ABSTRACT:

This article explores discourses on the Christian state, secular state and religion in the media during the 2014 Fiji election campaign. Drawing on the mainstream written media and interviews by the author it outlines and analyses church positions on these issues and how they related to the political debate. Discourses on the Christian state and secular state play an important part in discourses on what it is to be a Christian in Fiji. Yet there is lack of clarity as to how people understand and use the terms Christian state and secular state, and discrepancies between official positions of churches and general Christian discourses and practices.

Key words: Elections, media, Christian state, secular state
INTRODUCTION

Some weeks before the 2014 elections were held, an iTaukei student in my class on Religion and Politics in Contemporary Society outlined the dilemma she felt she faced as a first-time voter: ‘If I vote in relation to my identity as an iTaukei and my faith, I vote SODELPA. If I vote for equality, I vote FijiFirst’.

In a nutshell this student had outlined prevalent understandings during the election campaign of what each of the two main parties stood for and the seemingly unbridgeable divide between them: If you wanted to safeguard your identity as an indigenous Fijian, your belonging to the land (and sea), symbolically and literally, your cultural values and beliefs and your faith as a Christian, you should vote SODELPA. If you wanted to vote for equal rights for all citizens of Fiji, you should vote FijiFirst. As an Indo-Fijian taxi driver expressed to me before the election: “If FijiFirst wins it will be good for us Indians. If SODELPA wins, things will not be good for us” (July 2014).

At first glance the narratives that emerge from these two seemingly oppositional positions could be described as 1) a culturally and historically holistic position, focusing on continuity and roots, iTaukei cultural identity, historical kinship connections, a deep sense of belonging to the land and a strong identification with being a Christian (read here, first and foremost Methodist or Protestant Pentecostal Christian) – SODELPA; and 2) a strongly forward-looking, progressive position, based on human rights, equal citizenship, a common identity and the constitutionally enshrined secular state, focusing on the present, the future and the economic development of Fiji as a modern nation of equal opportunity; severing historical links to the past, weakening chiefly influence, redefining taken for granted symbols of cultural and national identity, replacing historical alliances and allegiances at international level with new ones - Fiji First.

The Christian state debate entered the political scene in the mid-1980s in connection with the first coup in 1987 as part of ethno-nationalist politics. Since 2012 the debate has shifted from being solely a debate for and against the Christian state ideal, to simultaneously being a debate for and against the secular state as well as a critique of the 2013 Constitution and the lack of consultation in the drafting of this constitution.

While the Christian state, secular state debate is highly politicised and polarised, interpretations of it and positions are not static, but shifting and ambiguous and take on complex associations.

Yet these nuances are generally lost in the simplistic polemics of media representations that dominate the debate.

This article explores discourses on the Christian state, secular state and religion in the media during the election campaign. Drawing on the mainstream written media and interviews by the author it outlines and analyses church positions on these issues and how they related to the political debate. There was a marked difference in the role and voice of the churches in the 2014 election campaign compared with the 2006 election campaign. In 2006 the Association of Christian Churches in Fiji (ACCF) advocated vociferously for a Christian state during the election campaign, for example placing a full page advertisement in the Fiji Times claiming it
to be ‘the duty of all citizens of this nation to elect a God-fearing and proven prime minister’ (Newland, 2007, 300-301). In 2014 the tone of the churches was quite different.

**POLITICAL AGENDAS AND RELIGION**

The key terms and core values in FijiFirst’s manifesto included equal rights, equal citizenry and meritocracy. The manifestos of SODELPA, NFP and PDP noted the importance and value of multiculturalism. Only two parties, however, mentioned religion in their manifestos: SODELPA and FLP.

The FLP Manifesto emphasised in relation to religious freedom:

> Fiji must remain a secular State that observes the fundamental freedoms and rights of its citizens, in particular the guarantee of full religious freedom” (FLP Manifesto, 2014, p.29).

The FLP Mission Statement was forward-looking, focusing on human and religious rights and the elimination of all discrimination:

> Together we will make Fiji a country and a society that will: • Assure every one of their future security and rights as people of one nation. • Remove all vestiges of discrimination based on race, religion, colour or creed (FLP Mission Statement).

