Introduction
Elections are at the heart of modern democratic processes in which representatives are chosen to govern on behalf of ‘the people’ – the body of citizens in whom sovereignty or supreme political power is vested. By their nature, democratic elections are highly competitive and are therefore conducted in an adversarial manner. This gives practical expression to the notion that democracy is, at least in one sense, the prosecution of war by other means. The provision of peaceful means for the management of conflict brings with it enormous benefits. This is best illustrated by looking at the dismal record of those places around the world where violence rather than voting has been used to determine who holds the reigns of government. The record of most Pacific island states in managing their political affairs peacefully, however, is a good one – with some notable exceptions. Fiji and Solomon Islands stand out as the most recent problem areas, with armed groups forcing governments out of office in May and June 2000 respectively. In the wake of these problems, the communiqué from the Thirty-First Pacific Island Forum (PIF) drew particular attention to the serious implications for regional security and economic development of the recent strife, urging support for such political goods as ‘constitutional democracy’ and ‘good governance’ (PIF, 2000: 2-3). The latter is generally seen as related closely to democracy but is not synonymous with it. Moreover, the mere fact that a democratic system, complete with effective electoral and other political machinery, is in place is no guarantee that good governance will result. Although democracy is meant to minimize corruption and mismanagement, dishonest and inept politicians can nonetheless manage to be elected regularly under a democratic system.¹

The ‘war by other means’ analogy noted above is useful in focusing attention on the fact that democratic processes are meant to provide an alternative to physical force or coercion in deciding the question of who governs in the name of the people. But it can be misleading if it is taken to imply that there are permanent winners and losers – and that the winners are empowered to do exactly as they please. The powers of governments are constrained by the rules of a constitution. Democratic elections, moreover, are obviously periodic – meaning that they are held at regular intervals. Governments therefore hold power for a limited time, and although they may be re-elected in successive elections there is no tenure for life. Taken together, these limitations constitute the foundations on which the democratic doctrine of constitutionalism rests. Further, the fact that elections are periodic and competitive is meant to ensure the integrity of democratic processes. This implies, first, that open political contestation is central to the process, and second, that the various parties to the contest are equal in terms of their basic legitimacy. As suggested above, there are no guarantees that all will be smooth sailing from then on, but it is the essential basis on which constitutional democracy of the kind apparently supported by PIF proceeds.

¹ An article in February 2002 on the election of corrupt politicians in Solomon Islands illustrates the point. See Field, 2002; see also Crocombe, 2001: 512-541 and Centre for Democratic Institutions, 1999: 3.
The variety of electoral systems around the world shows clearly that there is no single method or set of rules that is recognized as embodying best practice with respect to institutionalizing political competition and ‘peaceful conflict’ through democratic procedures. This variety is reflected in the Pacific where, as the organizers of the conference have pointed out, there is an extraordinarily diverse range of systems. There is a similarly diverse range of opinion on the merits of one system as opposed to another, which reinforces the general point that there is more than one way in which democracy can be institutionalized and that its procedures, including procedures for elections, can be varied and adjusted according to context. It remains the case, however, that the mere holding of elections does not necessarily mean that the political system as a whole is democratic. Elections are held regularly in most dictatorships to provide a superficial semblance of legitimacy. But one of the essential differences between dictatorship and democracy lies in the freedom not merely to dissent but to actively oppose ruling elements and vie for office.

It is also important to note that arguments about the importance of context – especially when linked to ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ – sometimes amount to a repudiation of democracy. For although democracy can indeed be institutionalized in different ways according to context, this does not mean that anything goes. If a particular practice is (apparently) legitimated by local tradition, it does not automatically make it ‘democratic’. One purpose of this paper is to illustrate some of the tensions between traditionalist conceptions of politics in the Pacific and the institutionalization of democracy, especially in relation to certain ideas about the place of ‘consensus’ in Pacific political contexts. The notion of context itself is embodied in the concept of ‘political culture’ – a term originally used to explain why democracy takes hold more easily in some societies and not in others. The next section looks briefly at the concept of political culture and how it developed in comparative political science, drawing particular attention to a major problem in its application, namely, the ease with which it can be used to support a highly deterministic approach to the analysis of particular political communities.

