

**Young political aspirants in the Fiji 2014 elections-  
motivations and experiences**

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**Abstract**

In 2014, Fiji held general elections for the first time since the coup of 2006. The elections had many features that differed from previous elections. One feature was the reduction of the voting age to 18 years. This, amongst other factors, propelled young people into the political limelight as both voters and candidates. This paper focusses on young candidates, whose entry into the political landscape is novel for Fiji. In a country historically devoid of young people's political participation this signalled a shift in young people's political engagement. The paper draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to understand candidate motivations to contest the election and their experience of political campaigning. Doing so allows us to appreciate the political aspirations of young Fijian politicians and what this might mean for the future of Fijian politics.

**Keywords:** Fiji, young people, election, participation, politics

**Introduction**

In September 2014 Fiji held its first election since Frank Bainimarama's coup of December 2006. The election was held under the new 2013 Constitution and the provisions of the 2014 electoral decree. The new constitution and electoral system ushered in changes which, according to Lal (2014: 459), "differed markedly from their previous counterparts".<sup>1</sup> A significant constitutional change was the lowering of the voting age to eighteen years; consequently young people between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five years constituted about forty percent of the electorate (Round, 2014). This cohort, most first-time voters, were exposed to Frank Bainimarama's<sup>2</sup> rhetoric that Fiji needed a new brand of politics and

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<sup>1</sup> These included the adoption of an open list proportional representation system to elect the new 50-seat parliament. Under the new system, political parties and independent candidates would need to meet the required five percent threshold or 25,000 votes in order to secure parliamentary representation; only three political parties met this threshold.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Bainimarama was the Fiji military commander who executed the coup in December 2006. He led a military government until the 2014 elections, when his Fiji First party was overwhelmingly voted into power.

new politicians.<sup>3</sup> As a result some political commentators argued that young people would influence the balance of power at the elections. Young aspiring politicians used this sense of optimism to launch political careers.

This article explores the motivations for contesting the elections and the campaign experiences of a group of young aspiring politicians in the 2014 Fiji election. It is positioned within the ambit of youth studies, acknowledging young political aspirants as self-actualizing and reflexive citizens whose aspirations and actions in shaping the world they want to live in are both public and private. The study is conceptualized using Bourdieu's notion of habitus; thereafter influencing the data analysis and discussion. It makes the case that young politicians should consider both conventional and individualised political realities if they are to cultivate an enduring political habitus. The study is significant for two reasons. First, it adds to the small body of local works specifically on Prime Ministers<sup>4</sup> or Opposition Leaders whose political pathways and experiences are generations apart from those of the contemporary era. Second, it contributes to the limited international literature on young politicians, particularly in new democracies (IPU, 2016).

### Young people<sup>5</sup> and political participation

The level of political activity in any society is predicated on factors including the political mindedness and involvement of its young people. In many western societies citizenship is a natural offspring of democracy. In the United States, for example, political socialization is traditionally attained through "social reproduction and social learning" (McFarland and Thomas, 2006: 405). The family, schools, community organizations and political parties provide opportunities and experiences to exercise good citizenship (Mycock and Tonge, 2012). As a result young people, as trainee adults, will come of age and demonstrate civic and political maturity epitomised through "participation in representative institutions" and voting in elections (Tonge and Mycock, 2010: 2). This expectation is, however, being challenged.

Over the past decade observations have been made about young people's growing disengagement and political apathy, raising questions about their citizenship roles (Harris, Wyn, and Salem, 2008; Holdsworth, Stokes, Blanchard, and Nadia 2007; Tonge and Mycock, 2010; Vromen, 2003). In the United Kingdom, for example, Tonge and Mycock (2010) noted a decline in the number of young voters (18-24 year olds) during the 2001 and 2005 elections. They further indicated young people's displeasure at the term 'politics' and that "only half of the school children declare an intention to vote in the general elections when they become eligible" (Tonge and Mycock, 2010: 182). Given these realities, in some instances panic has resulted in initiatives to strengthen young people's interest in politics, like the 'Big Society Project' in the United Kingdom (Sloam, 2012) and the Youth

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<sup>3</sup> Bainimarama would be quoted particularly when talking to young people that "the old politics must go. We must have a new breed of politicians who subscribe to the basics of telling the truth...not subscribing to fear mongering...and have true loyalty and patriotism to their country" (Bola-Bari, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> For Prime Ministers see Deryck Scarr's *Tuimacilai* (2008) and John Sharpham's *Rabuka of Fiji* (2000). For opposition leaders see Brij Lal's *A vision for change: AD Patel and the politics of Fiji* (1997) and *In the eye of the storm: Jai Ram Reddy and the politics of postcolonial Fiji* (2010).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'young people' is used loosely in this section. It refers to individuals who fit the chronological definition of being young in their respective societies. Being young is not a homogenous status but includes class, gender, ethnicity, cultural, geographic and other dimensions.

