Though founded just five years ago the Fiji Labour Party has experienced more in its brief life than most social democratic groups born out of stable democracies would suffer in generations - two military coups, a five-week government two years after the party's foundation, and now two charismatic leaders.

When Adi Kuini Vuikaba Bavadra was elected to fill the party's leadership following the sudden death of her husband from cancer late last year, the party hierarchy and their coalition colleagues sighed with relief so audibly it was heard from Nadi to Suva.

Adi Kuini is a ranking chief from the western province of Nadroga ('Adi' is a hereditary chiefly title for women used in the same way as Dame in the English system), as well as a journalist and trade union activist. She is thought by many of her followers to be willing to support what is best in the traditional Fijian chiefly system, of which she is a product, but also to ditch its negative features in favour of change and reform.

Fijian leaders are expected to be all things to all people. In a society dominated by traditional rituals and ceremonies in which time is a foreign intrusion, leaders are expected to participate for hours while traditional villagers or political supporters send them on their way.

The night before Adi Kuini left for her first overseas trip as party leader, thousands of supporters gathered in her beautiful seaside village of Veiseisei to farewell her. She was kept up till 1.30, and had to leave at 3.30 am to fly to Sydney. Following a 9am arrival, Adi Kuini then held a tough airport press conference, sustained a traditional Fijian welcome, recorded a live interview on ABC radio, five more radio interviews, a TV studio interview and a TV news interview before 4 o'clock. All in a day's work. By 5.30 she was bound for Canberra, where another round of well-wishers awaited her. More food, more wine and more speeches.

Most Pacific leaders would never put up with such a schedule, and they would certainly brook at being asked 'impertinent' questions by aggressive Australian journalists who don't conform to the script of tame interviews in their home countries.

If Adi Kuini is to go on to become Fiji's third prime minister since independence in 1970, she will need all her considerable skills to help turn traditionalists into reformists. For if the current regime is successful in implementing the draft constitution it seems almost certain that the Coalition parties will have to capture at least 70% of the vote to even have a chance of winning. Then they have to hope the army will accept the verdict.

Give or take a couple of thousand, Fiji's two main races are equally balanced numerically. In 1987 the Labour-led Coalition won because it was able to attract about 10% of the ethnic Fijian vote to add to roughly 85% of the Fiji Indian vote. The Coalition parties now believe that they can count on 90% or more of the Indian support and at least 30% of Fijian support. This would give them around 65% of the vote - a result most social democratic parties only dream of.

But in the Fiji parliament envisaged by the current military-appointed rulers, 65% is likely to leave the Coalition parties with a bare 30 seats out of 69. A combination of racially based communal voting, a whopping gerrymander against urban and western Fijians and a huge inbuilt bias against the number of Indian MPs, will make it very hard for Adi Kuini to win.

Prime Minister Ratu Mara recently claimed in the obscurity of Geneva that he envisaged elections by next year. At present Adi Kuini and the two Coalition parties are considering their options. There is support for an electoral boycott. But that would leave the government with a full house of corrupt leaders, who, like Coloured and Indian MPs in South Africa, could be paraded as international apologists for the regime. To participate in the elections, on the other hand, would legitimise the racist constitution in the eyes of the international community.

A third possibility is for the Coalition parties to take part but only with the intention of making the result a referendum on the constitution itself. On this basis it is expected the document would be rejected by a huge margin, possibly more than two to one.

Whether Adi Kuini becomes the region's first woman PM will be determined by events both domestic and international. In Fiji she has to successfully offer reform to traditionalists with a promise of a better deal under social democracy than military rule. Internationally she needs to convince specific countries and forums not to give support to a constitution based on apartheid principles. Adi Kuini's foreign policy strategy is to bring international pressure to bear on the regime in Fiji, so introducing more democratic constitutional standards, and enabling the opposition to challenge for office with some hope of being allowed to win.

DALE KEELING is editor of Fiji Voice.