

Migration as the Demographic Wild Card in Civil Conflict: Mauritius and Fiji

Research on the relationship between demographic change and internecine violence has gained some momentum in recent years (see, e.g., Dabelko, 2005). However, this work has mostly been confined to examining age structure phenomena such as youth bulges. By contrast, the intervening variable of migration is strikingly absent—even though migration is the third in the troika of core demographic variables, alongside fertility and mortality. Yet its absence is also understandable, because accurate and consistent data in conflict areas are very difficult to obtain. As a result, we actually know embarrassingly little about the bearing (if any) the demographic shifts precipitated by in- or out-migration have on internecine conflict. In this article, I focus on the demographic disequilibrium that results from migration and its impact on ethnic relations and conflict, using the cases of Mauritius and Fiji.

Since the paucity of data currently thwarts any attempt to test hypotheses that depend on a thorough statistical analysis (a large-n quan-

titative approach), I used a most-similar-systems critical case-study approach to compare different outcomes with respect to ethnic conflict in the small-island states of Mauritius and Fiji.¹ The conditions in these islands are, for the social sciences, a fair real-world approximation of controlled laboratory experiments; these small, (fairly) closed systems allow us to control for variables in a way that is virtually impossible to do with complex conflicts in larger countries.

Notwithstanding ominous predictions to the contrary, demographic trends in Mauritius have actually proven to be a source of political stability. However, the converse holds true for Fiji.

Comparing Mauritius and Fiji

Although they are located on different continents, a comparison of Mauritius and Fiji is appropriate because their colonial, economic, political, and social histories are similar.

About 850,000 people live in Fiji, while Mauritius is home to about 1.2 million people. At 720 square miles, Mauritius has less than one-tenth of Fiji's landmass, and is among the most densely populated countries on the planet. Indian migrants—who originated as indentured laborers shipped in by their British colonizers to work on the sugar plantations—comprise a substantial proportion of the population in both countries. Mauritius has a highly heterogeneous society, with 15 linguistic groups and four world religions. Although the main ethnic cleavage is between the Creole minority (27 percent) and the Indian majority (68 percent), the high degree of differentiation and stratifi-

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cation within Mauritian society makes ethnic categories less powerful than expected.² In Fiji, about half the population is of Indian descent, while the other half is native Melanesian with a Polynesian admixture.

If density, natural increase, and ethnic heterogeneity are the sole determinants of interethnic violence, then Mauritius beat the odds. On the advent of Mauritius' independence in 1968, Nobel Laureate James Meade, a British commission, and others arrived at ominous conclusions about the country's prospects for ethnic harmony, economic development, and political stability (Meade, 1961; Titmuss & Abel-Smith, 1968; Naipaul, 1973). Rapid population growth, the absence of economic growth, and growing population density on a small island with no natural resources caused some concern among policymakers. Independence also flamed the inter-ethnic fires, for the Franco-Mauritian and Creole communities saw independence as a ploy by the Indian majority to gain control of the state apparatus. In addition, the 1960s witnessed considerable labor and inter-communal unrest on Mauritius.

By contrast, prior to Fiji's independence in 1970, the experts were optimistic. Yet the outcomes in Mauritius and Fiji were contrary to expectations. Civil conflict in Fiji intensified, coming to a head in 1987 when, for the first time in its post-independence history, a party headed by a Fijian of Indian ancestry won the majority of seats. In response, some native Fijians staged a military coup, followed by subsequent coups in 2000 and 2006.

Could demographic patterns explain why Mauritius defied dire predictions while Fiji continues to struggle with civil tensions? While the presence of an indigenous population that considers Fiji its ancestral homeland is an indisputable source of tension, this explanation does not tell us why civil conflict worsens when it does. In contrast, the claims I advance about demographics in general, and migration in particular, distinguish themselves from much of the literature precisely because they have intrinsic predictive potential.

Migratory Trends

Mauritius is today the only country in the world where the Indian diaspora enjoys a two-thirds majority. As depicted in Figure 1, the Indian population of Mauritius quickly grew from zero in 1834 to a majority in the 1860s; since then, the proportion has remained fairly stable (Lutz & Wils, 1994).

In Fiji, the immigration of indentured Indian laborers occurred later; some 60,000 of these *girmityas* were brought to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. The demographic impact of this population movement was compounded by a subsequent wave of Indian immigration to Fiji between the world wars. In absolute terms and relative to the native population, migration to Fiji was disproportionately smaller than to Mauritius. As Figure 2 shows, since the onset of Indian immigration to Fiji, the numerical gap between Indians and native Melanesians has always been much narrower than the gap between Indians and the "general population" in Mauritius.

The differentials between the two main population groups on each island are largely a function of colonial migratory policy—that is, colonial migratory policy had the unintended consequence of producing a clear Indian majority in Mauritius. In Fiji, by contrast, it generated only a sizeable Indian minority.