The wording in the SODELPA Manifesto emphasised connections between land, history and faith and the need to protect indigenous cultures and traditions. In places it is couched in Pentecostal terminology:

> … a mighty mission and a sacred one, saving this precious land from a dictatorship which is remaking it to conform with their demands, their laws and their beliefs. We are called at this moment in our history to protect our ways of life, our cultures and traditions (SODELPA Manifesto, 2014, p.7, emphasis added)

In language and meaning this connected at a deep level with people’s faith and ‘calling’ by God as Christians to a divine mission. The language was relational and historically situated, connecting iTaukei people with each other and with the past, present and future. This is in keeping with the interconnectedness of iTaukei cultural and religious identity in relational and generational terms.

When the manifesto was launched party leader Ro Teimumu Kepa stated that SODELPA ‘will uphold Christian principles and values’ (Susu, Fiji Sun 2014, p.3).

> Our manifesto affirms SODELPA will place God in his rightful position so that our people in this globalised world will have a strong sense of identity and purpose … The religious freedom of all citizens will be guaranteed: we will uphold Christian principles and values and ensure respect for all religious faiths and freedom of religion for all citizens (Ro Teimumu Kepa in Susu, Fiji Sun 2014 p.3).
SODELPA’s election manifesto did not, however, call for Fiji to be declared a Christian state. Nor do all its members subscribe to this position, advocated by some of SODELPA’s members such as Laisenia Qarase. In an interview with Fiji Sun Ro Teimumu said that SODELPA’s position in relation to the secular state was based on Fiji’s former constitutions, including the 1997 Constitution, which refers to the coming of Christianity to Fiji. ‘As far as we’re concerned there is no God in this Constitution …’ she is reported as saying, ‘God is very much part of our existence. That’s why we are very concerned about the secular state and how far the Government will take that concept of the secular state’ (Delaibatiki, Fiji Sun 2014, p.1).

Ro Teimumu’s position here focused both on the historical perspective of Fiji’s Christianisation in the 19th century and an existential Christian perspective, connecting the Manifesto with an explicit critique of the 2013 Constitution.

The media, especially Fiji Sun, accused Ro Teimumu and SODELPA of stirring up fear among especially the rural iTaukei communities over loss of land rights and loss of rights to practice their faith as Christians. SODELPA’s ‘reclaim Fiji’ slogan, especially coupled with the intense drumming of the wooden lali in the party’s TV advertisements, a deeply meaningful and culturally significant sound to iTaukei, seemed to express a sense of urgency, danger and imminent loss. In this and in the wording of the manifesto above, there is an eschatological perspective of impending disaster if action is not taken.

Throughout the election campaign Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama repeatedly accused Ro Teimumu and her party of willful deceit: ‘I have been asked whether people will still be able to pray to Jesus if FijiFirst wins. Of course we will be. These are the types of questions that are indicative of the lies these people are spreading’ (Bainimarama in Walsh, Fiji Sun 6/9/14: 10).

At other times Bainimarama employed Christian rhetoric and biblical quotes in defence of the secular state ideal:

> The logic that Fiji should be a Christian state because there are more Christians than anyone else and their religious beliefs should take precedence ‘is not the way of Christ’. He quoted a passage from the Bible stating ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’, saying it underlined that ‘the state and religion are separate and our obligations to both are different’ (Fijilive 2014, see also Chand 2014 d).

At a voter’s meeting in Labasa Bainimarama ‘called on political parties and organisations wanting to declare the nation a Christian state to fix their spiritual lives with God first’, reported the Fiji Times. ‘He said God’s character was of love, which included equality and such intention by political parties to make Fiji a Christian state or disagree with the common identity of ‘Fijians’ did not go with God’s calling (Silaitoga, Fiji Times 2014, p.6).

The Hindi weekly newspaper, Shanti Dut, reported under the title ‘ITaukei Land and Christianity is safe – Bainimarama’:

> According to the PM Bainimarama, iTaukei land and Christianity is not under any threat in this country. He said that, in addition to endangering iTaukei land, he has been alleged
to also have weakened the churches. Bainimarama said that Fiji has been declared a secular state. However, some politicians are falsely preaching that Christianity has come under threat due to the secular state (Kumar, *Shanti Dut* 2014, p.37).

**CHURCH POSITIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN STATE AND SECULAR STATE**

At no time since the Methodist Church in the mid-1980s embarked on its highly politicised course and involvement in the coups of 1987 and 2000 has there been a unison position within the Church on the issue of the Christian state. The Methodist Church’s official position has fluctuated with changing leadership, with conservative and liberal factions continuously battling within.