**Political Culture in the Study of Comparative Politics**

The end of the Cold War, which brought with it some sudden and dramatic transfigurations of states and nations, is said to have sparked off nothing less than a renaissance in the study of political culture (Brint, 1991:1). However, some have viewed political culture as being in decline as a prominent political science paradigm because although few would dispute that the question of values is important to analysis, rationalist models, due to their allegedly superior empirical rigour, had come to predominate: ‘As a consequence, political culture has become a residual category, something that everyone knows is important but is referred to only to fill in the gaps that remain after harder analysis’ (Wilson, 1992: 2-3; see also Brands, 1988: 130). This reflects a persistent scepticism about whether political culture is a useful or even valid concept, despite its having made a ‘return’ in the post-Cold War period (Diamond, 1994:1; see also Wilson, 2000: 246). There is at least one point about which there can be little doubt, however, and that is that the idea of ‘sensitivity to context’ has become a widely recognized virtue since the 1950s, and that the concept of political culture ‘has been the political scientific manifestation of this virtue’ (Welch, 1993: 74).
The dominant understanding of ‘political culture’ that has informed comparative political studies for the last thirty years was first set out explicitly by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their work on the idea of ‘civic culture’. Their main interest was in examining the social structures and practices that sustained democratic politics, especially in light of the development of fascism and communism in the inter-war years in Europe which had shaken the ‘faith of the Enlightenment in the inevitable triumph of human reason and liberty’, and ‘raised serious doubts about the inevitability of democracy in the West’ (Almond and Verba, [1965] 1989: 1, 3-4). In addition, they believed that the study of political development in the ‘new nations’ of the decolonizing Third World required an approach that went beyond the formal institutions of democracy and looked to the problem of nurturing a political culture consistent with the democratic model of a participatory state.

... the ways in which political elites make decisions, their norms and attitudes, as well as the norms and attitudes of the ordinary citizen, his relationship to government and to his fellow citizens - are subtler cultural components. They have the diffuse properties of belief systems or of codes of personal relations, which the anthropologists tell us spread only with great difficulty (ibid: 3-4).

The political culture school took the discipline of political science beyond a narrow concern with legal-institutional studies which had concentrated largely on the formal apparatus of states and governments. Political culture studies therefore gave greater recognition to the now commonplace point that formal institutions such as constitutions, political parties, universal suffrage, elective legislatures, and so forth, are as much a feature of non-democratic regimes as they are of democratic ones. Furthermore, the collapse of many barely emergent forms of democratic government in former colonies highlighted the inadequacy of institutional approaches in accounting for the factors which determined success or failure. They turned instead to an assessment of how the subjective dimensions of human political behaviour influence or determine certain outcomes, particularly with respect to democratic stability. The concept of political culture as developed by Almond and Verba was therefore ‘a leading token of the ‘behavioural revolution’ in political science.’ (Welch, 1993: 64).

Despite a diversity of interpretations, conflicting definitions, critical assessments, and periodic stagnations in research as well as the persistent scepticism mentioned earlier, the concept of political culture as envisaged by Almond and Verba has survived, more or less in the form of conventional wisdom. Larry Diamond claims that the ‘pioneering political culture work of the 1960s blazed important trails in articulating our understanding of what political culture is and how it is structured’ and, further, that its conceptual foundations have ‘weathered well the test of experience’ (Diamond, 1994: 7) He also claims that ‘only a crude stereotype of political culture theory sees in it a causal determinism’ in that political culture more or less determines both political structures and political behaviour, and that the elements of political culture remain fairly impervious to change over time (ibid: 2). However, a recent textbook on comparative politics (the genre in which we are most likely to find the concept used) states that: ‘To a political scientist, as to an anthropologist or a sociologist, a ‘culture’ is the entire pattern of behaviour of a given society … therefore, individual behaviour within that society will in some sense be determined by that culture, and that of politics is no exception’ (Calvert, 2002: 107). The opening
lines of Lucian Pye’s work on Asia provide a clear example of just how deterministic a political culture approach can be:

Throughout Asia today the drama of politics is being played out by leaders and followers whose roles are largely prescribed by culturally determined concepts about the nature of power ...Briefly put, my thesis is that political power is extraordinarily sensitive to cultural nuances, and that, therefore, cultural variations are decisive in determining the course of political development (Pye, 1985: vii).

