This special issue of the *Journal of Pacific Studies* is dedicated to the watershed September, 2014 Fijian General Election. Although Fiji has experienced landmark elections in the past, held under newly promulgated constitutions and following in the wake of political upheavals, the election of 2014 was – even by those standards – historic. At one level, the significance of this election lay in the fact that it was the first to be held following the coup of December 2006 and thus provided a referendum on the leadership of Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama and the radical reforms that his regime had instituted over the previous eight years. Some of these were reflected in provisions of the 2013 Constitution, under which the election was conducted. But what made this election even more compelling and historically significant were the many novel features of the election itself.

There were many firsts. It was the first election ever held in Fiji on the basis of proportional representation and ‘one person one vote’. For the first time, candidates competed for 50 Open Seats, in a single national constituency. It was the first time voters in Fiji were registered on a single roll, rather than on separate communal rolls. For the first time, political parties had to appeal for votes from all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity. It was the first election to be held where the voting age was 18 (not 21), making the first-time (‘youth’) voters one of the largest constituencies in the election. It was the first election where all the major political parties had either women party presidents or were led by women. For the first time social networking sites were used as campaign tools by political parties and independent candidates. Finally, on a less positive note, for the first time elections were conducted under the shadow of decrees that limited the freedom of political parties, Non-Government Organizations and the media, sometimes in unprecedented ways.

Recognizing the potentially game-changing nature of this election, the School of Government, Development and International Affairs (SGDIA) in the Faculty of Business and Economics, at USP decided at the beginning of 2014 to coordinate and facilitate research on the elections – both the campaign itself and the outcomes of the poll. In July it held a research mapping workshop, in
collaboration with the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM) and the Citizens Constitution Forum (CCF) where research proposals were discussed and some (preliminary) findings presented. There was a follow-up workshop in November, 2014, where authors presented their draft papers, many of which appear in this volume. In the meantime, SGDIA hosted a Public Forum, also in November, at which a number of panelists analysed the September poll and its outcomes. Two of those presentations are contained in this volume.

One of these is by Fr David Arms, a member of the Fiji Electoral Commission, and the only member who had served in previous Electoral Commissions. In his paper he discusses the proportional representation and open list electoral system adopted under the 2013 Constitution. He maintains that it is a much more representative system that allows voters rather than political party bosses to decide on who should be their representatives. He argues that the allocation of seats on the basis of the proportion of total votes received by a political party is fairer to the political parties, and to the voters. However the threshold of five percent of the total votes cast to obtain seats in the 50 member parliament made it almost impossible for independent candidates and smaller parties to win a single seat.

The new electoral system is intended to shift Fiji away from the divisive, race-based politics and parliamentary representation that have impeded nation building and contributed to the political ruptures and coups of the past. This experiment in electoral engineering is discussed by Gordon Nanau in his article. He considers the completely revamped Fiji electoral system in the wider context of the Pacific region. This includes Papua New Guinea and Samoa where the electoral systems adopted in their independence constitutions have been amended to facilitate both greater representation and stability. The new electoral system in Fiji is seen in a positive light as it sets in motion a new era of representation based on criteria other than ethnicity, and the election of a government that is inclusive and progressive.

A significant campaign issue in the general election was the place of religion and specifically the Christian state and secular state. This issue is examined by Jacqueline Ryle through analysis of Church positions on this issue and how these terms were represented in political debates, including debates on the 2013 Constitution which maintains that Fiji will be a secular state. Ryle explores discourses on the Christian state and secular state during the election. She highlights the apparent confusion surrounding these terms at the vanua and national levels, and the attempts by some candidates to politicize the notions of Christian state and secular state for electoral gains.

