The Fiji Government – sponsored Rotuma Bills of 2015

would remove the Self-governing Authority of the Chiefs and the Council of Rotuma which would endanger the survival of the Rotuman Culture, Tradition, and Language of the indigenous people.

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Thesis Statement

The Fiji Government’s Rotuma Bills of 2015 should not be enacted into laws because they would remove the Self-governing Authority of the Chiefs and the Council of Rotuma, which would endanger the survival of the Rotuman Culture, Tradition, and Language of the indigenous people.

THE FIJI GOVERNMENT – SPONSORED ROTUMA BILLS OF 2015 to remove the Self-governing Authority of the Chiefs and the Council of Rotuma would endanger the survival of the Rotuman Culture, Traditions, and Language of the indigenous people.

1. Introduction:

The Rotuma Bills have kindled discussions and roused deep ethnic feelings amongst the global Rotuman community. Their counter move was to table the Rotuman Petition of 2015 in the Parliament of Fiji to question the Fiji government’s betrayal of Rotuma’s history, the Fiji – Rotuma administrative arrangements, and the usurpation of Rotuman indigenous rights. The Bills violate International Constitutional Law: for example, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), 2007, and the International Labor Organization’s Tribal Peoples’ Convention (ITPC) of 1989. The legal, and political ‘administrative arrangements or the Fiji – Rotuma relationship recognize the Rotuman people’s uniqueness as Polynesians; and having a matrilineal society with a different tradition, culture, and language to Fijians who are Melanesians; and having a patrilineal society with a different tradition, culture, and language. It is this ‘uniqueness’ that has been emphasized multiple legal, and policy echelons. [Anderson, K. J., 2007]. There is an immense sense of ownership and pride in being Rotuman, and so they ensure that they maintain a Rotuman identity in diaspora. (Mua, 2008; Howard., 1961). Despite the Fiji – Rotuma relationship, and the peoples’ unique identity, these were considered irrelevant or simply ignored in 1970 when Fiji gained its independence from the British Empire.

1. The Fiji situation is alarming because of the *cancel – culture* or Fiji’s *ethnically*

*blind* Constitution of 2013 which could permit the unconstitutional annihilation of

Rotuma Island without due parliamentary process, and the loss of Rotuman

culture, tradition, and language. [Kant, R. 2017; Kant, R., & Rakuita, E. 2014.]

1. The Bills are also in breach of the Preambles of the Fiji Constitutions of 1970, 1990, 1997 and 2013 – they all “*recognise Rotumans simultaneously as indigenous, but different from, Fijians.”* (Howard, A.& Rensel, J., 2017; Nawaikula, 2013; Anderson, K. J., 2007).
2. The Bills will not amend but repeal current laws, and cancel Rotuma’s history since 1881. The dire consequences of the Rotuma Bills could result in the loss of Rotuma Island to Fiji, the Rotuman culture, tradition, and consequently, their language. (Kant, R., 2017; Varea et al., 2018)
3. In the late 1970s, 1988 and 2000, there were attempts by Rotumans for Rotuma to be independent from Fiji but the government of Fiji swiftly squashed these.
4. Regrettably, the Rotuman peoples’ desires to be the masters of their destiny,

to defend Rotuma Island’s independence - their ancestral homeland, and safeguard Rotuman Culture, Tradition, and Language were considered seditious by the government of Fiji.

2. ROTUMA – The Ancestral Homeland

The island of Rotuma is situated between 12° - 15° south latitude and between 175° - 180° east longitude from the meridian of Greenwich. It is approximately 482 km North, North West of Suva. Fiji’s Capital which makes Rotuma the most isolated island in the Republic of Fiji.

The population of Rotumans worldwide is: Rotuma Island – 1, 500; Fiji - 10,000 (Fiji Census, 2017), and outside Fiji – estimated to be 5, 000. The island of Rotuma is symbolic of the culture that is valued by the global Rotuman diaspora. (Mua, M.; 2008; Howard, A., 1961) Many of its sons and daughters will not return permanently and the majority of Rotuman children born overseas may never visit its shores but they will still know it as a collective memory of their origins and part of their present being. For them *blood – ties* are everything and it doesn’t matter where they were born.

