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# Fiji's Ratu Mara: Profile of a Regional Statesman



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# **Fiji's Ratu Mara: Profile of a Regional Statesman**

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**Fiji's Ratu Mara:  
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**Summary**

*Information available  
as of 15 November 1984  
was used in this report.*

Fijian Prime Minister Ratu Mara's working visit to Washington on 27-28 November—a longtime ambition—should pay dividends in maintaining his pro-Western orientation. Under his guidance since independence 14 years ago, Fiji has become regional leader of the small South Pacific island nations and a bulwark against Soviet penetration into the area. At home, Mara has kept in check tensions between indigenous Fijians and descendants of immigrant Indians, but threats to communal peace could grow when Mara—now 64—eventually retires from the political scene.



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**Fiji's South Pacific Setting**



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**Fiji's Ratu Mara:  
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**A Chiefly Leader**

Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's meeting with President Reagan on 27 November will overcome his long disappointment at not being received by a US president. He has been well received in other world capitals. Among Fijians his visit will be taken as recognition of his regional preeminence. Mara, according to observers, sees himself as the senior statesman of the small South Pacific island nations, and that position is generally conceded by his Pacific neighbors. [redacted]

Mara is also preeminent within Fiji. His rank as paramount chief of the Lau Island group in the Fijis is in itself important in a country that sets great store on chiefly titles. His position is buttressed by his wife's even higher ranking in the chiefly hierarchy, a situation which he accepts with good humor. [redacted]

Mara's style of government is, to a degree, a product of his aristocratic beginnings (see appendix). A man of great dignity, he expects deference from others and speaks his mind both at home and abroad. He pursues an independent course, having, for example, converted to Catholicism in a society where Methodism has become the traditional Fijian faith. He is reported to delegate authority with some skill and has been interested in cultivating prospective successors with a view to retirement. US officials report that he makes good appointments in government and is a knowledgeable, discerning, and canny politician who takes the larger view of Pacific affairs. He is, in sum, by no means a man to be measured by the size of his turf. [redacted]

**Mara's Fiji**

Mara's stewardship is credited with making Fiji one of the more successful young nations of the South Pacific. Nudged into independence by the British in 1970, it is now recognized among the small South Pacific island nations as regional leader. Fiji has the

<sup>1</sup> "Ratu" is the Prime Minister's chiefly title. He is addressed as "Ratu Mara," or, more familiarly, "Ratu Sir Kamisese." [redacted]



Prime Minister Mara [redacted] Keystone Press ©

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highest per capita GDP of the independent nations of the region (except for phosphate-rich Nauru), the largest pool of trained local personnel, and thus the least dependence on expatriate expertise. [redacted]

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Fiji's prominence in the South Pacific is also based on its central location and the high esteem for Prime Minister Mara in the area. The almost familial relationship among the leaders of the South Pacific states—plus the generally low-key behavior that is traditional in the region—causes Fiji to take a similarly diplomatic approach to its neighbors. Only giant and potentially mineral-rich Papua New Guinea could eventually compete with Fiji as regional leader, but its present Prime Minister, Somare, defers to Mara in something akin to a nephew-uncle relationship. [redacted]

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Although Fiji's economic accomplishments have been impressive, its dependence on sugar for 75 percent of foreign exchange earnings makes Fiji's economy exceptionally vulnerable to fluctuations of the world sugar market. There was a massive expansion of production in the mid-1970s in anticipation of a growing US market, but Fiji's annual quota has not met its expectations. No other country in the region is so dependent on sugar, which also accounts for one-fourth of employment. Efforts to diversify the economy by promoting tourism, fishing, and forestry have had only moderate success. [redacted]

**Race Relations a Problem**

A growing political polarization of his country is Mara's main disappointment. He has long encouraged Indian membership in his predominantly ethnic-Fijian Alliance Party, with at best the reluctant cooperation of the Fijian membership. Nonetheless, Indian membership has dwindled in recent years as they have drifted to the almost exclusively Indian opposition, the National Federation Party. Mara has broached the idea of a coalition biracial government of the two major parties, but neither his Fijian political colleagues nor the Indian opposition have taken to the idea. [redacted]

