Fiji’s far-reaching population revolution
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Fiji is going through an amazing population transformation, one might even call it a population revolution, confirmed by the 2007 Census results and resulting population projections.

In the space of a hundred years, an immigrant community of Indian origin, has gone from being a minority (40% in 1921), to just over 50% in the 1970s, and thereafter sharply declining to a current 36%, and probably 26% by 2027. Indigenous Fijians will then be around 70 percent.

Most see the higher emigration of Indo-Fijians as the major explanatory factor. Rarely do our people focus on the remarkable Indo-Fijian decline in fertility, not matched by Fijians.

And the average Fiji person only focuses on population from the perspective of ethnic differences in numbers of voters and the resulting ethnic balance of political power in government, and ethnic sharing of public resources such as scholarships or poverty alleviation resources.

They rarely think about the population components, the changes in which will have profound impacts not just on ethnic political relationships, but also our ethnically based education systems, the differential abilities of households to save and accumulate wealth, the ethnic profiles of Fiji’s labour force and entrepreneurs, and profound ethnically driven changes in the patterns of consumption in the economy.

Population and politics

For more than fifty years, the relative numbers of indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians has been a politically explosive issue. Political tensions in Fiji worsened severely after 1946, once Indo-Fijians exceeded indigenous Fijians.

Even by 1986, when the population relativities had reversed, the tensions of the previous decades continued, and reached flash-point with the 1987 coup which removed a largely Indo-Fijian party from government. Then again in 2000.

But one can see from the first graph (1921 to 2027), that the dominance of Indo-Fijian numbers over Fijians, was a very brief period in Fiji’s history.

My population projections based on the 2007 Census numbers indicate that by 2027,
Indo-Fijians will comprise only 30% of all voters (assumed to be 18 years and over). The ethnic conflicts over political leadership or domination will be well and truly history by then.

And with the incidence of poverty roughly the same for Fijians and Indo-Fijians (a third) if poverty alleviation resources are allocated to the poor only on the basis of need, the Indo-Fijian share will reduce from the current 36% down to mere 26% by 2027. “Affirmative action policies” will be a total non-issue.

So also should be ethnic shares of public sector jobs sought by school leavers, another hot political potato in the past.

So what is drastically changing the ethnic composition of Fiji’s population?

The fertility revolution

Of course, Indo-Fijians have emigrated far more (roughly 5000 per year) than Fijians (now roughly 1000 per year).

But behind the massive decline in the Indo-Fijian population is an equally massive historical decline in the Total Fertility Rates of Indo-Fijian women- from above 6 forty years ago, to probably below replacement value currently (below 2). For the last forty years, Indo-Fijian couples have been having far fewer children than indigenous Fijians.

The Fijian fertility rate has also declined, but nowhere as rapidly, and is still quite high, probably still above 3. This is what has led to higher child dependency ratios for Fijians (see below).

But a puzzling question remains: while there has been a Government-sponsored Family Planning Programme for the last four decades, why is it that the Fijian total fertility rate has not shown the same decline as the Indo-Fijian one?

Was it due to pressure for more children (ie more voters) from Fijian political leaders? Or from Fijian community leaders who are worried about the Fijian depopulation in rural areas?

Or is it that Fijian couples just choose to have more children regardless of the economic impact on their households or whoever else ends up looking after them?

Or were the Indo-Fijian couples far more aware of the resourcing implications and would rarely be able to pass children on to relatives?

Surely there is a great PhD thesis topic here.
And for Fijian leaders, who is going to stand up and tell young couples—please limit the number of children to 2 or 3. Not 5 or 6. It will be good for your households savings and standards of living, and it will be good for your country down the line.

But on the contrary, the Fiji public have seen Provincial Council leaders pleading with their people to have MORE children (and drink less kava) because villages are becoming depopulated.

Note the sad reality that even if young couples did make the decision today to limit the number of children to 2, the benefits will take decades to work through.

But learn from China with its “one child” policy thirty years ago. Today, China has far fewer primary school children to support and far less poverty than India, whose economy is smaller than China and has weaker economic growth.

The Education Revolution

But it is in the field of education, that the population changes are remarkable and potentially revolutionary.

Not too long ago, Indo-Fijians had roughly a half of all school enrolments, in primary and secondary schools managed by their own committees and religious groups and subgroups—Hindus and Muslim.

Today Indo-Fijians are just 33% of secondary age children, and just 27% of primary age children. By 2027, Indo-Fijians will be only 20% of secondary age children, and 17% of primary age groups.

By then, most Indo-Fijians schools will have been forced, out of necessity to become not just multiracial but will end up having large Fijian majorities. Already, “Indian College” and many other “Indian” schools, urgently need name changes.

Hopefully, this ethnic intermingling at the primary and secondary school levels, will become the most powerful factor fostering a genuine multiracial society in Fiji, far more powerful than decrees from governments.

Governments which have historically allocated grants and subsidies on an ethnic basis to “Fijians only” schools will urgently need to set aside all such racist considerations as an even larger proportion of Fijian students will be attending “Indian” schools.
School amalgamations and rationalisation will an increasingly important agenda item for government and education authorities. Many Indian education authorities- Sanatan Dharm, Arya Samaj, Sangam, Muslim – will need to painfully rethink their focus on religious identities.

Clearly, the Ministry of Education must get precise projections of school age populations at all levels by ethnicity, level (preschool, primary, secondary and tertiary) and by rural and urban areas.

Not only is the large absolute decline in Indo-Fijian numbers going to play some interesting tricks on the national aggregate numbers at all levels (some bad news, but some goods news as well) but the massive rural:urban drift of both Fijians and Indo-Fijians will be depopulating rural schools even more.

