



# FIJI'S NEW FLAG: WORK IN PROGRESS: The process so far and the current status

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Portland Flag Association, NAVA

## INTRODUCTION

*Bula vinaka.* Hello.

My goal today is to report on what has happened in the national flag change process in Fiji so far, and on the current status.

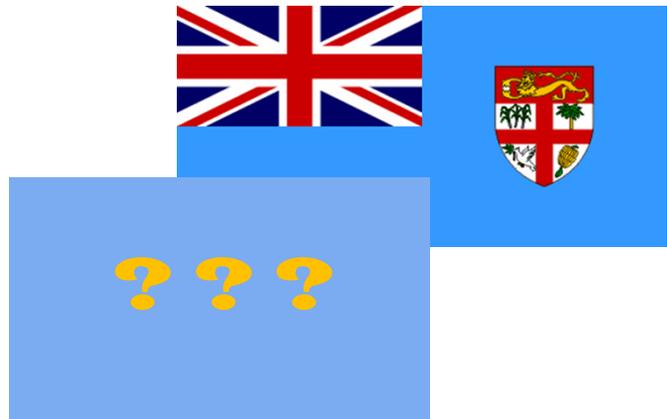
In May 2015, I served as a member of Fiji's national flag committee, as well as its technical advisor.

While I'm constrained by confidentiality from discussing many aspects of this work, I will share the basics of the design-selection process and show the evolving parade of finalist designs, in four successive groups.

I won't express my personal opinion of any flag proposal.

I won't discuss the politics of the country or of the flag-change initiative.

And this presentation will be far from comprehensive, as our time is short and the story is not yet complete. But I hope you'll enjoy this inside view of the Fiji flag process. Here we go.



Prime Minister  
Frank Bainimarama



Attorney - General  
Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum

## BACKGROUND

A former British colony, independent since 1970, Fiji is a South Pacific island nation, 3,000 kilometres from Sydney, with 332 islands and a population of 900,000.

The ruling government of Fiji, elected in September 2014, is led by former naval Commodore Josaia Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, the Prime Minister and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, the Attorney- General. They are usually just called “the PM” and “the AG”.

On 3 February 2015, the PM announced the flag change. Here’s what he said:

*We need to replace the symbols on our existing flag that are out of date and no longer relevant, including some anchored to our colonial past. The new flag should reflect Fiji’s position in the world today as a modern and truly independent nation state.*

*The existing flag is widely loved and admired and I want to stress that this initiative is in no way a repudiation of it or the warm sentiments we all feel whenever it is raised. It has served us well since it was introduced at Independence in 1970.*

*But after 45 years, my fellow Fijians, it is time to dispense with the colonial symbols on our flag – the Union Flag of the United Kingdom and our colonial shield – and embrace a flag that is relevant to every Fijian today.*

*... it is time for us all to embrace change. It is time to sever links that are no longer relevant. It is time to have a national symbol that reflects our present state as a nation. That has indigenous and truly Fijian symbols of identity. That we can honour as a truly authentic expression of our nation now and into the future. And that fills us with even more pride. Promotes even more unity. Because it is relevant and meaningful to us all.*

*The Union Flag belongs to the British, not to us. The shield on our flag has the British Lion and the Cross of St George – a British patron saint. What does this have to do with us? They are the symbols of the coloniser – Britain – a country with whom we are friends and will continue to be so. But they are not symbols that are relevant to any Fijian in the 21st century. And they should go. Honoured symbols of our past, but not of our future.*

The AG was charged with leading the flag-change process. He set out an ambitious timeline. His goal was to bring a design to Parliament for adoption in July, in time to be manufactured in quantity and raised on Independence Day, 10 October 2015. The competition opened the beginning of March and closed the end of April. The committee met in late May, and prospective designs were shared with the public in early June. However, by the beginning of July, the process had slowed down and the deadline was postponed.