Pye explicitly acknowledges his debt to the pioneering work on political culture carried out by Almond and others. In addition, he dismisses various criticisms of the political culture approach that claim that ‘the concept opens the way to fuzzy thinking and sloppy explanations’ on the one hand or, on the other, that ‘denounce it for being too deterministic’ (ibid.: 19-20). Pye also rejects what he regards as the blind application of Western (and especially American) universalist models for understanding how political power operates in other contexts. This may seem a refreshing change, but the extent to which Pye embraces cultural relativism and determinism is also problematic, especially with respect to the dichotomous construction of the relative categories that he uses, namely ‘Asia’ and ‘the West’. These are the two opposing categories that have underscored the so-called ‘Asian values’ debate in recent years. Any scholar of the Pacific who has followed this debate over the last decade or so cannot fail to have noticed the very close parallels with various versions of the ‘Pacific way’. The latter is a discourse which has also entailed a dichotomous construction of the Pacific versus the West in much the same way. Interestingly, it is one that often replicates the way in which some ‘Westerners’ have stereotyped the Pacific’s island societies as well (Nicole cited in Murray and Storey, 2003: 219).

This draws attention to the fact that not all exercises in stereotyping are necessarily negative. It has been noted, for example, that ‘early Western anthropologists often celebrated the ‘Pacific Way’ and emphasized the reciprocal and consensual nature of Pacific Island peoples and the societies of which they were part’ (ibid.). Another study, citing a wide range of literature, notes the extent to which it is believed ‘that political life in the Pacific is guided by a consensual mood’, but also suggests that ‘the ideal of consensus may be exaggerated in texts about Pacific politics’ (Anckar, 2000: 60). It is also worth emphasizing that stereotypes about harmony and consensus in Pacific politics may be just as ‘Orientalist’ as any other. Moreover, it is exactly the sort of thing that is often read off simplistically as constituting ‘political culture’.

The discussion that follows looks at some of these ideas in more detail, paying particular attention not so much to ‘political culture’ as the politics of culture, especially as it pertains to democracy in general and the issues of legitimacy raised by electoral competition in particular. As an essential background, we should first recall the general political milieu within which democracy became the most valued form of political rule in the post-War period, and how this was played out in the decolonizing world.

Democracy and Decolonization

‘Democracy’ is not simply a word which describes in straightforward or neutral terms a particular form of political rule – namely, rule by the people – and a set of
institutions designed to support this form and give it practical expression. Democracy as a concept has itself become highly politicized. This is because it is open to endless disputation not simply about its true meaning, but also about the way in which it should be institutionalized in practice. It is with respect to the latter that debates about particular cultural contexts are especially relevant, as we shall see below.

Arguments about the meaning of democracy and its practical institutionalization have a very long history, but for present purposes the relevant period commences with the defeat of fascism in World War II. It is often noted that the defeat of this ideology – which had no difficulty in declaring itself not merely non-democratic but explicitly anti-democratic – led to a world in which everyone now pronounced themselves to be democrats (Sartori 1987: 3). In addition to liberal democrats, located largely (although not exclusively) in that part of the world known as ‘the West’, both communist leaders and right wing authoritarians usually claimed to be democrats as well, albeit of a different stripe. It is in this context that the philosopher W.B. Gallie (1956) first described democracy as an ‘essentially contested concept’ which produced in turn the phenomenon of ‘democracy with adjectives’.

A second factor contributing to the essential contestability of democracy and the proliferation of adjectival qualifiers (such as ‘guided democracy’, ‘organic democracy’ and ‘presidential democracy’) in the post-war period, however, was the phenomenon of decolonization and the making of a world of sovereign states which obviously required national governments of their own. The process of decolonization itself had been accompanied by the language of democratic self-determination, and there was a strong assumption that the governments of the new states would be constructed on the basis of democratic principles. After all, the major colonial powers – Great Britain and France – were themselves democracies, and the principles on which the newly formed United Nations were founded reflected a widespread democratic mood in international politics. But the acquisition of statehood by former colonial entities from Africa to the Pacific raised new problems for the application of what were, after all, very Eurocentric conceptions of democracy in contexts that were culturally, politically and economically very different and which did clearly require sensitivity to context.

