



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

► OCEANIA

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Fiji is located in the southwestern Pacific, north of New Zealand. More than 300 islands comprise Fiji, but only about 110 are inhabited. Covering 7,054 square miles (18,270 square kilometers), Fiji's total size is about the same as Hawaii or just smaller than New Jersey. Three main islands, Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, and Taveuni, are home to the majority of the population. The larger Fijian islands are volcanic, mountainous, and surrounded by coral reefs. The windward sides (facing the direction from which the wind blows) are covered with dense tropical forests. The leeward sides (facing the direction toward which the wind blows) consist of grassy plains that receive less rain. The climate is humid and tropical. The rainy season is from November to April, when violent hurricanes are possible. Annual temperatures change little and range from 72°F to 86°F (22–30°C).

**History.** The islands of Fiji were first settled at least 3,500 years ago by migrating sailors whose descendants became known as the Lapita. Though their actual origins are unknown and written records do not exist, researchers think these early migrants may have come from Asia. Various Pacific peoples later migrated to the Fijian Islands, which they called Viti; Western explorers used the Tongan word *Feejee* to name the islands and the people. According to legend, sons of one of the early settlers (Degei) established the chiefly system (*yavusa*) that ordered society for centuries to come. Until Christianity was introduced, Degei was worshiped as a god.

Although the Dutch had a brief encounter with Fijians in 1643, Captain James Cook of England spent more time with them in 1774. Later, trade vessels came for sandalwood, which was used in ornamental carving and cabinetmaking. The islands were known by many as the Cannibal Islands because

of the Fijians' reputation as fierce warriors and cannibals. Eating the enemy let Fijians possess the enemy's power; it was not for lack of food. After years of tribal warfare, Chief Ratu Cakobau converted to Christianity in 1854, united rival tribes under the new religion, ended cannibalism, and became king of Fiji in 1871.

Cakobau was aware of European competition for territory in the Pacific and, in 1874, offered to cede the islands to Great Britain (after the United States refused the same offer). Britain brought in laborers from India to work on sugarcane plantations. The descendants of these workers now comprise nearly half the population. Exactly 96 years to the day after cession to Britain, Fiji gained its independence (10 October 1970). Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara became the first prime minister, and his Alliance Party (mostly ethnic Fijians) governed until 1987, when a coalition led by the National Federation Party (mostly ethnic Indians) won a majority in parliamentary elections.

Two weeks after the elections, however, General Sitiveni Rabuka led a military coup to restore control to native Fijians. The coup was halted because Britain's governor-general (Queen Elizabeth's representative in Fiji) assumed executive control and negotiated a settlement between the Indians and Fijians. Rabuka then staged a second coup, establishing a civilian government dominated by Fijians. Fiji subsequently was voted out of the Commonwealth by its member nations. Rabuka appointed Mara to once again serve as the prime minister. In 1992 elections, Rabuka was elected prime minister. Mara became vice president and was elected president in 1994 by the country's Great Council of Chiefs after the 1993 death of President Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau.

A new constitution ratified in 1990 favored indigenous

Fijians over Indians, making it impossible for Indians to ever control government. The document subsequently came under review and was officially amended and signed into law by President Mara in July 1997. Fiji rejoined the Commonwealth soon thereafter. The amended constitution opened the way for multiracial elections in 1999 and promised equality and basic human rights. It called for both Fijians and Fiji-Indians to be called Fiji Islanders.

A landslide victory in May 1999 gave the Fiji Labour Party (FLP, an ethnic Indian party) a majority in Parliament, and Mahendra Chaudhry served as Fiji's first Indian prime minister. However, in May 2000, rebels seeking control of the government for Fiji's indigenous majority stormed Parliament, taking Chaudhry and members of his multiethnic coalition hostage. Ten days later, the military took control of the country and declared martial law. After nearly two months of negotiations between the government and rebel leader George Speight, the hostages were released, Chaudhry was deposed, and an interim government was established.

