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# From Centralization to Citizen Empowerment: Advancing Environmental Democracy in Fiji

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## Abstract

This study examines Fiji's intricate governance landscape, a product of its colonial past, military interventions, and subsequent constitutional reforms, which have collectively fostered a highly centralized political system. By critically analyzing the evolution of Fiji's political structures alongside the case study of FIJI Water, the research highlights significant tensions between national unity efforts and the preservation of traditional indigenous governance. The study employs qualitative methodologies, drawing on extensive secondary data from academic literature, government documents, and media reports to assess the implications of centralized authority on democratic participation and environmental policy. Findings reveal that while recent reforms have sought to eliminate ethnic-based representation and promote a unified national identity, they have also marginalized traditional institutions and limited public accountability. In parallel, the FIJI Water controversy illustrates the broader conflict between corporate interests and the sustainable management of natural resources, as local communities continue to face challenges in accessing clean water despite the country's global brand image. The analysis underscores the urgent need for legal reforms—such as enforcing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and decentralizing governance structures—to empower indigenous groups and strengthen public participation in environmental decision-making. Ultimately, the study argues that a recalibrated governance model, which integrates environmental democracy with political reforms, is essential for ensuring sustainable development and upholding human rights in Fiji.

## Key Words

Environmental democracy, Fiji, indigenous rights, public participation

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## 1. Introduction

On July 28, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) approved a historic resolution affirming that every individual has the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. This milestone follows the earlier recognition of the same right by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2021. The UNGA resolution marks a significant step toward global consensus on environmental rights as a fundamental human right. While the resolution is not legally binding on member states, it establishes an important normative framework that strengthens international efforts toward environmental protection. The declaration creates a foundation for legal, policy, and institutional reforms, urging states to recognize and enforce environmental rights as part of their broader human rights obligations (UNEP, 2022).

The universal recognition of the right to a healthy environment is expected to complement and reinforce the efforts already undertaken by many countries. It is anticipated to bring multiple

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benefits, including strengthened environmental laws and policies, improved implementation and enforcement of regulations, increased public participation in environmental decision-making, reduced environmental injustices, enhanced environmental performance and sustainability (UNGA, 2022).

However, despite such global advancements, environmental protection remains a critical challenge, especially in developing countries. Economic development policies often take precedence over environmental considerations, leading to severe ecological degradation. This is particularly evident in Indonesia, where the government's push for economic growth frequently comes at the expense of the environment. Under the pretext of national development and economic progress, deforestation, water pollution, and air pollution have severely impacted local ecosystems and communities. These policies have led to the displacement of indigenous and local populations, depriving them of their traditional livelihoods and access to natural resources. This systematic destruction of the environment and its consequences on local communities highlight the urgent need for a more sustainable approach to governance (Lake, 1996; Pratisti, 2017; Mina, 2016).

To address these challenges, a fundamental shift in governance and political perspectives is necessary. In Indonesia and other similar contexts, this shift requires a re-evaluation of democratic principles to incorporate environmental considerations. An environmentally conscious approach to democracy—often referred to as environmental democracy—is a potential solution to these pressing issues.

Environmental democracy is based on the principle that human rights and environmental protection are inherently interconnected. This perspective moves beyond traditional democratic concerns that focus solely on human interactions and governance structures. Instead, it acknowledges that human well-being is intrinsically linked to nature and that democracy should facilitate the protection of both. This redefinition of democracy expands its scope, ensuring that environmental concerns are integrated into decision-making processes at all levels of governance.

Given the importance of environmental democracy, this study aims to examine its role as a component of human rights within the specific context of Fiji. While global discussions on environmental democracy often focus on larger nations, small island states like Fiji face unique challenges that require tailored governance approaches. Fiji's environmental issues, including rising sea levels, deforestation, and resource depletion, are closely tied to its governance structure and policy decisions.