The new leadership of the Church, however, is steering the Church, both at leadership and grassroots levels through a detailed programme of reconciliation and spiritual direction, determined to draw its members towards a caring and inclusive Christianity that is open to dialogue with other churches and faiths, and socially engaged in the society it is part of (Banivanua n.d.) This is a slow process, however, due to the democratic structure of the Church which can ‘only go as fast as the slowest member’ (Revd James Bhagwan, pers. comm. 2014).

In the eight years since the 2006 elections leadership within the three mainline churches had changed. Dr Winston Halapua became Archbishop of the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia in 2010. Dr Peter Loy Chong was installed as Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Suva in 2013 and General Secretary of the Methodist Church, Revd Tevita Banivanua, was elected President in August 2014.

Reflecting on this historical change, Dr Winston Halapua pointed out, ‘Since 1987 the Methodist Church has dominated in the media … Now the three of us [the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist Churches] say similar things … Because we talk inclusivity, I am very hopeful’ (interview 2014)

What were the official positions of these three ‘old’ mainline churches and the position of other churches in relation to church-state relations during the election campaign?

‘The Methodist Church has not taken a stand on Fiji being a secular state’, declared Fiji Sun (2014) in the midst of the Methodist Church conference marking the Church’s Golden Jubilee as an independent Church. According to the newspaper former President of the Church, Rev. Tomasi Kanailagi, told members that people ‘should put God first, not Fiji First … [and] … that he believed Fiji should be a Christian state’. General Secretary Revd Tevita Banivanua, however, emphasised that the Methodist Church did not share Revd Kanailagi’s views (*Fiji Sun* 2014).

On 26 August 2014 in an interview in the Fiji Times Revd Banivanua, now elected President Elect, emphasised the Methodist Church’s apolitical position: ‘We need to get ourselves in our rightful position, which is the gospel and not to mix it up with politics and things like that … The church stand remains clear – to be apolitical is the way forward for us’ (Sauvakacolo, *Fiji Times* 2014).
On the other hand, in relation to the secular state, Revd Banivanua emphasised:

We just do not know enough of what is the basis, the philosophical basis of a secular state. The Christian principles are much clearer to us than the secular because nobody dared to explain to the Fiji public what that was. We felt the idea of a secular state was thrust down our throats. We do not know how to chew it. That for us is one of the reasons why the Christian state was taken up by us … The way it was done was almost black and white … that there was no consultation … that caused us difficulties as a stakeholder in Fiji governance. At least civil societies, churches should have been consulted. We did that with the Yash Gai [constitution review] (Interview, pers.com, March 2, 2015).

Catholic Archbishop Dr Peter Loy Chong (2014) pointed out, ‘‘Secular state’ is a new term for Fiji, whereas it’s an old concept for other countries’. Yet the separation of the powers of church and state follow Catholic teaching. In August 2014 Archbishop Loy Chong sent out an Episcopal Pastoral Letter to be read out in all Catholic parishes in Fiji, stressing the Catholic Church’s position in relation to the state. ‘The Church’, he wrote, ‘must remain independent of any particular political or economic system’.

As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group … We are called to bring together our religious principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a better world’ (Loy Chong 2014).

Dr Winston Halapua stated that the ideal of the Christian state is against Christian principles:

The day you impose on a multi-religious society your own particular faith and say ‘what we have should become [for] all of us’, without having consultation or blessings of this, we are coercing the process for our own needs. This is not consistent with love of God and love of our neighbour. We find ourselves contradicting our own message (Halapua, interview, pers.com, September 1, 2014).

A Salvation Army position follows a similar line:

A Christian state … no … it’s a personal choice [one’s beliefs or faith]. It’s not that I decide for everyone what it should be … God … is giving you the right, the privilege to choose. God is a risk-taker … if God didn’t do that [decide that you should have a particular faith] why should we say ‘I choose for you’? (Major Uraia Dravikula, The Salvation Army, pers.com, February 24, 2015).