Laisenia Qarase of the Fijian United Party (an indigenous-Fijian party known by the Fijian acronym SDL) headed the interim government until parliamentary elections were held in August 2001. The SDL won by a slim margin over Chaudhry's FLP, allowing Qarase to remain prime minister. Although the country has regained relative stability, relations between indigenous Fijians and Fiji-Indians are still strained.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Fiji has a population of about 869,000, growing at an annual rate of 1.4 percent. Relatively few people live in urban areas. There are only nine towns, and six of them are on the main island, Viti Levu. The two largest towns are Suva, the capital, and Lautoka. Indigenous Fijians and Fiji-Indians have nearly equal numbers, together forming 95 percent of the total population. The Indians live mostly on Viti Levu. About 5 percent of the total population consists of other Pacific Islanders, Chinese, and Europeans.

**Language.** English is the official language. Fijian and Hindustani are widely spoken. Fijian can be written in two ways, one of which is more phonetic than the other. For instance, the letter *b* is pronounced with an *m* sound before it, as in the case of the town Ba. Its name can be written *Ba* or *Mba*, but it is pronounced "MBAH." Also, a *q* is usually pronounced "NGG." That is, *yaqona* is pronounced "YANGGONA." In this text, most Fijian words are written in the more standard, less phonetic spelling. The Hindustani spoken in Fiji is called Fiji Bat or Fiji Talk and differs slightly from the Hindustani spoken in India. English spoken among the people often includes words and phrases from Fijian, Hindustani, and other languages.

**Religion.** Religion plays a major role in the lives of Fijians. Most Fijians are Christian, belonging to various churches. Methodists and Roman Catholics predominate. Indians are either Hindu or Muslim and the Chinese are either Christian or Buddhist. There are also some Sikhs and Christian Indians. The people often celebrate festivals of other religions. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution.

**General Attitudes.** Fijians are generous, friendly, and easygoing. Daily life in Fiji is relaxed and casual. Some call it the "Pacific way." The community is important, as is evident in community ceremonies, cooperative building projects, and community pride. The custom of *kerekere* dictates that a relative or neighbor can ask for something that is needed and it

must be given willingly, without expectation of repayment. An exception is if the requested item were a gift from someone else, in which case a person does not have to give it away.

Although Fijians have abandoned their tradition as fierce warriors for a more peaceful life, they remain proud of their cultural heritage and traditions. Ethnic tensions exist between Fijians and Indians, although they may work, attend church or school, or play soccer together. Indians often feel discriminated against by Fijian government leaders. They point to such inequalities as land ownership to argue their case. More than 80 percent of all land is owned by Fijian clans; Indians do not have access to it. The 1997 constitutional reforms outlawed racial discrimination and guaranteed free speech. Many hoped that the changes would help the two groups resolve some differences and lead to further reforms. However, political unrest has hindered the process of reconciliation.

**Personal Appearance.** The people of Fiji wear light, casual clothing throughout the year, but public attire is fairly conservative (no bathing suits), especially for women. In traditional villages, women do not wear shorts or pants. Everyday clothing for indigenous Fijian men and women is most often the *sulu vaka toga*, a medium-to-long wraparound cloth made of colorful cotton. Businessmen, clergy, and civil servants (such as police officers) wear a tailored *sulu* made from suit material. This *sulu*, called a *sulu vakataga* or *pocket sulu*, is worn with a short-sleeved shirt and sometimes a tie. Indian men wear long pants and shirts. Indian women wear a *sari* (wraparound dress) or a *salwaar kameez* (pants with a long matching tunic). Fashions in the larger urban areas are changing due to Western influence.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Fijians are friendly and will go out of their way to greet whomever they meet. The most common way to say hello among indigenous Fijians is *Bula!* (pronounced "MBOOLA," meaning "Health!"). For formal meetings, they use a handshake and the more formal *Ni Sa Bula!* The Fijian handshake can last a little while, as the greeters continue polite conversation before they let go. Fiji-Indians typically use shorter handshakes and say *Namaste* when they greet. When passing a rural Fijian house, a person is often greeted with *Mai kana!* (Come eat!).