Maintaining *Rotuman-ness* is very important and is done in many forms; Rotuma Day 13th May annual celebration, attendance at *Rotuman language* church services and social gatherings, community reminiscences of the island, storytelling, the reiteration of myths, and legends all depend on memory and its transmission and culminated with a visit to the Ancestral Homeland. (Howard. A., 1961) The Rotuma Islands became part of Fiji in 1880. Interestingly, Rotumans continued to celebrate the islands Deed of Cession on 13 May, 1881 to the British Empire instead of celebrating Fiji Independence Day of 1970.

The name, ROTU – MA means WORSHIP (GOD) or BELIEF in GOD, and is testimony to Rotumans faith in the Christian God.

1. The Fijian government claims that the Rotuma Bills of 2015 would expedite economic development *for the good of* the minority Rotuman people’s Culture.

The Fiji – Rotuma administrative relationship dates back to 1880 when the British annexed Rotuma to Fiji “*for the good government of the inhabitants thereof,”* (Annexation document, 1881). This was the start of Fiji’s *administrative role,* which has remained in force till now. There are two specific laws; the Rotuma Act, Cap 122 of 1927, and the Rotuma Land Act, Cap 138, of 1959. These laws give the Council of Rotuma’s customary chiefs, and their elected representatives legislative powers befitting to the island and its people. The Fiji government representatives on the island only have administrative and advisory roles with relevant laws similar to Fiji. On the other hand, the Rotuma Act, 1927, and the Rotuma Land Act, 1959 are the only laws that apply to the island of Rotuma.

*Culture* is defined as the way of [life](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/life), [especially](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/especially) the [general](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/general) [customs](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/customs) and [beliefs](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/belief), of

a [particular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/particular) [group](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/group) of [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) at a [particular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/particular) [time](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/time). (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>)

According to the government, the Bills were tabled to repeal the current two Rotuma Acts because they are archaic, and to facilitate the social, political and economic policies of the government of Fiji. The Bills also recognize the imposed 2013 Constitution of Fiji, s.5 which states (1) that “*all citizens of Fiji shall be called Fijians”.* The government’s espoused view is that of a common identity “Fijians” for all rather than emphasizing ethnic differences in culture, tradition and language.

i. The government of Fiji respects diversity and cultural differences but they must not be drawbacks to economic development. The current Rotuma Acts have restrictive provisions in their application to economic development on the island. The Bills would have also opened up land leases for economic development to non-Rotumans. This would bring tourism revenue to benefit Rotuma because it is the stronghold for Rotuman culture and traditional pursuits. Furthermore, the government of Fiji is committed to addressing the adverse effects of tourism for *all* Fijians and will establish the National Council for Culture, Heritage, and Arts.

On the other hand, the Rotuma Bills of 2015 would remove the self-governing authority of the Chiefs and the Council of Rotuma, which will endanger the survival of the Rotuman Culture.

1. The Rotuma Act, (Cap 122**)** s2. defines Rotuman community*”…to mean the*

*Indigenous inhabitants of Rotuma …”* and a Rotuman is defined *“as any person of Rotuman or part Rotuman descend who is registered.”*  Rotuma Lands Act (Cap 138) s.21states that only a person of Rotuman descend, apart from the government of Fiji can own or lease land. The Bills will not amend but repeal current laws, and cancel Rotuma’s history since 1881. The dire consequences of the Rotuma Bills could result in the loss of Rotuma Island to Fiji, the Rotuman culture, tradition, and consequently, their language. (Kant, R., 2017; Varea et al., 2018)

ii. The Rotuma Bill No.6, clause 4 elevates the District Officer’s role, the

government representative on the island, as Rotuma’s administrator, while the Chiefs role is downgraded to being the guardian of tradition and customs only. This undermines the importance and the respect for the chiefly system in the Rotuman context. Clause 17 introduces the *Forum of the People* (FOTP) to include Fiji PM’s two nominees to the FOTP. This forum will be responsible for all developments on the island. These provisions were never explained properly to the people and the reality of eventually losing the Rotuman culture. *In Transnational Relations and the Articulation of Cultural Identity* by Clark (2005), it states that the Rotuman people have a weak sense of cultural identity while in diaspora and yet manage to preserve kinship ties and new network social relationships because of social media mediums like the Rotuman website.