This research will explore how environmental democracy is implemented in Fiji and assess its effectiveness in addressing the country's environmental challenges. It will also analyze the extent to which public participation, policy frameworks, and governance structures align with the principles of environmental democracy. By doing so, this study aims to provide insights into how small island nations can strengthen environmental governance while upholding human rights. Therefore, the author formulates the research question as follows: "How can Fiji strengthen its environmental democracy to better protect environmental and human rights?"

Through this analysis, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on environmental democracy, emphasizing its role in sustainable development and human rights protection. Ultimately, fostering environmental democracy can help ensure that economic progress does not come at the cost of environmental degradation and that the fundamental right to a healthy environment is upheld for present and future generations.

## 2. Literature Review/Analytical Framework

### 2.1. Linking Democracy and Sustainability

Democracy is widely regarded as the most effective system of governance for promoting environmental sustainability (Bornemann et al, 2022). However, the way democracy is implemented varies across nations, leading to differing outcomes in environmental management. While some democracies have successfully enacted policies that balance economic development with environmental sustainability, others continue to prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term ecological well-being. The evolution of democratic governance demonstrates that democracy is not a fixed system but rather a dynamic process that adapts to societal needs. In the context of environmental governance, democracy must evolve to integrate ecological considerations into its core principles. This involves ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent, and participatory, allowing communities to have a voice in environmental matters that affect them. Countries that have embraced environmental democracy have shown promising results in achieving sustainability goals. Public participation in environmental decision-making has led to improved environmental policies, better enforcement of regulations, and greater accountability of governments and corporations. Additionally, environmental democracy fosters a sense of responsibility among citizens, encouraging sustainable practices at both individual and collective levels.

The paper "Mapping Sustainability across the World: Signs, Challenges and Opportunities for Democratic Countries" by Ştefanachi et al (2022) has proven above statements. They explore the relationship between democracy and sustainable development, particularly in the context of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It examines whether democratic governance fosters sustainability, using data from 193 countries between 2015 and 2021. The study identifies two primary models of sustainable development: the Asian model, which prioritizes economic growth, and the Western democratic model, which emphasizes institutional governance, justice, and participatory democracy. Findings suggest that democracy plays a crucial role in achieving SDGs, as civic engagement, government accountability, and institutional strength are strongly linked to sustainability.

However, the study also acknowledges that some non-democratic regimes, particularly in Asia, have achieved high economic growth and sustainability metrics despite lower democratic indices. The research highlights key factors influencing sustainability, such as the functioning of governments, political participation, and economic development. While full democracies tend to achieve higher sustainability levels, flawed democracies and hybrid regimes show mixed results, often struggling with governance challenges. The paper also notes that democratic backsliding, or "democratic recession," poses a risk to sustainability progress, particularly in countries facing political instability or weakened institutions. The findings emphasize the importance of global cooperation, policy coherence, and adaptive governance models to balance economic growth with long-term environmental and social sustainability.

A paper by Westall (2023) explores the complex relationship between democracy and sustainable development, emphasizing both their interdependencies and tensions. It argues that while democracy promotes participation, accountability, and social justice—key elements of sustainability—it often struggles with short-term political cycles, individualistic economic models, and fragmented decision-making that hinder long-term environmental and social goals. The paper highlights growing public dissatisfaction with democratic institutions, a trend that threatens both political stability and sustainability efforts. It also examines competing perspectives on sustainable development, from those advocating incremental reforms within current democratic systems to those calling for deeper structural changes to governance and

economic models. The discussion underscores that without addressing these tensions, both democracy and sustainability may face significant challenges in the future.

To reconcile these issues, the paper explores potential solutions, including institutional innovations like deliberative democracy, future generations' councils, and participatory governance mechanisms. It highlights successful examples, such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales, which integrates long-term sustainability goals into policymaking. Additionally, it discusses the need for stronger global cooperation, multi-stakeholder engagement, and systemic changes to economic frameworks that prioritize well-being over short-term growth. Ultimately, the paper calls for a more integrated approach where democratic institutions are reformed to better align with sustainability imperatives, ensuring that both current and future generations benefit from just, inclusive, and environmentally responsible governance.

