Civil society

was unable to function as they should because of the intimidation by government. But despite that, we still voiced concerns. (pers. comm., 8 November 2017)

Apart from harassment by government, Maldivian academic Dr Azra Naseem stated that CSOs became challenged by lack of funds and international support:

CSOs have been killed by regulations that make it impossible for them to register. CSOs are harassed and systemically subjugated by government. Whenever they make a statement supporting democracy, they are labelled anti-Islamic. (pers. comm., 2 February 2018)

The situation deteriorated as the 2018 election approached. The judiciary had been providing anti-opposition, and pro-Yameen verdicts. However, on 1 February 2018 the Supreme Court, in a landmark ruling, ordered immediate release of nine high-profile prisoners—including Nasheed and former Vice President Ahmed Adeeb—and reinstatement of twelve *Majlis* members previously stripped of their seats (*Maldives Independent* 2018a). The Supreme Court decision was favourable to Gayoom. Yameen defied the court ruling and imposed a fifteen-days state of emergency on 5 February 2018. Soldiers sealed off parliamentary buildings and arrested parliamentarians trying to enter (Ray 2018). The military stormed the Supreme Court while police barricaded roads leading to it (Junayd and Aneez 2018). In June 2018, Gayoom was jailed for nineteen months for failing to cooperate with police investigating his role in “plotting to overthrow the government” (*South China Morning Post* 2018). Additionally, Gayoom’s son Faris Maumoon was convicted for bribery. Two Supreme Court judges Abdulla Saeed and Ali Hameed were tried and given the same sentences in proceedings criticised for lack of fairness, and rulings allegedly showing lack of impartiality by the Maldives judiciary (*South China Morning Post* 2018).

Despite a promising transition to democracy, the Maldives was unable to consolidate it. Substantive population groups did not regard democracy as the only means of resolving problems (Linz and Stepan 1996), leaving the risk of them overthrowing the democratic government. Gayoom’s loyalist elite beneficiaries supported a reversion to authoritarianism and abetted decline of democracy in the Maldives. Instead of aiding in democratic consolidation, they supported a reversion to electoral autocratic rule by electing Yameen in 2013. Yameen utilised parliament, security forces and the judiciary to serve his own interests. Under Yameen, the anti-opposition judicial verdicts were predictable and appeared pre-determined. This did not meet Przeworski’s

(1991) condition of democracy where results of conflicts should not be pre-determined. Yameen's multiparty elected government was an electoral autocracy.

THE MALDIVES 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

The 2018 presidential election in the Maldives was held in an atmosphere of repression. This was apparent in the lead-up to polling through the following: continuous firing and shuffling of senior military and police positions; interference with judiciary; elements of armed forces and judiciary acting against opposition groups; parliamentarians being detained; parliament being locked down to prevent tabling of motions against Yameen; and civil servants forced to sign membership of Yameen's party to retain their jobs. A major problem was fear of job loss due to peoples' dependence on the state which is among the Maldives' largest employers. Despite this fear, people went against Yameen.²⁶

Yameen's control over the Maldives was synonymous with personal dictatorships and filled the country with fear.²⁷ The media was constrained through the 2016 Defamation and Freedom of Speech Act while civil society was apprehensive due to unpunished offences of Islamic extremists. Amidst this atmosphere of a manipulated judiciary, besieged opposition and unjust governmental actions, it appeared doubtful if elections would be held, if it would be free and fair, or if vote-rigging might occur. There was hate speech against Nasheed by Yameen's ministers. Nasheed was portrayed as anti-Islam,²⁸ or *laadheeni*.²⁹ PPM supporters threatened to behead Nasheed and other opposition figures if they returned to the Maldives (*Maldives Independent* 2018b).

Elite families and businesses retain political and economic power in the Maldives³⁰ and influence elections. The tourism industry is highly politicised as big businesses fund both PPM and MDP parties and instruct employees who to vote for (Khandekar 2018). Elite beneficiaries of Gayoom supported Yameen in the 2013 polls, however, elite businesses support for Yameen's party decreased after the European Union announced sanctions due to the Maldives' deteriorating human rights situation (*ibid.*).

Yameen's loyalist Ahmed Shareef was appointed chair of the MEC earlier in 2018 which created doubts about whether elections would be free and fair (*Maldives Independent* 2018c). Shareef was former secretary-general

of Yameen’s party. While cracking down on opponents revealed Yameen’s insecurity about losing power, Shareef’s announcement in June for early polls on 23 September 2018 indicated Yameen’s confidence about an election victory, especially since his key opponents Nasheed and Gasim were living in asylum abroad, and Gayoom and Gayoom’s son Faris Maumoon were behind bars.