iii. According to the military coup leader of 2006, and the current Prime Minister

of Fiji since then, a means to minimize widespread corruption in Fiji is to get rid of institutions that promote ethnic or cultural differences. This was made possible with the promulgation of the Constitution of 2013 which provides for the dissolution of the Great Council of Chiefs for Fijians and the Senate seat for Rotuma Island’s sole representative in compliance with s6 that “(a) *Every citizen of Fiji is to be called a Fijian, and (b) all Fijians have equal status and identity…”*

1. The Rotuma Bills of 2015 would expedite economic development *for the good of* the Rotuman people’s Traditions.

*Tradition* is defined as the [belief](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/belief), [principle](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/principle), or way of [acting](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/acting) that [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) in a [particular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/particular) [society](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/society) or [group](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/group) have [continued](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/continued) to [follow](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/follow) for a [long](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/long) [time](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/time). (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>)

i. Fiji’s National Development Plan (NDP), with the vision of “Transforming Fiji”, maps out the way forward for Fiji and all Fijians to realize its full potential as a nation. The comprehensive 20-Year Development Plan (2017-2036), and a 5-Year Development Plan (2017-2021) can be fulfilled with ‘transformation’ efforts to modernize, and position Fiji as the ‘hub’ of economic activity and regional engagement in the Pacific. (<https://www.fiji.gov.fj>). These commendable efforts will require archaic laws in Fiji and Rotuma to be repealed to pave the way for government development policies to benefit all Fijians.

ii. Fiji is a multicultural country of many ethnic groups with their own traditions

customs, and beliefs. These traditions must evolve to reflect societal and world realities like climate change, and sustainable development.

On the other hand, the Rotuma Bills will cause critical negative consequences to the indigenous inhabitants’ traditions.

1. Rotuma Bill, no 6, clause 11 changes the election of Rotuma chiefs according to

tradition to voting for a candidate. Although Rotuman society is matrilineal, the chiefly role in recent years has been reserved for a male of the chiefly clan who is *God – fearing*, and custodian of tradition and customs.

ii. The Rotuma Lands (Amendment) Act, s4 (2) of 1959 states, “*It is hereby declared that from the commencement of this Act no Rotuman shall be registered as a member of more than one kainaga [clan] …”* This provision was never enforced because Rotumans had rejected it vehemently then, and it remains a red herring. The Rotuman society is matrilineal, and, traditionally, a married woman will live with her parents instead of her husband.

ii. The Rotuma Lands Bill, clause 29 prohibits the creation or gifting of land by

the landowner to another. clause 31 states that an adopted child will not be regarded as the child of the adopted parents. Both clauses undermine the Rotuman tradition of ‘reciprocation’, and ‘child–rearing’ as part of communal kinship, and an extension of the nuclear family. clause 26 discriminates against women and does not comply with Chapter 2 – Bill of Rights of the Fiji Constitution, and provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Traditionally, Rotuman tradition greatly respects women’s role in fostering alliances and cohesiveness amongst the menfolk.