## **2.2. Public Participation and the Right to Environmental Information**

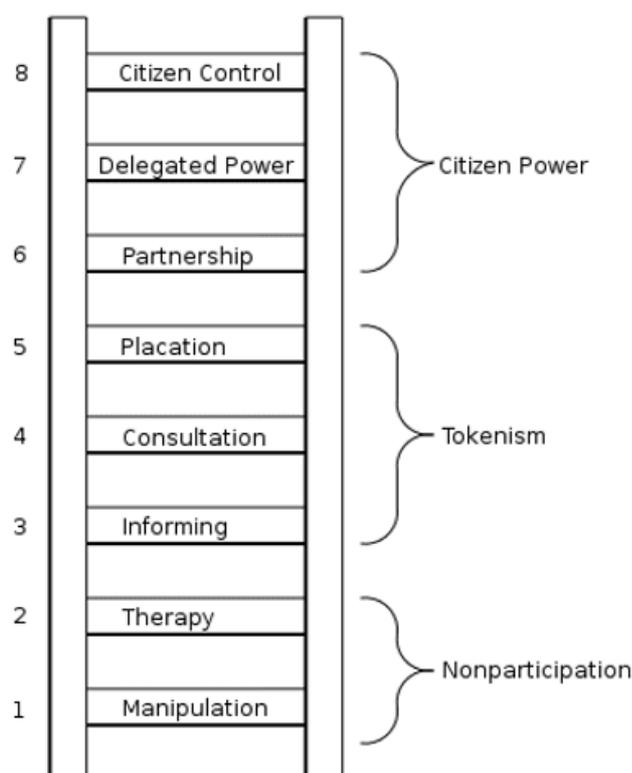
Public participation is also important in ensuring the fulfillment of environmental rights at the national and international levels. Only through careful observation of the policy-making process can we begin to build an ecological democracy that can effectively mediate the interaction between the government and the public. Public participation here means two-way interaction. The problem with public participation is that it requires the integration of public interests and values into policy formulation and is supported by all components of society (Hermawan & Budyatmodjo, 2022).

Hermawan (2018) emphasized that there are six aspects to public participation. First, public participation is based on the belief that everyone has the right to be involved in the policy formulation process concerning environmental issues, especially those affected by government policies. Second, it includes the promise that the contribution of ideas from the public can influence policy. Third, it promotes and supports sustainable policies by fairly communicating the interests of decision-makers. Fourth, the design of the ideal mechanism for public involvement in formulating government policy is drawn from the input of the public itself. Fifth, public participation provides objective and accurate information so that public involvement can be meaningful. Sixth, there is room for intensive discussion between members to harmonize interests in the context of implementing environmental regulations (Hermawan, 2018). Public participation in ecological democracy can be carried out by various elements of society, including environmental NGOs, environmentalists, and local communities. The way these groups voice their ideas and opinions also varies, such as demonstrations, lawsuits, discussion forums, and participation and membership in political parties. This public participation is also a benchmark to assess the extent of public awareness of environmental issues. In addition, the ecological democracy model of an open political system provides space for people to channel their aspirations and create awareness of the potential threat of environmental damage. Public participation in environmental decision-making has been recognized as one of the key principles of environmental governance in the 1992 Rio Declaration. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration states that environmental problems are best addressed with the participation of all concerned citizens at the relevant level.

The Rio Declaration also stipulates that states are required to ensure that individuals have appropriate access to environmental information held by public authorities, including information on hazardous substances and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. In addition, states should facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information readily available (Hermawan, 2018).

The Aarhus Convention (Convention Access to Information, Participation and Decision Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) procedurally asks the state to ensure the fulfillment of the right to access to information, community participation in decision making, and access to justice in issues related to the environment as a form of fulfillment of the right to the environment by the state (Hermawan & Budyatmodjo, 2022).

Public involvement in policy planning is illustrated by Arnstein using a multilevel style, known as the 'Arnstein ladder'. There are eight levels of public participation proposed by Arnstein to illustrate how groups of people who do not have influence tend to be exploited in the decision-making process by power holders. In addition, Arnstein also illustrates how much power stakeholders have in determining the final product or decision-making through his Arnstein's ladder (PSLH, 2022).