In this casual society, it is common to address most people by first name. When people are related or have an established relationship, they may greet by reference to that relationship rather than use first names. For example, close friends may address each other by *itau* (a traditional friendship), and male cousins might use *tavale* (cousin). People address chiefs by the title *Ratu* before their first names.

**Gestures.** Among Fijians, tilting the head down and avoiding eye contact while speaking to someone shows respect. Staring is offensive. One indicates agreement by raising the eyebrows, closing the mouth, and making an "mm-mm" sound (similar to a sound that would mean "no" in the United States). A "thumbs up" gesture means "good" or "OK." Pointing directly at someone while speaking to him or her is considered rude. Standing with hands on hips is thought to be aggressive or brash. Pointing the bottom of one's foot at another person is impolite. Among Fijians, it is especially offensive to touch someone's head (except for a child's); one must say *Tulou* if it happens by accident to restore respect to the person. *Tulou* is also said when walking in the midst of people who are gathered and conversing. One beckons by waving all fingers of the hand

with the palm facing down. Public displays of affection, even for married couples, are frowned upon. People practice a custom called *cobo* (pronounced “THOMBO”) when accepting a gift, presenting *yaqona* (see Visiting), or excusing oneself when reaching above a person’s head. *Cobo* involves clapping cupped hands three or more times.

**Visiting.** Visiting is an important part of social relations. Most people visit unannounced, and guests are welcome. Removing one’s shoes when entering a home is customary. Sitting cross-legged on a mat-covered floor is common in a Fijian home, but Indian homes have furniture. A chief or guest sits in a place of honor. It is impolite to stand higher than those who are sitting, so one takes care to also be seated or to walk in a stooped position when others are seated.

The people of Fiji are hospitable; they enjoy sharing a visitor’s company, so visits may last a long time. Hosts nearly always offer refreshments, including tea, juice, or food. It is impolite to refuse them. Instead, one accepts the offering and says *Vinaka* or *Dhananbaad*, the respective Fijian and Hindustani words for “Thank you.”

An important symbol of social relations is *yaqona*, which is made from the root and lower stem of a shrub in the pepper family. The powdered root, when combined with water, is Fiji’s national drink. It is sometimes called *kava*. It may be offered to guests as a special sign of goodwill. The bitter-tasting drink numbs the tongue, is not addictive, and can produce a mild sense of well-being. The actual kava herb has been shown in medical studies to relieve stress, and it is becoming available in the West. People in Fiji use *yaqona* to mark special occasions and end disputes; they drink it at all official ceremonies. Both ethnic Fijians and Indians use the drink socially. *Yaqona* is prepared in a *tanoa* (a special wooden bowl) and drunk from a *bilo* (coconut shell). When strangers enter a Fijian village, they seek out the chief or village headman to ask for permission to enter and visit, and are expected to present some unpounded *yaqona* to him.

**Eating.** Traditionally, neither Fijians nor Indians have used eating utensils, but spoons and forks are becoming more common in urban areas. For all meals, Fijians spread a cloth on the mat-covered floor, sit cross-legged, pray, pass a bowl of water around for washing hands, and eat from tin plates and bowls. They pass the water bowl again after the meal. Women and girls usually eat after the men and boys. Food is shared in Fijian villages, due not only to communal obligations but also to the fact that most homes do not have refrigerators to keep leftovers. For large feasts and special meals, Fijians still cook food in the traditional manner in a *lovo* (ground oven). Indian homes generally have a small washbasin in the dining room for washing hands. Indians eat with the right hand. Tipping is not expected in restaurants.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The father acts as the head of the Fijian family. Families can be large, and the elderly usually are cared for by their children. Villages are composed of families that form clans or *mataqali* (landholding units). In this extended family system, Fijians live in a collective or communal way. *Kerekere* plays an important role in family relationships. Subsistence chores are shared between men and women. Men are engaged in spearfishing, gardening, and construction, while women cook, collect wild food, and do line and small-net fishing.

The traditional Fijian home is called a *bure*. It usually is built of local hardwoods, a thatched roof, and woven floor covers.