February	PM announces flag change
March	Competition opens
April	Competition closes
May	Flag Committee meets
June	Designs shared with the public
July	Process slows

In March, billboards across the country had asked the people of Fiji to submit flag designs - in two months - and the entries poured in.



## NATIONAL FLAG COMMITTEE

The PM named the national flag committee just two days before it began its work. He described the members, in this order, as:

Iliesa Delana	Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports and a Para-Olympic Gold Medallist, (Chair)
Ted Kaye	American Flag expert <u>and</u> vexillologist
Shaenaz Voss	Senior manager Fiji Airways, former executive officer of Air Fiji, Board member of Unit Trust of Fiji and Film Fiji
Ilaitia Jikoiono	artist and designer and creative director of <i>Style</i> Magazine
Shammi Lochan	radio personality and currently radio program director Fiji Broadcasting Corporation
Lenora Qereqeretabua	national public relations consultant and former Miss Hibiscus
Manpreet Kaur	academic specialising in linguistics and diasporic studies at the University of Fiji
Niqa Tuvuki	culture and heritage specialist at the Fiji Arts Council
Ratu Orisi Baleitavea	The Tui Wainunu (traditional Chief)
Agni Deo Singh	Trade unionist and general secretary of the Fiji Teachers Union
Craig Marlow	community artist
Tiko Matawalu	sporting personality, rugby player and coach
Dinesh Patel	businessman and member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

They comprised a broad representation of age, gender, geography, work background, and ethnicity. Some were famous; all were leaders in their fields. We were all volunteers



Some of the National Flag Committee members with a leading international authority in the field of vexillology, Ted Kaye (left).

*Fiji Sun* 21 May 2015

The committee took its job very seriously. We met for two and a half days. The local press covered our work intensively, with items in the newspapers, radio, and TV.

### FIJI FLAG

## Committee starts selection process

**T**he National Flag Committee met yesterday to begin the process of going over the more than 1400 entries submitted during the competition, which ended on May 1.

The Chair of the Committee, Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports and Para-Olympic Champion, Iliesa Delana, said, "I'm very excited to meet the other members as we begin the search for the final design and am confident that we will work together as a team as we move forward."

The minister reiterated that the committee would be able to draw on the full range of ideas submitted as they make the shortlist and that the final flag may be a combination of a number of entries.

The minister was joined by Ted Kaye, a leading international authority in the field of vexillology, along with the other members of the committee.

Mr Kaye said he looked forward to getting to know and working with the members of the Committee in the coming days as they narrow down the entries.

The other members of the Committee include Shaenaz Voss; Ilaitia Jikoiono; Shammi Lochan; Lenora Qereqeretabua; Manpreet Kaur; Niqa Tuvuki; the Tui Wainunu

Fijians will then be given an opportunity to make their comments through a special website and share their ideas with social media.

Ratu Orisi Baleitavea; Agni Deo Singh; Craig Marlow; Jiko Matawalu and Dinesh Patel.

The committee gathered to discuss the overall criteria for choosing flag designs before considering each of the entries.

Several rounds of narrowing down the entries will take place to determine the final few designs.

Fijians will then be given an opportunity to make their comments through a special website and share their ideas with social media.

The final design will then be tabled in Cabinet before being submitted to Parliament for its consideration when it sits in July. **DEPTFO News**

Feedback: [newsroom@fijisun.com.fj](mailto:newsroom@fijisun.com.fj)



Here's the Chairman of the National Flag Committee, the Honourable Iliesa Delana, Assistant Minister for Youth & Sports, addressing the committee's opening session. He's a national hero - Fiji's only Olympic or Paralympic medallist - he lost a leg at age three, yet he won gold in the high jump in London in 2012, launching his political career. He is a member of Parliament.

Over 2,000 submissions had been received when the Committee began its work. The staff did an excellent job of logging them in, tracking the designers' name and contact information, as well as the explanations of the designs.



Many designs were extremely complicated - better as post cards than as flags. But a few were spectacular.