**Figure 1.** Arnstein Ladder

Source: PSLH, 2022

The first rung of the ladder is manipulation, as if there is public participation in policy-making when in fact there is none and it is just a gimmick to please the public. The second rung, therapy, the government listens to public complaints. However, these complaints are never accommodated because in this rung, the public is perceived as a patient who needs to be cured. So it can be said that there is a subordinate relationship in this rung. The first and second rungs are categorized by Arnstein as non-participation because public participation does not exist or has no influence at all on policy making. The third, fourth and fifth rungs, informing, consultation and placation are categorized as 'tokenism' which is better than the previous categories. In this category, there is already symbolic communication. In the third rung/informing, communication is still one-way. The fourth rung (consultation) has begun to have two-way communication where the public is able to convey their thoughts such as through

opinion polls. In the fifth rung (placation), public participation is strengthened by the inclusion of the public in the policy formulation discourse, but the government still retains full control. Finally, the citizen power category is a condition in which the public demonstrates its ability to participate. There are three levels of rungs, namely partnership where the government and the public are equal and there is strong two-way communication. The public here gets some government control in the context of planning, implementation, supervision and evaluation. Then there is delegated power where the government transfers its power to the public so that the public has clear powers and full responsibility for the success of the policies taken (there are seats filled by the public in policy-making committees). Finally, there is citizen control, where every input, suggestion and opinion from the public is negotiated and communicated both ways to the government in order to obtain policies that represent the interests of all parties (PSLH, 2022; Hermawan, 2018).

### **3. Research Method**

In writing this article, the author utilized qualitative research methods. Through the use of this method, the author interpreted the data that had been collected after the data collection was collected (Creswell, 2013). The interpretation is done to gain a deeper understanding of the social problem or phenomenon raised. The data used as the basis for analysis in this article was obtained from various secondary sources such as online media coverage data and previous studies. The data was collected using internet data collection techniques. With this data collection technique, the author can gain access to government pages or databases, international organizations, and mass media. Not only that, the technique also gives the author the opportunity to triangulate data given the large amount of data and sources so that the author can compare them with each other to avoid misinformation in building understanding. Considering the access to data and the opportunity to triangulate, the author believes that the use of secondary data from the internet is feasible to build an understanding of the chosen research problem.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1. Political Landscape in Fiji**

Fiji's governance structures have evolved through a history of colonial rule, military coups, and constitutional reforms. The country operates as a parliamentary democracy under the 2013 Constitution, but governance remains deeply influenced by its past. The author highlights that reforms post-2006 aimed to centralize power while promoting national unity. However, these efforts have been criticized for reducing the traditional influence and limiting political diversity (Gounder, 2023). Despite this centralization, elements of traditional governance persist through the iTaukei Administration, which operates as a parallel dual-power governance system or for indigenous Fijians. The iTaukei Administration operates as a parallel governance system for indigenous Fijians, managing land rights and traditional leadership structures. While intended to preserve indigenous identity, this structure has at times been in tension with democratic governance, as it grants authority to hereditary chiefs rather than elected representatives (Hall, 2019). Delving deeper, author finds further problems in Fiji's governance, highlighting issues such as media censorship, lack of transparency, and political interference in democratic institutions. These factors contribute to an ongoing "democratic deficit," where governance structures fall short of ensuring fair representation and accountability (Ramesh, 2023).

