

## **POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AS ADVENTIST CHRISTIANS - THE POSITIVES AND THE PITFALLS: A CASE STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

Seventh-day Adventists have often found themselves in a dilemma when confronted with the issue of political engagement. More often than not, members instinctively engage in national politics without proper grounding in church policies and guidelines. The ambiguity may stem from a lack of ethical and theological clarity in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy on the matter. Such actions have frequently yielded the church a mixed reputation subsequently impeding its witness and mission. Complexity arises when members are deeply involved in the state where the state looks to the church (rightly) for guidance. Is it ethical for the church to step aside (bad samaritanism) when the state needs help in times of national crisis? The positives and pitfalls of such engagement are drawn through a case study of Adventist members in Fiji who experienced four coups in a span of two decades.

**Keywords:** ethics, theology, church, Fiji, Africa, political engagement.

## 1. Introduction

The editorial of the *Adventist Review* magazine in its August 17, 2000 issue had the caption, “Guns in Paradise,”<sup>1</sup> describing the civilian takeover of the Fijian government on May 19 the same year. George Speight, a raised and baptized Seventh-day Adventist, led a group of indigenous Fijians, stormed through the parliament, took hostage the ruling Fijian government officials with its first ever Indo-Fijian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, and declared himself interim prime minister.<sup>2</sup> Speight, a non-practicing church member at the time, is an alumnus of Andrews University with a bachelor’s degree in 1981 and a master’s of business administration degree in 1983.<sup>3</sup> His takeover of the government was the third of four illegal removals of Fijian administration in a span of 20 years (1987–2006).<sup>4</sup> Johnson was right, “war has come to paradise,” and our island paradise reputation of “Fiji, the way the world should be,” had been essentially tarnished.



This article considers the issue of “political engagement” from the standpoint and experiences of Fijian Adventist’s members in the 2000 coup as a case study for African Adventists involvement in politics.<sup>5</sup> A brief backdrop to the issue under discussion is pertinent, followed by a broad sweep of biblical examples of political engagement/involvement from which some biblical-theological principles drawn, and concludes with some ethical dilemmas and considerations.

## 2. Background

Fiji had been an independent sovereign state since October 10, 1970. Under the 1970 independence constitution and a communal voting

<sup>1</sup>William Johnson, “Guns in Paradise,” *Adventist Review*, August 2000, 5.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Wolfgramm, “Fiji: A Social Perspective,” *South Pacific Record*, July 1, 2000, 4.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, “Guns in Paradise,” 5.

<sup>4</sup>Sanjay Ramesh, “Fiji, 1987-2007: The Story of Four Coups,” accessed February 19, 2017, <http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/2773.cfm>

<sup>5</sup>The 2000 civilian coup is chosen not only due to Speight’s leading role and Adventist member’s involvement, but also because Pastor Tuima was a non-Adventist during the first two coups of 1987.

system, indigenous Fijians enjoyed parliamentary majority and political hegemony in their land for 17 years. That supremacy was further protected by the “strong ideology of traditionalism and chiefly order, in which high chiefs occupied positions of great economic and social privilege, in the manner of feudal lords.”<sup>6</sup> That ideology incorporated the unity of the indigenous Fijians and continued respect for their chiefs and maintenance of their chiefly system. To buttress that sense of oneness, the British rule established two polities, namely the Great Council of Chiefs and an ethnic Fijian military.<sup>7</sup>

By 1987, however, Indo-Fijians,<sup>8</sup> consistently perceived by chiefs as a threat to the integrity and authority of the indigenous people, had increased in number to the point of outnumbering the locals. Boosted by fractures within the indigenous community in the first half of 1980s, an Indo-Fijian coalition party was founded and later formed government after winning the parliamentary elections of April 1987. Consequently, the new government, with Indo-Fijian majority which had an indigenous Fijian as prime minister, was overthrown a month later on May 14, 1987 by a lieutenant colonel in the Fijian army, Sitiveni Rabuka. The same officer conducted the second coup after the supreme court of Fiji ruled the coup as unconstitutional. Fearing the loss of the achievement of the May coup amidst the attempt to build a platform for a government of national unity and a more representative leadership under the headship of the Governor-General, he took over the reins again on September 25.