Development and support Programme in Australia (Black, Walsh and Taylor' 2011). However, all is not doomed because young people continue to show interest in politics, rather in individualised than in adult-centric ways.

Cultural and structural changes in late modernity have impacted on citizen's participation in conventional politics. According to Norris (2003) these are evident through shifts in the means and organization of political action. Young people are often the first to experience these changes, demonstrated via three processes: "generational effect...such as steadily-rising levels of education; life cycle effect such as settling down to start a family; and period effect [such as a] historical event that leaves a lasting impressions..." (Norris, 2003: 8). Events like the Arab Spring protests and Hong Kong's Umbrella revolution are manifestations of these processes. Young people implicated in these and related events are referred to as 'self-actualizing citizens' (Bennett, 1998) or 'everyday makers' (Bang, 2004). This is because they are involved in new, issues-based and individualised forms of politics (Norris, 2003; Sloam, 2012), where much of the engagement takes places via social media (Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015).

Globally, social media is increasingly permeating the lives of young people; they are growing "up with the Internet and [treat] email and websites as everyday forms of communication and sites for information retrieval" (Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel and Burgum, 2014: 832). During election cycles social media has become an active site for youth political talk and engagement (Ekstom, 2016) and a campaign medium for politicians (Farthing, 2010). In new democracies the media and, one would suggest, social media has become, during elections, a platform for campaigning, networking and disseminating information (Baker, Ames and Renno, 2006; Loader et al., 2014). However, a Swedish study showed that the public dimension of social media discourages young people from engaging in direct political discussion and debates (Ekstom, 2016). Mediated by context, purpose and preference "social media platforms are likely to play an increasingly significant domain for the political messaging, discussion, disruption and the presentation of the political self" (Loader et al., 2014: 832). Young political aspirants in the Fiji 2014 general elections launched, organized and maintained part of or, in the case of independent candidate Roshika Deo, her whole campaign via social media.

Despite the proliferation of literature on youth political participation there is a dearth of information on young politicians. In recognition of this reality the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) commissioned a study in 2014 to gather information about young parliamentarians. The study identified three significant "areas for attention: electing young MPs, empowering young parliamentarians and engaging the wider youth population" (IPU, 2016: 5). The first area is of interest to this paper because of the low representation of young people in parliaments. This is because young people do not often join political parties and therefore are not considered as candidates or because parties often consider fielding candidates with political experience, thus ruling out inexperienced young candidates (IPU, 2016). Duarte Marques (2013), a young Portuguese parliamentarian, agrees with these explanations but makes the case that young politicians have different experiences, knowledge and skills to offer. He adds that young people are better able to articulate their issues because they are free from the distrust that taints the reputation of older politicians (Marques, 2013).

In the case of Fiji, young people are most certain to secure a parliamentary seat via political party membership. However, this paper is about budding young election candidates, not about their place in political parties. Their affiliation with political parties and motivations for

specific party membership<sup>6</sup> is acknowledged, as party politics is a central feature of Fijian politics and a determinant of its parliamentary composition. The relationship between young people and political parties in Fiji is complex and significant, deserving of its own discussion. In Fiji, party politics, predominantly organised along ethnic lines, is entrenched. The period of political party hiatus since 2006 did not halt this but instead in the lead up to the 2014 elections produced new and ‘weak’ parties<sup>7</sup> with uncertain voter support (Baker et al., 2006). Young people and political parties ended up in a ‘marriage of convenience’. Anshu Lata, a National Federation Party (NFP) candidate, explains this well, “I was a last-minute candidate<sup>8</sup>; it is difficult to get the five percent threshold as an individual, you can achieve things as a team” (Lata, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). Young people needed political platforms and parties needed young and ‘fresh’ faces, mostly to attract the youth vote. The motivations to stand in the elections for young aspiring politicians are wider than party considerations; they lie in the fluid interaction between personal convictions, public concerns and immediate social networks and relationships (Baker et al., 2006).

