The following comment by Winston Churchill in the House of Commons in 1947 is pertinent as the 2014 Fiji General Election is examined from a civil society organization perspective: “…No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”.

This paper begins with an introductory comment on the work of SEEP (Social Empowerment Education Programme) and its aim of democratization at the community level, followed by a snapshot and reflection on the ‘practices of democracy’.

Very briefly, since 2001 SEEP has been working as part of the Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy (ECREA) organization, and during that time it has evolved a very contextual community development process. SEEP works in the provinces of Naitasiri, Tailevu, Bua and Namosi as well as Ra and in a few Indo-Fijian settlements in Dawasamu. The aim of our work has always been increasing the practice of democracy at the community level to ensure collective participation and ownership of activities and issues.

This paper is both a snapshot and reflection on the ‘practices of democracy’ through due process that SEEP engages with, and how the 2014 General Election has impacted on this process in the immediate and long term which is likely to affect our journey to a more robust democracy in the country. A few examples of the overriding of due process at the national level will be drawn on but the crux of this reflection is our experience on the ground with partner communities. This paper is somewhat specific to a geographic locality, and does not pretend to cover all the complexities of the coup and its aftermath since 2006, and the 2014 elections.
At the outset the following clarifications need to be made about SEEP:

1. It accepts that election/voting is only one aspect of the role of the citizen in a democracy.

2. It is apolitical and non-partisan, supporting no political party position.

3. Being a social justice based organization it believes in parliamentary democracy but at the same time is open to exploring the re-thinking of democracy in a changing global landscape.

4. The organization believes that being informed by our history and reflecting on the lessons that history tells us provides us with positive guidance as we move forward.

With the anticipated 2014 General Election, we were interested in the election process at two levels: first, with voter education and the conduct of the elections and second, with political party campaign strategies. Our intention to engage in the voter education process was denied by the restrictions on NGO involvement in producing voter education materials, discussing and debating issues relating to the elections.

I wish to focus on the election outcome and specifically, the winning party FijiFirst, and its impact on the longer term practices of democracy at the community level.

For SEEP, it was never an issue that the FijiFirst party would win. This was because working in rural areas over time; it was easy to see why: much awaited ‘development’ and infrastructure projects like rural electrification, roads (feeder and main) promised, sometimes decades ago, were now a reality. What we also saw in the lead-up to the elections as far back as 2008 was that despite strong opposition from various quarters (local and international), many rural communities perceived Bainimarama as the ‘people’s Prime Minister’. A number of factors contributed to Fiji First’s victory including the handout of development projects but also his physically reaching out to rural communities, sometimes on horse-back, sometimes by boat, constantly engaging with people so that this image of a ‘benevolent caring dictator’ won him the legitimacy his administration needed.

Even now, despite the anticipated tabling of the Auditor Generals’ Report which may reveal the extent of misuse of public funds, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommending the Government to fully review the 2013 Constitution, in rural communities Bainimarama’s popularity remains very strong. The public perception of the Bainimarama administration and the FijiFirst Party has been further shaped by the muzzling of the media and rule by decrees (including the Elections Decree 2014). At the same time, the PR machinery of FijiFirst strategically highlighted the handout of ‘development’, resulting in a resounding 32-seat win in the new Parliament.

So, from this angle, SEEP congratulates the Government for a people-savvy strategy that they implemented immediately upon seizing power in December 2006 and that continued into the last few weeks leading into the polls of September 2014. However, the concern from the community development and justice perspective, is that the strategy that has won FijiFirst
the Government, in reality greatly undermines practices of democracy at all levels by the intercepting, circumventing and overriding of ‘due process’ and the practices of democracy.

Post 2006, the most visible and devastating impact of the use of this strategy of the Bainimarama Administration was in relation to the 2012 Yash Ghai Constitution Commission. SEEP members were on the ground like most other NGOs working with communities to participate and take ownership of the process of constitution making. This process was set up for broad and open participation by Fiji citizens and they did with over 7,000 submissions. Unfortunately the draft Constitution that so diligently sought to reflect the people’s views was summarily rejected by the Administration. What followed was the deafening silence from the majority of the people. This is an extreme illustration of a process in which most communities in Fiji participated and the end result was overridden so harshly that it stunned the nation into silence. The fear of triggering military reprisals (the military involvement always part and parcel of Fiji politics) provided more reason for many to remain silent.