India, the European Union and the Commonwealth’s reminders to respect democracy and release political prisoners were met with belligerence by Yameen who felt bolstered by Saudi Arabia’s military aid and China’s infrastructure aid. Maldivians twittered fears of increased debt to China from infrastructure projects. The USD200 million China-Maldives friendship bridge opened three weeks before elections on 1 September 2018 with a few-stories-high cutout picture of President Yameen erected next to the bridge and multiple cutouts of Yameen lining the bridge (*Maldives Independent* 2018d). The cutouts attracted controversy on Twitter as the previous month, Yameen ordered a resort to remove “human-form” sculptures viewed as against Islam (*ibid*).

As the Maldives withdrew from the Commonwealth in October 2016 (*BBC News* 2016), the Commonwealth did not send observers to the 2018 elections. The European Union and UN declined MEC’s invitation to send observers. However, MEC approved thirty-eight delegates from eleven international organisations to observe the polls, including the Asian Network for Free Elections, Foreign Correspondents Association of Sri Lanka, Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (which had links to Yameen’s PPM), and twenty-six media representatives from fourteen outlets including *The Wire*, AFP, *Le Figaro*, WION, Strategic News International and *New York Times* (*Maldives Independent* 2018e).

Yameen made huge populist concessions and announced development activities to win support in the lead-up to elections. Media³¹ reported the government waived fines for fishermen, tenants, motorists and water bills. Tax violations by small businesses were waived, Yameen inaugurated projects for harbour, sewerage, water supply, roads, housing and shore protection. Yameen admitted during campaigning that he was responsible for stripping of seats from parliamentarians and excluding Nasheed and Gasim from contesting elections. The police were biased towards Yameen and took no action when the Financial Intelligence Unit reported that Yameen received \$1.5 million cash into his private bank account prior to polling (Rasheed 2018). Thus, the state was being utilised as an instrument of Yameen and appeared to be totally under his control.

The opposition parties joined forces to fight against Yameen. Four opposition parties, MDP, JP, Adhaalath, and a breakaway faction of PPM led by Gayoom, formed a broad coalition but could not agree on a candidate.³² Finally, one month before polling, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was announced as MDP's presidential candidate. Solih pledged to legislate income tax, combat corruption, implement decentralisation, seek justice for sacked workers, reform the police, try Yameen for crimes, and end tyranny and dictatorship. Solih was fielded as the joint opposition candidate and, in a major upset, defeated Yameen in the 23 September 2018 presidential election securing 58.3% votes while Yameen received less than 42% (*Al Jazeera* 2018).

Local observers played a key role for elections observation in the absence of the European Union and the Commonwealth. TM played a lead role in election monitoring and deployed about 400 domestic observers. TM (2019) noted parties and candidates did not enjoy requisite freedoms and were prosecuted or persecuted causing widespread disillusionment. Despite these issues, citizens came out in numbers and “used the power of the ballot” resulting in transparent and peaceful elections (TM 2019: 21). Independent international and local observers, international journalists, and a vigilant public out on the streets in huge numbers, kept watch on elections activities, which provided credibility to the polls. It can thus be deduced that in a truly participatory democracy where active citizenship is exercised, where citizens continuously engage to monitor government and are out in numbers to monitor elections, international observers are not necessarily a requirement, as people power is able to perform this role. Solih's election was a victory for civil and political society, who worked together to oust a dictatorship. This reaffirms Linz and Stepan's (1996) assertion that civil society holds the capacity to shift the power balance. It provides a lesson to electoral authoritarian regimes, including Fiji, that it is possible to overthrow a dictatorship if the political and civil society and general public unite to oust the undemocratic ruler through the ballot. Conversely, without civil and political societies working together, it is impossible to hold free and fair elections, eject an autocracy and usher in democracy. The Maldives was back on the path of transition to democracy.