Two important intellectual approaches to these issues were evident in the post-war period. The first was the anthropological concept of cultural relativism which had emerged in the earlier part of the twentieth century, particularly within American cultural anthropology, and which now came to underscore the approach taken by UNESCO to virtually all matters pertaining to culture in non-Western or indigenous settings. In the development of a normative doctrine of cultural relativism, major emphasis was placed on the social or cultural determinants of human behaviour, and biological and psychological factors were almost completely excluded. Culture was therefore viewed as a unified and self-bounded realm of phenomena rigidly differentiated from other factors (Horigan, 1988: 18). Derek Freeman – who later became better known for his controversial denouncement of Margaret Mead’s research findings in relation to Samoa – noted that this doctrine became as extreme as that of the hereditarians before them:

It was expressed in the formula *omnis cultura ex cultura*, which, in asserting that cultural phenomena can be understood only in terms of other cultural phenomena, was predicated on
the existence of an unbridgeable chasm between biology and cultural anthropology, and so inexorably involved an absolute cultural determinism (quoted ibid).

Cultural relativism and cultural determinism both relied on the assertion of Difference-with-a-capital-D, or what anthropologists would call ‘radical alterity’. The demonstration of Difference remained as crucial to later schools of anthropological thought as it was to the earlier ones. The extent to which anthropology’s disciplinary interests are in fact vested in ‘characterizing exotic otherness’ has been emphasized by another well-known and controversial anthropologist working in the Pacific – Roger Keesing. In symbolist/interpretive modes of anthropology, Keesing argued that radical alterity remained an essential requirement for showing that conceptions of personhood, emotions, agency, gender, and the body are culturally constructed, Difference, he said, must be demonstrated and celebrated, and ‘cultures’ must still be put in separate compartments and depicted in essentialist terms (Keesing, 1990: 47).

The second approach was developed within Anglo-American political science, and this was the ‘political culture’ concept discussed above. It was significantly influenced in its approach to the culture concept by work in cultural anthropology that used it largely to delineate Difference between one community and another. Cultural difference could of course be taken to distinguish between communities at any level, but whereas anthropologists had typically been concerned with small-scale communities, political scientists focused on the larger sphere of the nation-state and its political institutions.

Scholarship in both fields (and in others for that matter) also came to speak even more generally about ‘the West’ as an entity on the one hand, and the ‘non-West’ on the other. The West, in particular, is often assumed to possess ‘a culture’ which owes whatever coherence it possesses to its assumed contrast with non-Western culture(s), and this translates readily into the category of political culture as well. A common application of the political culture concept has therefore been to denote a dichotomous division between Western and non-Western communities. This dichotomy has translated into another important division – that between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Generally speaking, the latter distinguishes between those who ‘belong’ to the cultural group in question and those who do not. More specifically, the outsiders are usually ‘Westerners’ (academics, journalists, bureaucrats and experts or professionals of various kinds from Europe, North America, Australia or New Zealand). The category of insider seems straightforward – they are usually the natives, the locals, the indigenous.

In the decolonizing Pacific, the newly independent island states adopted most of the trappings of representative democracy as part of a formal written constitution establishing the basic political structures of the state, but often with important modifications that reflected local conditions. Although it is commonly said that former colonial powers ‘imposed’ constitutions crafted in their own image, it was rarely the case that something like a ‘Westminster model’ was simply forced on the new states without due regard for local particularities or without extensive consultation. The same can be said about the larger states bordering the western Pacific; namely, Australia and New Zealand. As former British colonies, they both

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2 A rival concept is North/South – a division that is at least as simplistic and problematic.
adopted a basic parliamentary model but with numerous adaptations which reflected their own local political conditions and which made the colonies quite distinct. Thus, although Australia and New Zealand were largely settler societies, this did not mean that the institutions adopted at independence were simply carbon copies of those in the ‘home country’.

The new states of the Pacific islands, however, were obviously quite different. Although some contained substantial immigrant populations, they were not settler societies as such. Moreover, indigenous political leaders had sometimes played a much more active role in colonial government and administration. This was clearly the case in Fiji where chiefly figures were prominent in the Fijian Administration (originally called the Native Administration), and were appointed to the Legislative Council from 1904, while in Tonga, which was a British protectorate rather than a colony, most governmental functions remained in the hands of the Tongan monarch and the aristocracy. However, the idea that ordinary (‘commoner’) people without traditional chiefly status should be able to vote or otherwise participate actively in politics – especially in the new realm of ‘national’ politics – was slow to develop.

