

Coups, Media and Democracy in Fiji

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Introduction

This special edition of *Fijian Studies* looks at the mainstream news media in Fiji. The journal attempts to cover the last 20 years, a turbulent period in Fiji's history scarred by four coups in May and September of 1987, May 2000 and December 2006. The first coup commenced what turned out to be a cumulative decline and stunted progress, causing political and social chaos, heightening racial tensions, crippling the economy, and causing an inexorable decline in living standards.

The media too has been scarred by the coups. Fiji's journalists had little experience covering upheavals of such magnitude, and for them it has been a steep learning curve. Given the complexities of their society and the context in which they were operating, mistakes were inevitable. So while the coups gave journalists lots of copy to work with, they also gave rise to an unprecedented level of public and academic interest in the inner workings of the media. The Fiji media, consequently, found itself under the spotlight like never before. Its coverage of the coups and its stance on various issues were scrutinised, with the reporting being both lauded and condemned.

Once the questions started, they kept coming. Does the media understand its role, and is it fulfilling this? Who owns and controls the media? Who gave the media its watchdog mandate? Who is watching the watchdog? Is the media really a force for good, or is it the handmaiden of a few powerful, vested interests? Such questions apply to, and are being asked of, the media in other countries also. In the United States, the media stood accused of beating the war drums on behalf of the then President, George Bush, resulting in the destructible foray into Iraq. Fiji's media has been blamed for fermenting coups by the manner in which it reported political and racial issues. Insidious motives and naivety on the part of journalists have both been put forward as reasons for these alleged transgressions.

A Historical Snapshot

Whatever its shortcomings, the media has always been regarded as a vital organ of democracy. In Fiji, following the peaceful and euphoric transition to independence in 1970, there were high hopes in government circles that the media would be a partner in the country's development agenda. The media, however, did not see itself merely as the government's news agency. It had a broader view of its developmental role. This included scrutinising and criticising government when the need arose. So the media and government did not become bosom buddies. Testimony to this is the Hansard Reports filled with the invectives heaped on the media in Parliament over the years.

But it can be said that the media led a charmed life until the 1987 coups, which changed things forever. The initial media outrage against the military takeover by Sitiveni Rabuka was courageous and exemplary. Journalists took great and unprecedented risks to report the news. However, after the initial shock, and as the dust settled, there were accusations that the media had given in to the views of the coup perpetrators, and succumbed to the seductive powers of Rabuka.

There were also accusations that a media based on the traditions of the western press had been sucked into the cold war agenda of powers such as the United States and Britain, and their proxies closer to home, Australia and New Zealand. The 1987 coup conspirators accused the overthrown National Federation-Fiji Labour Party coalition of promoting a socialist agenda, aligned with the policies of countries opposed to the ideals of western democracy. The media, it is said, swallowed such allegations hook, line and sinker. It also propagated the communist bogey, and the coup-driven, ideological agenda of Fijian political domination to counter the alleged Indian threat.

The 1987 military coup was a watershed year for the Fiji media. *The Fiji Sun*, Fiji's second newspaper, closed never to re-open. *The Fiji Times*, the nation's oldest and most prominent media, adopted self-censorship in order to survive, and was allowed to continue printing. During the subsequent five-year rule of the interim government led by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the media learnt to be cautious in its reporting.

Then, in 2000, George Speight struck with his so-called 'civilian coup'. He claimed he was ousting Fiji's first Prime Minister of Indian descent, Mahendra Chaudhry, to protect indigenous Fijians from political subjugation by Indians. By then, many of the journalists who had covered the events of 1987 had left the country, and a new generation of reporters found themselves in the frontline of another history-making episode.

Again there were examples of courageous reporting, along with allegations that the media had fallen for the photogenic and quotable Speight, and his nationalistic message.

Apart from being gullible, some journalists were said to be conniving with Speight and his cohorts. Some reporters, both local and international, did become part of the commune in Parliament, where Speight and thousands of his supporters were holding the ousted Chaudhry government hostage. They accepted food, drinks and lodging from the hostage takers. Some journalists formed friendships with them, and started to sympathise with 'the cause'. A selection of articles and research papers by Fiji journalists and academics on the 2000 coup was published by the University of the South Pacific's *Pacific Journalism Review* in the themed edition 'Crisis and coverage'.

Adapting to the Coup Culture

The 2006 coup by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, unlike the previous coups, did not have an overt nationalistic agenda. It was instead dubbed a 'clean-up' campaign against corruption and racism that Bainimarama alleged was becoming entrenched in Fiji under the Prime Ministership of Laisenia Qarase.

