

The Media and the Truth

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Abstract

A vital function of the press in a democracy is to perform the role of a public watchdog, protecting the people's right to know and protecting them against bad government. Journalists in a developing or newly independent nation have an arguably greater responsibility than their colleagues in more developed nations. If a newspaper happens to be the only daily in the country, it needs to be more responsible than its counterparts in a country where readers have many newspapers to choose from. Unfortunately this has not always been the case in Fiji.

Introduction

The only daily newspaper in Fiji in the 19th and most of the 20th centuries was *The Fiji Times*. Though the monopoly of *The Fiji Times* was broken in 1974, there still was no locally-owned daily until after the military coups of 1987.

At the time of independence, mass media in Fiji consisted mainly of *The Fiji Times*, owned by private (at first local, then foreign) business (which had started publishing in 1869, five years before Fiji became a colony); and the Fiji Broadcasting Commission (later known as Radio Fiji), launched in 1954 as a statutory organisation which began regular trilingual transmission in English, Fijian and Hindi.

The founder of the *Fiji Times* was a white settler whose aim was to provide a medium for transmitting news from Fiji and beyond which was of interest to the European settlers in the island group. It also provided its readers with an opportunity for expressing their views on matters that affected them or their community – that is, the immigrant community.

From being a newspaper for the European settlers, *The Fiji Times* slowly became a national newspaper as the knowledge of English spread through Fiji. The outlook of *The Fiji Times*, however, remained the same – that of the European community in the colony. Most of the time, *The*

Fiji Times took a pro-establishment and often anti-worker stand. This was most evident in the anti-Indian propaganda that it generated from the nineteenth century onwards.

In this paper I focus on the influence of the media (both local and foreign) in Fiji and the role it played in race relations in the 30 years from 1970 to 2000. My main argument is that because there was no locally-owned and controlled daily newspaper in the country during most of that period, the media failed to help in contributing to the important task of building a nation out of the plural society that existed at independence. I believe *The Fiji Times'* coverage actually fostered ethnic rivalries. I conclude by looking at the state of the media in Fiji today.

Anti-Indian Propaganda

Throughout the indenture period, there was often violence in the cane fields, resulting sometimes in murders of the overseers by the labourers. The *Fiji Times* invariably described these incidents as cold-blooded murder and depicted Indians as a violent, unreasonable and primitive community. As one scholar noted, the *Fiji Times'* stories of the violent crimes in the cane fields portrayed the image of Indians as 'a mysterious race of criminals to whom violence came naturally' (Kelly, 1991: 40). The fact, however, was that most of the time the violence was brought about by the behaviour of the overseers, which was never mentioned (Kelly, 1991: 35-41).

Until the 1920s, white settlers did not differentiate between Fijians and Indians, seeing both groups as dark skinned people and therefore inferior to them. But after the 1920 and 1921 strikes by Indian workers, when Fijians were sympathetic towards the strikers, the Europeans started posing as friends of Fijians, turning them against the Indians. The *Fiji Times* became their main tool for conveying this pro-Fijian/anti-Indian stand. It deliberately disseminated news about Indians that would cause unease in the minds of the Fijians. This was done through news stories, letters to the editor, editorials, headlines and so on.

In the 1920s there was a campaign for 'White Fiji' with almost daily attacks on Indians in the pages of the *Fiji Times* (Gillion, 1977: 81). There was a particularly disparaging letter in March 1922, describing the Indians as 'evil smelling' and 'treacherous'. This appeared during the visit of an Indian deputation to look into the grievances of Fiji Indians. The Acting Governor, Fell, told the editor that 'the publication of such material was discourteous and ill-timed' (Gillion, 1977: 82). The Gover-

nor thought of

legislating to prevent newspapers promoting ill-feeling and racial discord, but was advised that there was no precedent within the British Empire. The Executive Council resolved that restrictive or suppressive legislation was undesirable, but steps should be taken to influence the press to adopt a moderate tone regarding racial questions (Gillion, 1977: 82).

The editor of the *Fiji Times*, Alport (later Sir Alport) Barker, apologised and dissociated himself from that particular letter, but the attacks on Indians continued in his newspaper (Gillion, 1977: 82).

In 1929 the *Fiji Times* wrote: 'Fiji does not require permanent settlers of the Indian type. Her lands and her climate are for Europeans who can employ what labour they require' (quoted in Gillion, 1977: 116). In 1943, the *Fiji Times* called for the deportation of Fiji Indian leaders, Swami¹ Rudrananda and A. D. Patel (Gillion, 1977: 184). In an editorial, the *Fiji Times* branded them as the evil men. In fact, Swamiji and Patel were agitating for an end to the exploitation of the Indian farmers. This anti-Indian propaganda by the newspaper continued for the next three decades.

A good example of the *Fiji Times* causing racial ill-will was in 1959. In that year when the Fijian and Indian workers went on strike, demanding better wages, a riot took place in Suva following the administration's refusal to give in to their demands. There was a lot of damage to European property during the riots. Mainly because of this, it was generally seen as an expression of anti-European sentiments by the darker races. But recent research has pointed out that it was *The Fiji Times* and its editor, Len Usher, who first made the suggestion that the strike was 'racially motivated and anti-European' (Heartfield, 2001/2: 76).