Over the next two and a half days...The committee learned the basic principles of flag design, with a special focus on national flags. Each member reviewed every one of the 2,000 submissions. In the first pass, the number was reduced to 167. In the second pass, the number was reduced to 47.

# 47 Entries Short-Listed for Final Pick



National Flag Committee member Ted Kaye with various new Fiji flag designs at Suvavou House yesterday. Photo: Jona Konataci

**ANA SOVARAKI**  
**SUVA**

**F**orty-seven of the more than 2000 entries for the national flag competition have been shortlisted.

This has been confirmed by National Flag Committee member Ted Kaye during a press conference in Suva.

Mr Kaye, an international expert in the field of scientific study of the history, symbolism and usage of flags, also confirmed that the blue background of the current flag would remain.

“The committee has concluded that the most important symbol on the Fiji flag is the Fiji blue and it will follow to the new flag. It is the most important and first conclusion of the committee,” Mr Kaye said.

He said they were also looking at other symbols like the sun, dove, coconut palm, canoe and the shape of the divisions of the flag that would carry meaning to the people of Fiji.

The *Fiji Sun* 22 May 2015 noted that we were down to 47 entries at the end of the first day.

“It should have very few colours, meaningful symbols, no lettering, no seals and it should be distinctive from other flags,” Mr Kaye said.

He said a special website would be set up soon to display the final few entries being considered.

“We haven’t determined the number of entries that will be displayed on the website, but it will be a small number to allow the people of Fiji to give clear guidance on what components of those flags they are enthusiastic about,” Mr Kaye said.

“My hope is that it will be a hard decision by the members of the public because we will deliver so many good flags to them.”

He said he was extremely delighted with the quality of the designs of the large number of submissions.

“It was wonderful to see the enthusiasm, the passion and the emotion by the people of Fiji that was put into the flag design, it’s very inspiring,” Mr Kaye said.

“It also shows the tremendous creativity of the Fijian people and the passion they have for their country.”

Mr Kaye said it was an honour for him to be help Fiji in this important process, therefore he was providing his service for free.

Feedback: [ana.sovaraki@fijisun.com.fj](mailto:ana.sovaraki@fijisun.com.fj)



**Fiji Flag Conference**

## DECISIONS

The Committee was unanimous that the field should be “Fiji Blue” and in proportions 1:2.

A medium-light blue is the field of the current flag, and it’s referenced in the national anthem as the “noble banner blue”. 1:2 are the current flag’s proportions, consistent with most of Fiji’s neighbours and its British flag heritage.

Some flags were redesigned by the Committee; some were created by Committee members.

The final group of designs was reduced to 20, then 10, then 5.

## SYMBOLS

A major issue underlying the flag-selection process is the country’s ethnic divisions and the symbols important to each group. 54% of the population is ethnic Fijian, a Melanesian people with Polynesian mixed in; 38% is Indo-Fijian, descendants of Indian contract laborers brought by the British in the 19th century. Tensions between these two groups shape Fiji’s culture and politics.

Several symbols emerged frequently in submissions. The Committee articulated their meaning, and I quote:

- The Sun** symbolizes a new day, hope, and Fiji moving forward. It recalls Fiji’s place as “the land of the first rising sun” and its tropical location. It represents health, light, life, and energy, as well as the warmth of the Fijian people.
- The Triangle** signifies Fiji moving forward together as one people, its points recalling the three confederacies of Fiji.
- Stars** represent guidance, navigation, and direction. They symbolize the gallantry of Fiji’s people.
- Seven** a number significant to the I Taukei (the ethnic Fijians) and meaningful in all faiths. It is the number of completeness and perfection. Doubled it is 14. It also honours Fiji’s Rugby Sevens.
- Fourteen** represents the 14 provinces of Fiji. It is evoked either by 14 rays or by seven stars or rays counted on both sides of the flag.
- Tagimoucia** (*Medinilla waterhousei*) represents blessings, courage, and peace. The flower is unique to Fiji and found only on the island of Taveuni.
- The Turtle** represents the humility, strength, patience, and perseverance of the Fijian people.
- The Davui** (conch shell) represents community and respect; calling the nation to unite as one people.
- The Drua** The canoe represents past, present, and future: the Past of all Fijians as travellers, irrespective of race, religion, and even time and the Present our voyage into the Future, one people, one nation towards a new destination.
- The Dove** represents peace and prosperity; an encompassing government looks after the people and their future [also the symbol of Ratu Cakombau, who united the Fiji Islands in the 1860s].