Assemblies of God (AOG) General Secretary, Rev. Viliame Vakasausau was quoted in the Fiji Times as stating that AOG ‘will not involve itself in any political debate but [will] continue to uphold the significance of Christianity … Reverend Vakasausau said the church remained apolitical but encouraged members to pray for good leadership as the country prepared for the election’ (Nasiko, 2014).
A different position was held by the Pentecostal church, Apostolic Gospel Outreach Fellowship, as reported in Fiji Sun (Susu 2014). General Secretary Pastor Orisi Qica affirmed the church’s stand since its inception in 1990 that Fiji should ‘become a Christian state. Pastor Qica added that ‘the word Christian state has a wide interpretation’. He was quoted as emphasising the church’s focus on teaching people within the church ‘Christian principles and Christ-like character’ (ibid).

The fact that the term ‘Christian state’ has a wide range of often unclear interpretations is one of the points I make in this article. In many cases people who claim to want Fiji to be a Christian state do not mean this in the de jure, legalistic sense but in the sense of upholding Christian values. What this might mean, practically speaking, is also open to wide interpretation.

DEBATING THE CHRISTIAN STATE, SECULAR STATE IN THE MEDIA

In August 2014 Fiji Times analysed a Fiji Times Tebbutt Poll on Christian state, secular state preferences among registered voters. In response to the question “Would you prefer Fiji to be a Secular State where there is no official religion, or a Christian state, where Christianity is the official religion?” 58% were in favour of a secular state, 35% preferred a Christian state. 5% did not know; 2% gave no answer.

The article states that in terms of ethnicity, iTaukei were divided into 57% for a Christian state and 39% for a secular state.

Fijians of Indian descent were firmly in favour of a Secular State, with 80 per cent in favour of no official religion against 10 per cent who favoured Christian State … Overall results showed that males and females, all age groups … showed an overall preference for a Secular State (Chand, 2014, p.4, see also Chand 2014b, Chand 2014c).

The Fiji Times asked politicians for their opinions in relation to this result. Independent candidate, Roshika Deo’s response expressed succinctly the general sentiments behind support for the secular state ideal. In addition to this she pointed to an issue raised many times among those who advocate against a Christian state: which denomination, which ‘version’ of Christianity would be dominant in a Christian state? Would there be freedom of expression of faith even for Christians of other denominations in a Christian state?

Fiji is a nation of diverse religions, beliefs and culture, and the results [of the poll] are an indication of this. There are different Christian denominations and in having a Christian State, conflicts would arise within leadership, which denomination’s values to abide and follow. The Fiji Police Force under (former Commissioner) Esala Teleni’s leadership is a good example of the imposition of a Christian denomination. In having a Secular State, we are all able to practice whatever faith or belief we have without fear and prejudice. This promotes greater humanity, respect and acceptance among us all (Roshika Deo, Independent Candidate, Be The Change leader, Fiji Times 2014).

Advocates of the Christian state argue that Christian principles and faith should permeate all aspects of Fiji’s government and society and that this will create stability in the country (Ryle
Deo’s point about the imposition of a particular form of Christianity within the Fiji Police Force underscores this.

Emphasising that in a secular state freedom of religion is guaranteed and that the Government has a neutral stance to religion, Bainimarama similarly referred to the preferential treatment for Christians of particular beliefs advocated by the Association of Christian Churches during the Qarase government (Ryle 2005; 2010; Newland 2007, 2009, 2013). ‘The State doesn’t say ‘because you are a Christian you should get the best jobs in the civil service’ or ‘because you’re a Pentecostal civil servant you should only serve members of your church first’ (FijiLive 2014, see also Chand, 2014 d).

While the issue seems to be a ‘Christian state’ contra ‘secular state’ debate, it is much more complex. What exactly is a Christian state? What exactly is a secular state? And, perhaps more to the point, what do different people think a Christian state and a secular state means? Most people, even some church leaders, are not entirely clear about this. The terms secular state and secularisation were often conflated, not least by the media.

An article by Wadan Narsey in his blog, most of which – though not all – was printed in the Fiji Times in August 2014 (Narsey 2014a) maintained that calling Fiji a secular state is meaningless since Christian prayers are dominant in all sectors of society in workplaces, at the start of conferences, workshops, in the RFMF and in government departments.