On its institutional framework, Fiji's has undergone several transformations. Fijian in the past 30 years has experienced two constitutional changes. The 1993–1997 constitutional process was ambitious, but the Commission lacked sufficient resources to conduct nationwide public

hearings. Additionally, without prior constitutional education programs, many Fijians were not well-informed enough to provide meaningful input. Even if they had been, their influence remained minimal since the Commission was not obligated to base its draft on public submissions. A similar situation unfolded during the 2012–2013 process. Although it initially provided greater avenues for public participation, political circumstances ultimately shifted control over the final draft to the president, prime minister, and Constituent Assembly, sidelining both the Commission and public contributions. As a result, neither process can be considered genuinely participatory, as the general public exerted little real influence over the constitution's content. The 1997 Constitution emphasized power-sharing among ethnic groups, granting indigenous Fijians a built-in majority in the House of Representatives. In contrast, the 2013 Constitution sought to eliminate ethnic-based representation in favor of a common national identity, ensuring equal status for Indo-Fijians. However, this change also centralized power under the executive branch, reducing the role of traditional chiefly institutions. While the 2013 reforms aimed to create a more inclusive national framework, they have faced resistance from indigenous groups who perceive them as undermining their political rights. The shift away from ethnic representation marked a significant departure from previous governance structures, reflecting broader efforts to unify the country. However, ongoing tensions highlight the complexities of balancing national identity with the political and cultural rights of different communities (Saati, 2020).

The 2013 Constitution centralized power under the executive branch, significantly diminishing the influence of traditional chiefly institutions like the Great Council of Chiefs. This restructuring aimed to establish a more inclusive and unified national framework by reducing ethnic-based political structures. However, the move sparked controversy, particularly among indigenous groups who saw it as an erosion of their historical and political rights. Many viewed the removal of chiefly authority as a direct challenge to indigenous identity and governance, leading to ongoing tensions between the state and traditional leaders. Despite government justifications, opposition remains strong, highlighting deep-rooted concerns over political representation (Kant, 2017).

Power in Fiji has historically been concentrated within the executive branch, particularly under military-led governments. Constitutional transitions have often reinforced centralized authority rather than promoting genuine democracy. Voreqe Bainimarama's 2006 coup resulted in a decade-long rule with limited political opposition. Even after elections resumed in 2014, political power remained heavily centralized under Fiji First, Bainimarama's political party (Kant, 2014). This power concentration has affected governance, particularly through restrictions on media and political dissent. The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) and other oversight bodies have been criticized for lacking autonomy and serving political interests rather than ensuring accountability (Ramesh, 2023). Furthermore, the electoral reforms, while nominally aimed at fairness, have not significantly decentralized decision-making power. Instead, the political system continues to favor the ruling elite, limiting opposition influence in key legislative and policy-making processes (Gounder, 2023).

All of these structural problems led to concern over land governance in Fiji, make the land policies remain a contentious issue, with indigenous communities expressing concerns over government-driven land reforms. These reforms have been perceived as favoring economic development at the expense of indigenous land rights (and thereof environmental issues), creating tension between state policies and traditional governance structures (Maiono, 2023). Furthermore, with the power concentrated on the circle of military-led government, they tend to prioritize economic benefits over environmental protection, as seen in the FIJI Water case.

## 4.2. Case Study: FIJI Water Controversy

Fiji Water is one of the most well-known bottled water brands, It is US-based company that is derived, bottled, and shipped from Fiji, and the waters came from artesian aquifers in the Yaqara valley of Viti Levu. However, it remains highly secretive. The company has become a symbol of both the positive and negative aspects of the bottled water industry. On the negative side, Fiji Water's global distribution results in significant plastic waste and high energy costs, and the company has faced scrutiny for its dealings with Fiji's unelected military regime, which took control in a 2006 coup and has maintained martial law since 2009. On the positive side, the company claims to contribute to Fiji's economy through job creation and other benefits, as well as promoting itself as "carbon negative" a claim that, due to a lack of publicly available data, cannot be independently verified (Gleick, 2010). The selling point of FIJI water is that they always advertise it as a "pure" product, its purity, and the intricate process to keep it pure until it arrives at the hands of the consumer (Dass, 2025).

However, FIJI Water was surrounded by numerous controversies and several backlashes with its sustainability in question, involving environmental concerns, corporate tax avoidance, exploitation of local resources, and social injustices. While FIJI Water has attempted to mitigate criticism through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, the author argue that these efforts are insufficient to address the deeper ethical and economic issues linked to its operations in Fiji. By analyzing the company's practices through the lens of economic, environmental, and social justice perspectives, it becomes clear that FIJI Water exemplifies the ongoing struggle between corporate interests and the well-being of local communities in resource-rich but economically vulnerable nations.

