

Trouble in paradise

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue



A church in Fiji. [Attribution](#) [Some rights reserved](#) by [ErinKhoo](#)

As Christianity has spread around the globe, interfaith contacts have become vastly more complex. Not only do Christians now interact much more extensively with Buddhists, Hindus and members of other Asian faiths, but they no longer do so solely as humble minorities. Euro-Americans might find the resulting religious politics quite unsettling.

Consider for instance the nation of Fiji, a country in the Pacific known to Westerners mainly as an exotic tourist destination or a splendid layover en route to New Zealand or Australia. In recent years, though, the country has acquired a troubling reputation for religious and ethnic confrontations.

From 1874 to 1970, Fiji was part of the British Empire, creating a connection that endures today: Fijians have long made up a respectable share of the fighting strength of the British army in Afghanistan and elsewhere. British rule also helped make Christianity a potent force across the Pacific region. Today, Christians make up around 60 percent of Fiji's 880,000 people, with the Methodist Church the largest denomination. Fijian Christianity has a potent streak of charismatic enthusiasm and a taste for miracle healers such as Benny Hinn and Reinhard Bonnke. In 2003, one revival crusade reportedly drew over 100,000 believers.

So fervent has been the enthusiasm that we may well ask: Why is Fiji not wholly Christian? For the answer to that question, we must again look at British imperial

policy, which transported South Asian migrants to distant corners of the globe. Today, indigenous Fijians make up just 57 percent of the island's population, while South Asians represent close to 40 percent. The two groups have long competed for power. The numerically smaller South Asians are likely to be wealthier and more commercially oriented, while natives dominate the military and police. And although the ethnic and religious lines are not identical, indigenous Fijians are generally Christian, while the island's Asians are predominantly Hindu. The combination of ethnic, economic and confessional tensions makes Fiji ripe for conflict.

Since independence, Fiji politics has endured coups and mutinies. Through the 1990s, Asians made significant political progress, culminating in a 2000 election that elected an Indo-Fijian prime minister. This was too much for the country's native Christian elites: the army staged a coup d'état. Although democracy was restored, another coup followed in 2006, followed by a 2009 crisis in which the constitution was abrogated.

Indigenous Fijian nationalism is intimately intertwined with religious identity. After the 2000 coup, some military leaders demanded a theocratic Christian state. Also in these years, the newer Pentecostal and charismatic groups combined to form an Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji, which explicitly aims to convert non-Christians, assert indigenous solidarity and ultimately create a Christian polity. Successive waves of political turmoil have both asserted Fijian nationalism and bolstered Pentecostal strength.

Charismatic Christians progressively expanded their power in the secular realm, insofar as we can ever use the word *secular* in this context. In 2008–9, the leadership of the nation's police force formed a close alliance with the revivalist group Souls for Jesus (or New Methodists). With official approval, the group organized rallies intended to promote moral reformation and communal solidarity—all, of course, in a strictly evangelical Christian context. As attendance at these events was in practice compulsory for all officers, they created a chilly climate for Muslim and Hindu police, who felt powerful pressures to convert. Although the rallies have ceased, Souls for Jesus still holds frequent prayer services on police premises and during regular work time.

The island's religious tensions have spilled over into intercommunal violence and attacks on Hindu temples. As a result, the Asian share of the population has declined steeply from its 1980s peak.

Muslims and Hindus criticize the aggressively Christian regime, but so do sections of the Methodist Church, which is concerned about the deteriorating human rights environment and also about the aggressive new Pentecostalism. Over the past two years, the government has turned its attentions to Methodist pastors hostile to the regime, arresting key leaders who had allegedly been spying on the military in the interests of the former regime. Most grievously, the government postponed until 2014 the church's annual conference. It gives some idea of just how thoroughly interlinked religion and politics are in Fiji that the timing of the Methodist conference should be one of the dominant issues in the nation's affairs.

Outsiders have little reason to notice the affairs of such a tiny country, unconnected to the world's great power blocs. For anyone interested in the political contours of emerging global Christianity, however, Fiji demands attention—and concern.