Power and Influence?  
A Commentary on ‘New Culture’ and its Role in Shaping Political views

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Identifying precise sources of political influence in Fiji has always been difficult. Tradition, provincialism and religion have all been identified as major factors. This commentary, based primarily on ongoing research for a pilot study to be published later, shows that aspects of what can be deemed as ‘new culture’ in Fiji are also an important tool for analyzing influence. Accordingly, the media — as a cornerstone of this ‘new culture’ — should also be understood to be one of the major influences on political viewpoints in Fiji.

While Fiji’s political spectrum has changed dramatically in the past three decades, the basis for most political analysis has not. In terms of assessing influences on the political viewpoints of people living in Fiji from an ‘intellectual’ perspective, many academics (local and overseas) have tended to focus on what could now be (albeit arguably) described as ‘conventional’ areas of research; ‘tradition and culture’, ‘law’, ‘religion’ and ‘economics’. These are areas which are largely understood to have been the forces driving the political culture of the state.

As an area of academic critique, it is also the case that many political studies tend to assess the state as a whole rather than engaging in more focused research. As state, Fiji contains a diverse and relatively large population. It contains a dynamic society, much of which is open to the changes wrought by globalisation and technological advances. However, it is such change that has resulted in society at large as being one that can be considered somewhat polarised when trying to analyse something as abstract as influence on political viewpoints. Put crudely, village life is not the same as town life and town life cannot be considered the same as city life. Generic overviews generalising the perceptions and viewpoints of almost 1 million people who live very different lives are valuable but more rigorous analysis is also needed.

While all of the aforementioned research areas are valid, this commentary argues that in order to really understand the complexities of Fiji’s political arena, there is a need to look beyond the conventional factors argued to be the sources of influence. Newer social considerations need to be integrated into assessments and they should be reflective of current circumstance. To garner a full picture of what is happening in the state there is a need for more precision in the analysis. As Ratuva and Hegarty argue: “To understand how people think in Fiji, we really need to examine the specific institutions and agencies, both formal and informal — from the family to the state — which shape the way we develop our perception of each other” (2003: 12).

Such factors have been the catalysts for a pilot study which focuses specifically on the political viewpoints of young people living in the metropolitan and urban areas of Fiji’s ‘Central Division’ (Suva and the ‘greater Suva’ areas). Using a combination of normative and empirical research methods, the study intends to assess the impact of ‘new culture’ as an influence on the formation of political perception and viewpoints. As a result of the research so far, it is surmised that ‘new culture’ — with media as one of its cornerstones — must be understood as a political opinion shaper for those born in Fiji and living in the Suva area. It is further proposed that the ‘new culture’ is considered a worthy area of analysis.

Methodology

Empirical research for the study is primarily in the form of surveys answered by people living in Suva. Two separate and confidential questionnaires were distributed randomly and returned between August and October 2008. Demographic information required from respondents in both surveys was restricted to place of birth, age groupings and gender. Later follow up discussion with individuals and focus groups will also be necessary.

The first survey asked only three questions and has been completed by 56 people to date. Of these, 31 (just over 55 per cent) were born in Fiji

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and are currently living in what can be described as the Suva and ‘Greater’ Suva area. The vast majority of respondents born in Fiji were between the ages of 18 and 30 years (93.5 per cent). The questions posed were as follows:

1. What has been the main influence on your political viewpoints? (A range of options were presented — education, media (including radio, TV etc.), family, church/religious institutions, culture, friends, other - please specify). Respondents were asked to tick one box only.

2. Where do you get most of your political information from? (Again, this question required respondents to select one of a range of options — family, school, media, church/religious institutions, friends, other - please specify).

3. What type of media do you use or rely on for your political information? (In this section respondents were able to choose as many responses as desired. Categories given were radio, newspaper (print), newspaper (online), television, internet, news magazine, cinema/film, music, other - please specify).

While the research methods used for the study are quite basic and the results presented within this paper should be understood as preliminary, the answers returned certainly make for an interesting insight into some of the core influences on political influences. While further research on the topic is clearly necessary, this commentary serves as a contribution to what should be an ongoing discussion about the types of political analysis that should be undertaken in Fiji.

Establishing the Framework—Why Suva?