There was apparently some expectation on the part of the coup makers that the media would support such 'noble' ideals. This was not to be. The media once again showed it had a mind of its own. Yet again, threats and intimidation were used to try and bring the media into line. Such tactics did not result in complete success. The media adapted by taking measures such as not using by-lines on some stories. Self-censorship again became part of life. As the Bainimarama regime consolidated its hold on the country, it relaxed its grip on the media.

The media, in turn, became bolder and started pushing the envelope further. This cat-and-mouse game resulted in the unceremonious expulsion of three expatriate newspaper publishers from the country—*The Fiji Times*' Rex Gardner in January 2009, and his predecessor, Evan Hannah, and the *Fiji Sun*'s Russell Hunter in 2008.

Pressure-cooker Atmosphere

Given Fiji's socio-political situation and demographic make-up, it has never been easy being a journalist in the country. Both the major races—indigenous Fijians and Indians—feel equally aggrieved. Fijians believe they are marginalised in business and the professions, and fear

losing political control. Indians, on the other hand, believe they have been denied their fair share of political power, and that they are discriminated against in government jobs. Added to this is the land issue, which remains contentious. Also, voting in Fiji is based along racial lines, and many politicians are keen to exploit this by playing on the fears of their electorate.

The coup culture only made things more complex for the journalist. For one, journalists belong to different racial and religious groups, which make them vulnerable and prone to their own biases, as well as to pressures from their communities. Secondly, the media corps, at any given time, is quite young and relatively inexperienced due to the high turnover in the industry. Thirdly, few Fiji journalists have been educated beyond secondary school.

Furthermore, the news situation in Fiji over the last two decades has become faster due to increased competition, and more complicated because of the political upheavals and tensions of recent years. Journalists have to deal with and report on more complex issues than perhaps in any other period in Fiji's history. All the while, there is tough competition in the media sector. All media companies are under immense pressure to return profits. Some are doing well while others are struggling to survive. Media companies need to be, among other things, mean and lean. Cost-cutting measures such as multi-skilling, reduced staff and increased workloads are present day realities that impact on journalists and their performance.

Because remuneration and promotions are often based on the story count, the more stories produced, the better for the journalists' careers. In the race to get as many stories as quickly as possible, journalistic ethics can, and have, become casualties. Hence, in Fiji, one of the complaints about the media is that quality has not been accompanied by quantity. A discernable decline in English standards at the school level, the exodus of experienced journalists since the 1987 coup, and the movement of experienced journalists to better-paying jobs in public relations, are also cited as reasons for the decline in quality.

On the part of journalists, there is often a feeling that the public does not understand the pressures that they work under. They complain that public expectations are much too high. Journalists feel that they are blamed for all manner of ills, and that the good work that they do often goes unappreciated. Journalists contend that they hold a mirror to society. Fiji's society is undeniably fractured. Should journalists then be made the scapegoats if society does not like what it sees in the mirror?

Beyond Objectivity and Neutrality

Fiji is undeniably a politically, socially and economically fractured nation. Development progress has been squandered in all areas of life. Under such circumstances, is it enough that the media remains an objective and neutral bearer of grim events? Given its reach and its power to influence, should not the Fiji media take a more proactive role in terms of helping the nation forge a common vision shared by its entire people? At a time when the future remains hazy and without a well-defined direction, should the Fiji media continue to stick to the western journalistic principles of objectivity and neutrality, or should it report in a manner that is more beneficial for a developing country such as Fiji?

There are no ready answers to these complex questions. But what can be said is that the media should probe further and understand better the issues so that any criticism is well interrogated. It should also re-examine its ethos and its role in national development.

In Fiji there is a palpable dissatisfaction with media standards in the community. But this is overridden by the public desire to have a free media. This was demonstrated in the strong public opposition to proposals by the Qarase government to introduce new, draconian media laws. It is for the media to ensure that this public goodwill is not squandered.

By providing an in-depth analysis of the media issues in Fiji, this edition of *Fijian Studies* hopes to contribute to the debate concerning this very important sector. The objective is to provide readers with an independent set of well-researched articles and dialogue pieces from well-known researchers and media personalities about various aspects of the media in Fiji, both past and present.

Erik Larson starts by providing an analysis of how the public uses and interprets information in the media. This analysis is timely because it goes to the heart of the problem of why public understanding and appreciation of the role of the media may be lacking. Larson's analysis suggests that the Fiji media generally relies too much on official sources of information. He concludes that 'predominant public orientation toward news media results in most citizens experiencing news as disconnected from their daily lives'. He suggests that the media look at this issue seriously so that it can better connect with ordinary citizens.