1. The Rotuma Bills of 2015 would expedite economic development *for the good of* the Rotuman people’s Language.

*Language* is defined as a [system](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/system) of [communication](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communication) used by [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) [living](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/living) in a [particular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/particular) [country](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/country), and consists of a set of sounds or written symbols. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>)

1. The Rotumans in Fiji have a feeling of ‘dual citizenship’ that they must become

tri-lingual to learn Fijian and English as well as their native Rotuman language. They maintain a dual ‘identity’ in diaspora which enable them to maintain their cultural mores and values but also supports them in their other roles as citizens of their adopted country. (Clark, A.2005). As an indigenous minority group in the host country, Rotumans instead of greater pluralism, feel threatened and cling tenaciously to their own identity. (Clark, A.2005).

ii. The UN Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage was ratified

by Fiji in 2010. The Fiji Department of National Heritage, Culture and Arts (DNHDA) is aware that the Rotuman community is one of the most endangered groups regarding the survival of Rotuman culture and language. The current UNESCO funded project implemented by DNHDA collates, analyses, and documents Rotuman tangible and intangible cultural artifacts which include Rotuman language. The project also includes Rotuman practices and norms and their allegiance to Rotuma land and sea territories.

iii. The National Council of Heritage, Culture, and Arts - an initiative of DNHDA is

the government’s commitment is to centralize all efforts to promote and nurture all Fijians’ cultural, traditional beliefs and customs, and languages.

On the other hand, the Rotuma Bills of 2015 should not be enacted into laws because they will cause critical negative consequence to the indigenous inhabitants’ language.

1. The Rotuman language is linguistically distinct from Fijian. The Bills will cause

the loss of Rotuman culture, tradition, and subsequently the loss of the Rotuman language.

ii. According to UNESCO, the Rotuman language will be the first language in

the Pacific to disappear. (UNESCO, 2019). This means the loss of identity for the indigenous Rotuman people unless the government of Fiji reverses its ethnically – blind Constitution that mandates the promotion of *Fijianess* rather than *Rotumaness.*

3. The Rotuma Bills of 2015 would be detrimental to the Rotuman people’s Culture, Traditions, and Language.

The Bills would repeal current laws and cancel Rotuma’s history since 1881. The relegation of Rotuma’s Chiefs to Traditional, and Customary roles breach UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights (UNDRIP), 2007, and the ILO’s Tribal Peoples’ Convention (ITPC), 1989 to allow indigenous people the right to govern themselves. The Bills are in keeping with Fiji’s ethnicity – blinded Constitution by including provisions to include or nominate non-Rotumans into decision–making positions on the island. The Bills undermine Rotuma’s historic links to Fiji since 1880.

For now, the Rotuma Petition of 2015 was instrumental in stopping further readings of the Bills in the Parliament of Fiji. However, there is no guarantee that a Fiji government in the future will not table similar Bills for as long as the Fiji – Rotuma’s legal and constitutional impasse remains unsolved. This success of the impasse is relevant for a just, and lasting solution for the Rotuman people. The Rotuma Bills saga has united the global Rotuman community via social media, and enhanced their cultural identity. (Varea, R., Titifanue, J., & Kant, R. 2021; Clark, 2005) This is an encouraging development because from a cultural standpoint, Rotumans of the past seemed more interested in their past than they do today. (Alan Howard & Jen Rensel, 2013; Anselmo, Fatiaki; et al., 1991)

. The Bills proved the systematic undermining of ethnic aspirations which the government of Fiji claims to lead to divisive politics. This ideology is alien to Fiji, and is in contrast to multiculturalism - the diversity of cultures that has gained Fiji its international acknowledgement as the ‘Pacific Hub in the Asia Pacific’ (Skully, M., 2016).

4. **Conclusion**

If enacted into laws, the Rotuma Bills of 2015 would obliterate Rotuman indigenous rights on Rotuma Island; destroy customs and traditions with grave consequences, and subsequently, the loss of the Rotuman language. The provisions of the Bills undermined Fiji – Rotuma administrative arrangements since 1880, breach Fiji and international laws, and lacked due Parliamentary process. Importantly, the Bills were not fully explained to the Rotuman people. The primary desire of the Rotuman people is for the government of Fiji to recognize, respect, and protect their indigenous rights.

Instead, the Fiji government–sponsored Rotuma Bills were to remove the Self-governing Authority of the Council of Rotuma, and endanger the survival of the Rotuman Culture, Tradition, and Language of the indigenous people.

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