### Conceptual approach

To make sense of this reality the article employs Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, defined as “systems of durable, transposable disposition, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1995: 72). The article argues that young people’s political dispositions or habitus are influenced by the many fields they experience and the forms of social and cultural capital (resources, qualifications and networks) they have access to or are constrained by in their lives (Bourdieu, 1991). Fields, “autonomous sectors of social activity” (Kauppi, 2003: 778) that participants in this study access are imbued with all forms of capital (social, cultural, economic) and include but are not limited to the family, communities and networks, education, social media and the political landscape. Primary among these fields is Fiji’s political landscape which, following the coup of December 2006, was characterised by the absence of parliamentary democracy and party politics, curtailed rights of workers, diluted influence of indigenous social structures such as the Great Council of Chiefs and restriction of free speech. This political reality and associated socio-cultural and political capital favoured the incumbent government, which contested the elections under the banner of Fiji First. The participants in this study embodied a habitus imbued with political power differentials complicating their existing subordinate status derived from being young citizens and political novices.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus has been successfully used in studies of youth political involvement in Australia (Threadgold and Nilan, 2014) and in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia (Loader et al., 2014). In this study, habitus allows us to go beyond the Weberian distinction of people ‘living for’ and ‘living off’ politics (Boffi, 2012); to view young political aspirants as relational agents who apply to the political field, social and cultural capital and experiences drawn from other influential spaces (Loader et al, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> For a specific discussion on why politicians join political parties in the Pacific see Corbett (2015)

<sup>7</sup> Newly registered parties contesting the 2014 election include; Fiji First, People’s Democratic Party (PDP), One Fiji Party. The indigenous dominated Soqoqo ni Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SVT) underwent a name change and contested the elections as the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SDL).

<sup>8</sup> Anshu was named with three others as NFP candidates on August 15, a month from the elections. See Ahmed (2014).

This permits us to understand their motivations and experiences and contemplate their future in Fiji's political landscape. Whilst Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* concentrated on French society (Bourdieu, 1984) and his contribution to politics was limited to mainstream institutions and career politicians (Loader et al., 2014), his ideas permit us to examine how young political aspirants with limited access to legitimate forms of cultural and social capital fare in a field characterised by struggle, competing interests and privileged individuals and groups (Bourdieu, 1991; Thomas, 2007). These factors have implications for Fiji, whose democracy as expounded by Lal (2006, 2015), Madraiwiwi (2015) and others is still a work in progress; the political habitus of young people offers a glimpse of what this democracy might look like in the future.

## The study context

The Fiji 2014 general election was contested by 248 candidates. The Fiji Elections Office provided only a confirmed list of candidates, known as the National Candidates List (NCL). Demographic information such as ethnicity, age or religion was not available. Gender became the most obvious category identified from the NCL; 207 (eighty-four percent) were men and forty-one (sixteen percent) were women (Morris, 2014). It is estimated that young people, individuals aged between 18 and 35 years, comprised about seventeen percent of those on the NCL. The representation of young candidates, although small, was significant because of the publicity given to the reduction of the voting age to 18 years and the recognition by political parties of the place of young people in politics. As a result each registered political party fielded young candidates or candidates identified as the party's official youth candidate (not necessarily a young person). There was an exception, an independent candidate, Roshika Deo, the face of the 'Be the Change' campaign.

## Method

Data for the study were collected from two qualitative sources; secondary material and in-depth face-to-face interviews. In the lead up to the elections, the media, particularly Fiji's two daily newspapers, the *Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun*, consistently profiled political candidates, including young political aspirants. These media profiles facilitated the development of participant profiles and later were used as contextual information during the in-depth face-to-face interviews.

The profiles identified eleven young individuals who met the study's chronological and social age criteria; either between the ages of 18 and 35 years or self-identified as a young person. These individuals were sent email invitations to participate in the study. Of this number, seven candidates agreed to participate and to be interviewed; two from the People's Democratic Party (PDP), two from the National Federation Party (NFP), one each from the Fiji Labour party (FLP) and Social Liberal Democratic Party (SODELPA) and the independent candidate Roshika Deo from the 'Be the Change' campaign. Despite follow-up emails and phone calls, attempts to include participants from Fiji First (FF) (two of whom are now in Fiji's parliament) and the One Fiji Party (OFP) were unsuccessful and reasons for this remain unknown.