Constitutional safeguards enacted during the British colonial period to protect the Fijians from being overwhelmed eventually by the more aggressive Indians contribute to Indian resentment and have created an as yet unbridgeable distance between the races. Under the constitution, Fijians retain ownership of 90 percent of the land. Indians, who make up the majority of sugar smallholders, must rent on terms they consider onerous. The electoral system is also weighted in favor of indigenous Fijians. [redacted]

Despite this, Indians dominate business and the professions. Indians also prevail in institutions of higher learning in spite of government-decreed advantages for the Fijians, such as scholarships and lower entrance requirements. Indians, for example, make up the majority of graduates of the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and almost the entire faculty and student body of its medical school. [redacted]

The Indians seem resigned to second-class political status as long as they can prosper economically. When the Indian political party won a majority of seats in

the lower house of Parliament in 1977, largely because of the Alliance's inattention to campaigning, it declined to form a government—partly because of an inability to resolve internal differences, but also from uneasiness over possible violent Fijian reaction to an Indian-led government. There has been no communal violence over the past decade, and local observers see greater social mingling—although not intermarriage—between the younger generation of Fijians and Indians. [redacted]

**Foreign Policy: In the Western Camp**

The British were more attentive to Fiji than to their other South Pacific colonies and did more to prepare the local leadership for independence. As a result, Fijians were instilled with Western values and perceptions. Fiji does not engage in Third World rhetoric, although it may criticize the West for not doing more to help underdeveloped countries. [redacted]

For a nation of only 700,000 people, Fiji plays an active role on the world scene, and the populace seems to take satisfaction from Fiji's participation in international groupings and peacekeeping forces. For his part, Mara has been an effective spokesman for the South Pacific at the United Nations and in other international forums. [redacted]

Mara has a high regard for the United States. He has without exception supported US initiatives on Afghanistan and Poland. In addition, Fiji's UN Ambassador delivered a strong condemnation of the Soviet downing of the South Korean airliner, and Fiji sided with the United States on all subsequent votes on the issue. At a Commonwealth conference at the time of the US action in Grenada, Mara supported the United States in corridor conversations and later expressed Fiji's readiness to participate in a possible Commonwealth peacekeeping force. [redacted]

One of Fiji's three military battalions has served with the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon since 1978. Fiji has appreciated US support in prodding the United Nations when that organization has fallen in

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arrears in its financial compensation for Fiji's participation. Fiji offered another battalion when the Sinai multinational force was being assembled and was the first nation to announce that it would participate without conditions. [redacted]

Mara also has been instrumental in preserving the strong anti-Soviet stance of the small South Pacific island nations. Fiji closed its ports to Soviet naval and cruise ships after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the ban continues. Fiji has repeatedly turned aside Soviet overtures to open an embassy in Fiji, and its example has helped hold the line against any Soviet diplomatic mission in the South Pacific region. For his part, Mara manages to be unavailable when the Soviet Ambassador in Australia—accredited to Fiji—makes his annual visit. [redacted]

Two years ago Mara asserted publicly that the opposition party was being financed by the Soviets through the Indian Embassy, with a view to ousting him. A commission appointed to inquire into this allegation found no evidence that this was the case, but this has not served to change Mara's mind. Mara is quoted as saying, "Russia wants me out because it has been my influence that has successfully blocked Russian incursions into the Pacific . . . with me gone, they think they can gain a permanent foothold in the South Pacific." [redacted]

#### Regional Policies

In 1982, overreacting in a parliamentary election year to what he perceived to be the Fijian populace's antinuclear mood, Mara announced implementation of a previously unenforced ban on port calls by nuclear ships. The ban could have hindered movements of the US Pacific Fleet, now over 40-percent nuclear powered. Mara later became convinced of the safety of nuclear propulsion as a result of briefings at CINCPAC in Honolulu, and in mid-1983 prevailed upon the Fijian Cabinet to lift the ban. Since then, Fiji has not questioned whether visiting US naval vessels are nuclear armed. Mara's attitude is that such a query would be inappropriate in view of Fiji's dependence on US protection. [redacted]

In addition, Mara has questioned the antinuclear policies of the new Labor government in New Zealand, fearing a weakening of the ANZUS alliance and the protective shield he sees extending to the South

Pacific. Mara also has doubts over the regional nuclear-free zone now being debated among the South Pacific nations and will probably exert his influence to see that any treaty is couched in terms that will not inhibit US military activity in the area. [redacted]