Indians and Chinese also suffered property losses but there were downplayed by the *Times*. Moreover, Fijian policemen were attacked. Europeans suffered greater losses because they owned most of the property in central Suva. Heartfield also points out that the riots followed the police use of teargas whereas subsequent accounts revised the order. What was more important was that this racial element, first introduced by *The Fiji Times* as the reason for the riots, was taken up by others later, including the judge who conducted the inquiry into the riots. Heartfield concluded: 'It was not the riots that were racially inspired, but rather the

administration's response to them' (Heartfield, 2001/2: 29).

The influence *The Fiji Times* had over the colonial government was revealed when a Bill detailing the powers and privileges of the Legislative Council was moved in the Council in 1965. The Bill, which set out the powers and privileges of the council, had a provision which related to the authority of the council to institute 'prosecutions for offences against the provisions of the Bill'. For example, if any of the members was insulted by anyone outside, including the media, the council could prosecute the offender. The Acting Attorney General, who moved the Bill, said that since the publication of the Bill, representations had been made in relations to certain provisions. Those representations had been carefully considered and the Acting Attorney General wanted to move amendments. It was proposed to delete all references to 'insults' from the legislation (Legislative Council Debates, 22 June, 1965: 235-6). It turned out that it was *The Fiji Times* that had made representations to have the word 'insult' deleted. This meant that if any member of the Legislative Council was insulted (for example, by *The Fiji Times*), instead of the Council taking strong action, 'a privilege that is given to the members of the House of Commons' (LC Debates, 22 June, 1965: 246), the court would have to deal with it. Even Falvey and Patel, two of the Government members, were not for the amendment. But as Government members, they were 'not going to rock the Government boat' (as Falvey put it) by voting against it. Patel said the House was 'delegating its authority to a Magistrate's Court in matters relating to its privileges, immunities and dignities ... Surely this House is entitled to have at least as much dignity as a Magistrate's Court, to put it very mildly', Patel concluded (LC Debates, 22 June, 1965: 247).

Incidents like this justified Usher's proud claim: 'More than once in its long history it has not only described but has also influenced events in Fiji' (1987: 25). The question is: who benefited from its influence?

Siddiq Koya, who led the main attack on the amendment, said: 'I am amazed that because of certain representations made by certain people government has decided to take away the word "insult"' (LC Debates, 22 June, 1965: 239). He then launched a scathing attack on *The Fiji Times*:

I think Fiji has already produced in the newspaper world one or two gentlemen something like Lord Hawhaw and Dr. Goebbels who held the office of Minister of Information in Germany during the war. They would like us to believe that two and two are five; they like to molest and insult members of this House who disagree with them. The moment you disagree with them ... you are

¹ Swami is a title given to a Hindu monk who has renounced the world; 'ji' is a suffix showing respect. Swami Rudrananda, a Hindu monk who played a major role in stopping exploitation of farmers in Fiji, was popularly known as Swamiji

either a Communist or Nazi or a reactionary Unfortunately, in this country, we have only one newspaper They can do and are doing at the moment a great harm to the minds of the public (LC Debates, 22 June, 1965: 243).

Then in 1966, before party politics started in earnest, there was another attempt by the media to divide the Fijians and Indians. The last Bill to be passed before the first party based elections took place was the Landlord and Tenant Bill of July 1966. The Bill was to be enacted mainly to stop exploitation of tenants by unscrupulous landlords. It was made clear that most of these landlords were the owners of freehold land who leased their land. This meant that the European settlers, who owned most of the freehold land, were the landlords who would be most affected by the Bill, though Patel emphasized that 'whether the landlords are the native owners or the Government or the Colonial Sugar Refining Company or the freeholders, all of them have got a skeleton in their cupboards and it is no use for any of them to feel more virtuous than the rest' (LC Debates, 20 July, 1966: 579).

Joshua Rabukawaqa, a Fijian member, however, noted that 'the local Press said that if the Bill was going to be passed it would override the Deed of Cession and would conflict with the trust of the Fijian people in the Crown' (LC Debates, 20 July, 1966: 571-2). The European members in the Council took up a similar line and warned that Fijians would lose control of their land. In their speeches they pretended to be concerned about the rights of the Fijians when in fact they were worried about losing their own privileges, because for the first time in the history of Fiji, rules were going to be applied to leasing of freehold land (LC Debates, 19 July, 1966: 542).

Ratu Mara, who had seconded the Bill as Member for Natural Resources, noted: 'This statement that it destroys the control of the NLTB and it overrides the Deed of Cession, is the sort of statement which must surely disturb the minds of the Fijian people' (LC Debates, 19 July, 1966:531). And disturb them it did. Even high chiefs like Ratu George and Ratu Edward, following the European members, expressed their preference for a deferral and reluctantly supported the Bill while expressing the fear that it was being rushed. The government was not prepared to defer the Bill because it feared that the land issue would be made into a political football in the elections and it feared that the Bill would be shelved by the incoming government which would be a 'political' government. The Fijian landowners had been consulted through the Provincial Coun-

cils and the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). Ratu Penaia, as Secretary for Fijian Affairs, had himself explained the Bill to the Provincial Councils and the GCC. Ratu Penaia and others noted that the middlemen and land agents 'were squeezing the tenants and the legislation was to stop such exploitation which is on a scale that can only be described as a crime against the people' (LC Debates, 20 July, 1966: 575). Koya expressed the hope that the Government would not be 'bullied by the landlords in the colony' (LC Debates, 20 July, 1966:570) who wanted the Bill to be shelved.