Fast forward to May 19, 1999, Mr. Mahendra Pal Chaudhry, for the record, was sworn in as Fiji’s first ever Indo-Fijian prime minister following his Labour Party victory in the elections. His prime ministership was short lived when Speight and company took over the reign on May 19, 2000. He had merely served a year of his five-year term. Clearly, what spurred the first three coups evinced indigenous Fijians aspirations garbed with Christian nationalism. Supporters were predominantly indigenous Fijian Christians who carry nationalistic ideologies. In a nutshell, their worldview included (1) the biblical notions of “land” as a gift with rights given by God and which, despite suffering and hardship, . . . one day will be free of the “stranger in the land;”<sup>9</sup> (2) the maintaining of their hierarchical (chiefly) polity within their “vanua”

<sup>6</sup>Yash Ghai, “Constitutional Order in Multi-ethnic Societies,” in *Coup: Reflections on the Political Crisis in Fiji*, ed. Brij Lal and Michael Pretes (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>A name given to Fiji citizens of Indian origin who are descendants of indentured labourers, from India brought to the islands by the British in 1916 to work on Fiji’s sugar cane plantations.

<sup>9</sup>Wolfgramm, “Fiji: A Social Perspective,” 5.

(land); (3) the notion of state religion (imposed by the national Sunday ban of the 1987 military coup); and (4) maintenance of indigenous political leadership.

### 2.1. Adventist Coup

Speight's Adventist affiliation sadly led to his coup being labelled as an Adventist coup." The show of support by Fijian Adventists during the takeover demonstrated their endorsement of his political aspirations and pro-indigenous stance. A considerable number of members, including some pastors (both retired and in ministry) publicly revealed their support through visitation, donation of cash and kind, provision of transportation, conduct devotionals or worship services, giving of advice, and/or simple provision of moral support at the parliamentary complex during the 56 days (May 19-July 13) of hostage. In spite of the staunch support by Adventist members, the Church through its leaders clearly expressed disapproval of Speight's actions and upheld the church's position on the separation of church and state in the *Fiji Times*—the country's major newspaper.<sup>10</sup> In a statement expressing censure, the South Pacific Division posted on their weekly *South Pacific Record* of July 8, 2000, "With sadness and regret the church acknowledges that in recent ethnic and political conflicts and coups in the Pacific, some former Seventh-day Adventists and current members have been involved."<sup>11</sup>

Key questions asked in this paper in relation to Adventists' political involvement at such a time of national crisis are the following. What should be the appropriate position and response/actions of Adventist members in such situation especially when their land and rights come under threat? Should we "stand aside" in a bad Samaritan fashion or be actively engaged? If "yes," to what basis and extent? Should Adventists be involved at all? Answers to the above questions are sought from biblical examples drawing principles that may be useful for reflections amongst African and Fijian Adventist communities.

## 3. Biblical Examples

<sup>10</sup>Tihomir Kukolja, "Political Challenges the Church Cannot Afford to Ignore," *Spectrum*, 28, no. 4 (2000), accessed February 19, 2017, [http://www.adherents.com/people/ps/George\\_Speight.html](http://www.adherents.com/people/ps/George_Speight.html)

<sup>11</sup>"SPD to Develop Pacific Peace Strategy," *South Pacific Record*, July 8, 2000, 4.

For Christians, what the Bible says in any topic of discussion is paramount. It is the foundational source where divine principles are given through historical experiences of God's people who were confronted with the same issues we face today. They are principles for Christians to live by. The Bible records numerous examples where God's people found themselves fronting the civil state in political engagement. In such a time, those individuals or groups make critical decisions in a demonstration of their faith and allegiance (or lack of it); and in most cases, they were life and death situations. Their decisions and experiences, according to the apostle Paul, "were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11).<sup>12</sup>

Two episodes of political leadership and political engagement of the people of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament are examined plus a brief summary of the same for a few occasions when individuals or small groups of Israelites fronted with non-Israelite or heathen political leadership. In the New Testament, the example of Jesus, Paul, and Peter are analyzed briefly. These biblical passages, though not exhaustive, provide a framework from which some principles for the discussion on the issue of political engagement are drawn.