## COLOURS

Apart from the current flag being essentially a blue flag, some of the symbols naturally suggested appropriate supplementary Colours:

- FIJI BLUE** (Process Blue – PMS 2995) provides continuity from the 1970-2015 flag, remaining the “banner blue” of the national anthem. It represents peace, serenity, and freedom, as well as the Pacific Ocean. It shows solidarity with Fiji’s island neighbour countries. (The blue in Fiji’s current flag varies widely, from light to medium, and there is no official specification of its shade. So, using swatches of actual flag fabric, the committee determined the precise shades of colours in the final designs).
- YELLOW** (FM Yellow - PMS 108) represents radiance, life, sustenance, and a new beginning. It recalls the sun and Fiji’s place as “the land of the first rising sun” and its tropical location.

**DARK BLUE** (Deep Blue - PMS 2736) stands for peace, prosperity, trust, dignity, and intelligence. The colour of the deep ocean, it represents the depth of Fiji’s culture. [It was also the field colour of the colonial flag 1874-1970, and the sole change made then to mark independence of a Pacific nation].

**ELIMINATION**

We identified 20 final designs, and then started formal voting. They were quickly narrowed down to 10 and then 5. These are the sketches from our easel pad.

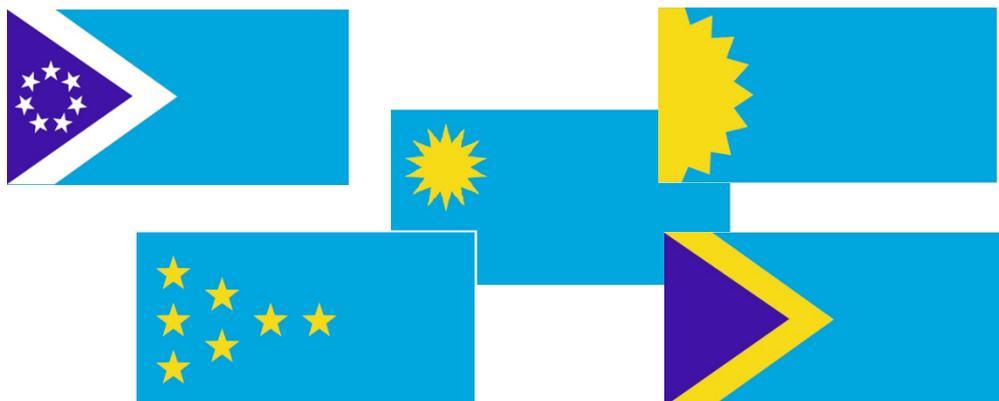
It helped that we were not trying to pick a single final design.

**FIVE FINALISTS**

The committee voted on 5 finalists to advance.

It agreed that the final flag might not be one of these designs, but that this group of 5 would go to the government for consideration.

Below are the final 5 designs, as determined by the committee. Note the use of 7 or 14, the “Fiji Blue” field, and the use of dark blue and yellow.



NAVA and FOTW members Peter Orenski and Eugene Ipavec contributed their graphics talent to developing design images for these and some later iterations.



Parliament was in session, but during a break the AG addressed the committee at the end of its deliberations. He said he was pleased by the outcome, and grateful to all of its members.

After we finished our work, we posed for a group picture. All but one committee member is shown here, along with the very competent staff who supported the project.



After the committee reported out to the government, and I left Fiji, the finalist group was expanded from 5 to 12. Then it was revised and expanded to 24.