The practice by some study participants over the age of 35 years, self-identifying as young people deserves clarification. Two reasons are relevant; first, in Fiji it is common that institutions via socio-cultural and political markers stretch the definition of chronological youth. This is consistent with the IPU Forum of Young Parliamentarians that defines 'young'

as individuals under 45 years (IPU, 2016). Four (FLP, NFP, SODELPA and PDP) of the seven registered political parties fielded specific 'youth' candidates over 35 years to represent young people and their issues. Laisa Bale, the FLP's youth candidate, described her position: "I define myself as a young person...I think as long as you have the right motivation, the right passion...I am not young in that [age] category but I see myself as young" (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August). The three remaining parties, Fiji First, OFP and Fiji United Freedom Party (FUIFP) also entered young people but they were not identified as youth candidates. Second, there is a recent trend for individuals to reclaim their 'youth' lost during periods of political instability. This was reflected in the words of Lynda Tabuya, a youth candidate and President of the PDP. She said, "You know I am forty. We have had eight years of no democracy and dictatorship; I feel that I needed to take away eight years from my age ...I feel that I am 32 years old and have never lost that burning need to get into politics" (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August).

The interviews were conducted in August 2014, a month before the elections and focused on participants' motivations for standing as candidates and their campaign experiences. The interviews used newspapers and online media stories to clarify and confirm available data and as prompts to garner new information about motivations and experiences of participants in the impending election. The data collected were thematically analysed with an emphasis on how participant dispositions interacted with relevant fields and forms of cultural and social capital available to them. There is not scope in the article for detailed biographical narratives. Instead, direct quotations are included to convey individual voices and sentiments. In line with the authentic representation of participant voices, identities were not concealed because none of the participants chose to use pseudonyms and they were already public figures. As in qualitative research, the participants' narratives are contextual and reflective of diverse personal, family and group influences. The elections became the impetus for self-actualization and the platform to highlight concerns and aspirations not only harboured for some time but that may turn out to define the nature of Fiji's future political discourse.

### **Motivations to stand as election candidates**

The motivation for young political aspirants to contest the Fiji 2014 elections appeared to stem from two related factors: the opportunity to be involved in the country's democratic transition; and to do this using personal, family and community experiences of Fiji's troubled political history. Collectively the participants agreed that Fiji's coups and associated challenges denied them much of their youth, energy and rightful participation. Roshika Deo summarised this by saying, "I really can't pinpoint one thing but it is a search for justice...I am fed up with the things that have happened, frustrated and angry and I am channelling those emotions into something positive" (Deo, 2014, pers. comm, 19 August). This sentiment was similar to the way other participants felt; the elections offered them an avenue to contribute and be involved.

## ***Elections – an opportunity to be involved***

After eight years of living under an imposed government, citizens, political parties and Civil Society Organizations welcomed the 2014 general election. Many politically minded young people saw this event as an opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote and stand as a candidate. In talking about her decision to stand as an election candidate, Lynda Tabuya explained, “The moment I decided to [stand] was really last year [2013], when I heard that there were going to be elections. I had no doubt, in fact I believe that I am the first person in Fiji to declare publically that I was standing for elections...the timing was just right” (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). Other participants made their political intentions known in the lead-up to the elections, a decision influenced by many factors. Personal motivations ranked high amongst these.

### ***Personal influences***

Young aspiring candidates have experienced all of Fiji’s four coups. The coups had a profound impact on their lives, providing either direct or indirect motivations to run for political office. Jone Rasi, an indigenous iTaukei youth and PDP candidate recounted, “I was in form 6 during the 2000 coup; I sat my exam but that was a traumatic experience for me so I failed my Fiji School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). I went home [refusing to return to school] the following year to repeat Form 6” (Rasi, 2014, pers. comm, 18 August). Jone eventually returned to school after two years with the support of his family and officials of the Ministry of Youth Office in Lautoka who, he had become close to as a result of his involvement in village, community and province-based youth work. Jone banked on his youth-work experience to propel him into parliament.

Coups had a direct influence on participants’ decision to stand in the elections, sometimes from a very early age. The first coup in 1987 had a profound impact on Roshika Deo, who was then seven years old. She recounted saying something like wanting to be the future Prime Minister so Fiji would not have any more coups. Lynda Tabuya also ran for political office because of the coups. She says:

Having lived through four coups, like many people my generation I am just done with coups. I am involved more now than ever, the eight years of dictatorship and no democracy in Fiji; it is not just a desire anymore but a calling. I have to put my name forward to try on behalf of the people of Fiji to get involved in the process (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August).

Like Roshika, Lynda’s interest in politics and parliament was put in place from an early age. Much of this was influenced by a combination of factors; challenging childhood experiences, family and international role models like Nelson Mandela and Barrack Obama and a sound educational pathway. Laisani Qaqanilawa, the SODELPA youth candidate echoed similar sentiments:

Many people do not know that I came from humble beginnings. I have managed to have a good education...I am the first in my family to get a Masters. For us coming from that type of life (growing up in an informal settlement) it is an achievement. That's my motivation...I know what it's like to live a hard life and I would want to give back at the national level in terms of implementing right laws and putting in place policies that will better [people’s] standard of living (Qaqanilawa, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August).