### 3.1. The Story of Naboth

The murder of Naboth for his vineyard in 1 Kings 21 is a definitive story for the topic under discussion. Ahab, King of Israel given his wealth and presumably all the land that he had, still craved a small block of land belonging to Naboth. The king's rationale behind this offer was twofold: (1) he wants to make a vegetable garden for himself and (2) it is near his palace, even next to his house. He also had two offers for Naboth in the proposed deal: (1) he will get a "better" vineyard than his current one and (2) he may choose to receive a good sum of money for it (1 Kgs 21:2).

The response of Naboth was immediate and straightforward. He did not have to think hard about it. "The Lord forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers" (1 Kgs 21:3). Apparently, he did not find difficulty in refusing the king's offer and the reason was quite simple. For him, the piece of land in question was never exclusively his own. It was God-given and he had received it as an inheritance from his father and forefathers. Those who had received the land worked and cared for it, made a living out of it, and passed it on to the next generation as inheritance. Thus, the land was not something he can exchange for a bigger or better one or sell for a fortune. No! Not even to a king. He, like

<sup>12</sup>All Bible texts are taken from the New American Standard Bible version.

his forefathers before him must pass it on to his children even if it be the only thing which he could pass on to them. More importantly for Naboth, as he understood it, the piece of land was allocated specifically for his ancestors, himself, and his descendants with God as part of His covenant with them.

The story of Naboth sets forth an example of unswerving integrity and a prime illustration of a God-fearing individual who stood his ground on the principle that his land is God-given and, therefore, cannot be given away or sold, neither appealed to, bought, nor even coerced into submission. Compromise for Naboth was a no-no which flies in the face of greed, corruption, and injustices of political power. The ensuing evil plot of Jezebel (Ahab's evil wife) and the murder of Naboth brought judgment upon the house of Ahab namely: condemnation and death to him, the slaughter of his 70 sons, and the eventual extermination of the members of his household (2 Kgs 9:6-10) including Jezebel's violent death (2 Kgs 9:30-37).

### 3.2. The Story of Joash

The second book of Kings (2 Kgs 11) narrates a revolt against Athaliah's murderous rage over the royal heirs after the murder of her son Ahaziah, king of Judah, by Jehu (1 Kgs 9:27-29). Sensing the possible demise of the royal bloodline through the evil action of the queen-mother, Jehosheba/Jehoshabeath, Ahaziah's sister and courageous wife of Jehoiada the priest, spared baby Joash's life by stealing and hiding him in the bedroom with his nurse. Afterward, he was cared for in the temple of God for six years (1 Kgs 11:2-3; 2 Chr 22:11-12). After which, Queen Athaliah's wicked rule came to an end after Jehoiada the priest staged a "coup d'etat" and made Joash as king on the throne of Judah. In the ensuing installation ceremony of the king, Jehoiada ordered the killing of the blood-thirsty Queen Athaliah (2 Kgs 11:13-16; 2 Chr 22:13-15). The process by which Athaliah was deposed and replaced was an intelligent plot by the priest, for Joash's keeping and safety included the equipping of the priests with the temple armoury consisting of King David's spears and shields (2 Kgs 11:10) The well-ordered coup plan of Jehoiada and its execution by the priests and the military officers and the presence and support of "all the people of the land" (2 Kgs 11:14, 18) made it successful. What made it favorable, morally, and ethically sound, however, was not only the defeat of Athaliah's evil rule but also the accordance of the three key parts of the coronation ceremony of Judah's kings namely: the

incoming king has to be presented and accepted by the people,<sup>13</sup> he should have “the testimony”<sup>14</sup> in his hands, and he anointed<sup>15</sup> by the high-priest (2 Kgs 11:12).

### 3.3. The Story of Shiphrah and Puah

Other stories of political engagement in the Old Testament included Shiphrah and Puah, the two Hebrew God-fearing midwives (Exod 1:17) who saved Hebrew male children in defiance of Pharaoh’s ruthless command to kill them at birth (Exod 1:16). Pharaoh’s plan was foiled by the two women who were probably the ones in charge of the midwife station. By their actions, the midwives made a moral and ethical choice to honor God’s command rather than a political leader’s directive. Because of their faithfulness, God rewarded them by giving them descendants (Exod 1:20-21).