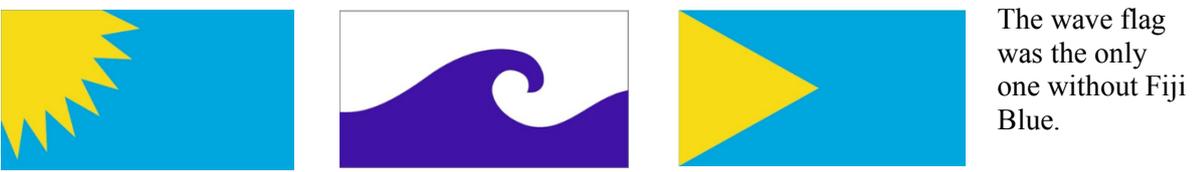
And then it was changed significantly with 23 designs going before the public. The response to those 23 has led to delays in the process.

Here are the expanded 12.

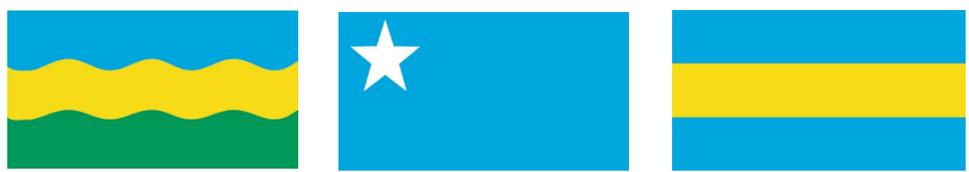
The first 5 were retained, plus 7 more from the Committee's final 20



**Left and below left:**  
The original five finalists.



The wave flag was the only one without Fiji Blue.



That was the first round of changes. Here's the next.

In this round, some of the 12 were revised and the group was expanded to 24.



Several of these new designs were created by individual committee members after my departure.

By early June a further revised set of 23 was ready to be posted for the public's response.

The website (<http://www.newfijiflag.com/> ) said:

*Welcome to the Homepage of A New Flag For A New Fiji.*

*We are pleased to present the final selection of designs for Fiji's new national flag.*

*On this website, you will be able to participate and evaluate the 23 designs chosen after reviewing the more than 2,000 received during the national flag competition and give us your feedback on as many or as few designs as you would like.*

*The feedback period will end 30 June. Then the designs will be submitted to Cabinet for consideration before going on to Parliament.*