Yameen's party staged nightly protests after his defeat, but the judiciary this time respected the election and rejected Yameen's petition to annul the results (*Maldives Times* 2018). Yameen announced a new military welfare company *Sifainge Ekuveri Kunfuni* (Military Friendship Company), although two already existed (*Maldives Independent* 2018f). Nonetheless, security forces, judiciary and MEC, with new-found freedom, announced they would respect the election results. The *Maldives Independent* reported that Yameen's

party harassed a *RajjeTV* journalist; threatened MEC members resulting in elections commissioners fleeing the country; called for MEC Chair Shareef's arrest and fresh elections; as well as attempts by the outgoing regime to sell 400 residential plots which was halted by the Anti-Corruption Commission.³³ These actions indicate Yameen's difficulty in accepting defeat and last-ditch efforts to nurture some clients.

In short, the Maldives 2018 election was conducted in an atmosphere of fear and repression, amongst an ethnically homogeneous Islamic population. The elections were authoritarian, as Yameen's autocratic government severely restricted freedoms of opposition parties and candidates, which affected their ability to compete on a level-playing field with PPM. However, Yameen's extensive firing, imprisonment and persecution of public officials and politicians led to an erosion of support by some of his own loyalists that had enabled his victory in 2013. Yameen's tyranny against his own loyalists led to his electoral defeat in 2018, because Yameen failed to sustain the patron-client relations necessary for an autocrat's survival. A vigilant civil society with citizens determined to bring back democracy, had aligned with likeminded political actors and was able to topple Yameen's dictatorship through the ballot. Civil society triumphed over Yameen's dictatorship when he lost the elections to the opposition coalition. International election observers were not prominent in the 2018 elections, however, more than 400 domestic observers, plus watchful citizens, played an important role by monitoring the polls thus giving an independent record and providing for government accountability. The Maldives pulled back from democratic reversal and returned to the path of transition to democracy.

After Yameen's defeat, the judiciary and armed forces, who had been at Yameen's mercy, refused to support Yameen's effort to have the election results nullified, and gave their allegiance to the elected President Solih. Political prisoners were released, suspended MPs were reinstated, Gasim's bribery conviction and Nasheed's thirteen-year terrorism conviction were quashed, the PPM's speaker of parliament was voted out, and the former president's senior public servant appointees sacked.³⁴ A raft of legislation was introduced after Solih's victory, including a bill to protect whistle blowers. New military and police heads were appointed, the defamation act was repealed, commissions of inquiry were formed to probe unsolved murders, and judicial reforms were proposed. The police reform programme launched under Solih is ongoing. Yameen was convicted for five years in 2019 for money laundering.

Nevertheless, democracy is fragile in the Maldives and threats to it remain. In the *Majlis* 2019 elections, MDP won sixty-five of eighty seats, which provide it with a strong mandate to implement its pledges. But challenges to democracy persist. In 2019, the Maldivian Democracy Network³⁵ (MDN) called for a truth and reconciliation process to deal with atrocities under past administrations. A new activist group *Navaanavi* claimed everything in the Maldives was controlled by 1% of powerful people and they protested in December 2018 against four unelected coalition leaders, including Gasim and Gayoom, making major decisions as advisors to President Solih (*Maldives Independent* 2018g). Additionally, appointees of previous administrations continue to occupy many official positions, creating feelings of unfairness amongst MDP supporters (*Maldives Independent* 2019a).

Islamic extremist groups pose a serious threat to democracy in the Maldives. A Presidential Commission in 2019 found that assaults on and deaths of four free thinkers during Yameen's rule were carried out by a local extremist group linked to al-Qaeda. The group used mosques in the capital Malé to recruit Maldivians to fight in Syria³⁶ (*Maldives Independent* 2019b). In a troubling move, the Solih government dissolved MDN in November 2019, citing a 2016 report that challenged Islamic principles after protests by religious scholars (*Avas* 2019). The PPM has been using Islam to provoke actions against President Solih's government and former president Nasheed. Nasheed returned to the Maldives following Solih's victory in 2018 and became the speaker of parliament. Gayoom as president introduced political Islam to the Maldives and employed it to sanctify his rule. This paved the way for utilisation of Islamic nationalism by Maldivian politicians opposed to democracy (Bhim 2023). These politicians' rhetoric provide fodder to Islamic extremists and is contributing to polarisation of Maldivian society.