### 3.4. The Story of Daniel and His friends

Daniel and his friends defied Babylonian civil command in honor of and loyalty to their God in heaven and were rewarded in a compelling manifestation of God’s power through their deliverance from the fiery furnace and the lion’s den. The Hebrew boys were brought to the authorities for refusing to follow civil and religio-political laws namely: bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden idol (Dan 3: 4-6) and the decree forbidding prayer to any other god except the King of the Medes (Dan 6:7, 12). In both stories, the Hebrew boys stared death in the face, but fearlessly remained calm with resolute faith, and their God delivered. The story of Daniel and his friends demonstrated that when earthly powers and/or rules conflict with God’s clearly revealed will, it is better to obey God rather than man.

### 3.5. The Example of Jesus, Paul and Peter

Jesus is the supreme exemplar of political involvement for Christians. While He had supreme authority over the powers that were present

<sup>13</sup>Acceptance by the people is a mark of true royalty and points to willing subjects. Together, they guard the nation and also set boundaries for the kingly rule.

<sup>14</sup>The ‘testimony’ may have refer to the book of the law. Thus, it was used during the coronation service to “denote the king’s devotion to the law of the Lord, according to which he would regulate his life and rule his people.” See “הַקְּדוּשָׁה” [Deut 17:18-20], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976), 4:115. See also Deuteronomy 17:18-20.

<sup>15</sup>Anointing speaks of divine appointment and equipping of the monarch with the ability which qualifies him to serve in the appointed office.

during His time, He lived as a responsible law-abiding citizen. He recognized them but He never lost focus of His priorities—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and giving hope to the poor and marginalized, thus drawing them to God in a spiritual way. His ministry was never in any way confrontational nor condemnatory. When checked for His political views, He responded affirmatively, recognizing the legitimacy of the state authority, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). He made it clear, however, that “the things of God” takes precedence over every earthly connections (Matt. 22:37) including “the things of Caesar [every civil power]” (Matt. 22:39). The ultimate demonstration of this principle was when He was condemned to die under the authority of the state ignited by religious plotting even when there was absolutely no evidence of wrong doing. Ellen White’s comment in her book *Desire of Ages* summarizes Jesus’ political engagement in a nutshell.

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart.<sup>16</sup>

Paul’s epistles to the churches showed that he believes just about the same. Writing to fellow Christians in Rome, he penned, “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God, and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves” (Rom 13:1-2). In addition, he encouraged believers to pray for “kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim 2:1-2). Undoubtedly, the apostle understood the need for Christian participation in the government. In the same way, the Apostle Peter, although he understood the evils and corruption within the Roman government, still admonished Christian believers to honor human institutions and authority, for “such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet 2:13, 14). Jesus, Paul, and Peter all advocated good citizenship,

<sup>16</sup>Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1898), 509.

obedience to the laws of the land, and good deeds to others even if the political environment is unfavorable or evil.

From the above biblical accounts, the following biblical-theological principles are drawn for consideration:

1. Christian worldview informs political engagement.
2. Uncompromising commitment to religious convictions.
3. Political engagement can be unavoidable for God's people.
4. First things first.
5. Christians are citizen of two kingdoms
6. People should reconcile and exert positive influence.
7. State leadership should be divinely elected
8. God honors those who honor Him (1 Sam 2:30) even in political engagement.
9. Political engagement may be unavoidable.
10. God-fearing Christians are law-abiding citizens.

With biblical-theological principles in place, this article will conclude by highlighting ethical dilemmas and recommendations for the consideration of the Adventist community in the vast African continent.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1. Ethical Dilemmas and Recommendations

A key point that justifies this case study is the significant commonalities between African and Fijian communities. These include:

- Ethnic identity and belongingness including indigenous rights as the heartbeat of both communities
- Both underwent British colonization.
- Fijians and Africans fought for their freedom.
- Chiefs have autonomy in the land especially in their localities.
- Indigenous Fijian hierarchical polity of Great Council of Chiefs – Regional Chiefs-Provincial Chiefs-Group of villages called “*Tikina*,” and then the village itself where it consists of “clan” [*mataqali*] which in turn is made up of sub-clan [*tokatoka*] are similar to African polity as well.
- Their social structures share deeply-ingrained indigenous and ancestral views.
- *Coup d’etats* and political upheavals in the south-sea island nations mirror the same for certain parts of the African continent.