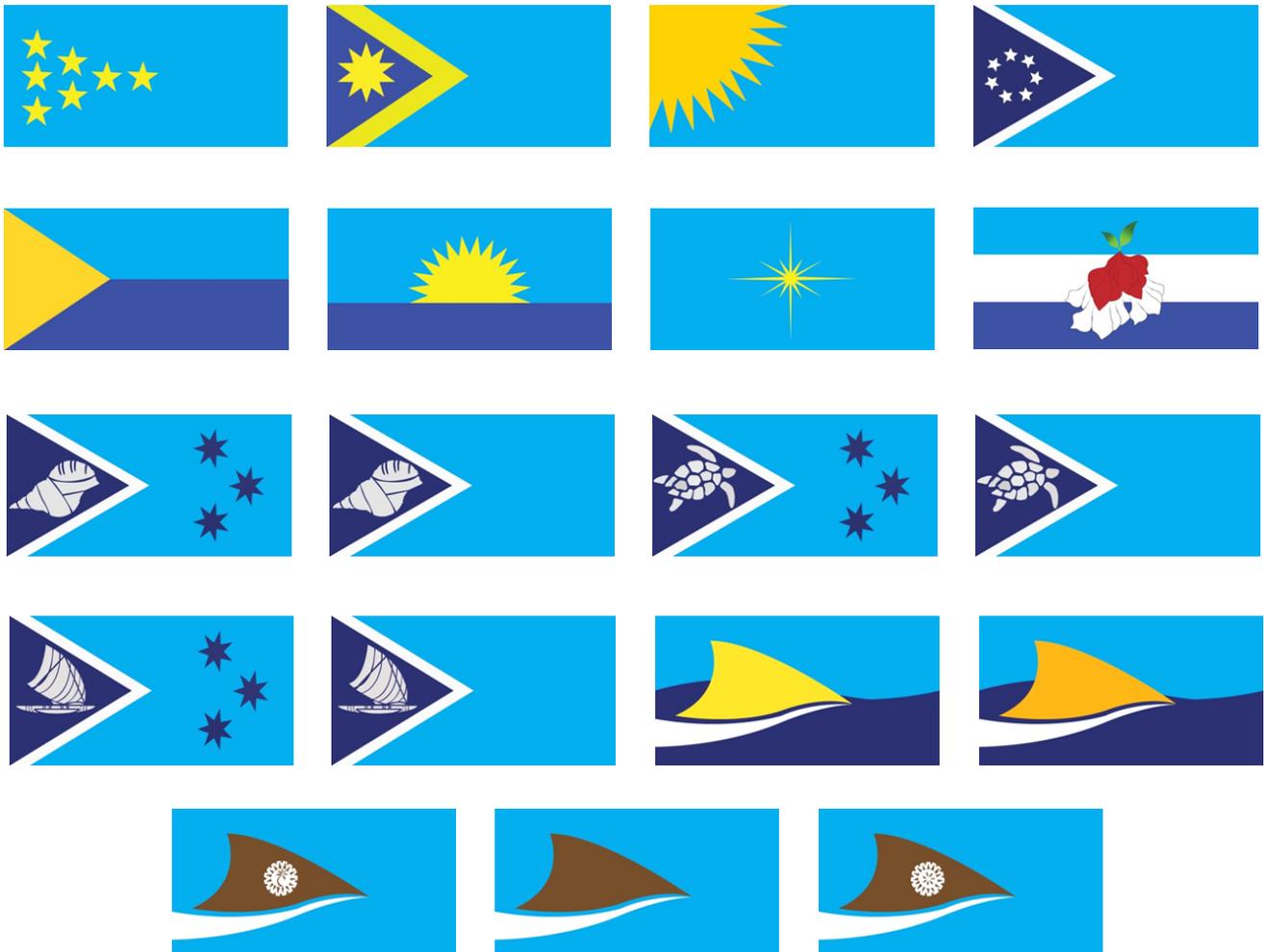
*Please submit your comments on the designs here or find out how to give us your feedback via text message, e-mail, social media, radio phone-in and the post.*

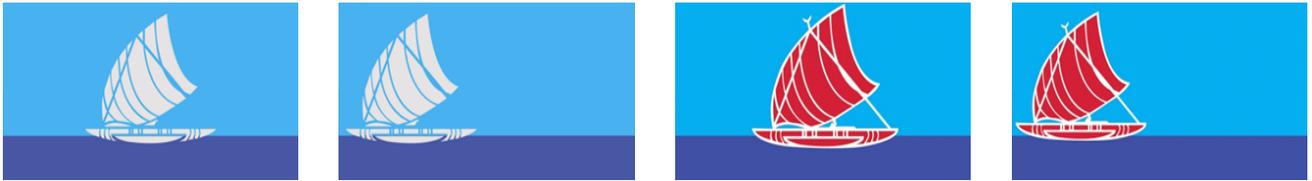
Here are the 23 designs presented to the public.

A local graphic artist in Fiji worked on these.

Several designs were carried over from the previous 24 - but with some changes, some new designs, and multiple variants.

(If you're counting, versions of each of the initial "Final 5" appear, plus some of the expanded 12 and the revised 24).





Those are actually different images on the (brown) canoe sail in the fifth row - the one on the left has a coconut tree on it, the one on the right has a flower shape.