Of a total national population of 860,743 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics [FBS], 2007), almost half (49 per cent or 423,803 people) live in ‘urban’ areas. Of these, close to 60 per cent (or 248,591 people) live in the areas deemed as ‘urban’ or ‘peri urban’ in the Central Division. This includes Suva City (75,289), Nasinu Town (76,382), Nausori Town (24,729), Lami Town (10,476), Korovou Peri-Urban (358), Navua Peri-Urban (4,969) and Pacific Harbour Peri-Urban (1,832) (FBS, 2008). The city area itself (as characterised by the Central Business District) is easily accessible to the people of the Central Division vis-a-vis those from other divisions. This makes Suva an ideal starting point for understanding the political influences and viewpoints of those living within the area compared to other parts of Fiji. As such, it is essential to understand some of the defining features that make it so different to other parts of the country.

This identified area contains a dynamic society which can be characterised broadly as multi-cultural (as opposed to multi-racial or multi-ethnic) and economically diverse. As well as the ‘instruments of the state’ (parliament, major government ministries and departments, and courts), Suva is also home to a large number of embassies, high commissions, international and regional organisations, including the regional university and key United Nations agencies. The staff and students of such places, coming from a large number of countries, contribute to the ‘appearance’ of Suva. Regular tourist and other ships arriving in the port also contribute to large influxes of visitors from all around the world who weave themselves, some more inconspicuously than others, into the Suva population. It makes sense that Suva is arguably more cosmopolitan than other places in Fiji.

According to the 2007 government census, of those living in the Central Division’s urban areas, 53 percent (133,361 people) identify as ‘Fijian’, almost 37 per cent (or 91,750 people) identify as Indian, 2 per cent (5,437 people) as ‘Rotuman’ and 7 per cent (17,743 people) as ‘Other’ (FBS, 2008). Such a population breakdown is of interest to this study because it shows that the urban population of Fiji is different to other urban areas, thus making it somewhat culturally ‘unique’. This in itself contributes to people’s influences and ideas.

Another factor, but one that has escaped a large degree of academic scrutiny thus far, is the virtual social and industrial ‘revolution’ that has occurred in Suva. Within the space of less than ten years Suva has undergone a massive shift in appearance and culture. This is particularly obvious in two areas – the increasing presence of ‘high-rise’ buildings and the prevalence of new forms of media (as best characterised by mobile

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2 ‘Others’ in the Fiji context is generally understood to constitute any body either unable or choosing not to identify with any one of the first three categories.

3 In contrast are the demographic breakdowns of other divisions. In the Western Division, those identifying as ‘Fijian’ constituted 45 per cent of the urban population and ‘Indians’ 49 per cent. In contrast Rotumans constituted 1.4 per cent and ‘Others’ 4.2 per cent. In the Eastern Division urban areas (which is actually only Levuka Town), ‘Fijians’ equated to 74.5 per cent of the urban population, ‘Others’ 15.5 per cent, Indians 8.9 per cent, and Rotumans 1 per cent. The Northern Division showed a different story again with those identifying as ‘Indians’ constituting the majority of the urban population (57.6 per cent) while ‘Fijians’, the majority community in all other urban areas, constituted 37.6 per cent. In the Northern urban area, ‘Others’ constituted approximately 4 per cent of the population, Rotumans less than 1 per cent.
phones, cyber or internet cafes, local and foreign ‘glossy’ magazines now on the market). These two indicators have contributed to a ‘new culture’ surfacing in Suva, one that is much more in touch with international influences, trends and opinions in comparison to other parts of the state.

**Why ‘New Culture’?**

Culture is a difficult area to use as a tool in political assessments because it is not static, it changes over time and often depends on context. As an entity, culture can be viewed as both tangible and non-tangible. The term can extend to language and spirituality (indigenous and contemporary), arguably essential components of identity (Teaiwa, 1997; UNESCO, nd). As a starting point, a useful definition of ‘culture’ is found in the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001):

> Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Accordingly, ‘new culture’, as defined in this paper, refers specifically to the ‘ways of living together’ and modes of communication. This extends to new forms of media outlined earlier because they contribute heavily to the creation of the contemporary culture found in Suva. This term can be expanded to include elements of ‘sub’ or ‘counter’ culture.

The new forms of media and the increase in technology available distinctly mark Suva apart from other places in Fiji, and even the region. In terms of media availability, Fiji is host to a generous range of media sources compared to many other Pacific Island states and territories. Yet this wasn’t the case two, or even one decade ago. The amount of media generally available to the public has increased dramatically. And the variety of media available represents a veritable ‘culture clash’ in itself between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ media. With the myriad of resources available it stands to reason that media must be understood as a major influence on public opinion and on society at large. As a political force, this influence can be on those things often seen as politically inconsequential (such as fashion and hair styles) and on those things that are clearly political, such as voting behaviour and opinion.