Laisa Bale's quest for political office was both personal and professional. Laisa, who has tertiary qualifications<sup>9</sup> from the United Kingdom and the United States and years of international development work experience, expressed concern about Fiji's struggling economy, particularly in terms of unemployment.<sup>10</sup> Laisa also has personal connections to George Speight's coup in 2000. She revealed, "I had baggage from 2000, my father was one of the coalition members taken hostage. He was a parliamentarian and Minister" (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August). Standing as a candidate in the 2014 elections is a continuation of that journey for Laisani.

### ***From community involvement to politics***

The young political aspirants saw contesting the elections as part of their role in community involvement. "You don't just roll out of bed and say that you're running for political office. I see this as an extension of my work...this is what political leadership is about, serving the community," remarked Laisa Bale (2014, pers. comm, 25 August). Similar sentiments were echoed by a NFP youth candidate, Usaia Moli. Usaia, a career youth activist and advocate, contested the elections on the back of village, provincial and national youth work experience. In the late 1990's Usaia was part of a successful village youth group farming project. Since moving to Suva in the early 2000s he has involved himself in many youth-related activities, including being a life skills trainer with UNICEF and working with the 'street kids' of Suva, Fiji's capital. In recognition of his work Usaia became part of his province's youth council and subsequently the Chairman of the Fiji National Youth Council. In the lead up to the elections he was the President of the NFP Youth Wing. For Usaia, politics was something he gradually transitioned into:

a year ago, maybe six months ago if you asked me, I would have said no. It has come to a point where young people are looking for someone they know and recognise. The work I have done over the years, working under bureaucracies, frustrated that things are not done, people want to voice their opinion and there is no outlet. No one was standing up to be the voice [for] young people (Moli, 2014, pers. comm, 26 August).

Community involvement was recognised as a significant criterion for individuals applying to be candidates for parties like the PDP. This worked in favour of candidates like Lynda Tabuya, who came with a history of community work. Tabuya explained, "As you can see with the new electoral system, it is a popularity contest. The more following you have, the better your chances are of bringing in votes and getting into parliament. You can show that the community knows you" (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). Bainimarama's convincing victory in the 2014 elections demonstrated this point. According to Lal (2015: 88) this was possible through "the remorseless use of the power of incumbency....[using public finances to appease] Fiji's growing poor [and attracting young voters] via his rhetoric of equal citizenship... [and] promise to end the corrupt politics of old".

### **Campaign strategies and experiences**

This section discusses the participant's campaign experiences. Whilst all participants except Roshika Deo are members of political parties, the discussion will focus on individual

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<sup>9</sup> Laisa has Law degree with Honours from the University of Sussex and a Masters from Harvard.

<sup>10</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) unemployment stood at 9 percent in 2013 (Williams, 2013)

experiences. This is largely influenced by the proportional voting system that favoured candidate popularity over political party influence. The discussion concentrates on participant's campaign strategies and experiences of encounters with young people whose votes they were targeting.

About two months before the September 14 election, candidates were actively campaigning, most of them on a full-time basis. They did this at two levels; collectively through organized campaigns and personally via individualised creative strategies. Laisa Bale's campaign demonstrates the latter strategy. She formed a campaign team, comprising five young people, who were recruited and paid an allowance of FJ\$100 a week. Given that she campaigned in predominantly iTaukei communities, it was a requirement that members of the team were familiar with iTaukei protocol. "My campaign team members also had speaking rights (authorised to speak on Laisa's behalf and give her feedback). I want these young people to have a taste of (political campaigning) what I am going through and run for office in the future" (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August).

Lynda Tabuya and Jone Rasi belonged to the same party, the PDP. As a campaign strategy the PDP had candidates for each of Fiji's four administrative divisions. According to Tabuya, the President of the party, "Each division has a vice-president. They organize meetings. We have three candidates who would together attend a party meeting" (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). Locally the candidates mobilised their own support and resources. As a result, each candidate's experience was different. In Jone Rasi's case, he and party candidates formed an iTaukei branch of the PDP. The intention was to target the iTaukei community through culture and language. Jone conducted outreach visits in village communities and spaces like sports fields to attract young people. Small community-based or 'pocket' meetings were also popular.

Funding was a major challenge to effective election campaigning. According to Lynda Tabuya, running a good campaign in Fiji can easily cost up to a quarter of a million dollars.