This was perhaps the last attempt in the Legislative Council by the European settlers to control the affairs of the country to suit their preferences. Soon after this an elected government came into power and there was a shift in the power base with the European minority losing most of its privileges (though perhaps still retaining a disproportionate amount of power and number of privileges). *The Fiji Times* continued to play its part in bringing about divisions in the nation but its power to influence shrank, with its monopoly broken soon after independence, until after the military coups of 1987, when it once more regained its monopoly.

In 1970, when constitutional talks were held in London leading to independence, Len Usher, then editor of *The Fiji Times*, who had gone to the conference in his capacity as an official of the Alliance party, was the only one striking a note of discord amidst the general harmony that prevailed. He refused to attend the opening of the Constitutional Conference though he was invited. Ratu Mara expressed disappointment at the lack of co-operation from the daily newspaper for his efforts in 'trying to promote the idea of co-operation among all the races' (Parliamentary Debates, 17 Dec., 1970: 382).

Role of the Media in Developing Countries

David Robie believes that journalists in developing nations have a greater responsibility than their colleagues in other, more developed nations (1994: 9). This applies more to the editors and publishers of newspapers. If a newspaper has a monopoly as in the case of Fiji at independence, the responsibility becomes even greater. Unfortunately the attempts to break the monopoly in Fiji met with opposition.

K. C. Ramrakha, the Opposition Whip, who was a shareholder and director of the Pacific Daily (Fiji) Limited, a company formed with the view of starting a second daily newspaper, complained about Usher, who was also the mayor of Suva. Ramrakha claimed that Usher successfully

blocked the company's efforts to acquire land in Suva because in his capacity as the mayor of the city he chaired the meeting and no one contradicted what was being said. 'There was nothing we could do about it because a small group of men voted in one particular way, the whole thing rested on their whim and we were completely frustrated' (Parliamentary Debates, 7 December, 1970: 96-7). Ramrakha concluded: 'There is nothing, Sir, that would please me greater if the Alliance Government were to get enough people together and start a daily newspaper in competition with *The Fiji Times* because I think that would be a very healthy move' (Parliamentary Debates, 7 December, 1970: 103).

Soon after the Constitutional Conference, Siddiq Koya, the Leader of the Opposition, attacked Usher in the Legislative Council, describing him as 'a person who has done more damage to this country than anyone else that I know of' (Legislative Council Debates, 15 June, 1970: 196). A personal attack of this nature on an individual outside the Parliament was condemned by many as vicious. Without the protection of the parliamentary privileges, it would have amounted to slander, they pointed out. At the same time many people believed that there was at least some element of truth in Koya's claims.

A few months later *The Fiji Times* figured prominently again in Parliament. R. D. Patel, the brother of A.D. Patel, said: 'Sir, we have one Australian daily monopoly in this country which has got into [the] habit of giving a sermon to all and sundry in this country without any exception right from the backbenchers of this House to the Prime Minister' (Parliamentary Debates, 14 December, 1970: 364). He went on to say:

... even after it has become independent, there is not one single national daily in this country which is a great shame for all of us. The only daily is a foreign daily – a monopoly which has no scruples about what will happen to Fiji's interests when it comes to that so long as it serves its own masters. Sir, in a situation like that where the vast medium is in a foreign company's hands in a country, it becomes very dangerous ... an inspired propaganda can be stage managed contrary to the best interests of this country, contrary to the truth and justice of the situation ... (Parliamentary Debates, 14 December, 1970: 368).

Ratu Mara also was critical of the daily newspaper and the racist attitude it displayed. He referred to the leader of a local paper which blamed him for lavishing praise upon the Leader of the Opposition. He said:

At the opening of the London Constitutional Conference ... I am sorry that the editor refused to attend as he was invited to attend at the time because he might then have found that it was not lavish ... I paid tribute to the gifted and distinguished man, the late A. D. Patel ... It was, in fact, Mr. Patel who initially in 1965 gave an impetus to harmonious and productive talks by his assertion that ownership of land of any kind be it native, crown or freehold, cannot be called into question There has been too much anti-Indian propaganda [by the *Fiji Times*] in the past and the balance had to be redressed" (Parliamentary Debates, 17 December, 1970: 383).

The opposition suggested giving encouragement to the setting up of another newspaper so that the *The Fiji Times* would not have its way all the way through. Koya said they were not only past masters in slanting headlines but the trend had gone to dangerous lies. Koya thought if they insisted on having local participation to the point that the locals had a say in policy making, then the newspaper might change because they might have local people there who would point out when something was not good for the country (Parliamentary Debates, 21 December, 1970: 467-8).