One of the most glaring contradictions in FIJI Water's operations is the paradox of water scarcity among Fijians themselves. Despite being home to one of the most well-known bottled water brands, many Fijians still face challenges in accessing clean and safe drinking water. The report highlights how local communities have long expressed resentment toward FIJI Water, as they see their nation's natural resources being extracted and exported for foreign profit while they struggle with contaminated water supplies. The company taps into an underground aquifer in the Yaqara Valley, but this resource is not made available to the general population. Instead, FIJI Water's distribution is focused on international markets, with its product being consumed in high-end restaurants, hotels, and by wealthy elites worldwide. This raises ethical questions about the fairness of a system where a multinational corporation profits from a resource that remains out of reach for the very people living on the land it is extracted from. The disparity between local living conditions and the luxurious branding of FIJI Water creates a stark contrast that underscores the broader issues of economic inequality and resource exploitation (Ulrich, 2009).

Beyond resource access, FIJI Water has also been implicated in controversies related to corporate tax avoidance and its influence over Fijian government policies. Jones et al (2017) details the company's history of leveraging its economic power to challenge government-imposed regulations, particularly taxation policies. In 2010, the Fijian government introduced a significant tax increase on water extraction, aimed at ensuring that multinational corporations like FIJI Water contributed a fairer share of revenue to the national economy. However, FIJI Water responded by temporarily shutting down its operations and threatening to withdraw from the country entirely. This move was widely interpreted as an attempt to pressure the government into reversing its tax policy. The government stood its ground, and FIJI Water ultimately resumed operations, but the incident highlighted the imbalance of power between small, developing nations and global corporations. The company's ability to challenge sovereign economic policies and dictate terms of engagement demonstrates the extent to which multinational corporations can exert influence over local governance, often prioritizing profit over national interests.

In addition to economic and political concerns, FIJI Water has faced criticism for its environmental impact and sustainability claims. While FIJI Water promotes itself as an eco-friendly company, using carbon-negative branding and highlighting its reforestation projects, critics argue that its actual environmental footprint tells a different story. The bottled water industry as a whole is associated with excessive plastic waste, and FIJI Water is no exception. The production and global distribution of plastic bottles result in significant carbon emissions, as the product is shipped long distances to reach markets in North America, Europe, and Asia. Furthermore, the extraction of groundwater for commercial purposes raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of the aquifer, especially given the lack of comprehensive studies on its replenishment rate. The enforcement of environmental regulations in Fiji has been inconsistent, and companies like FIJI Water operate with limited oversight, allowing them to present an environmentally responsible image while continuing practices that may not align with genuine sustainability (Finau et al, 2013).

Another critical aspect of FIJI Water's operations is its approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR). As mentioned earlier, the company has initiated various projects aimed at improving infrastructure and access to clean water in Fijian communities. However, the author noted that these initiatives have been met with skepticism. Many view FIJI Water's CSR efforts as more of a public relations strategy rather than a genuine commitment to addressing systemic issues. While the company has funded some schools, health facilities, and clean water initiatives, the scale of these contributions remains small compared to its revenue from water sales. Moreover, these projects do not change the fundamental reality that Fijians continue to face structural inequalities in accessing clean water while their natural resources are exported for corporate profit. The selective nature of FIJI Water's philanthropy suggests that its CSR programs are strategically designed to improve its brand image rather than bring about substantial change. This aligns with a broader trend among multinational corporations, where corporate social responsibility is often used to deflect criticism rather than to implement meaningful reforms (Jones, 2017). Unfortunately, there have not been large-scale, sustained public protests specifically targeting Fiji Water's broader ethical and environmental issues. The protests were mainly in the form of corporate actions and government responses, rather than grassroots public demonstrations.