**Media? Politics? Media Politics? Major Influences on Perception**

The media plays a major role in influencing the mood of the nation but that needs to be done fairly, objectively and with close regard to how best to help Fiji to move forward, Bainimarama (quoted on Fiji Live, 2008).

> ‘I am convinced that the rise of promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases and accidental teenage pregnancies, is directly linked to the influence of the media’, Qarase (quoted in Wansolwara Online, 2004)

In general terms, ‘the media’ is often understood to mean news and current affairs and the industry involved in reporting through these mediums. But the term itself extends beyond those realms (albeit it wasn’t defined in the survey). For political science purposes media can be understood to be the way in which ‘large numbers of people receive information…’ (Oxford). In this sense, the mode of communication can be verbal or written.

Politics is another broad term which can be interpreted in numerous ways. The term was never defined in the survey and, while assumptions should be avoided in academia, it should be recognised that, outside of the discipline of political science, politics is often thought to pertain specifically to politicians and government.

‘Media politics’, in contrast to both of the aforementioned definitions, can be understood to be the way in which the media portrays certain political issues and leaders. While many aspects of the media are understood to be objective agents of reporting the news, others are more focused on delivering opinions. Note Ratuva and Hegarty:

Ownership and control of the information source, political ideology of the people directly involved such as journalists and the style of presentation could determine the way information is packaged. Some news, and information are meant to “inform” while some are meant to change people’s views in a particular way (2003: 31).

With its wide societal reach in Suva, it stands to reason that the media has become one of the major influencing agents in shaping political opinions.

Fiji’s media landscape is vast when compared to many neighbouring countries. In terms of ‘traditional media’, Fiji now has two local free-to-air television broadcasters (plus an additional free-to-air station), two pay
television services, and countless radio stations broadcasting in a variety of languages. There are three daily English language newspapers, and two vernaculars. But you don’t have to buy the paper to read the headlines — around the streets of Suva, newspaper stands and store windows (and sometimes buildings) plaster posters of the latest news to catch the general public’s attention. Non Government Organisations publish newsletters and leave them for free collection in public places (such as cafes and shopping centres). The ‘coconut wireless’ (or ‘word-of-mouth’, or ‘grapevine’) works just as fast as it ever has, although some of the new technology has helped facilitate the speed of delivery.

So-called ‘new’ technology has certainly made its presence felt in Suva, changing the way people communicate with each other. Ten years ago Suva had one commonly used café with internet access (with two computers), now there are seventeen listed in Fiji Yellow Pages. The cost to access the internet has dropped dramatically and connection is faster and more reliable. Mobile phone ownership has increased rapidly and users can access current affairs and news updates in less than one minute.

At election time, the variety of media is even more extensive with political party posters, banners, placards and party manifestos. And this election coverage sometimes extends to overseas elections (such as the recent US Presidential race – see figure 1) as well.

While these are obvious forms of using media for political influence, other, more subliminal, incidental areas (and perhaps even accidental) of political media worthy of consideration for the political messages they can convey. These include fashion, graffiti, beauty pageants, talent contests, advertising (corporate and commercial), and marketing.

‘Urban factors’ such as fashion and graffiti are particularly relevant areas of consideration when considering young people and political viewpoints. A number of civil society and government organisations in Suva have capitalised on this, turning to printed t-shirts to get their messages across. From local and international environment campaigns (recent examples and logos include WWF Pacific’s ‘Protect Our Cultural Icons’, and the Department of Environment’s involvement in ‘Food Security Beyond Climate Change’ for Environment Week, 2007) to Human Rights (in general and targeted campaigns), to broader political icons (such as Che Guevara) or proclamations of identity (such as ‘Tongan & Proud of It’ (figure 4), ‘100% Rotuman’). Printed Bags, coloured ribbons, hats and the more ‘old fashioned’ badges all combine to see young people wearing their political messages literally.

Graffiti is sometimes considered more a part of ‘sub’ or ‘counter’ culture. That it appeals to many young people and is sometimes used to get political messages across to the broader public, however, cannot be doubted. Derived from the word ‘graffito’, the usual use of the term refers to ‘drawing or writing scratched or scribbled on wall’ (Oxford). While much graffiti appearing in the streets of Suva and the greater Suva area sometimes have personal rather than political meaning (as in declarations of love or random swear-words), on occasions it is used entirely for political purposes. A key example is the graffiti messages that appeared on a burnt out building on the outskirts of Suva after the political events of 2000 (see figure 2).