The land question was also a highly charged political issue during the general election. Like religion it has also reinforced ethnic divisions between the owners of the land, the Taukei ni vanua, and those who leased the land, people of other ethnicities, especially Indo-Fijians. Sefa Sakai examines the potency of land in the 2014 General Election. As a set piece in a rugby game, the dominant ethnic Fijian party, SODELPA, made the security of customary land ownership a significant campaign issue. Sakai shows that land as a ‘political gimmick’ did not work so well this time around. He shows that the party’s ‘land-race’ card failed to appeal to Taukei voters and scared non-Taukei voters into supporting the Bainimarama-led Fiji First Party.
Taking a civil society perspective, Chantelle Khan focuses on the impact of the election on the longer term practices of democracy at the community level. She considers whether the electoral processes and outcomes reflected due ‘democratic process’ and contribute to the empowerment of ordinary rural citizens. She maintains that there was no question about which political party would win the general election, given that many rural communities perceived Bainimarama as the ‘people’s Prime Minister’. However she draws attention to the strategy that has won FijiFirst the Government, which in her view greatly undermine practices of democracy at all levels by the intercepting, circumventing and overriding of ‘due process’.

There was much speculation prior to the election about whether the new proportional representation open list electoral system would favour women candidates. Asenati Liki and Claire Slatter examine this question and also whether the mainstream media (mainly the print media) positively covered women’s campaigns. They conclude that the election of a relatively large number of women MPs may suggest that the electoral system was more empathetic towards women candidates. They also found that the ‘robust’ media coverage of women candidates, with very little negative stereotyping, may also have contributed to this outcome. However, they also show that votes for women candidates still represented less than 16 per cent of total votes cast for all parties, indicating there is still some way to go for women candidates, especially those standing as independent candidates or as members of smaller political parties.

The paper by Jope Tarai, Glen Finau, Romitesh Kant and Jason Titifanue examines the contemporary phenomenon of on-line political campaigning. Social media is seen to resonate most strongly with the youth voter – estimated at 47 per cent of Fiji’s electorate. It is no surprise therefore that social media emerged as a key component of the election campaign. By analysing the Facebook pages of various candidates and parties, this research examines the extent of social media used for campaigning by the political parties, the impact of their sites and the messages being delivered by the images used. They show that there was clear correlation between the effective use of social media and election results for political parties. But what is also indicated is that while political engagement may be facilitated via social media; it is also a tool that reinforces the power of the dominant political group.

In their chapter, Nicola Baker and Haruo Nakagawa provide detailed breakdown and analysis of the voting patterns of the election. Explanations of voting behaviour remain somewhat of a mystery, in the absence of exit polls and data on voter ethnicity. In their analysis they highlight the ‘unknown unknowns’ of the election results: the dynamics within and between Fiji’s many customary communities. They argue that this is an aspect that requires further research and understanding, and caution against accepting assumptions about why voters –especially from the Taukei community – made the electoral choices they did. Predicting future elections will in part depend on what we learn from this one.

In the final paper, Vijay Naidu questions the fundamental assumption that the general election was a step towards the transition to democracy. The open list proportional representation electoral system is seen as unique and unprecedented for Fiji and certainly moves the country away
from its former ethnically divisive electoral arrangements, but there has also been a significant change in the political landscape. Formerly influential institutions and entities such as the Great Council of Chiefs, the Methodist Church, trade unions, the media and even NGOs were either eliminated or so hobbled by years of repressive decrees that they became largely ineffective. The overwhelming victory of the Fiji First Party, and the very considerable voter support for the Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimara, are accompanied by a constitution that entrenches several hundred decrees which cannot be challenged in any court of law, and a social environment that constrain fundamental freedoms. This leaves an impression of an uncertain future for democracy in the country.

This special issue of the *Journal of Pacific Studies* addresses important aspects of the 2014 General Election. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis of the elections and there are issues and areas that have not been covered, for instance the individual attributes of candidates in the 2014 general election, as well as the logistical challenges of holding the supposedly, ‘one day election’ on 17th September. However it brings together original, critical and scholarly perspectives of this historic election that will be of interest and importance to observers of Fiji’s political journey and to its participants and stakeholders.