The household wealth revolution

While ethnically focused politicians love to compare the apparent wealth of Indo-Fijian families to the poorer Fijian ones, they rarely talk about “dependency ratios”. An important one is the child dependency ratio- the proportion of children aged 0 to 14, to those aged 15 to 64- the supposedly productive age groups in most societies. A low child dependency ratio would imply a low burden on the economically productive. And conversely.

For Indo-Fijians, the child dependency ratio has dramatically fallen from over 100% at the 1966 Census, to around 32% currently, and will fall to an incredibly low 20% by 2027. But the Fijian child dependency ratio has fallen far more slowly- to only 52% currently, and expected to be a still high 45% in 2027.

So, while the Fijian child dependency ratio was only 4% higher than the Indo-Fijian ratio in 1976, the extra burden climbed rapidly to 29% higher in 1996 and 62% higher in 2007.

For the last four decades, Fijian productive persons between the ages of 15 to 64, have had to support far more children between the ages of 0 to 14 than Indo-Fijian productive persons. The future will be even worse. The extra burden on Fijian productive people, will grow to a massive 107% by 2027.

There can be no doubt, and the evidence is there from Fiji’s national Household Income and Expenditure Survey data for 2002-03, that Fijian households with the same income per working adult, have had to support far more children than Indo-Fijian households, leading to lower savings ratios, lower wealth accumulation, higher proportions of children dropping out of school, and lower education expenditures per child.

Conversely, the far lower child dependency ratios of Indo-Fijians has enabled their households to save and accumulate more wealth (houses, cars, household goods etc) and have a generally more affluent life-style.
It is no wonder that Fijian households have not been able to accumulate wealth in the last four decades as have the Indo-Fijian households. A lot was to do with dependency ratios, not how hard they worked.

But there is another twist in the tail. When it comes to the elderly dependency ratio (the over 64 group relative to those 15 to 64), that for Indo-Fijians is going to rise astronomically to reach over 20% by 2027, compared to just around 10% for indigenous Fijians.

Are Indo-Fijian communities and households preparing for the day when looking after seniors will be more of a burden than looking after the children?

**The changing labour force?**

For decades, a common view was propagated that Fiji’s modern economy, government tax revenues, and most of the development infrastructure, depended critically on Indo-Fijian labour. That was no doubt largely true for most of the last century, when the majority of Fijians were encouraged to stay in their villages. That is no longer the case.

Along with the massive changes taking place in the ethnic composition of the population, is an equally revolutionary change taking place in the composition of the labour force in rural areas.

This change is taking place not just because Indo-Fijians are a smaller proportion of the workforce, but also because Indo-Fijian households have fewer workers (because of their smaller household size), and these workers tend to work in towns and in formal sector jobs, rather than the unskilled work on farms.

The result is that even on farms owned and managed by Indo-Fijian farmers, the unskilled labour for cultivating, weeding, applying of pesticides and fertilisers, and harvesting, is increasingly being supplied by indigenous Fijians. This is well known for sugar cane farms. But it is equally the case in non-sugar agricultural activities.

It is indigenous Fijian labour which is now keeping the rural cash economy alive.

This Fijianisation of the Fiji labour force will accelerate over the next two decades, not just in rural areas, but also all the urban areas, in government statutory organisations, and private companies.

**Loss of entrepreneurs**

It is probably the case that much of the economic wealth in Fiji over the last century has been catalyzed by Indo-Fijian (and Chinese and European) entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, these are the three communities who have suffered the heaviest outflow of skilled and professional immigrants, including entrepreneurs.
While some successful entrepreneurs have remained, they generally tend to be on the old side, clinging pitifully to past government concessions and subsidies. Unfortunately, our current emigrants also include bright young sparks who would normally have been the great entrepreneurs of the future.

Will this enormous loss of existing and potential entrepreneurs imply a further downward pressure on future economic growth in Fiji and increasing poverty?

**Changing patterns of consumption**

Talk to the shop-keepers in town, and they will tell you who are their target ethnic groups “with money to spend” when it comes to the products that they sell.

This is obvious for ethnically associated items such as saris or gold jewelry. It is also obvious that Indo-Fijian children in the past few decades, coming from small families, would have had far more purchasing power than Fijian children coming from large families.

But virtually all items of consumption have ethnic patterns to them. Dalo, yams, kumala and cassava are largely Fijian items of consumption and demand for these items may be expected to strengthen as the Fijian composition of the population grows.

What about all the other items that largely Indo-Fijians consume such as lentils? What happens to their demand as the Indo-Fijian numbers decline further over the next twenty years?

And what items may we expect major increases in demand as the Fijian share of the population increases?

Fijians households will continue to grow in number, generating growing demand for household appliances like fridges and stoves and household furniture.

For make no mistake, along with their increasing indigenous Fijian share of the formal workforce, is also a rapidly increasing share of the total money income in the country, already over 50% in 2002-03, as revealed by the Bureau’s Household Income and Expenditure Surveys.

Budding entrepreneurs would do well to think about where the future profit opportunities are going to lie, given the changing ethnic demographics of Fiji.

**The Expensive 2007 Census**

In 2007, Fiji tax-payers paid for a massively expensive national census exercise, the results of which are currently being processed by the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics staff. When the tables are available, basic analytical reports will be written.
These reports will throw much light on the kinds of issues we have discussed above, including the demographic parameters which will enable more accurate population projections into the future.

We have not even discussed the strange declines in life expectancies for Fijians and Indo-Fijians, males and females, over the last three decades- another bomb waiting to be examined using the 2007 data.

Is Fiji even interested in the detailed results from the 2007 Census?

Note, it is now 2010.