In Fiji, indigenous commoners – along with women from all ethnic groups – were not enfranchised until 1960, just 10 years before independence (although this was a decade ahead of Switzerland as far as women were concerned). This contrasted with the voting rights given to all adult Indian males from 1916. Today, all adult citizens in Fiji have ostensibly equal voting rights but they are not equally represented. Rather, indigenous Fijians are privileged under an electoral system which retains important elements of communalism. The Council of Chiefs (Bose Levu Vakaturaga), which comprises an upper chamber of Parliament, also entrenches aspects of chiefly privilege. In Tonga, constitutional reforms in the nineteenth century saw the arbitrary power of local chiefs curbed through the introduction of basic rule of law principles. But while petty chiefs lost much of their power, the monarch and a select aristocracy acquired a highly privileged constitutional position. All adult Tongans now have the franchise, but their representatives are a minority in Parliament and are absent from the Cabinet. In Samoa (formerly Western Samoa), the establishment of a Legislative Assembly in 1948 provided enhanced opportunities for political participation at a national level, but matai-only suffrage was instituted at the start and remained in place at independence in 1962. It was not until 1990 that universal adult suffrage was finally introduced. Candidacy, however, remains a matai privilege.

European colonialism had a profound impact on economy, society and politics in the Pacific islands, and this includes Tonga where the present monarchy and aristocracy clearly owes a great deal to the British model – at least as it existed in the mid-nineteenth century. Decolonization also saw the entrenchment of the European sovereign state system together with constitutional government. To say that the former colonial powers ‘bequeathed’ democratic systems, however, is stretching historical truth somewhat – colonial governments were obviously not democratic. But, by the time of independence, elective representation had been practiced on a significant scale in many parts of the Pacific. The legitimacy of systems of democratic elective representation in the post-independence era, however, was always going to have to compete with the superior legitimacy claimed for entrenched systems of traditional political privilege. And the legitimacy of the latter depended at least in part
on the political role played by the culture concept. This is not at all the same thing as ‘political culture’ but is rather concerned with the politics of culture.

**Democracy and the Politics of Culture in the Contemporary Pacific**

Arguments supporting the privileging of some sectors of the population when it comes to both representation as well as holding political office have been common in the three countries mentioned above. Many of the problems relate to the tension between ‘traditional’ leadership and democratic practices. Fiji, Tonga and Samoa are the three Pacific states best known for the tension between traditional chiefly leadership and democratic processes, although similar tensions do exist in other places. But for the purposes of this paper I will limit the discussion to these three.

Before proceeding it is important to note that I use the terms ‘tradition’/‘traditional’ here with caution. One reason is that if a certain practice or institution is described as ‘traditional’ in the Pacific it usually implies that it has its origins in the pre-colonial or at least the pre-European past, and can therefore be seen as authentically indigenous as opposed to an introduced and therefore less legitimate practice. However, many practices and institutions that pass as traditional in this way have their origins in the colonial period. Fiji’s *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* (Great Council of Chiefs) instituted by Fiji’s first substantive Governor is one; the constitutional structure underpinning the Tongan political system is another; and in Samoa the Land and Titles Court and all the practices associated with it are clearly based on introduced structures. Even the matai system itself is said to have developed since the adoption of Christianity (Schoeffel and Turner, 2003: 9). And yet all are seen as embodying authentic Pacific traditions as opposed to practices influenced by European (and sometimes other) cultural and political influences. It is especially interesting that Christianity is also now regarded as very much part of the Pacific Way but is obviously just as alien in its origins as democracy is assumed to be. But whereas democratic institutions and practices tended to undermine existing structures political privilege, the institutions mentioned above, as well as most of the Christian churches actually supported it. And this is why they have not been targeted for criticism in the same way let alone denounced as foreign imports.

‘Tradition’ is a close relative of the culture concept and the two are often used synonymously or interchangeably. There is a fairly substantial critical literature on the politics of culture and/or tradition in the Pacific and much of the ground is therefore well worn, at least in academic circles. However, the debate is ongoing, and it remains particularly important in issues concerning elections and the legitimacy of both candidates and office holders. Its importance for the purposes of the present discussion lies partly in the implicit opposition of consensus as an ideal that underscores the Pacific Way of doing politics with the notion that the *dissensus* that accompanies elections and voting is not simply undesirable but is somehow *unPacific*. This tends to undermine not just the role of opposition parties in the political process, but the whole idea of political opposition per se.