Islamic radicalisation, combined with lack of political unity, the Solih government's slow pace of achieving justice and stamping out corruption, and social and economic fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic, is creating an unfavourable climate for further liberalisation in the Maldives (Bosley 2020). The Maldives' tourism-dependent economy suffered harshly during COVID-19, which spread fast in its densely populated islands. Furthermore, MDP lost its majority in local council elections for the capital Malé to PPM (*Sun Media* 2021). This indicates that Maldivians remain vulnerable to extremist rhetoric, especially during periods of disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic has not diminished the threat from Islamic extremists as Nasheed, regarded as the Maldives democratisation hero, was injured in a bomb blast on 6 May 2021 by followers of extremist ideologies. The UN, European Union, Interpol, as well

as Britain and India are contributing funds to combat terrorism in the Maldives due to the acute danger it poses to the Asian continent. It is in the Maldives' economic interests to keep Islamic extremism at bay, if it wishes to maintain its middle-income status that have partly accrued as rewards from luxurious tourism. Failure to do so could result in a reversion to authoritarianism. No doubt, Maldivians have a long journey ahead of them towards consolidating democracy.

CONCLUSION

The 2018 elections in Fiji and the Maldives had qualities of authoritarian elections with some similarities and key differences. For both Fiji and the Maldives, the executive controlled key appointments to the judiciary, elections office, security forces and state-owned media, and were able to manipulate information dissemination, rules to contest elections, and the space available to other political actors. Both Fiji and the Maldives invited international observers and made efforts to have their polling and vote counting processes declared as credible. The major differences were that in Fiji, while the military occupied key positions in the government and civil service, it did not interfere in people's daily lives and there were no outbreaks of violence nor public use of force by the armed forces. In contrast, in the Maldives, the armed forces were misused by the autocratic president to crack down on opposition. This meant that there were high levels of repression, use of force and arbitrary detentions in the Maldives. Fiji's election was conducted in a freer environment than the Maldives, but resulted in the re-election of Bainimarama. It is probable that Bainimarama's slim victory was aided by loyalists in the military and civil service, benevolence to the poor, and a strong vote from Indo-Fijians. Conversely, the higher levels of repression in the Maldives galvanised its citizens, civil and political societies to work together, resulting in the dictator Yameen's loss and victory for the MDP. Despite the advantages of incumbency, Yameen lost due to being a harsh ruler who undermined too many of his own loyalist clients, which eroded his support base. The authoritarian elections had provided an opportunity for multiparty competition, despite some limitations on exercise of freedoms. The above cases show that there is a chance for a country to return to transition to democracy if it is able to receive sufficient support from the wider political community and civil society. However, it is likely that the nature of democracy will be fragile and there could be a high danger of threats to consolidation of democracy.

In the post-2018 election period, major threats to democracy remain in both countries. In Fiji's heterogeneous multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, the biggest threat to democracy remains the military, which, since 1987, has interfered in politics and put in power the political party supported by the military. The military's influence on Fiji's government means that unless the military's size is drastically reduced, the possibility for Fiji's return to full democracy could be slim. The likelihood for a coup in Fiji remains a prime possibility, if a party that does not have the military's support wins elections. Fiji's general election in December 2022 saw the loss of FijiFirst to the People's Coalition Government who promised to remove repressive laws. Nevertheless, former military officers are influential in the new Fiji government with Rabuka as elected Prime Minister and former soldiers holding positions of Leader of Opposition, Home Affairs Minister, and MPs.

In the Maldives' homogeneous society of one ethnic group following Islam, another threat to democracy is the political elite that benefited under authoritarianism. Since the 2008 transition to democracy commenced, they have tended to play on the fears of the population that Islam is under threat, and use that as a pretext to incite hatred and violence against the MDP. The COVID-19 pandemic has not lessened the challenges to democracy in the two nations, as political leaders with their polarising rhetoric remained in power. For democracy to flourish in these two small island states, a significant portion of their political elites and ordinary citizens need to accept democratic mechanisms as the only means to resolve political and social problems in future.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Consent was obtained from interviewees as per the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of UNE. The HREC approval number for Fiji is HE16-114 and for Maldives is HE16-166.