Susan Naisara and **Graham Hassall** assess the print media's coverage of the Auditor General's report in Fiji. They found that while there is extensive coverage immediately after the report is tabled in Parliament, there is hardly any follow up or investigative reporting at later stages. The

AG's reports showcase the systematic abuse of public funds by civil servants. These reports are major public interest issues that deserve sustained and in-depth coverage, argue the authors. The level of abuse, they say, could be reduced by better media coverage.

David Robie provides a comparative analysis of the media councils in Fiji and New Zealand in the context of the recent reviews of both councils. He points out that the New Zealand review took place under a democratic framework, with media industry support. The subsequent recommendations were aimed at strengthening media accountability and independence. In Fiji, the media council review took place under an authoritarian regime, and it was controversial from the start. The Fiji Media Council and the industry rejected the review because they felt that it was not going to be independent. They also rejected the recommendations, which they said were designed to curtail media freedom.

Rae Nicholl analyses media coverage of women during the coups in Fiji. Women in many crisis situations usually do not attract as much media attention as men. However, they play an important role in addressing the needs of families who are most affected. Nicholl finds that women opposing the coups and highlighting issues that affect women and children got better coverage in the aftermath of the 2000 and 2006 coups than in the after the 1987 coups.

Carolyn Thomas, **Carly Tawhiao** and **Natasha Burling** conduct a study of media accountability systems and of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation in Fiji, Cook Islands and Papua New Guinea. Fiji does not have FIO legislation even though this had been an explicit requirement of the 1997 Constitution. Instead, there have been various attempts by all governments since the 1987 coups to pass legislation to curtail media freedom. This includes governments who came to power through the ballot box, and those that got in via the barrel of the gun. Media freedom, as pointed out by the authors, will not be easy if there is no freedom of information legislation.

Hannah Harborow traces the role of blogs in fostering democracy and resisting authoritarian regimes. She points out that while some bloggers may be mischief-makers and do not represent a genuine attempt to foster democracy and social change, blogging does have a place in the media sphere. She argues that blogs, like their media counterparts, should develop a code of ethics or conduct to ensure that unethical practices are not used to defame organisations and individuals.

Sophie Foster tackles the interesting and challenging issue of online publications and how the internet could be useful in enhancing interaction between journalists and their audiences. Her analysis of results from in-

interviews with journalists, media executives and the public, shows that most media organisations have been slow in adapting to the demands of readers through the internet. She uses *Sotia Central*, a social networking site, as an example of an approach that can be used to develop better and more meaningful interaction between the public and journalists.

Usha Harris presents her findings of an ethnographic case study of a participatory video (PV) workshop with rural women in Fiji. While most articles since the 1987 coups concentrated on the role of media in the political and economic context, this article dwells on participatory video production as a media tool to generate social capital and goodwill among rural women in Fiji.

Evangelia Papoutsaki and **Naomi Strickland** provide an interesting analysis of the ethnic media outlets in New Zealand that could have lessons for Fiji as the media here has always found the multicultural context challenging. The needs and perception of ethnic groups in Fiji have not always been easy for journalists and media organisations to handle without criticism that they may be treating each one of them preferentially.

The dialogue section starts with a commentary by **Kylie Anderson**, which is based on her ongoing research for a pilot study to be published later. Her paper argues that the media — as the cornerstone of a ‘new culture’ — should be understood to be one of the major influences on political viewpoints in Fiji. In other articles, **Richard Naidu** provides a commentary on ‘new world journalism’; Verenaisi **Raicola** gives a journalist’s perspective of the everyday challenges Fiji’s scribes face on the field; **Daryl Tarte** outlines the form and function of the Fiji Media Council and responds to the criticisms contained in the Anthony Report, and **Sophie Foster** shares her ideas about how the Fiji Media Council could become more responsive and accountable. **Padmini Gounder** discusses the influence of the media on race relations in the 30 years from 1970 to 2000. Her 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. An article written almost a decade ago by **David Robie** analysing media coverage of the 2000 coup, and originally published in the *Asia-Pacific Media-Educator* in early 2001, is republished here for the first time in a Fiji-based publication. This is done to give Fiji readers access to the article, and to see what lessons history holds for us.

This issue also includes reviews of two recent books on the media:

Media & Development: Issues and Challenges in the Pacific Islands, edited by Shailendra Singh and Biman Prasad, and *Valuable Stepping stone to Pacific Media South Pacific Islands Communication: Regional perspectives, local Issues*, edited by Evangelia Papoutsaki and Usha Sundar Harris. Other books reviewed are Brij Lal’s *Turnings* and *Shedding Silence – An Anthology of Writing from Fiji Prisons* edited by Mary Daya.

Reference

‘Crisis and coverage’ (2001). Themed special edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*. 7(1): 188pp.