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3 The examples I have used here relate to the three Pacific states best known for the tension between traditional chiefly leadership and democratic practices. Similar tensions exist in other places in the Pacific, but for the purposes of this paper I will limit empirical examples to these three.
A report on parliamentary democracy in the Pacific Islands in 1999, following a meeting of Pacific island politicians, said that:

The animated discussion in the session on the role of the opposition in parliamentary democracies revealed that many Pacific cultures did not comprehend the nature of that aspect of parliaments. The participants recognised that a robust opposition was vital to the success of a healthy democracy, but the ordinary people had great difficulty in understanding this. A large part of the difficulty here lay in the fact that in many Pacific cultures, business is conducted in a consensual manner, and often, especially in Polynesia, leadership was the prerogative of chiefs. Even legitimate criticism of the policies of political leaders of chiefly background was seen as disrespectful not only to the person concerned but also to the region, group, tribe or clan that he or she represented (Centre for Democratic Institutions, 1999).

The report does not provide details on exactly who said what, but again, the alleged problems with the toleration of political opposition seem to emerge on virtually every occasion that democracy is discussed. Apart from the familiar emphasis on consensus politics, a particular point to note from the above is that while the participants at the conference appeared to agree that opposition was important, they attributed the problems with it to a lack of understanding on the part of ‘ordinary people’, thus shifting the blame from leaders to followers. In a different report, emanating from the same institutional source, however, it was pointed out that since independence: ‘A whole new generation of Islanders has grown up knowing only the democratic process as the form of government’ and, in a later passage that: ‘Elections in the Pacific are robustly contested affairs …’ (Rich, 2002: 4). Both observations suggest that ‘ordinary people’ in the contemporary period are not entirely without the experience or resources to cope with competitive politics.

In another relatively recent report on democracy in the Pacific, it is stated that:

Given the very different cultural and historical settings in which the Westminster system evolved, it is not surprising that difficulties have been experienced in transplanting it to Pacific environments. Problems have arisen with the fundamental Westminster division between government and opposition … This confrontational approach clashes with the Pacific ideal (seldom achieved in practice at the national level) of consensus decision making (Henderson 2002: 6)

But the author goes on to state that:

Deviations from the Westminster system to promote unity may create a whole new series of problems. … The greater the emphasis on consensus, the less vigilance of government that opposition MPs ideally should maintain. The Westminster system gives the parliamentary opposition the job of keeping the government honest. … Governments …. require an effective Opposition to make accountability work (Henderson, 2002: 6).

Although this report is reasonably critical of some of the attitudes and practices resulting from the emphasis on consensus politics, which is undermining the proper functions of opposition in a democracy, it seems that the general stereotype of Pacific politics as consensual remains unchallenged.

A recent study of ‘consent versus dissent’ in Samoa, however, throws some interesting light on the subject. Although consensus is often highly valued (with some exceptions), and discourages the expression of dissent at very localized levels in
Samoa (i.e. in family and village spheres), its operation at the national level is almost non-existent. Here, it as an ideal that rarely finds expression in practical terms while dissent, although scarcely acknowledged ‘permeates public life’ (Huffer and So'o, 2003: 300). Another interesting point, which touches on the issue of what is traditional (in the pre-European contact sense), and what has emerged as the product of inter-cultural contact, is the suggestion that the Samoan ideal of consensus may be traced to a period when many Samoans felt the need to unite in opposition to European power and influence. Tuimaleali’ifano has argued that in the period before European contact, there was ‘a tradition of dissent among major political lineages’, Furthermore, there appears to have been a balance of power ‘that acknowledged the legitimacy of the itu malo (winning or governing side) over the itu vaivai (losing side), until the latter could wrestle power and in turn become the itu malo itself (Tuimaleali’ifano quoted in Huffer and So’o, 2003: 294). If this is the case, then the parallel with ideas about government and opposition and the peaceful alternation of government in a democratic system is quite striking. On the other hand, pre-contact Samoan society had its share of warfare. Indeed, there is evidence pointing to endemic sporadic warfare in this period. And the main reason for the establishment of the Land and Titles Commission in the early twentieth century was ‘for the peaceful resolution of disputes that would otherwise have escalated into violence’ (Meleisea, 1987: 22). Among other things, this illustrates precisely how rule of law procedures represent the prosecution of war by other means.

Among Tongans, skirmishes and outright warfare were scarcely unknown in the pre-contact period either, but the arrival of Europeans, bringing with them both Christianity and weapons that were vastly more lethal than anything that had been available in the islands before, saw the proliferation of organized violence. This was for reasons that had much to do with political centralization as well as Christian conversion to one or other of the rival sects. Subsequent developments saw the triumph of Christianized chiefs under the leadership of Taufa‘ahau who went on to establish a monarchy with a landed aristocracy attached to it under a formal constitution that owed a great deal to the Hawaiian constitution as well as to the British (see Lawson, 1996: 88-90). These institutions did not actually accord with the pre-existing system, but rather with political expedience demanded by the circumstances of the mid-nineteenth century. The system in place today is nonetheless regarded as ‘traditional’ and therefore legitimate. But it is far from democratic, as indicated above.