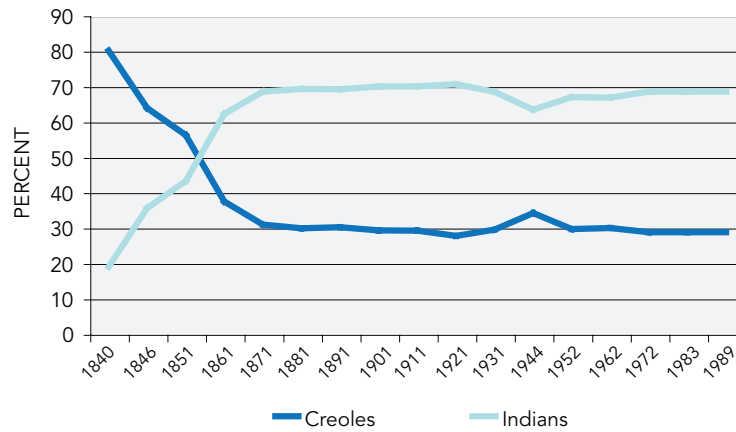
Effect on Age Structure

In another unintended consequence of colonial migratory policy, the Indian minority in Fiji inadvertently challenged native predominance. Indian migration to Fiji postdates migration to Mauritius by several decades. Having entered the demographic transition later, the age structure of Indians in Fiji was comparatively younger than that of Indians in Mauritius. The age-structure differential is partially accountable for the rapid population growth among Indians in Fiji during the first half of the 20th century. While immigration had virtually ceased by 1921, Fiji's Indian population quadrupled between 1921 and 1966.



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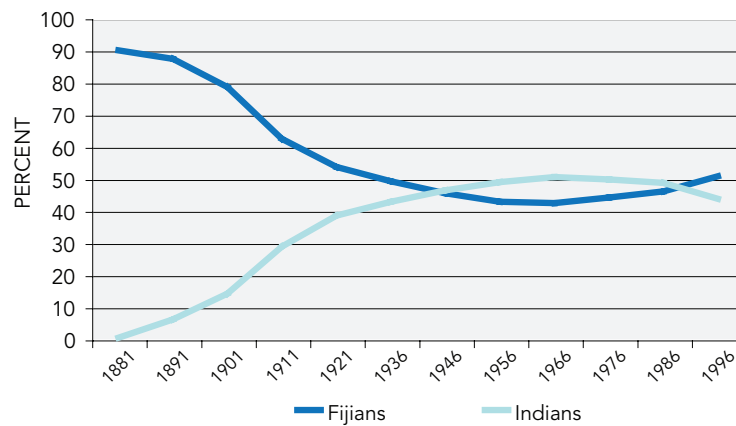
Figure 1: Mauritius, Proportions of Ethnic Groups (1840–1989)



Source: Mauritius Central Statistical Office (1973); Dinan (2002).

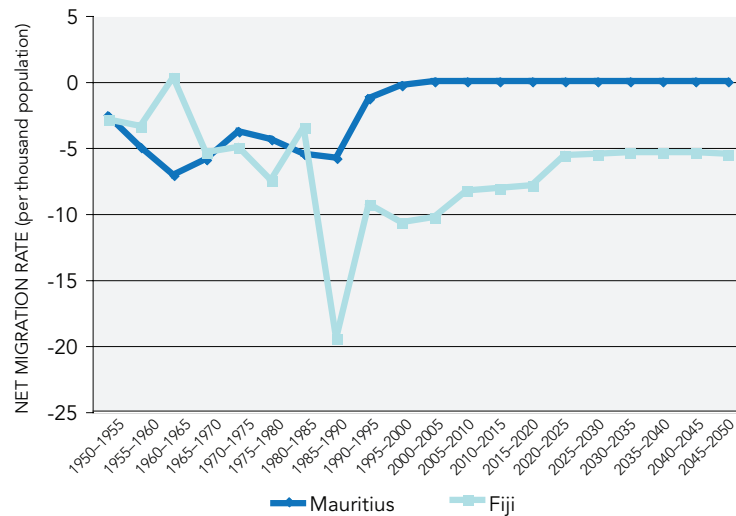
Note: Data after 1973 are based on estimates because Mauritius stopped collecting data by ethnic group at that time.

Figure 2: Fiji, Proportion of Ethnic Groups (1881–1996)



Source: Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics (2007).

Figure 3: Mauritius vs. Fiji, Net Migration Rate (1950–2050)



Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2007).

If population growth remains constant, the total fertility rate (TFR) must be declining. However, even if TFR is declining, the number of women of childbearing age will continue to grow, due to population momentum. As a result, the crude birth rate may continue to rise, thus producing a sizeable youth cohort. These growth dynamics caused Indians to outnumber native Melanesians in Fiji by the end of World War II and approach an absolute majority by the late 1950s (Meller & Anthony, 1968; Milne, 1981).