Bainimarama’s famous quote from March 2011, “Call me or text me” was intended to mobilize and straighten out an apparently lethargic public service. What it did was to ensure that the due process set in place by past and present governments could now be intercepted, and short circuited by the Prime Minister or one of his senior military officers. The consequences of this initiative included the instilling or deepening of fear among civil servants for their jobs and/or physical safety; growing hostility by civil servants toward communities having to circumvent their own processes due to orders “from the top”; and possible arbitrary divergence of public funds that had implications for how the national budget was actually being utilized. The analysis of the Auditor General’s reports as they become available will provide useful information about where funds had been allocated, how they were actually used, and what processes were used to allocate funds during period from early 2011 up to September 2014.

This is not to say that ‘due process’ of government mechanism is not frustrating in its slowness and public servants are not lethargic in their responses. It is very frustrating for the general public, and even more so for our rural partner communities. However, the existing government processes are tied to public utilities and services for which specific budgetary allocations were made that require accountability.

Moreover, the persistent disregard for due process, justified by claims of noble ends, has, for SEEP, longer term impact on the journey to a robust and active democracy. How, one may ask? During SEEP and partner community analysis sessions, community members are asked to dissect the impediments to ‘practices of democracy’ within their communities or groups. The following ‘blocks’ are often identified:

- Leader not listening and members are not listening to each other,
- Leaders making all the decisions with no consultation with community members, and
- Men make all the decisions.
It would be amusing if it were not so sad that the behavior at national level is reflected in community practices. Whether one came before the other is a matter of debate but the message over the years is that the ‘leader’ should be able to override decisions and processes.

From our experience, we see the long term impact of the elections on Fiji’s ‘new chapter’ of democracy to be more widespread dependency syndrome on the Government of the day (free bus fare, free milk, and free education), and further disillusion for community group/members who will have to realign their assumptions about democracy as they experience it. If Parliament does not work, then go straight to the PM.

Considering this, further questions arise-

- How do we ensure ‘practices of democracy’ are increased at community level?
- How can we re-establish frameworks that ensure that due process will be followed in our new chapter of parliamentary democracy? The Government Whip’s comment about respect for parliamentary and other due processes is encouraging.
- How can we ensure that our Parliament works in the interest of the people at all times when the government majority is overwhelming at 32 MPs and the opposition with 18 MPs?

So, what is being done?

Rest assured that through all kinds of governments, political upheavals, and struggles, CSO’s have been working tirelessly and sometimes courageously (most of the women’s NGO’s anyway), to ensure that there is return to due process and parliamentary democracy. Even before the political dust is settled, CSO’s (including SEEP) have been engaging and will continue to engage by

1. Sharing information with communities to build capacity to access government mechanisms and processes. There is excitement at the resumption of parliamentary democracy and the possibilities of engagement with the processes that are likely to emerge. (The latest Suva-craze among CSOs is for training on how to engage). Having an elected governing cabinet and ministers, and an active parliamentary opposition together with the tabling of the Auditor Generals’ Report for the first time since 2006, are all very exciting to those living in the capital city where there is access to those in power and where CSOs can engage with each other and the government to have our voices heard.

2. And engaging with local level Government when this is established so that we are working together to build better cohesion among community groups (sometimes providing a facilitating role, sometimes advocating, lobbying or educating – but always, building).

SEEP’s special interest is in ensuring that our rural communities, so easily the target of top down approaches and undemocratic processes, comprehend and take ownership of their own roles in building robust active democracy. We believe that it is only through the daily practice of democracy at all levels that our next election results will be a true reflection of our nation’s
values and principles rather than simply long overdue development needs. The onus is not on one of us, but all of us - CSOs, academia, and the private sector. The onus is on all of us who voted.

ENDNOTES:

1 This article is based on a presentation made to a Public Forum at USP on 12 November 2014. Chantelle Khan is Director of the NGO, Social Empowerment Education Programme (SEEP).