A year after independence, in October 1971, Dr. Verrier, an opposition (Liberal Party) member, moved in Parliament that *The Fiji Times* 'should be transferred to public ownership under the control of an independent Commission' (Parliamentary Debates, 21 October, 1971: 1524). Opposing the motion, a government member, Rob Yarrow, pointed out that it was a dangerous motion because it sought 'to undermine one of our precious democratic freedoms, the freedom of the Press' (Parliamentary Debates, 21 October, 1971: 1526).

The Opposition NFP had seconded the motion but they abstained from voting. The Opposition Whip, K.C. Ramrakha, said that they seconded it to give members a chance to express their views on *The Fiji Times* but they did not want to interfere with the freedom of the press. Ramrakha pointed out that *The Fiji Times* was criticized by two Roman Catholic Fathers who consistently read the paper for a period of time and found it to be anti-Indian. He said that even the Prime Minister had criticized it as being anti-Indian. Ramrakha went on to say that it was not only anti-Indian but it had also become anti-Fijian (Parliamentary Debates, 21 October: 1971). Worse still, one could say that it was anti-Fiji because it seemed to have no commitment to Fiji as a nation. Ramrakha warned: '... we must strangle this newspaper before it strangles us, and I mean it'

(Parliamentary Debates, 21 October, 1971: 1537). He hoped that the Pacific Daily (Fiji) Limited which published the *Pacific Review*, would soon start publishing as a daily newspaper. He admitted rather disarmingly that he was a majority shareholder in the company (Parliamentary Debates, 21 October, 1971: 1530). However, the *Pacific Review* never became a daily, and even the weekly publication ceased soon after independence. The anti-Indian propaganda of *The Fiji Times* continued.

It, however, modified its attitude and tone to some extent when a rival newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*, started publishing in 1974. It no longer persisted in highlighting reports that caused anti-Indian feelings in the rest of the society but this was a brief respite while the rival publication continued to exist. In 1987, after the military coups, when *The Fiji Times* regained its monopoly, it slowly drifted back to its original state. This became all the more pronounced after the 1999 general elections which resulted in the installation of the first ethnic Indian Prime Minister in the country.

Now the anti-Indian bias of *The Fiji Times* was focused on the Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. *The Fiji Times* contributed to the crisis of 2000 through its reporting of events which highlighted every little lapse of Chaudhry and caused concern in the minds of people, especially ethnic Fijians. Chaudhry and his government realised this but did not know how to effectively deal with the problem. They wanted to get rid of the expatriate publisher of the paper. This only made the situation worse as the paper became more anti-government as it then seemed to have a justification for maintaining such a stance.

Breaking the Monopoly

In 1974, when the *Fiji Sun* started publishing, it broke the monopoly, although it was also foreign-owned. Deryck Scarr contrasted the two papers, saying that *The Fiji Times* was 'soberer than its newer rival the *Sun*' which was 'much fascinated by the stars of the Bombay film industry' (1988: 7). This hardly described the real difference between the two papers which was that from the beginning *The Fiji Times* portrayed the views of the vested interests and was anti-Indian while the *Fiji Sun* tried to appeal to the masses, both Fijian and Indian. Within a short time it became very popular. This was achieved in two ways. Firstly, it gave wide coverage to sports which appealed to the Fijians. It also gave coverage of Indian movies ('the Bombay film industry') which attracted the Indians.

The Fiji Times was not 'soberer' but more pro-establishment. The

Fiji Sun, which had been in business for just over a decade at the time of the military coup that overthrew the FLP/NFP coalition government in May 1987, did not have a deep understanding of the situation unlike *The Fiji Times* which had a better knowledge of the ethnic realities in Fiji, having been in the country for well over a hundred years. Consequently, the *Fiji Sun* might have been 'hasty' (Scarr, 1988: 76) in some of its reporting when the coup happened. The *Sunday Sun* later admitted it could not find any basis for the stories the coalition spread abroad such as 'seven murders and innumerable rapes since the coup' and 'suggested that their main proponent, the deposed Foreign Minister Krishna Datt, was hallucinating' (Scarr, 1988: 2).

It, however, goes to the credit of the *Fiji Sun* that it was not accused of spreading lies, unlike *The Fiji Times*, which had been accused of spreading 'dangerous lies' (Parliamentary Debates, 21 December, 1970: 467). In 1987, after the military coups, when censorship was introduced, the *Fiji Sun* refused to publish under such conditions. Soon it withdrew its operations from Fiji. The withdrawal was unfortunate because censorship was lifted soon afterwards.

A local business firm, Punja and Company, was interested in starting a daily newspaper after the *Fiji Sun* closed, but it did not take off. There was no local medium to give voice to the feelings of those affected by the coups in 1987. Two years after that, a local daily newspaper, the *Daily Post*, started publication. Paradoxically, it was started by an ethnic Fijian, not an Indo-Fijian, though initially it was the Indo-Fijian politicians who were trying to set up a rival daily.

If the Indo-Fijian businesses had joined hands with the Fijian publisher to strengthen the publication financially it would have been good for the country to have at last a strong local news medium. It would, moreover, have meant a 'multiracial' business venture which would also have been a good move. But no such co-operation was forthcoming. The *Daily Post* struggled along for over ten years before it fell into dire financial trouble before the Qarase government decided to bail it out as an indigenous business enterprise.