Its four doors generally are kept open for circulation and are used by different people. Visitors enter through the front door, except for the village chief, who enters at the side. A *bure* consists of one large room and is typically built by the entire community. Other than beds and sometimes a dresser, furniture is not considered necessary. Women cook in a smaller, separate structure.

Indians usually live in furnished tin, cement, or wood homes. Urban dwellers of any ethnic group often live in Western-style homes. Some rural Fijians have adopted the tin, cement, and wood homes.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating traditionally has been nonexistent in Fijian culture, but Western influences are changing society so that people date in some areas. The ethnic Fijian man chooses his own wife and a grand wedding ceremony is held, accompanied by a *solevu* (great feast). In high-chiefly Fijian families, parents must still approve their children’s future spouses. Indian parents customarily have arranged their children’s marriages, but this practice is also changing with Western influence.

**Diet.** The mainstays of the Fijian diet are boiled taro and cassava, starchy roots often grown in the family garden. There are also some leafy vegetables and many tropical fruits (papaya, mangoes, pineapples, bananas). Many dishes are prepared in *lolo* (coconut milk). Seafood, chicken, pork, and beef are eaten in Fiji. Foods are rarely deep-fried, but are steamed, boiled, or roasted. In Fijian villages, breakfast consists of tea drunk from tin bowls and possibly rice or any leftovers from the previous night’s dinner. Indian cuisine is often made with curry and is spicy. Hindus do not eat beef; Muslims do not eat pork. Many Indians are vegetarians. Indian meals consist of curries, rice *dhal* (lentil soup), and *roti* (round, flat bread).

**Recreation.** Fijians are sports enthusiasts. The most popular team sports are rugby, soccer, and cricket. Fiji’s national rugby team has been successful in international competition. Visitors enjoy the beaches, golfing, many water sports (snorkeling, windsurfing, scuba diving, etc.), and game fishing. Festivals are also a time of recreation for many people. Women in villages play the traditional Fijian game of *veicage moli* (kick the orange) during January to celebrate the New Year. The winning team must present the losers with clothes, while the losers are responsible for mixing and serving *yaqona* to the winners that night.

**The Arts.** Fijian handicraft artists produce *masi* cloth from bark and use stencils to decorate them with elaborate patterns. These highly valued cloths are used for ceremonial dress and traditional domestic purposes, although today they largely are made for the tourist market. Other handicrafts include detailed wooden *yaqona* bowls and *ibe* mats, made of pandanus leaves.

Fijian *meke* dances describe legends and historical events. Chanting, clapping, bamboo percussion sticks, and wooden *lali* drums accompany the dancers. Fiji-Indians perform classical Indian dances with intricate movements. Both indigenous Fijians and Fiji-Indians hold ceremonies in which participants walk across hot stones or embers. In the Fiji-Indian ceremony, religious songs and drumming play a prominent role.

**Holidays.** Official public holidays include New Year’s Day, Easter, the Queen of England’s Birthday (13 June), a Bank Holiday (1 Aug.), Fiji Day (or Independence Day, 10 October), the Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday (26 Oct.), Prince Charles’s Birthday (14 Nov.), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). Boxing Day comes from the British tradition of presenting gifts to tradesmen and service persons. It is now a day for

## Fiji

relaxing and visiting friends and family. Many festivals throughout the year celebrate different events. The largest, held in Suva for a full week in August, is the Hibiscus Festival. Also popular is *Diwali*, the Hindu Festival of Lights, held in either October or November.

**Commerce.** Businesses are open Monday through Friday, usually 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with an hour break for lunch. Stores and restaurants remain open during lunch but are closed Saturday after 1 p.m. All stores close on Sunday, with the exception of some restaurants that are permitted to remain open. Nearly all businesses in Fiji are owned by Indians and Chinese.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** The government of Fiji is comprised of three branches. The executive branch is led by a prime minister (currently Laisenia Qarase) as head of government, a president (currently Ratu Josefa Iloilo) as head of state, and a Great Council of Chiefs (the highest ranking members of the traditional Fijian chief system). A Supreme Court heads the judicial branch.