- Fijians trace their roots to *Taghaniyka*—Tanzania, Africa, that is, the “stranger in the land,” (non-indigenous Africans/Fijians).

Given the biblical-theological principles, the Fijian coup culture and commonalities with the African indigenous culture, and political experience and viewpoints, some ethical dilemmas and recommendations are rendered herein.

#### 4.2. Ethical Dilemmas

Adventist Church members have two sets of beliefs. In spite of their core beliefs, Adventist members of both communities hold on to their indigenous, ethnic, and/or tribal ideologies which exert themselves when issues of indigenous concerns arise. At such times, there is an apparent tendency to suppress religious principles and convictions. The Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division recognized this complex situation in their Biblical Research Committee document of October, 2012 on the issue of “Guidelines on Adventists Involvement in Politics in Africa.” It stated, “Hegemonies of various kinds are common phenomena in Africa. They are essentially manipulative in their character. These may include particular ideological stances, dominant religious formations and resultant intolerance, group affiliations such as tribal or ethnic collectives, marginalization and persecution of minorities, the use of sex as an instrument of coercion and subjection, marginalization, deprivation of socio-material opportunities, deliberate systematic infrastructural underdevelopment.”<sup>17</sup>

Also,

- i. Church members can rally behind a politician irrespective of how he/she has assumed power.
- ii. Latent ethnic political feelings becomes visible at the time of political crisis.
- iii. The church in Africa is growing. This is a critical point to remember.
- iv. The church in Africa must do more than just publish a statement.
- v. Political engagement per se is not wrong as long as it does not come in conflict with God’s revealed command.
- vi. All personal, ethnic, tribal, cultural, and traditional beliefs must be surrendered to the clearly revealed will of God.

<sup>17</sup>Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, Guidelines on Adventist’s Involvement in Politics in Africa BRC Document, October, 2012, 9, accessed March 12, 2017, from <http://sidadventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/GUIDELINES-ON-ADVENTIST%E2%80%99S-INVOLVEMENT-IN-POLITICS-IN-AFRICA.pdf>

- vii. When granted opportunity to engage in political matters/issues, members must adhere to Christian principles.

### 4.3. Recommendations

Based on the Fijian experience and common political and cultural grounds shared with the African continent and the biblical-theological principles and ethical dilemmas, a few recommendations are given:

- i. Avoid extremes—non-involvement versus open disobedience. These extremes must be shunned. Political involvement in a non-violent way in respect to the laws of the land (unless it contradicts God’s command) is confirmed by the biblical examples of Naboth, Daniel, Shadrach, and Shiphrah and Puah in the OT; and Jesus, Paul, and Peter in the NT. One cannot stand aside in bad-Samaritanism on one hand or resort to violence and law breaking on the other. Instead, we should stand for what is right and do everything possible according to the laws of the civil authorities.
- ii. Address spirituality. The Bible characters were men and women who feared God and never compromised their personal convictions for political aspirations. They stood for principle even when death was beckoning them. Naboth died, but the LORD did not have Ahab live on without being reprimanded for his evil actions. God will reward Naboth’s uprightness just as He rewarded the loyalty of the other characters studied. Hence, the fear of the LORD and maintaining spiritual connections is the key to overcoming issues including political engagement.
- iii. Address political engagement (newly baptized members) through Bible and Spirit of Prophecy principles. Church leaders have the vital task of nurturing current and new members (especially after they are baptized). Nurturing includes the teaching of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy on this crucial topic. Members need to be informed and to learn how to present themselves in political crisis. There is a great need for members who will represent God and the church in a way that is consistent with its beliefs and teachings when confronted with political matters.

In addition to the on-going discussion, the Fijian coups have somehow yielded some positives outcomes for the Adventist Church in Fiji in terms of its mission as well as growth of membership. First, the first and second coups of 1987 resulted in the passing of a Sunday Law in the Fijian parliament. Influx of former members and backsliders to the churches was recorded. Secondly, it has been noted that during times of national crisis

such as the coup, membership tithe increases tremendously. There has not been a study on this unique phenomenon. Third, the fourth coup (2006) has created flexibility in laws relating to evangelism. The church has since been able to penetrate and run evangelistic campaigns in places where it used to be prohibited.