Foreign Media

Apart from the foreign-owned media in Fiji itself, there were also problems with the foreign media, mainly Australian and New Zealand, which often judged Fiji's situation from their Euro-centric standpoint and gave it their own slant (Thomson, 1999: 134). This problem became ap-

parent soon after independence. In 1975, K. C. Ramrakha asked the Ministry of Information to counter the propaganda by foreign media because 'as a result people carry a wrong impression of this country in their minds, and it is the task of everyone of us to correct that' (Parliamentary Debates, 2 December, 1975: 1742).

In the 1980s, Australian journalists persistently gave the impression that corruption was rife in Fiji Government. Peter Thomson who worked for the Fiji Government for sixteen years, asserts that Fiji did not have a corrupt government. There was corruption, of course, but he never came across an instance when it was not punished. He lived in Sydney in the 1980s as Fiji's Consul there and he found corruption in Australian state governments much more 'spectacular than anything that might have existed in Fiji'. He, moreover, said that in the Sydney diplomatic corps 'it was common knowledge that ministers of various Australian state governments were on the take and that senior levels of the state police forces were in cahoots with organised crime' (Thomson, 1999: 137-8).

Rather than exposing the corruption that existed in their own country, the Australian journalists from early 1980s were interested in exposing corruption in Fiji government. When the military coup overthrew the newly elected coalition government in 1987, the Australian media portrayed it as a move supported by the defeated Alliance party to hide the corruption that existed when they were in government.

Deryck Scarr held similar views to that of Thomson about corruption in Australia. Writing about Australian journalists who wrote about Fiji in their newspapers, Scarr noted: 'In New South Wales, particularly, which was trying with difficulty to imprison its minister for corrective services on a bribery count, it was very easy to relate to the corruption which, said the Australian press and coalition ministers on their support-raising travels, it was the object of Rabuka and his backers to hide' (Scarr, 1988: 44). Scarr further noted that facts were not produced or when produced were not always facts.

The Coalition government claimed that Ratu Mara, after the defeat of his party in the election, was taking important papers to Lau to prevent discovery of corruption. But the vessel supposed to be carrying these papers went down off Nasilai. The papers 'lay on the Suva foreshore to be photographed by the press' (Scarr, 1988: 48). They would have been able to read them too. But nothing scandalous seemed to have been found in any of them. Besides, if the Coalition really wanted to expose corruption in the Alliance government, Scarr believed making the Alliance parliamentarian Militoni Leweniqila the Speaker, 'for no evident political rea-

son but rather to enjoy the resulting gnashing of Alliance teeth' (Scarr, 1988: 48) was a safeguard against such exposure. Scarr asserts that '[t]o have been minister for home affairs is to have been exposed to temptation' (Scarr, 1988: 48).

Michael Howard had also noted that Leweniqila had been accused of corruption and the Alliance Party was reluctant to have him as a candidate in the 1987 general elections (1991: 394-5) yet the Coalition government was bent on having him as the new Speaker.

Thomson had the impression that the Australian investigative journalists found it easier to run corruption stories on Fiji as there would be no physical or legal threats to their persons or their careers which might not have been the case if they had run similar stories on the 'widespread corruption going on in the courts, governments and police forces of Australia at that time' (Thomson, 1999: 138).

As a proof of Australian media bias, Thomson gives the example of a *Four Corners* programme, screened by Australian TV early in the 1980s, which was 'so one-sided in its opposition to Ratu Mara's government that the opposition parties in Fiji made videos of the programme and used them as election propaganda' (Thomson, 1999: 137).

If it was suspected that there was any truth in the allegations made by the Australian TV programme, the Opposition could have brought it up in Parliament and questioned the Government rather than using it for election purposes. The Opposition's action showed a clear departure from its position under Patel when Opposition members used to make use of the Parliament to raise important issues that concerned the nation. The Ministry of Information, with Ahmed Ali as the minister, also failed to counter the propaganda effectively, correcting the misconception, if there was any, from the beginning, rather than appealing to ethnic Fijian feelings towards the end of the campaign.

David Robie notes that in a developing country vigorous journalism could jeopardise the stability of government. Unlike in developed countries, where individuals come and go while the political and economic systems are intact, in developing countries, where issues are centred around individuals, toppling a leader can bring about anarchy (Robie, 1994: 12). This is more likely what happened in Fiji in 1987.

For twenty years, the country revolved around Ratu Mara and those who made concerted efforts to get rid of him failed to realise the disastrous consequences that would follow if they succeeded. Multiracial Fiji, with rights for everyone, was Ratu Mara's creation. Removing him prematurely (before the country became an integrated nation) would result in

the destruction of what had been achieved slowly and painstakingly over two decades.

When the Fiji situation is contrasted with western countries where the system of government is less affected by personalities, Robie's point becomes clearer. In the Pacific itself we have the example of the removal of Gough Whitlam by the Governor General but it had no effect on the system of government in Australia. By contrast, defeating the government of Ratu Mara signalled the end of democracy and equal rights for the people of Fiji, although on the surface, there was a smooth transition when the Bavadra government assumed power.