The legislative branch is comprised of Parliament, which has two houses: a 32-seat Senate and a 71-seat House of Representatives. The Great Council of Chiefs appoints the president and 14 members of the Senate. Of the remaining senators, nine are selected by the prime minister, eight by the opposition leader, and one by a council of Rotuma Islanders. Among representatives, 23 seats are reserved for Fijians and 19 for Indians. Three are reserved for people of mixed race and one is set aside for Rotuma Islanders. The remaining 25 seats are open to any race, making it possible for either Fijians or Indians to gain a majority.

Most Fiji-Indian legislators belong to the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). Most indigenous Fijian legislators belong to the Fijian United Party (SDL). A number of smaller parties also operate, but they have little power.

**Economy.** Subsistence farming (supplemented by fishing) is the key economic activity for most Fijians. Primary cash crops include bananas, rice, taro, cassava, pineapples, coconuts, and copra (a coconut product). Fiji-Indians comprise the vast majority of sugar farmers. Until recently, sugar was the most important industry and major source of revenue. In recent years, tourism has grown to equal sugar in economic importance. Fiji also exports ginger, gold, lumber, and processed fish (mostly tuna). It manufactures clothing and furniture on a small scale.

Fiji relies heavily upon foreign aid, and poverty still affects up to 30 percent of rural families. However, the rising generation is already benefiting from increased economic opportunities. The currency is the Fijian dollar (FJD).

**Transportation and Communications.** Most people travel by open-air bus because service is regular and inexpensive. Taxis and private automobiles are also used but are more expensive. Relatively few people own cars. Following the British tradition, traffic travels on the left side of the road. A ferry service and two airlines provide travel between more populated islands.

Fiji has a modern communications system, with satellite links to other countries. Eight radio stations broadcast in

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	81 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	67 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$4,850
Adult literacy rate	95 percent (male); 91 (female)
Infant mortality rate	14 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	68 (male); 71 (female)

English, Fijian, or Hindustani. Limited television broadcasts, now available in Suva and Nadi, are expanding slowly. There are two daily English newspapers, one weekly Hindustani paper, and two weekly Fijian papers.

**Education.** The government provides free education for grades one through eight. Many schools are operated by religious groups such as the Catholics, Hindus, Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Methodists, and Muslims. Each school has its own uniform, and most accept both boys and girls. The University of the South Pacific is a joint effort by several small Pacific Island nations to provide their people with higher education. It receives substantial funding from Fiji's government, and one of its many campuses is located in Suva. Fiji also has a medical school, an institute of technology, and a college of agriculture.

**Health.** There is usually very little disease in Fiji, and the water supply is safe to drink. The government provides most medical care through local clinics. Life expectancy rates are rising steadily and infant mortality rates are falling.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In July 2003, Fiji's Supreme Court ruled that Prime Minister Qarase was in violation of the constitution (which promotes multiethnic representation in government) by refusing to include members of the Indian-dominated FLP in his executive cabinet. Though Qarase then offered positions to 14 FLP legislators, they did not include FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry (the former prime minister deposed by the 2000 coup), creating a new controversy.
- Fiji contributed troops to an Australian-led peacekeeping force deployed in July 2003 to help restore order in the Solomon Islands. The force of more than two thousand troops disarmed ethnic militias and arrested militia leaders.
- George Speight, the leader of the 2000 coup, was convicted of treason in February 2002. Though the charges required mandatory execution, President Iloilo changed the sentence to life imprisonment.

**Contact Information.** Embassy of Fiji, 2233 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Suite 240, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 337-8320. Fiji Visitors Bureau, 5777 West Century Boulevard, Suite 220, Los Angeles, CA 90045; phone (310) 568-1616; web site [www.visitfiji.com](http://www.visitfiji.com).

**CultureGrams™**  
People. The World. You.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
333 South 520 West, Suite 360  
London, Utah 84042 USA  
1.800.528.6279  
fax 801.847.0127  
[www.culturegrams.com](http://www.culturegrams.com)