## **DELAY SINE DIE**

Within three weeks, the Prime Minister announced a delay. He said:

*The response [we] have been receiving from the Fijian people has been very positive. And the Government recognises that they want more time to consider what form the new flag should take and are seeking more choices than are being offered by the existing 23 designs.*

*While we had originally set a deadline of today for the first phase of the flag selection process to be completed, the Government has decided to extend the period of consultation. More choices are going to be offered over the next few weeks and months. And the closing date for design consultations will now be 31 December 2015. Cabinet and then Parliament will consider the new flag design when it convenes in 2016.*

*By extending the deadline, there is now ample opportunity for Fijians of all ages and backgrounds to further contribute and consider what symbols most appropriately represent our wonderful nation. It has taken some time – in the Fijian way – for many people to become fully engaged and I very much welcome the current lively debate on the flag designs.*

*The Government has decided to extend the period of consultation. More choices are going to be offered over the next few weeks and months. The closing date for design consultations will now be 31 December 2015.*

*I appeal to all Fijians who have yet to do so to become involved in the process in a spirit of cooperation, collaboration, goodwill, and nationhood.*

So that's where things stand today.



Clearly, much will happen between now and early 2016, and everything is subject to change. But I hope it has been interesting for you to peek inside the process so far.

Now I'm happy to take your questions.

Thank you and *Vinaka*.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

In December 2015, Prime Minister Bainimarama delayed the next stage of the new flag process by a further two months, due to the wish for further new design proposals from the public. He confirmed the view that a flag change was inevitable. In January 2016 the PM, whilst refusing demands that a referendum be held, he announced that there would be a 3-month public consultation process to select a flag from the best 5 designs chosen by the PM's office, beginning March.

In February 2016 the Fiji Islands were devastated by Cyclone Winston, one of the strongest recorded. The recovery and restoration immediately became Fiji's highest priority, and changing the flag was considered insensitive by critics. The timing of the process was delayed.

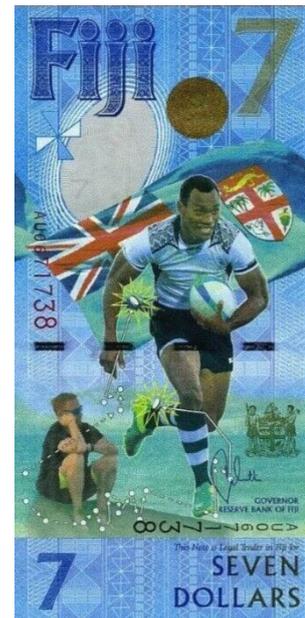
However, all changed on 11 August 2016 when Fiji's Rugby Sevens team won a gold medal at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, Fiji's first medal at an Olympics Games. The Fijian team defeated Great Britain 43-7 in the final. The Fijian public were ecstatic at the victory and the national flag was a focus for their pride. Fijians became emotional to see the national flag being hoisted to a worldwide audience.

On 17 August 2016 Prime Minister Bainimarama, reversed plans to change the flag, acknowledging Fijians rallying around the flag in their public celebrations, and citing the costs of a flag change as too great, especially measured against the costs of the cyclone recovery. PM Bainimarama stated that he "remained convinced personally that we need to replace some of the flag's colonial symbols with a genuinely indigenous expression of our present and our future", but it was "apparent to the government that the flag should not be changed for the foreseeable future".

The day the Rugby Sevens team returned to Fiji was declared a public holiday. Bainimarama urged Fijians to display the Fijian flag on the team's arrival in Nadi. It was a "time to celebrate not only their remarkable achievement but our collective unity and national sense of purpose."



Fiji issued a unique banknote on 20 April 2017 to commemorate the Rugby Sevens gold medal – a \$7 banknote with a vertical design showing the Fijian flag in background to an image of Savenaca Rawaca in motion with a rugby ball.



One can speculate as to what would have happened had the original timetable of a new flag on the anniversary of Independence on 10 October 2015 been delivered, and the numerous delays and additional designs complicating the process did not happen. One suspects that the Rugby Sevens' gold medal would have been celebrated with an equal amount of flag waving, and perhaps the new flag could have been considered a propitious omen in support of Fiji's new status as an Olympic gold medal winner.