Ratu Mara believed that it was the media that ruined his reputation in 1987 by spreading stories that he was behind the coup. After Ratu Mara's death in April 2004 Jim Shrimpton, the Australian journalist, talked (in a radio interview) of how at the first press conference after the coup Ratu Mara was close to tears when it was suggested that he was behind the coup. Shrimpton said he had never seen Ratu Mara, who denied that he had any involvement in the coup, in such a state. Shrimpton believed him because he thought Ratu Mara was sincere in his claim that he had no part in it. The only evidence against Ratu Mara until now is Rabuka's claim that he carried out the coup at Ratu Mara's suggestion. No other evidence has emerged to prove the accusations that the media started spreading soon after the first coup.

After Ratu Mara's death, there had been a reassessment of his contribution and an acknowledgement that it was extremely positive. *Time* magazine noted:

The turmoil of recent Fijian politics only served to underscore Mara's achievement ... he gave Fiji the basis of a stable democracy and laid the foundations of its current prosperity. And he never stopped reminding Fijians that racism was the enemy of both (3 May, 2004: 8).

However, even when admitting of his greatness, the media distorted facts to give a less favourable picture. For example, *Time* magazine noted that Ratu Mara was imperious and 'visitors were enjoined to approach him on their knees' (*Time*, 3 May, 2004: 8).² In Fijian culture, during the yaqona ceremony, it is true that they approach the chiefs (not just Ratu Mara) on their knees and offer them a bowl of yaqona but this was part of

² During my stay of more than 30 years in Fiji I had attended several functions where Ratu Mara was present (I have also met him a few times) but I had never seen anyone approaching him on his/her knees.

the traditional ceremony and has nothing to do with Ratu Mara's imperiousness or his desire to keep his people servile.

If the foreign media and the foreign-owned local media ruined Ratu Mara, it was *The Fiji Times* and other local media that played a major role in helping to overthrow Chaudhry³ as the head of government. The absence of a truly local national newspaper to counter the adverse effects of the foreign-owned newspaper in the country contributed immensely to such adverse developments.

A New Zealand journalist, Bruce Connew, was amazed to learn that a whole groundswell of Fijians were 'convinced, by those with other agendas, that Chaudhry's master plan for Fiji was "a little India"'. He was further puzzled that Chaudhry didn't counter the 'crass disinformation campaign'. 'Is he a politician or not?' Connew asked (2001: 79).

This is quite understandable to people who are familiar with the position of the media in Fiji. They know the immense power of *The Fiji Times*, which virtually had no rival in 2000. The locally owned daily newspaper, the *Fiji Sun* was in its infancy and the other local daily, the *Daily Post* (though at that time still independent) was going through financial problems.

A veteran local journalist, the late Robert Keith-Reid, while identifying the motives behind the crisis of 2000, had said:

What it is all about is money wanted by people who had it but couldn't keep it, who have debts they don't want to pay, who have money deals they don't want found out, and above all, who want back positions in which they can make LOTS more money laced with the thrill of power.... What a pity it is that no one is loudly declaring that the myth that Mahendra Chaudhry wanted to steal the Fijian heritage and Indianise is a lie (*Fiji Times*, 18 June 2000).

By then it was already too late as the People's Coalition Government

³ Even if the media is owned by local people it can still work against the interests of the country, as Michael Field has rightly pointed out, giving the example of Fiji during the 2000 crisis. He talks of the dominant role of radio and television – 'both strongly locally owned' – in promoting a particular view point. He points out that Fiji TV in particular, which is owned by Fijian provincial councils had a big role in this. Field argues that they were irresponsible in promoting a particular view point and 'the private radio station (also locally owned) was crucial in giving a voice to the coup plotters and even broadcast their breakfast shows from inside the hostage parliament!' (Personal communication, March, 2006).

had been removed at gunpoint. If Keith-Reid and other journalists had stated that earlier, it might have helped as it could have reassured the Fijian people. Chaudhry's mistake was underestimating the power of *The Fiji Times* and challenging it before he was well settled in his position as the head of the government.

While Ratu Mara was the greatest leader that Fiji has had in modern history, it is undeniable that the media had at least some part in undoing him. Similarly, many felt that Mahendra Chaudhry was the ablest among those who succeeded Ratu Mara. Ratu Mara himself had acknowledged that Chaudhry was able. Robert Keith-Reid went a step further and suggested Chaudhry could have been a better leader than anyone else. The media helped to undo him too.

Media Distortions

In 1987, during the first coup, the media personnel (especially the foreign journalists) were taken by surprise. Most of them were 'Clueless on Coup, Coup Land' (Field, 2000) but soon they started posing as experts on Fiji. Media accounts were often distorted. Unfortunately there were some deliberate distortions too. According to Thomson, during the 1987 coup New Zealand TV viewers were shown tanks driving through the streets of a tropical country with the picture of the Bank of New Zealand building in Suva in ruins. There were, however, no tanks in Fiji and the Bank of New Zealand was being demolished to give way for the construction of a new building. So, Thomson believed, the TV journalists must have cleverly juxtaposed pictures of tanks in some African country with the picture of the Bank of New Zealand to give the impression that the army was running riot in Fiji (Thomson, 1999: 134).