This amount was quite difficult to raise because political donations were not forthcoming. Cost is perhaps a reason why more young people did not contest the elections. "Being part of this process, I can understand why a lot of young people are dissuaded from entering. Which young person has campaign funds?" (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August). Many candidates, including the study participants, self-funded their campaigns, but the degree to which they could do this varied. Laisa Bale, for example, could afford to remunerate her campaign team members. Others, like Jone Rasi, relied on family, friends and community fundraising in the form of *lovo*<sup>11</sup>, barbeques, and curry nights. Traditional and cultural networks were drawn upon in different ways. Candidates like Usaia Moli, Jone Rasi and Laisa Bale openly admitted using these to their advantage. To a party President like Lynda Tabuya networks were critical spaces for promoting party ideas, particularly the party's 'brand' of issues-based politics. Candidates, many of whom were 'fresh' faces in politics, drew inspiration from their networks. Alongside this optimism existed a general fear of intimidation, experienced since the 2006 coup.

The crackdown on dissenting voices in Fiji following the December 2006 coup was etched in the minds of the participants during the campaign period. Although the Public Emergency

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<sup>11</sup> Lovo fundraising involves selling a meal combination cooked in an earth oven.

Regulations were lifted in 2012, freedom of expression remained a concern for many, including young political aspirants. The interviews revealed that many campaign meetings and candidates were monitored by members of the security forces. According to Laisani Bale, “We were having our pocket meeting in Nawailevu and two vehicles kept on circling the meeting house, that was frightening...in Qauia we identified a man from the military at the back of the room” (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August). For the young political aspirants being an election candidate was a risk worth taking.

### ***Campaign and the media***

In the lead-up to the elections the traditional media (newspapers, radio and television) played an important role in covering election-related news, political party campaigns and political debates. The media environment was still recovering from restrictions placed upon it by the PER between 2009 and 2012. As a result, particular media outlets were guarded about the stories they published and the individuals and parties they covered. Roshika Deo openly spoke about her ‘love-hate’ relationship with the media, “the media had blocked me for a long time...refusing to cover me. I know of [a newspaper] that got calls from the Ministry of Information asking them why they’re covering Roshika. I know the media has been under a lot of pressure but they try their best in this current context” (Deo, 2014, pers. comm, 19 August).

In addition, social media also featured strongly as a campaign medium. Candidates created public Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts to generate interaction and address some of the financial challenges of campaigning. Roshika Deo used this technique, operating a predominantly online- and social-media-based campaign and interaction. Social media was used to gauge the level of support candidates received. During the interview Lynda Tabuya mentioned, “PDP is leading in terms of the number of likes on our [Facebook] page. We have close to 30,000 likes. Fiji First is second with about 24,000 and the other parties follow...on our pages there is quite active conversation going on, certainly targeting young people” (Tabuya, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). Others like Usaia Moli, Anshu Lata, Laisa Bale and Laisa Qaqanilawa, used personal Facebook accounts to help create visibility as candidates, where followers could track campaign trails and contribute to online discussions.

### ***Campaign experiences with the young electorate***

Historically, young people in Fiji are known to be politically apathetic. The absence of parliamentary democracy since 2006 can be argued to have exacerbated this situation, but a small group of young citizens provide an exception to the general rule. Young political aspirants, representing this minority group, signify the gradual political awakening of the general youth population. During their campaigns the candidates observed that young people were increasingly developing an interest in politics. According to Laisani Qaqanilawa, “Young people are definitely becoming involved. When I say involved, it means being aware of what is happening around them...for those I’ve met the elections has really given them the opportunity to be involved” (Qaqanilawa, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). She added that many young people do not know how to be involved. She therefore sees her role as supporting their involvement in an organized manner.

Politics in Fiji is known to have a strong ethnic dimension. Participants identified evidence of ethnic political socialization during their campaigns. “We found that (people of) Indo-Fijian origin are more involved than the iTaukei people, unless something has happened to them: then they will be involved,” said Laisa. She added, “We went to the rice farms [owned by Indo-Fijians] in Dreketi. We didn’t have to preach. They knew what was happening in government, they followed the news, they threw back some of my statements at me, they were engaged. When we go to iTaukei communities, they are waiting for me to give them information” (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August).