Lack of democratic accountability in Tonga, and the perception of corruption in government because of it, led some years ago to the formation of a pro-democracy movement, now formally styled as the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement. Although not a political party, it endorses candidates at election time and the majority of the MPs elected by Tongan commoners have declared themselves aligned to its objectives. It has recently formulated concrete plans for the democratization of the legislature. The principal proposal is for the moving of the nine noble members of parliament to an upper house, while a new lower House of Commoners would have 21 fully elected members. King Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV, however, is reported as opposed to the move ‘which he claims his people are not ready for’ (http://www.pacificislands.cc/pm42002/pmdefault.php?urlarticleid=0033 accessed 12/06/2004). The government in Tonga has also been in a long-running battle with critical media in the country and there have been numerous court cases,
many consisting of defamation suits bought by the government against long-time pro-democracy leader, Akilisi Pohiva, and others involved in the movement. In 2003 an independent newspaper, *Taimi o Tonga (Times of Tonga)*, was banned by the government. This was subsequently overturned by the courts which in turn prompted the government to introduce a constitutional amendment to simply get rid of troublesome newspapers altogether. A demonstration of 5,000 people in the capital – which is huge in Tongan terms – failed to make any impact on the authorities.

The main impetus for reform, and the criticisms of the present system, come mainly from within Tonga itself. External criticism from countries like Australia and New Zealand, however, rankle deeply with the establishment. The king’s youngest son and Prime Minister, Prince Ulukalala Lavaka Ata, commenting on *Taimi o Tonga* issue, as well as external criticism of the Tongan government’s stance, delivered another familiar condemnation of outsiders who do not ‘understand’ Tongan politics and society. He suggested that Westerners wanted to impose their (democratic) values on Tonga: ‘Thank you, we have our own’. Furthermore, he said (to the journalist); ‘You don’t see things as a Tongan … You see things as a Westerner. So it’s very hard for you to understand.’ (Wagner, 2003: 3). The exclusion of commoners from a share of effective political power, as well as the gagging of critical voices, is generally justified by reference to Tonga’s ‘own’ cultural values. But if this is so, then why do the majority of Tongans seem not to share them? In addition, the dismissal of external critics as cultural imperialists who do not ‘understand’ (i.e. agree with) Tongan political culture as interpreted by the elite, is entirely self-serving. And if anything is patronizing towards Tongan people, it is surely the King’s assertion that they are ‘not ready’ (i.e. not sufficiently mature), for democracy. It is evident that there is a fundamental hostility to democracy among Tonga’s political leaders. And this, combined with the fact that the people’s representatives play no part in government, means that the type of electoral system under which they are chosen is the least of their concerns for the time being. The more pressing issue is one of reform of the constitutional system as a whole so as to shift the monopoly of power from the clutches of a tiny political elite.

The authoritarian attitude adopted by the Tongan elite, however, does seem to be in accordance with long-standing custom and to that extent can be seen a part of Tonga’s ‘cultural tradition’. As I have discussed elsewhere, the old political order in Tonga was characterized by unquestioning obedience (fakaapaapa) to the authority of chiefs on the part of commoners. And whereas the village *fono* in Samoa was indeed a place where extensive discussion took place until a consensus was reached, in Tonga it was never more than a meeting at which instructions were issued by chiefs to those below them (see Lawson, 1996: 85). Whatever consensus existed, therefore, was not one reached after an inclusive process of deliberation. Traditional authoritarianism has certainly fed into contemporary political culture, but it is increasingly at odds with what ordinary people seem to want in the way of political representation and accountability. Tonga’s political culture therefore contains within it some very strong tensions and contradictions, thus illustrating a more general point about culture (political or otherwise), and that is its inherent dynamism.

Turning now to Fiji, a speech delivered by the Fijian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Kaliopate Tavola, at the opening of the Commonwealth Roundtable Meeting for Pacific Heads of Government on the importance of
‘Democracy and Good Governance in the Pacific’, enumerated a list of problems faced in the implementation of democracy in the Pacific (clearly with Fiji uppermost in mind), and finished with an emphasis on the degree to which conformity and consensus is valued as a social and political good in the Pacific. The following is composed of short extracts from the speech highlighting what have come to be the most familiar arguments against the suitability of democracy in Pacific contexts.