There was also another problem. According to Thomson, in 1987, the deposed Labour Government had an effective public relations campaign in Australia, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission used a lot of the material given by the Fiji Labour Party. Scarr had further noted that after the second coup Radio Australia was for some days the main source of local news as local newspapers had shut down. But it was also in the 'forefront of scare mongering' (Scarr, 1988: 77). Quoting Krishna Datt, it reported 'seeing gangs of Indians armed with cane knives roaming Suva at midnight' when 'they themselves were the only people on the main Victoria Parade, at any rate' (Scarr, 1988: 77). Scarr blames the foreign journalists for giving a false picture but admits that it would be wrong to blame all of them as there were one or two 'honourable excep-

tions'. He mentions ABC television journalist Margot O'Neill as one of them (Scarr, 1988: 77) while Thomson praises Jim Shrimpton of the AAP.

One former minister was reported to have told the media that a large number of Indians were murdered or raped in the wake of the coup; Scarr names Krishna Datt as the former minister spreading this misinformation, (1988: 77, 116.) When Thomson heard this news he decided to ring up Radio Australia's Director, Peter Barnett. Thomson introduced himself as the Governor General's Permanent Secretary and told Barnett that Radio Australia should check its facts before broadcasting them. AAP's respected correspondent Jim Shrimpton had heard the same stories, checked them and found they were untrue. Thomson himself had checked with the police and it was clear that those reported incidents just had not happened. While there were some exceptions among the foreign journalists who tried to report the happenings accurately, in contrast, even the local (foreign owned) media was guilty of inaccurate reporting as, unlike Shrimpton, some of the local journalists did not bother to check the accuracy of some of the stories that were being spread. As mentioned earlier, the *Fiji Sun* reported several deaths and rapes in the wake of the coup in May but later admitted that there was no substance to these stories.

Thomson told Barnett that 'Radio Australia was a "victim" of a campaign of rumours which dangerously distorted the situation in Fiji' (1999: 135). The media, however, had the last word. Radio Australia later announced that Thomson had 'ludicrously accused Radio Australia of "orchestrating" a campaign of rumours against the Fiji administration'. Sir Len Usher subsequently wrote to Sir William Heseltine, the Queen's private secretary, that the Governor General's permanent secretary 'rather overdid a protest by suggesting that the ABC was carrying on an orchestrated campaign against the Fiji administration. Heseltine sent a copy of that letter to Ratu Penaia who showed it to Thomson with the remark, "Len got that one wrong"' (Thomson, 1999: 135-6).

That was not the only one Len Usher got wrong. Throughout the crisis, he kept writing letters to Heseltine informing the Queen of what was happening in Fiji. Later he published these letters. Then it became known that he had been giving a lot of misinformation especially about the Indians. For example, when Anirudh Singh, an academic at USP, was abducted and tortured by the army for expressing his protest, Usher wrote that Singh was no longer a Fiji citizen and he was married to a foreigner. These were lies and Singh threatened to sue Usher. Usher then admitted that he had made a mistake.

Usher was no longer the editor of *The Fiji Times* but he continued his role of generating racial ill-feeling. He seemed to think it was all right for the army to torture if the victim was an Indian who was no longer a citizen of Fiji and whose wife was also not a Fiji citizen.

The foreign media also made heroes of the coup makers—Rabuka in 1987 and George Speight in 2000—rather than depicting them as traitors. Both Peter Thomson and David Robie talk about how Rabuka impressed the foreign journalists with his communication skills and easy manner (Thomson, 1999: 143; and Robie, 1989: 226-7). Robie talks of the series of ‘exclusive’ interviews he gave in his barrack home to five women journalists. ‘All pandered to his egotistical portrayal of himself. He was idolized for his good looks, charm, sporting prowess (he had represented Fiji in rugby) and wit; the dark side of his character was obscured’ (Robie, 1989: 226). Michael Goldsmith also talks of ‘a cult of personality around Rabuka that came to seem like a form of hero worship’ (1993: 26).

Simione Durutalo had also noted:

the very important role and power of the Australian and New Zealand based corporate media to formulate opinion and define reality in a particular way. These corporate-media effectively legitimized the [1987] coup(s) in Fiji (1993: 6).

Few foreign journalists – and virtually none regarded as critical or incisive – were allowed access to the country after the military coup of 1987 (Robie, 1994: 80). In that way Rabuka was able to control negative publicity of his actions. Another problem that emerged, especially with *The Fiji Times* and its Fijian weekly, *Nai Lalakai*, as well as the government owned Radio Fiji, was that even without censorship, Rabuka was able to control and manipulate them. Robie gives as an example Rabuka’s massive military build up, shopping for weapons and helicopters in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea and Taiwan, which passed without any criticism from the media. Arms and ammunition worth \$1 million were ordered. Two patrol boats were bought for the naval squadron for \$2 million from an American company. Rabuka also asked France to train Fijian troops in security measures, supply military vehicles and train Fiji army officers at French military academies. Fijian news media justified the military build up as a ‘measure to counter supposed internal and external threats’ (Robie, 1989: 239).