NOTES

- * Mosmi Bhim has been a faculty member of the Fiji National University for twelve years and teaches Bachelor of Applied Social Sciences. Mosmi completed her PhD at the University of New England, Australia, on the topic: Authoritarian regimes in small island states: The anomalous cases of electoral autocracies in Fiji, The Maldives and Seychelles.
- ¹ The declaration of Fiji's 2018 elections as credible led to Australia's announcement of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale partnership (DFAT 2019).
- ² Fiji, the Maldives and Seychelles were selected as case studies for Bhim's PhD thesis because they were the only three countries out of twenty-eight independent small island states, where coups resulted in successful post-coup regimes (Bhim 2020).
- ³ A 2012 decree changed the name of indigenous Fijians to iTaukei.
- ⁴ For more on competitive authoritarianism, see Levitsky and Way (2010).
- ⁵ A regrouping of the former SDL party.
- ⁶ Post-2006 coup and 2014 elections, Bainimarama has at various times, retained portfolios of Defence, Home Affairs, *iTaukei* Affairs, Lands, Disaster Management, Finance, Charter process, National Development, Sugar Industry, Information, Strategic Planning and Public Service. Khaiyum has mostly retained portfolios of Attorney General, Economy, Finance, Information, Elections, Tourism, Public Enterprise and Civil Service.
- ⁷ Fiji's oldest political party.
- ⁸ "Ro" and "Ratu" denote chiefly status.
- ⁹ Prior to this, Konrote was Minister for Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment.
- ¹⁰ Rotumans are a minority indigenous group.
- ¹¹ Police commissioner Andrew Hughes (an Australian) was removed from his position after the 2006 coup.
- ¹² Air Terminal Services Employees Trust Chairman Jay Dhir Singh was fined \$9,000 for saying the judiciary is controlled by one minister to intimidate people (Narayan 2018).
- ¹³ Offences under the 2010 Media Industry Development Decree could incur maximum sentences of two years and fines of \$10,000 for editors and/or \$100,000 for media companies who were required to have 90% local ownership.
- ¹⁴ The Public Order (Amendment) Decree 2012 gave excessive powers to the security forces to search and detain. Penalties incurred maximum jail terms of ten years or fines of up to \$10,000. Gatherings required a permit from police.
- ¹⁵ These headlines were printed on page one of the *Fiji Sun* daily newspaper on 16 July 2016.
- ¹⁶ Chaudhry was convicted in absentia in 2019. Ravindra-Singh's practising license was suspended in 2019; he was fined \$120,000 in 2020.
- ¹⁷ Maciu Navakasua was jailed for his role as one of seven gunmen who stormed parliament on 19 May 2000.
- ¹⁸ Australia's elections assistance to Fiji included co-leading the MOG 2018. Australia's 2018 aid programme noted Fiji's 2018 elections as credible (DFAT 2019). This assessment led to reprioritising aid to Fiji in key areas (DFAT 2019).
- ¹⁹ This project continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020–2021.

- ²⁰ Meaning “family”.
- ²¹ Including Mahendra Chaudhry, Sitiveni Rabuka, Viliame Gavoka, and Biman Prasad.
- ²² Created in 2003, the MDP is the Maldives’ first political party.
- ²³ Over 25,000 people took part in these protests on 1 May 2015 in Malé; nearly 200 protestors were detained and six convicted (*Maldives Independent* 2018h).
- ²⁴ Revealed in interviews for the author’s PhD thesis.
- ²⁵ Thowfeek stated these included cases against Colonel Nazim, the first Vice-President Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, the second Vice-President Adeeb, and the Prosecutor General.
- ²⁶ In 2015, employees of three state-owned companies on public utilities—water, electricity and ports—were suspended or dismissed for supporting opposition activities (Hameed 2015).
- ²⁷ The author visited Maldives from 24 October – 21 November 2017 for PhD research.
- ²⁸ The author observed a Maldivian Minister making such comments about Nasheed on state television, while waiting to board the ferry from Malé to Villingli in November 2017. The Minister’s *Dhivehi* words were translated into English captions.
- ²⁹ In interviews, MP Ali Hussain (pers. comm., 16 November 2017) and former MDP Parliamentarian Ghafoor (pers. comm., 8 December 2017) confirmed that Nasheed was being portrayed as very *laadheeni*, or anti-Islamic.
- ³⁰ This was the view of several prominent Maldivians interviewed by the author in 2017.
- ³¹ See *Maldives Independent* news articles, August–September 2018 (<https://maldivesindependent.com>).
- ³² See *Maldives Independent* news articles, August–September 2018 (<https://maldivesindependent.com>).
- ³³ See *Maldives Independent* news articles October 2018 (<https://maldivesindependent.com>).
- ³⁴ See *Maldives Independent* news articles, September–November 2018 (<https://maldivesindependent.com>).
- ³⁵ MDN official Facebook page, viewed August 2019.
- ³⁶ More than 200 Maldivians went to fight in Syria and Iraq (*Maldives Independent* 2019b).

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