The young candidates argued that young people faced the challenge of not having a good awareness of the electoral and voting system. Restrictions placed on campaigns prevented the candidates from engaging in voter education. “We’re not allowed to [conduct] extensive voter education, just talking about what’s already public knowledge,” (Qaqanilawa, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August). However, the candidates viewed the reduction of the voting age to 18 years as constructive. This enabled campaigns to gather the views of young people and the issues they considered important; employment and educational opportunities ranked highly. It is likely that candidates and the party they represented had a significant bearing on the responses they received. For example Qaqanilawa, whose SODELPA party had been very critical of Bainimarama’s leadership, had this to say: “...young people aren’t happy with what this government has done...there are limited scholarships, the loan scheme has been very limiting as well, they haven’t been able to get guarantors because of the conditions attached to them. [Metaphorically speaking] they are realising that a lot of the nice things, nice ‘lollypops’, are very bitter” (Qaqanilawa, 2014, pers. comm, 20 August).

### **Election performance**

Despite coming from different political parties, the young aspiring candidates had one desire in common: to ensure that FijiFirst, led by Frank Bainimarama – who had had free reign for almost eight years – did not win the elections. This didn’t eventuate and none of the political aspirants interviewed for this study won a seat in parliament. Lal (2014) put Bainimarama’s victory down to political incumbency since 2006 and the absence of a joint strategy by opposition parties. This outcome would be understandably disappointing for some candidates, given their optimism in the lead-up to the elections. Much of this optimism was drawn from campaign experiences and exemplified in comments like, “It’s not if I go [to parliament], I will go! Looking at how things are and the response coming in, there is definitely the opportunity” (Moli, 2014, pers. comm, 26 August) and “I have a pretty good chance, I can say that” (Qaqanilawa, 2014, pers. comm 20 August). Laisa Bale was also hopeful, “I think I have a good chance...having communities tell me that they will vote for me...I get phone calls from people saying that they will vote for me, strangers coming up to me and saying that they would like to disseminate my [candidate] number. To me that is promising,” (Bale, 2014, pers. comm, 25 August). Independent candidate Roshika Deo expressed similar sentiments, “I think lots of people have faith in us and we’re working really hard not to break their faith, to live up to their expectations. So I am thinking I am going to win,” (Deo 2014, pers. comm, 19 August).

This optimism was balanced with a degree of modesty about their chances. “I’ve done some research on the number of young people in the province. [Whether] I go [into parliament] or not I will be at peace,” (Rasi, 2014, pers. comm, 18 August). Balancing out her optimism, Deo said, “If we [are unsuccessful], which is also a possibility, that is going to be really sad but we

have had successes along the way. We have had small wins so that will make us more determined for 2018” (Deo, 2014, pers. comm, 19 August). Three candidates, Laisani Qaqanilawa, Usaia Moli and Ansu Lata, belonged to SODELPA and NFP, the only other two parties that made it past the five percent threshold required for parliamentary representation. Although the parties were unable to secure parliamentary seats, the participants fared reasonably well individually. Lynda Tabuya got the third highest and Jone Rasi the fourth highest number of votes in their party, the PDP. Laisa Bale ranked 14 out of 37 candidates fielded by her party (FLP) and Usaia Moli 16 out of the 49 candidates fielded by the NFP. Roshika Deo, as an independent candidate, polled 1055 votes, which was more than some of the current parliamentarians.

## Discussion

The fragile state of parliamentary democracy in Fiji has had a direct influence on young people’s interest in electoral politics; to some degree stifling the political involvement of youth (Madraiwiwi, 2015). However, the participants in this study are challenging this view. A glimpse of their shared novice political habitus, influenced by Fiji’s turbulent political history, and hope for the future has allowed us to make sense of their motivations and experiences as candidates in the 2014 elections. The participants had varying access to social and cultural capital, which overall did not turn out to have much bearing on their election performance. However, this could be significant in the future aspirations of those that decide to spend time mastering the political game. This would align with Bourdieu’s assertion that those with highly valued habitus translates into socio-cultural and political success (Threadgold and Nilan, 2004). In the meantime, the participant’s narratives have offered some initial understanding about the motivations of young politicians, their access to associated resources and their contribution to Fiji’s democratic future.

The Fiji 2014 election landscape was not a level playing field. Frank Bainimarama’s government used the power of incumbency to its advantage. His eight years of rule before the election saw the suppression of any political opposition and control of the media (Lal, 2015), appeasing communities through infrastructure development (Madraiwiwi, 2015) and the “careful manipulation of the rules and broader electoral environment” (Fraenkal, 2015: 3). As a result, Bainimarama’s Fiji First dominated the political field over other parties, including young politicians, reflecting Bourdieu’s contention that “persons with more reserves of resources and experiences salient to the activities tend to win in these power struggles...” (McFarland and Thomas, 2006: 402). Realistically the young candidates had no chance against the power of incumbency, which appeared to hold much sway with voters, especially young voters.