More incidentally, and falling into the category of ‘public education’
are areas such as poster art, whether it be for campaigning or advertising purposes (see figure 3). To this end, even floats in festival parades can convey messages which will be interpreted politically, again some without deliberate intent. Floats in the annual Hibiscus Festival parade have often included examples of this (see figure 4).

Recognising this increase in the prevalence of available media, however, does not correlate to users accessing political information (even if it is available) or interpreting the message as a political one. And if the message is not interpreted as political, it is virtually impossible to deduce if it has an impact on political viewpoints. Often, ‘non-political’ forms of media are determined to be for entertainment purposes alone and people often do not think about the subliminal political messages they are being exposed to.\(^4\)

Presenting the media as such a broad area of study, it is perhaps of no surprise that media was identified by survey respondents born in Fiji as being one of the prime influences on their political viewpoints. Just over 61 per cent of those surveyed and born in Fiji pointed to the media when asked ‘what has been the main influence on your political viewpoint?’ The main secondary source was education (just over 34 per cent recognised education as influencing their viewpoints). Religion and culture were ranked comparatively low (9.6 per cent and 16.1 per cent respectively). These results could lead to the deduction that these areas may have been over-emphasised in the past. Alternatively, they could be interpreted as part of the ‘cultural change’ that has occurred in Suva, indicating that more research on the topic would certainly be valuable.

While these results were primarily for the Suva urban area, they do correlate with those findings of a baseline study on civic education released in 2003 (Ratuva & Hegarty, 2003: vi & 29). Ratuva & Hegarty’s study identified ‘mass media’ (including radio, newspapers, magazines, 4 The author has taught political science courses at USP for five years. This theme has risen in discussions with students on number of occasions and few identify things such as cinema or fashion as being political in the first instance.
television, telephone, fax, internet, e-mail, telex, books, video, and CDs) to be amongst the main sources of information in Fiji (2003: 29).

In comparison, survey respondents born in ‘other countries’ indicated different influences as being the main shaper of their political views. For example, 48 per cent of respondents born in ‘other countries’ cited ‘education’ as the main influence on their political view points, and 44 per cent cited the media. The obvious point of differentiation here is the breadth of media availability in those countries (even in the capitals) when compared to Fiji.

When all responses were combined it was clear that the media should now be understood as a competitive influence in people’s viewpoints. Diagram 1 shows the combined results of the survey. Media accounted for the largest source of influence with education as the second most influential force.

**Diagram 1: Influences on Political Viewpoints – All respondents.**

If people do not identify major political events as shaping their views, then this would indicate that they are not, at least on a conscious level, the major determinant some would assume. This assertion also correlates with commentary in the Ratuva & Hegarty study, the authors observing that ‘people’s “political memory” generally tend to be focused on the most recent and the most controversial’ (2003: 30). In this instance, one could deduce that the ‘political memory’ lay more in the subconscious and so history is not the first factor people think of when asked about what influences their viewpoints.

**Sources of Political Information**

The second survey question asked participants: ‘Where do you get most of your political information from?’. In terms of obtaining political information, 78.6 per cent of all respondents identified the media as their main source. As a note of comparison, of those born in Fiji, over 93.5 per cent indicated media was the main source while 64 per cent of those born in other countries identified the media (40 per cent of this category identified ‘school’ as a source).

**Types of Media**

The third survey question asked ‘what type of media do you use or rely on for your political information?’ As noted earlier in this commentary respondents were able to choose as many responses as desired. Categories given were radio, newspaper (print), newspaper (online), television, internet, news magazine, cinema/film, music, and other (please specify). Print newspaper still proved to be the favourite type of media respondents relied on for political information. The first survey revealed that print newspapers were the single major source of political information for all respondents. For those born in Fiji, at Table 2 shows, the majority favoured print newspapers over other sources. When online newspapers are added to the equation, it is clear that those born in Fiji rely on newspapers as a source of information.