The British model of democracy evolved over time to what it is today. It had the luxury of time and an old prior institutional order that did not hamper such evolution. … In the Pacific, democracy has not had time to evolve sufficiently … More importantly, the passage of democracy in the Pacific is occurring, unlike in the British model, within a cultural, social and historical framework inclusive of its value system, which does not offer a natural setting for such a concept. … The hierarchical traditional structure, for example, that prevails in parts of the Pacific does not readily succumb or reconcile itself to the democratic principles of equality and liberty. … In historical terms, therefore, the relative passage of democracy through the Pacific, as compared to the long evolutionary period in Britain and the revolutionary pathway in the US, can only be regarded as rudimentary. … Finally, how can the ‘Westminster’ parliamentary democratic model, premised on an adversarial configuration, promote unity in a society that is deeply divided and which is grappling with national reconciliation after the schisms if its recent past? How can this be so, especially in a traditional society that places great value on conformity and consensus? (Tavola, 2002).

A number of the views expressed here are based on false premises – especially the assumption that democracy evolved in Britain within a cultural, social and historical framework which provided a ‘natural’ setting for its emergence. British society been as hierarchical as many of those in the Pacific – and a great deal more so than some. Moreover, absolutist theories of the state are as European as are theories of representative democracy – although neither are exclusive to Europe. Tavola’s final point highlights the ever-present theme of Pacific consensual politics in contrast with the adversarial character of the Westminster system. More generally, the main points of Tavola’s speech would be monotonously familiar to anyone who has studied the speeches of Fiji’s conservative political leaders (many of them Oxford-educated) over the years, beginning with the speeches of the Bauan chief, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna (who apparently drew much of his information from the conservative and anti-democratic English jurist and historian, Sir Henry Maine), followed up by those of his successor the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, paramount chief of Lau, and various other traditionalist leaders. High chiefly status is no longer an essential qualification for political office in Fiji but the distaste for democracy that has characterized conservative political speeches for decades remains evident in those such as Tavola’s. In the final analysis, however, it can scarcely be said that it is democracy that has wrought the damage in Fiji, but rather the resort to force that is its very antithesis.

Conclusion
The foregoing discussion has raised a number of issues to do with the relationship between democracy, political culture, and the politics of culture. These issues are clearly important for the analysis of electoral systems whose principles of democratic competition, as we have seen, are often said to conflict with ‘traditional political culture’ in the Pacific islands. A significant part of the problem turns on the legitimacy of political opposition and the role it plays in promoting dissent and criticism. In the cases mentioned above a particular version of political culture has been promoted by traditional elites – a version which emphasizes values such as conformity and consensus and which claims that these values are not only part of a
longstanding tradition in the countries concerned, but that they preclude the kind of
give-and-take politics associated with competitive and adversarial electioneering. And although most Pacific leaders pay endless lip-service to the need for democracy and good governance, as evidenced by so many speeches and communiqués, the mantra of consensus politics as the authentic expression of Pacific Way politics nonetheless continues to negate the basic principles that underpin them.

It has been argued that one of the fundamental attractions of democracy is that it allows the diffusion of power within a relatively ordered social environment. It follows that if certain actors (such as a traditional elite) insist that only they have the ability to define what is or is not open for collective decision-making – for example, the protection of certain cultural traits – democracy is unable to function effectively to diffuse power and therefore becomes ‘a meaningless reflection of its original purpose’ (Fierlbeck, 1988: 2). It is for this reason that democracy, while flexible enough to accommodate various different styles of institutionalization according to context, cannot mean all things to all people. To call a form of government ‘democratic’ means that it is attuned to the primary normative principal that sovereign political power should be vested ultimately in ordinary people (see Lawson, 1998). Competitive, adversarial electoral systems are, for all the faults we might find with them, a principal means of giving practical expression to this normative principal. If the particular ‘political culture’ of a country is said to be incompatible with this, but its leaders – not to mention ordinary people – claim that democratic development is important, then it is perhaps time for them to think about how the political culture can be changed.

References


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4 These arguments tend to ignore, in any case, the fact that an over-arching consensus on the desirability of tolerating dissent characterizes most well functioning, stable democracies. Given this, one could argue that the consensus on dissent is actually a prerequisite for political stability.


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