Despite this reality the young candidates had some impact on the political scene. They developed the capability to mobilize supporter, both by traditional means<sup>12</sup>, but even more through social media, which has proved a significant tool in the ‘new politics’ of young people (Mycock and Tonge, 2012: 142). Social media created visibility, generated conversations and was used as a measure to assess candidate popularity. However, ‘likes’ on social media did not directly translate into election success for participants in the study nor

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<sup>12</sup> This approach is predominantly an iTaukei strategy which incorporates extensive kin links that no one else in Fiji has, to mobilize support.

did it become an influential tool for regime change as witnessed during the Arab Spring (Mulderig, 2013). Nevertheless, social media became a platform for discussing issues like poverty, unemployment, access to education and the human rights championed by young people. For example, Roshika Deo used social media to challenge ageism and sexism, two prejudices that are often taken for granted in Fiji. As internet connectivity expands and media freedom returns, social media will play an increasingly influential role in the political habitus of young Fijians.

The young politicians signalled the advent in Fiji of what Mycock and Tonge (2012: 142) refer to as “new politics” and demonstrated that the political habitus of aspiring young politicians is far more complex than in the past. The participants observed how different ethnic groups related to political information; but ethnicity was not a central feature of their campaigns. Interpreted as either the result of post-2006 intimidation or 2014 election hope, such a trend has the potential to contribute to the gradual demise of ethnic-based politics, the historical backdrop of Fijian political rivalry. As self-actualizing citizens, all candidates interviewed (except for Laisa Bale, whose father was a former parliamentarian) demonstrated a break with traditional pathways for politicians. iTaukei political participation is usually a privilege reserved for chiefs and social elites (Corbett and Connell, 2014) and others – particularly those of Indo-Fijian descent – must first find an apprenticeship or career within the sugar industry or trade union movements. In the absence of clear political socialization pathways in Fiji, these candidates demonstrate that it is possible to develop an evolving political habitus. However, sustained participation and success in this field for young self-actualized politicians may require institutional support, which in Fiji’s case is best articulated through political parties and government support.

Although political parties and government policies do not occupy a central place in this paper, they are critical in the political socialization of young people. Political parties like the NFP, PDP and SODELPA recognise this and have included young people in their management structures and rejuvenated youth wings. This is critical because Fijian political parties of late tend to have what Corbett (2015: 138) refers to as an “absence of party-facilitated career trajectories”. For political parties, the challenge lies in accommodating the motivations and experiences that influence the ‘new politics’ of young people (Mycock and Tonge, 2012; Marques, 2013) and moving beyond what appeared to be a ‘marriage of convenience’ between young candidates and some parties in the 2014 elections. As a consideration, political parties need to invest in their young members’ political capital, comprising of mobilization skills, policy mindedness and the motivation for parliamentary involvement (Kauppi, 2003). This addresses certain challenges experienced by Fijian political parties, significant amongst which is the assertion by Madraiwiwi (2015: 57) that, apart from the NFP, “political parties in Fiji generally...do not survive their founders”.

## **Conclusion**

This study has offered a snapshot of the motivations and experiences of young aspiring politicians in the 2014 Fiji elections. It shows that the participants had noble intentions in contesting the elections, providing them the opportunity to connect personal experiences to public issues and concerns. Their election experiences were not entirely positive, particularly if measured by the ability to secure a parliamentary seat; however, they will continue to have a direct influence on their evolving political habitus. The question, then, is how to translate this habitus in a way that allows young people to have a role in addressing leadership

dilemmas and the turbulent political history that has plagued modern Fiji for years? At the government level clear policy initiatives for the political participation and education of young people are required. Otherwise youth involvement exists only in rhetoric and youth will be exploited for their vote in the 2018 elections. Alongside this is the fear that young people will emerge to contest elections and then disappear should they be unsuccessful.

It must be remembered that the young political aspirants discussed in this paper are not representative of Fiji's young people or the small group that is politically active. The participants drew confidence from their personal, educational and professional backgrounds, networking experiences and party support. This raises the question of support for future aspiring politicians and how opportunities can be made available to others whose 'fields' do not necessarily contribute to political habitus or allow them access to relevant forms of social and cultural capital. It is encouraging that some study participants indicated they saw a long-term place for themselves in politics. This is important because a political habitus is cultivated over time. The conceptual framework used in the study provided the ability to make sense of this intention between elections. It accounts for the evolving nature and influence of fields and capital on the embodied habitus of young political aspirants. In essence knowledge of Fiji's young politicians is only just emerging, their political habitus more performative than instructive. This offers a window to understanding the future of Fiji's democracy and what its young leaders have to offer.

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