Migrating populations tend to be fairly young, and accordingly, they reproduce at disproportionately high rates. Native populations may fear being “swamped” by migration. In addition, native populations may gradually end up being outnumbered by migrants due to differentials in natural increase. Neither phenomenon threatened political stability in Mauritius. Mauritius’ native population did not feel its territory was being “swamped,” and colonial migratory policy unintentionally preordained an incontrovertible Indian majority. In Fiji, by contrast, the feeling of being “swamped” was compounded by an unintended challenge to native plurality. Although in both cases the demographic outcome of colonial migratory policy was unintended, this outcome was not necessarily unpredictable. The impact of migration on conflict is a man-made problem; the way migration is managed (or not) can determine its potential for mitigating or escalating a conflict.

Both cases show evidence of significant differentials in age structure. Today, the ethnic populations on Mauritius are similarly structured. In contrast, Fiji’s minority population is younger than the majority population, whose demographic position has been undermined further by emigration. As a result, the minority is now in a position to challenge the majority’s plurality.

Migration, Age Structure, and Conflict

Demographic change *per se* never had a significant impact on conflict in Mauritius because the Indian population consolidated its majority



Military checkpoint after the 2006 coup, Fiji (Courtesy photobucket user loaspoa; http://i39.photobucket.com/albums/e159/loaspoa/fiji%20aftur/checkpoint_near_qeb.jpg)

early on. All population groups in the island state have been aging rapidly since the 1960s, and, as a result, no one group has the young age-structure dynamics that may call Indian hegemony into question. In Fiji, migration created a very young Indian population that reproduced rapidly and, in the process, undermined the hegemonic demographic position of the native population. However, the younger population structure among Fiji’s native population made it impossible for Indians to consolidate their temporary plurality. Figures 1 and 2 depict inter-communal population trends in Mauritius and Fiji, while Figure 3 visualizes why migration—particularly the past, present, and projected out-migration of Indo-Fijians—functions as a source of instability in Fiji. Both the size and rate of immigration and subsequent emigration rapidly changed the size and age structure of the Indo-Fijian population. In Mauritius, by contrast, the slower initial rate of change and subsequent equilibrium in population size and age structure could have contributed to the relative stability of inter-communal relations on Mauritius.

This comparison of Mauritius and Fiji suggests that the most volatile situations are those



REPORT ONLINE

Christian Leuprecht discussed demographic shifts and civil conflict at an event at the Wilson Center on June 13, 2007: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1413&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=238429

The UN Population Division's World Migrant Stock database provides estimates of refugees and migrants by country and region for every five years from 1960-2005: <http://esa.un.org/migration/index.asp?panel=2>

The UN's Small Island Developing States Network helps small islands face several challenges, including remoteness; poor connectivity; limited human and technological capacity; and economic and environmental vulnerability: <http://www.sidsnet.org/>

Ethnopolitics, the Journal of the Specialist Group on Ethnopolitics and the Association for the Study of Nationalities, is soliciting submissions for a special issue on the relationship between demographic change and ethnic politics/conflict/relations. Contact Christian Leuprecht, guest editor, at christian.leuprecht@rmc.ca with prospective submissions or inquiries: <http://www.ethnopolitics.org/ethnopolitics/cfp.html>



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where a majority's demographic dominance is called into question, but where the same group is eventually able to recapture a demographically hegemonic position. This recapture may be due to its younger age structure, co-ethnic immigration, or emigration by the other group. A group with a younger age structure that regains a demographically dominant position is problematic not only because the group may use its numerical superiority to regain dominance and avenge past grievances, but also because of the general link between youthful populations and political instability.

I am not arguing that demography and migration are deterministic or monocausal explanations for conflict. Still, some important conclusions follow from this comparison. Strong differences and some similarities between Mauritius and Fiji were, at their root, attributable to migration, including demographic changes and relative differences in age structure between ethnic groups.

This study thus confirms that migration is an intervening variable in the different out-

comes of ethnic relations in the two island states. Migration turns out to be particularly problematic when a native population's majority (or even its plurality) is challenged temporarily by migration, but the native population's age structure makes it probable that it may one day recapture a position of demographic dominance. The propensity for serious political instability—and possibly violence—appears to be especially high once the native population is able to consolidate its hegemonic demographic position, a finding that is echoed in a recent quantitative study (Toft, 2007).

This conclusion is not just significant for Mauritius and Fiji, but for all small island developing states. Many small island states are ethnoculturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse. As a result, these states are realizing that managing civil relations is a prerequisite for achieving their economic and environmental goals. Ascertaining demographic—and especially migratory—patterns that may prove particularly problematic for civil relations is a significant contribution toward attaining these goals.



Street market in Port Louis, Mauritius (Courtesy flickr user austinevan; <http://www.flickr.com/photos/austinevan/2377033631>)

Notes

1. This article draws its methodological inspiration from Don Horowitz's (1989) piece comparing differences in outcome in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Mauritius and Fiji are among 38 UN-member Small Island Developing States; another 14 small island states are either not UN members or associate members of the regional commissions.

2. Mauritian Creoles trace their origins to Madagascar and East Africa, especially Mozambique.

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