Despite his strong pro-US orientation, Mara does not hesitate to show displeasure over actions he considers demeaning to him or his nation. Mara has long fretted over what he sees as US inattention to the South Pacific, yet he is quick to sound off against any US attitudes he takes as overbearing, such as the US refusal to recognize the island nations' jurisdiction over fishing for highly migratory tuna in their maritime zones. [redacted]

After Fiji attained independence, Mara took umbrage at US questioning of Fiji's application for UN membership, even though the US intention was to register concern over the proliferation of ministates in the world assembly and not to challenge Fiji's qualifications. Mara has on occasion expressed disappointment over Fiji's sugar quota in the US market because of Fiji's exceptional dependence on sugar exports, but he understands the limitations on US flexibility to increase Fiji's share. On the other hand, Mara would appreciate any progress that could be made during his Washington visit on developing a bilateral aid program that he could present to his countrymen as evidence of his success in getting greater US attention to Fiji. [redacted]

#### After Mara's Visit

Mara will probably remain the dominant figure on the Fijian scene for the foreseeable future. Many of his countrymen—who have known only his leadership—regard him as indispensable, a view Mara professes not to agree with. [redacted]

On occasion Mara—in moments of weariness over his political burdens—expresses a desire to step aside. Few local observers are convinced that the proud and attention-loving Prime Minister would choose to depart the political scene, but the fact that he is into his sixties is a reminder to his countrymen of his mortality and the need for a qualified successor. Comments

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by some observers at the time of Fiji's independence that the country might become a Pacific Cyprus now seem overdrawn, yet race divisions remain deep, and Mara is the leader most committed to maintaining communal peace. No one matches his respect among both races. [redacted]

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A possible, though as yet undesignated, successor is Ratu David Toganivalu, appointed by Mara as Deputy Prime Minister in January 1984 after the post had been vacant for a year. Toganivalu is married to the Prime Minister's half sister, but his relationship with Mara reportedly is strained at times. He is more extroverted than the Prime Minister, and he can be more accessible, without the aloofness that Mara feels is proper to his high rank. Toganivalu also moves with ease in both Fijian and Indian political and social circles. [redacted]

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**Appendix**

**Ratu Mara:  
Background and Personality**

Mara showed leadership potential at an early age and was groomed by an uncle who held a high position in the British colonial administration of Fiji. The uncle persuaded Mara to abandon medical studies in New Zealand and to switch to a program that would better prepare him for public life. Mara went to the United Kingdom, where he earned a degree in modern history at Oxford and went on to obtain a diploma in economics and social administration at the London School of Economics. [redacted]

Mara joined the British colonial service in Fiji in 1950 and rose to membership in the legislative council and later in the executive council. During this period he founded the Alliance Party, which he still leads. Mara headed the Fijian delegation to independence discussions in London in the mid-1960s. He was Chief Minister in the final years of the colonial period and became Prime Minister when Fiji attained independence in 1970. He has remained in that position since. [redacted]

He is married to Adi Lady Lalabalavu Tuisawau, a woman of considerable distinction in her own right. He and his wife have eight children, and he is reported to live a comparatively simple life. The Maras have a modest house and only a single body-guard; Fiji since independence has been free of political violence and assassination. One of Mara's daughters is married to a young Ratu, who is commander of the Fijian Army and considered by some local observers a potential successor to Mara. [redacted]

The 64-year-old Mara's chiefly status and commanding height (6 feet 5 inches) contribute to his expectations of deference befitting his rank. Mara's personality is complex, molded by the sometimes contradictory influences of long exposure to the West and his chiefly heritage and strong commitment to maintaining the traditional Fijian system and values. He is witty and urbane but also can be touchy and moody, showing quick sensitivity to real or imagined slights. [redacted]

Mara occasionally shows difficulty in combining his chiefly position with leadership of a parliamentary democracy. He takes offense at questioning in Parliament, even though the Indian opposition, cautious not to cause racial strife in which Indians would be the sure losers, is generally guarded in criticizing him. Mara has been described by one foreign detractor as practicing "government by tantrum"; a US consul, in 1971, compared him to Charles de Gaulle. [redacted]

Mara has been reported as sensitive to anything that smacks of colonialism. A journalist has written of having heard him relate on more than one occasion a racial incident with the Australian customs that continues to rankle. In addition, it has been reported that he had some unhappy experiences in the United Kingdom as a student when he ran into racial prejudice. [redacted]

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