#### **4.3. Room for Improvement: Strengthening Public Participation of Fijians**

While there are numerous problems that need to handle, that mean there are plenty of room for improvement that can be made of by Fijian people. Public participation in environmental governance will be a critical pillar of sustainable development, ensuring that local communities have a meaningful role in decision-making processes. In Fiji, however, structural barriers such as limited legal protections, centralized decision-making, and corporate influence have restricted the ability of communities—particularly indigenous iTaukei groups—to assert control over their natural resources. Strengthening public participation requires legal and institutional reforms, decentralized governance structures, and enhanced corporate accountability mechanisms. By addressing these gaps, Fiji can move toward a more inclusive, participatory model of governance that balances economic development with social and environmental justice.

A major barrier to meaningful public participation in Fiji's environmental decision-making is the absence of robust legal protections ensuring Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for communities affected by resource extraction projects. While FPIC is recognized under international human rights frameworks, its implementation in Fiji remains weak. Strengthening legal frameworks to mandate FPIC would allow local communities to veto projects that pose environmental or social risks. Such a law would prevent exploitative agreements where

companies extract resources without adequate consultation or fair compensation to affected populations. Legal reforms should prioritize mechanisms that empower marginalized groups, ensuring that their voices are heard in governance structures (Vakaoti, 2019).

Establishing independent environmental tribunals could provide an accessible avenue for local communities to challenge environmentally harmful projects. This aligns with the Aarhus Convention's access-to-justice pillar, which guarantees the right to challenge environmental decisions that violate public interest. Currently, dispute resolution mechanisms in Fiji are often bureaucratic, expensive, and favor corporate interests. Ensuring fair and expedited hearings for environmental grievances would strengthen public trust in governance institutions and discourage corporate misconduct.

Empowering local governance structures is crucial for ensuring that Fijians, particularly indigenous communities, have a direct role in resource management. The centralization of decision-making in Fiji often excludes indigenous and youths from meaningful participation, despite their deep ecological knowledge and historical stewardship of natural resources (Vakaoti, 2016). Decentralized governance would allow local councils, especially those integrating iTaukei leadership, to play an active role in water management boards and environmental oversight bodies. This approach recognizes that indigenous knowledge is not only cultural heritage but also an effective tool for sustainable resource management. One method to enhance decentralized governance is the creation of participatory platforms such as community scorecards, where local residents assess corporate compliance with environmental regulations. These platforms would provide real-time feedback on issues such as water quality, deforestation, and pollution, allowing regulators to hold corporations accountable for their environmental impacts. By shifting from Arnstein's Ladder's lower rungs of "placation" toward true partnership, such initiatives would enable communities to co-govern resources rather than merely being consulted in a symbolic manner.

## 5. Conclusion

Fiji's political landscape has been shaped by colonial history, military interventions, and constitutional reforms, leading to a centralized governance system under the 2013 Constitution. While this structure aimed to foster national unity and eliminate ethnic-based representation, it has faced criticism for reducing political diversity, limiting democratic participation, and weakening traditional chiefly institutions. The persistence of media censorship, lack of transparency, and political interference further contribute to a "democratic deficit," preventing genuine public influence over governance. The FIJI Water controversy highlights the tension between economic development and social justice in Fiji. While the company promotes its global brand as sustainable and beneficial to the local economy, its operations raise ethical concerns. Issues such as corporate tax avoidance, environmental degradation, and the exclusion of Fijians from their own water resources demonstrate how multinational corporations can exploit weak regulatory frameworks in developing nations. Despite FIJI Water's corporate social responsibility efforts, local communities continue to struggle with clean water access, reinforcing economic inequalities. For Fiji to achieve a more just and sustainable governance model, public participation must be strengthened. Legal reforms should ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for indigenous communities, preventing exploitative resource extraction. Establishing independent environmental tribunals would provide fair avenues to challenge harmful projects. Additionally, decentralizing governance structures would empower local councils, particularly iTaukei leadership, in resource management. Community-driven oversight mechanisms, such as participatory scorecards, could enhance corporate accountability. By prioritizing legal protections, environmental justice, and participatory governance, Fiji can move

toward a more equitable system that balances economic development with social and environmental responsibility.

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