In August, at the height of the election campaign, former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase caused a media uproar by declaring at a SODELPA campaign meeting at Davuilevu that Fiji should be declared a Christian state. According to Fiji Sun Qarase ‘said Christianity should be recognised as the predominant religion. He dismissed Fiji as a secular state and linked numbers on the ballot paper to the Muslim holy book, the Quran’ (Ahmed, 2014). The Fiji Times reported Qarase as saying that:

Christianity brought civilisation to Fiji and that Fiji should be declared a Christian state … Qarase told SODELPA supporters … that he believed God had given Fiji to the iTaukei. He claims God gave the land to the forefathers of the iTaukei’ (Fiji Times 2014).

Shanti Dut, reported, ‘Qarase said Fiji First will never be able to attain equal citizenry in Fiji. He said that his party (SODELPA) firmly believes that Christianity should receive the primary place in Fiji and that Fiji should be declared a Christian state’ (Kumar, Shanti Dut 2015).

Revd. Banivanua was asked by the Fiji Times to comment on Qarase’s statement and was quoted as saying that

Christianity should be part and parcel of the principles that guide Fiji’s policies and constitution … that Christianity’s contribution to this country was enormous and this was the reason some individuals pushed for a Christian state … Christianity has proven itself to the life of Fiji and its principles are good for Fiji as a whole … Rev. Banivanua emphasised that Fiji was a multi-religious country and that as such it should be guided by religious principles (Fiji Times 2014).
Comments on Qarase’s statement on the Christian state from non-Christian quarters emphasised freedom of religion, equality and Fiji’s multi-religious composition. ‘Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha’s Deewan Chand Maharaj said’, the Fiji Times noted, ‘he could not understand that statement by Mr Qarase, a man who had led Fiji in the past. Mr Maharaj said no religion should take precedence over another religion’ (Fiji Times 2014).

FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry emphasised that ‘FLP has always advocated religious freedom and tolerance and we want to keep Fiji that way. All religions teach the same values of love for one another, peace, harmony and tolerance, and in Fiji we have learned to respect and accommodate each other’s religious freedom and practice’ (Ahmed, Fiji Sun 2014).

Shanti Dut quoted NFP leader Professor Biman Prasad as saying, ‘All citizens of Fiji have equal citizenry and rights’. His comment was based on SODELPA member, Laisenia Qarase’s statement that only Christianity and iTaukei people should have a primary place. He declared that his party is against ethnic division and believes that Fiji is for all citizens’ (Kumar, Shanti Dut 2014). According to the Fiji Times, Biman Prasad said that Qarase was ‘fanning the flames of racial and religious hatred’:

This is racial bigotry. He thinks that those following Christianity … can never be equal to others. He is therefore saying that those following or practicing other religious beliefs are subservient. This is preposterous and an insult to each and every citizen of our beloved nation. As a party born out of the struggle for dignity and justice of our ordinary people, we will not tolerate any racist remark or attack on any community in our nation (Fiji Times 2014).

A CHRISTIAN ‘STATE’ OR A CHRISTIAN ‘COUNTRY’?

The ways in which many iTaukei see Christianity and the Christian state rest on historical understandings of the interweaving of iTaukei tradition with church and society. What is widely represented among iTaukei as the Three Pillars of Fijian society: vanua, lotu and Matanitu can be broadly translated as a holistic understanding of land and tradition, church and governance (cf Niukula in Ryle 2001, 2005, 2010, 2012).

This is a predominantly Fiji Methodist religio-cultural ideal structure that came into being during the colonial period, 1874-1970 (cf Tippett, 1955, p.213, p.219). From the time of cession in 1874, the term matanitu, formerly understood as the most powerful manifestation of divine chiefly governance, came to be equated with colonial governance. It was, however, never divested of its chiefly connotations. And since Fiji’s independence in 1970, matanitu has come loosely to be understood as state.

Yet the iTaukei term for ‘Christian state’ is vanua lotu va Karisito. Literally, this means ‘land of the Christian Church’ or ‘land of the Christian faith’. Vanua is a highly complex term, representing deep, spiritual connotations of land and tradition and the historical relations between land, people, chiefs and church (vanua, lotu and matanitu). This translation therefore makes for an unclear understanding of the ideology behind the Christian state and its political and constitutional ramifications. As a village headman expressed to me in 1998:
Before, in the olden days Fiji was a land of darkness, a land of hunting and killing and cannibalism. The missionaries brought the Light of Christianity to Fiji and the killing and cannibalism stopped. Of course Fiji is a Christian land, \textit{na vanua lotu va Karisito} (Ryle 2005: 66).