The second most popular source identified was television. Previous studies have already demonstrated that television is a source of influence on young people in Fiji and, in his capacity as Prime Minister in 2004, Laisenia Qarase was quite blunt in his views on some of the negative social influences on young people caused by television (Chetty, 2004).
While not overtly ‘political’, a 1990s study conducted by Harvard Eating Disorders Center of Harvard Medical School provided evidence that television had impacted on the body image of young girls in Fiji (Becker, et al., 2002; Goode, 1999). More directly related to the area of politics as it is generally understood, Dale Hermanson conducted extensive research on television as an influencer of the political process in Fiji society. He argued Fiji One’s television news broadcasts was ‘a powerful agenda setter for public opinion in Fiji’ (Hermanson 2007: 78). Research results included in this commentary supported that. Due to the coverage available, and the costs associated, one could put forward the argument that television is more likely to influence those that have access to it, and these are most likely to be those in or near urban centres (Ratuva and Hegarty, 2003: 29).

The third most popular category was radio, which remains a source of information and entertainment for young people in Fiji. Communications Fiji, Ltd., (CFL) one of the major media conglomerates in Fiji, launched their first radio station in 1985. They have had more than two decades to research and identify their market audiences. In terms of radio, they have identified three main groups (‘Westernised’, ‘Traditional Indo Fijian’, and ‘Traditional Fijian’) although it is the first that is most relevant to the pilot study because of the implications it has for the development of the ‘new culture’ seen to be influenced by international forces:

This market is mainly urban based around the capital and major cities and towns in Fiji (Suva, Nadi and Lautoka). It is a multi-racial combination but largely Fijian and young. This market sets the trends they like to follow (and often adapt) western fashion in the clothes they wear, music and so forth.

This market grew rapidly through the 1980’s and 90’s and has now split into two different sectors. A very large group under 25 and a smaller market that were adolescents in the 80’s and 90’s yet have remained very western in their outlook as they have matured (CFL, nd).

CFL notes that their audience surveys have shown ‘…that the attraction of western/global trends tend to fade as individuals mature. Many who are very ‘western’ in their youth tend to drift back to more conservative traditional markets once they reach their late 20s or early 30s’ (nd). Such observation has implications for those trying to assess the impact of media influences on political view points because as people’s tastes change, so do their influences (and often their political preferences).

Much ado has been made about the internet and politics, particularly in relation to the areas of internet blogging and e-democracy. An Editorial in Fiji Daily Post (2007) wrote about this specifically in terms of its relevance to Fiji:

New media is emerging in Fiji as an alternative to traditional media and is challenging long-held rules of news reporting…. The power and political clout of Fiji’s post-colonial institutions that have dominated the social and political scene for so long is being undermined by our new generation of liberalised cyber-democrats… In political terms, democratic governance, mass participation and mobilisation is being enhanced by the use of the Internet and other modern ICTs (Fiji Daily Post, 2008).

The inequity of access to the internet for women in general, those outside of urban centres and for those at the lower end of the economic spectrum across the Pacific Islands has already been commented on (Bhagwan Rolls, 2007; Anderson, 2007). Arguably, those based in Suva have more access to this form of media. Indeed, in the Ratuva and Hegarty study, the internet was only cited as a source of information for those in the urban centres (2003: 29). However, that people have access to the medium need not infer that they access this media for political purposes. Interestingly, only some 38 per cent of respondents (born in Fiji) reported the internet as a source of political information. When the responses for those born in other countries were included, this figure

Table 1: Responses to survey question ‘ what type of media do you usually rely on for your political information?’ Fiji respondents only.
dropped to just over 30 per cent. It can be surmised that electronic media is still not as influential in the Pacific as other forms of media.

Conclusion

‘New culture — specifically in the form of the media — has made its mark on Fiji society. Suva, with a greater access to a diverse market of media is arguably influenced more than any other part of the state. This is an area that needs further attention from researchers. More specific studies — focusing on individual areas or parts of the country — rather than generalising the country as a whole are also necessary in assisting a greater understanding of the socio-political circumstance.

The survey results used in this commentary, while not conclusive, certainly reveal that factors other than tradition, economics, and religion need to be taken into consideration when trying to analyse Fiji’s current state. Societies are constantly evolving. Fiji has changed, Suva has changed, and yet the focus of much research and investigation has remained constant. Ironically, when areas of new research have been undertaken (such as on the contribution of the internet in Fiji politics), they often neglect other forces (such as print media). This commentary reveals the need for political analysis of Fiji to move beyond the predictable themes. This is not to discount their importance or relevance to the shape of the political arena. But a more comprehensive approach – one which incorporates contemporary society values and themes into the equation and shows awareness of the lives of young people in urban settings – may contribute to a greater understanding of Fiji’s politics in contemporary terms and, ultimately, be more relevant to developing a more comprehensive political understanding.

Bibliography


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