Robie further noted that when unfounded allegations were made by the military, these were always done in the Fijian language broadcasts

and reports and not in English. It must, however, be noted that *Nai Lalakai*, the Fijian publication of *The Fiji Times*, had been known to be an instrument for creating racial animosities. In 1977 Ratu Mara talked of the ‘enormous damage’ *Nai Lalakai* had done to racial harmony. He claimed that over the past five years it had done a lot to ‘foster, encourage and disseminate the views of the Fijian Nationalist Party’ (*Fiji Times*, 6 June, 1977).

The news magazine, *Island Business*, published by Robert Keith-Reid, former *The Fiji Times* and Radio Fiji journalist, which had established a reputation for its independence over the previous five years, ‘became criticized as an apologist’ for Rabuka and his regime even though Keith-Reid was detained by the regime for four days. Keith-Reid named Rabuka the Pacific Man of the Year in the end of the year issue. There were also New Zealand journalists who were criticized for their reports which were seen as biased in favour of Rabuka and the Taukei movement (Robie, 1989: 239).

Media during a National Crisis

‘How do you reconcile the commercial demands of the empires of Murdoch and Packer for drama and controversy with a desperate national need for calm and consensus?’ Thomson wondered. His answer: ‘Platoons of public relations consultants might have helped but in their absence there was a great temptation to tell the foreign journalists to just jack off to where they’d come from’ (Thomson, 1999: 137). The trouble, however, was not only with the foreign journalists but also with the local newspaper(s). Having a truly local daily newspaper, which had its primary interest in the welfare of the nation, would have been even more effective than having a lot of public relations consultants.

Thomson noted that at a time of extreme national crisis it is not unusual for Governments to impose censorship. The feeling amongst a lot of Fijian leaders in 1987 was that censorship should be imposed. In the main their motivation was not suppression of truth, it was dousing of what they saw as potentially inflammatory press provocation.

On the Governor General’s Council of Advisers, Bill Cruickshank was the one who spoke up strongly against censorship, but there were many who would have welcomed it (Thomson, 99: 136). If there had been a local newspaper committed fully to the nation then even the question of censorship might not have arisen. In the absence of that, censorship would have been the obvious answer to prevent a national catastro-

phe. One is reminded of Siddiq Koya's warning, soon after independence, that it would not be a big joke if the country went 'mad', if it went 'berserk', in the critical hour because of the newspapers of the day. He noted that 'freedom and democracy without discipline are meaningless, they mean nothing' (Parliamentary Debates, 1 December, 1970: 468).

Nemani Delaibatiki, a former president of the Fiji Journalists' Association, who was the editor of the *Fiji Sun* at the time of the coup in 1987, was a strong defender of a free press. In 1986 he had become the first journalist to be charged under the 66-year-old Official Secrets Act when he received a leaked confidential document about the Fiji military and published a series of articles based on that. He was later acquitted. The chief magistrate ruled that the prosecution had failed to prove that when receiving the leaked document Delaibatiki knew that it was in contravention of the act. He also did not know that the leaked report had been written by a Tovata faction in the Home Affairs Ministry to undermine the leadership of Nailatikau, the commander of the Fiji army, a Kubuna chief, and helping to prepare the way for Rabuka to take command. Later Delaibatiki confided that the Fiji media had enjoyed a good measure of press freedom compared with other Third World countries (Robie, 1989: 240).

In Fiji the major problem as far as the media is concerned was not government trying to control it but the media not showing any commitment to the nation. This was true mostly for *The Fiji Times*, which from its early days, portrayed the views of only an expatriate (immigrant) minority with vested interests rather than giving priority to national interests. Some would argue that this policy has continued to this day, adversely affecting national causes like integration and multiracial harmony.

Conclusion

The only daily newspaper in Fiji for close to a hundred years, *The Fiji Times*, has done little to foster a sense of nationalism in its readers, especially the youth of Fiji. There was at least some truth in Ramrakha's claim in 1971 that the newspaper would strangle the nation if allowed to continue. For instance, the People's Coalition blamed *The Fiji Times* for destabilizing the country and it seemed to have contributed to the overthrow of the Chaudhry government in 2000. Leaders of the country after independence lacked the foresight to take effective preventive action even though they had understood and recognized this lurking danger.

One way of balancing the equation would have been by establishing and fostering a truly national newspaper. By failing to take effective ac-

tion in this regard, the leadership of Fiji failed to ensure that one of the vital ingredients for making democracy durable and sustainable, was a committed press.

Indian leaders in particular, who came very close to starting a daily newspaper to counter the anti-Indian propaganda of *The Fiji Times*, abandoned this idea after independence.

A quarter century later, some Indian businessmen realized the need for a locally-owned paper and established the *Fiji Sun* in 1999.⁴ It is not clear what prompted them to such an action. Besides there was already a local daily, the *Daily Post*, from the late 1980s although it had been in financial difficulties for a few years. While the two locally owned papers struggle for survival, the foreign-owned *The Fiji Times* forges ahead as the clear winner.

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⁴ Though it has the same name as the paper that was published from 1974 to 1987 it has no other connection with it.

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