In the mid to late 1990s the Christian state was strongly debated in Methodist and Pentecostal Christian quarters in connection with the 1995 Constitution process and ratification of the 1997 Constitution. Then president of the Methodist Church, Revd Dr Ilaitia Tuwere, seeking to steer the Methodist Church away from its politicised position, highlighted the lack of clarity of terminology:

I want to see a distinction made between Christian state and Christian \textit{vanua}, Christian land … \textit{vanua lotu va Karisito}. They are two separate things. Christian state… \textit{matanitu lotu va Karisito} … that brings in the whole question of the constitution … a very complicated question – legally as well as theologically … that does not need to get into the constitution. We can simply live according to the principles of the Christian faith … (Revd Dr Ilaitia Tuwere, interview 1998 in Ryle, 2001, 2005, 2010, p.58).

Salvation Army officer, Major Uraia Dravikula, pointed to the interwovenness of the core elements of iTaukei identity: ‘The Fijians are steeped into Christianity … \textit{Lotu}, \textit{vanua}, \textit{matanitu}: what the iTaukei firmly believe is that if one suffers, the whole suffers’ (pers.com. February 24, 2015). This point, also made by Tuwere (1997:45), concerns demarcating Christian principles and values from those of \textit{vanua} and arguing against the principles of a Christian state. It adds some explanation to the SODELPA campaign connections between land, \textit{qoliqoli} rights, Christianity and iTaukei identity. Yet Major Dravikula points out that Christian values and principles supersede institutionalised Christianity as well as \textit{vanua}, culture and tradition:

Christianity is not Methodism, Salvationism, Catholicism, it’s Christ … My Christianity comes first before my Fijian identity. My being Fijian comes later. If their culture, their tradition and everything does not embrace Christian values then they must do away with it. I make no apologies for that. My Fijian culture must bow before Christian values and principles (Major Uraia Dravikula, The Salvation Army, (pers.com. February 24, 2015).

**CONCLUSION**

What was clear in media debates during the 2014 Fiji election campaign and in interviews I have subsequently conducted is that any current discussion of the Christian state is also necessarily a discussion of the secular state and the 2013 Constitution. What is also clear is the lack of clarity as to what exactly a Christian state is or might be, and what exactly a secular state is.

Constitutionally-speaking, Fiji was always a secular state. While freedom of religion was always tacitly guaranteed in Fiji (cf Mahendra Chaudhry and Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, interviews March 2015) Christianity held a special place in former constitutions. The Constitution of 2013 redefines
Fiji on a legalistic basis of universal human rights and secular values, making no mention of religion in its Preamble.

The many Christians from different denominations and churches I have discussed this with – including those who strongly support a secular state -find this difficult to accept. They feel that omitting any mention of religion, especially of Christianity, severs Fiji from its historical, cultural, religious and spiritual foundations and is in effect ‘a sanitised version’ of Fiji history (Madraiwiwi, pers.com. March 30, 2015). Many people in fact believe that the 2013 Constitution has shifted Fiji from being a Christian state to now being a secular state. At the same time Fiji’s Christians continue to live their lives according to Christian values and principles, and Christian beliefs and rhetoric are part of everyday life.

In contrast with this is a narrative, especially among Indo-Fijians, of dynamically moving forward, of relief that equal citizenship, freedom of religion and freedom of religious conscience are now enshrined in the constitution. ‘Today we all are one. There is no ethnic distinction. We are all called Fijian and we are proud of it’ (Raj, 2014).

While Fiji is now a de jure secular state, on two significant occasions on either side of Election Day the Government held national multi-religious thanksgiving services at the ANZ Stadium. The first was held to celebrate the safe release of the 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers from Islamist rebels in the Golan Heights in Syria. The shock and potential tragedy of the hostage-taking had brought people in Fiji together in prayer in temples, mosques, churches or homes. For a time the election campaign was eclipsed by the fears and hopes this issue evoked.

Celebrating the safe release of the soldiers and inviting all to the Thanksgiving Service, in a large centrepiece colour photograph of Fijian UN troops, the Ministry of Information advertisement announced: ‘Fijians of all faiths are encouraged to gather together wherever they may be to give thanks to God for keeping our men safe … God has answered our prayers for the safe release of our men. Let us give thanks and rejoice’ (Fiji Times 2014).

The second Thanksgiving Service was hastily organised for the 19 September 2014 to give thanks for FijiFirst’s landslide victory. Both services were multi-religious services. It is notable that the Government invited individual representatives of different churches and religious organisations. They did not invite the interdenominational (ecumenical) and interfaith organisations, Fiji Council of Churches and Interfaith Search Fiji.

This article has explored discourses on religion, the Christian state and the secular state in the mainstream written media as they were played out at the height of the election campaign from mid-July till Election Day, 17 September. The article has also drawn on interviews with church leaders and church members by the author between September 2014 and March 2015 and an interview with former Methodist Church President Ilaitia Tuwere in 1998 on iTaukei semantics regarding the Christian state.

Discourses on the Christian state and secular state play an important part in discourses on what it is to be Christian in Fiji. Yet there is lack of clarity as to what exactly people mean by a Christian state and secular state, and discrepancies between official positions of churches and general
Christian discourses and practices. The religious rhetoric that permeates Fiji society, whether or not it is a secular state, in many ways leads us back to Wadan Narsey’s point of the ‘myth of the secular state’ (Narsey 2014a & b, cf above). Discourses on the Christian state and secular state are complex, ambiguous and often paradoxical. As Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (pers.com. March 30, 2015) succinctly pointed out, discussions on the Christian state ‘tend to get lost in translation and people end up speaking past each other’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Revd Tevita Banivanua, Revd James Bhagwan, Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, Major Iraia Dravunikula, Most Revd Dr Winston Halapua, Most Revd Dr Peter Loy Chong, and Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi for their time.

ENDNOTES:

1 The last survey of Fiji’s religions was in the census of 2007. At this time the population was just over 837,000. Almost 476,000 were iTaukei, almost all of whom were Christians. Just under 314,000 were Indo-Fijian, most of whom are non-Christian. There were just under 11,000 part-Europeans. According to the census, 58% of the population was Christian, about 33% Hindu, 7% Muslim and just under 1% Sikh. Several other religions do not figure explicitly in the statistics.


3 In 2012 ‘[as] well as rejecting the report and the draft constitution proposed by the government-nominated Constitution Review Commission [headed by Professor Yash Gai] the government also scrapped the proposed Constituent Assembly that had been assembled to discuss the draft, despite having the power (through the prime minister) to appoint its entire membership’ Madraiwiwi (2015: 55).

4 The mainstream written media consulted were the English language daily newspapers Fiji Times and Fiji Sun, the Hindi weekly, Shanti Dut and the Fijian weekly, Nai Lalakai. It is notable that between 15 July and 17 September 2014 in Nai Lalakai there was only one brief mention of the Christian state issue. (Ravula 2014).

5 Interviews were conducted between September 2014 and March 2015. I also draw on earlier interviews and data.

6 The ACCF was formed by the Methodist Church and a number of Pentecostal churches in 2001 in response to the 2000 coup. It usurped the Fiji Council of Churches, an ecumenical organisation of mainline churches established in 1965 and member of the Pacific Conference of Churches. In 2014 the ACCF was inactive and the Fiji Council of Churches had been revived, now including as its members not only mainline churches but also Pentecostal churches. In 2009 ministers of the Methodist Church leadership were detained by the military authorities and the Standing Committee of the Church was charged with breach of the Public Emergency Regulations (PER). Between 2009 and 2011 the Church was prohibited from holding its annual conference. In 2012 and 2013 it was permitted to hold limited conferences. After the adoption of the 2013 Constitution the Church was again fully free to hold conferences (Revd James Bhagwan, per comm 2015). See Weir 2015 for a detailed discussion. See also Newland 2013.
Translation of this and other quotes from Shanti Dut by Shailin Gonelevu. And also Virendra Singh.


See detailed discussion of this in Tomlinson 2013, see also Fraenkel 2010, Newland 2013.

In his Wednesday Fiji Times column Revd James Bhagwan offered a clarification of secularisation (Bhagwan 2014).

One place that does have interfaith prayers is the Judiciary (Chief Justice Gates, pers comm 2015)

The relationship between the Bainimarama military government and the Fiji Council of Churches (FCC) became fraught when FCC refused to be part of the People’s Charter. Omitting to invite Fiji’s long-established ecumenical and interfaith organisations could be read as a sign of a government-controlled secular state which makes use of religion when it is expedient to do so.

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