

13. The Fiji coup six months on: The role of the media

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I came across a very interesting story not too long ago, the headline-grabbing type, one sure to be a best seller. The story revealed the wisdom and farsightedness of the founders of modern Fiji as portrayed in the islands' coat of arms. The sugar cane on the national emblem is reflective of the leadership of Fiji's first modern leader and prime minister, the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, and his unquestioned role in securing unparalleled prices for our sugar in Europe. Then there's the coconut palm, symbolic – the story claimed – of the policies and leadership of the late Dr Timoci Bavadra and Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, the *vara* (a fledgling palm tree) being the symbol of the Fiji Labour Party. The white dove on our coat of arms is reflective of the rulership of the *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL) party of the ousted Prime Minister, Mr Laisenia Qarase. And what of the final insignia on our coat of arms, a bunch of bananas? Perhaps this reflects a disturbing premonition that Fiji would eventually, after four coups, become a banana republic.

You did not miss reading this story in one of our dailies in Fiji. I picked up that story from the many that had been crowding Suva's coconut wireless, the rumour mills. Under the seemingly strict and tested rules of conventional journalism, such rumours would not make the pages of any serious newspaper or broadcast. And rightly so. But with all the media outlets in Fiji – three daily newspapers, at least two weekly vernacular newspapers, two parent radio companies, one commercial television station, at least three news online services, and, by the last count, seven monthly or semi-monthly partly news, mainly lifestyle magazines – adopting self-censorship in the light of harsh and violent reactions from the Fiji military, one has to wonder how many stories are being left untouched and untold in Fiji today.

In this chapter, I consider whether or not self-censorship was the best media response in post-coup Fiji. Is this the best the industry in Fiji can do? Was there a lot of thought, even debate, on the approach the media should take? What would have happened had journalists, with the support of their editors, decided to take the other option – that of unitedly and single-mindedly opposing the regime's decision to become an uninvited player in determining what is news and what is not?

I raise a lot of questions; questions to which I personally do not have the answers. I make no apology for that. First and foremost, I do not count myself an authority

on the news media. Besides, nature itself dictates that a pathologist cannot perform a post mortem on himself! I certainly do not pretend to carry the mandate to speak on behalf of Fiji's media industry. In fact, I believe that no one carries that mandate – neither within or without the industry – unless of course you believe what Major Neumi Leweni has been saying since 5 December 2006.

The media in the lead-up to the coup

In the lead up to the coup, relations between the elected government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) had been stormy at best. We know that because the news media in Fiji had chronicled, in a rather spectacular fashion, the up and down, love/hate relationship between the two, played out in large part by Mr Qarase himself and the commander of the RFMF, Commodore Frank Bainimarama.

Look back at past issues of the newspapers, as far back as 2001 after the SDL government assumed power, and you will see how bad blood, distrust, disrespect, and the lack of confidence was built up, especially by the military, against the government of Prime Minister Qarase.

Journalists covered this love/hate relationship like any other 'normal' story. If Commodore Bainimarama said something nasty about the SDL government, it hit the front page the next day. Then, when Qarase or his minister for home affairs or even the PM's chief adviser responded, it received prominent coverage the day following. You could be forgiven if you wondered whether the news media was being used by the two parties to out-bid and out-smart each other. This of course raises the question – of course with the benefit of hindsight – as to whether or not the news media in Fiji could have done their job better, been smarter.

To be fair, there are some of us in the industry who, amidst the daily pressure of meeting deadlines and pleasing our editors, did (and do) ponder the way we do our work. Should we, as a rule of thumb, stick to our traditional role of reporting society as we see it, day in day out? We are, after all, the mirror of society. A house is burning in the neighbourhood and that is exactly what you are going to hear in your next radio or television bulletin. You might even have a colour image in the morning newspaper the next day, flames leaping high to the sky from the roof of the burning house.

Thanks to democracy, there is no shortage of critics of this traditional approach to journalism. One such critic is none other than Chief Justice Daniel Fatiaki, whom the military regime forcefully sent on leave and then suspended after the 2006 coup. In a paper he had presented to the Attorney-General's conference in December 2001, he had this to say:

Media coverage is ... often dictated by 'what sells' and in this day and age it seems that what sells is 'bad news' and the sensationalising of it

in the media by eye-catching by-lines or sound bites. Pick up any newspaper today or watch the first five minutes of the evening TV newscast and chances are that most of the coverage will be about what went wrong in the country and the world – how someone failed to do something or did something they should not have done. It has been said that ‘conflict, criticism and controversy are the staples of news coverage today’ and I ask, why should it be? Why cannot it be balanced by the reporting of ‘good news’...?¹

Interestingly, Fatiaki’s last question on balancing ‘bad news’ reports with ‘good news’ was put to a panel of journalists at a seminar held recently at the University of the South Pacific. My response to it was simple; everyone loves a good story and there are many waiting to be told. But if a house is burning, what do you expect me as a reporter to do? Report about how nice the flames looked from where I stood?

I recall one day in 2006, around the middle of the year, wrestling with this very issue over coffee with a colleague who holds a senior position in the newsroom of a daily newspaper. I asked her: Why can’t all media organizations in Fiji decide not to publish or broadcast any story relating to the military/government row? Her response was swift. She didn’t think her own editor would agree to such an idea, as it is a fact that when Bainimarama appears on page one of the newspaper, it sells. Back in the office about an hour later, I received a telephone call from this same friend of mine. She said, ‘Guess what. I related your question to my editor and his response caught me by surprise. He said he would support such a proposition’.² Sadly, that is where the story ended and where such an idea died. Neither my friend nor I are managers or editors, and neither of us were members of the Fiji Media Council, so our powers to influence matters within the industry are virtually nil.

We all know that the news media of any country is not the panacea of all our ills. It can be a force for good, yes, but not all the time. I am one who subscribes to the view that by simply headlining the stormy relationship between Bainimarama and Qarase day in, day out, one cannot expect the two to set aside their widening differences, to simply kiss and make up. I guess in another world, this could have happened. Bainimarama or Qarase, or both, might have woken up one morning, read *The Fiji Times’* headline, realized they had overstepped the mark, and resigned.

But we do not live in that world. I wonder, though, what would have happened if the media in Fiji – as one – had decided to impose a ban on any coverage of the Bainimarama/Qarase love/hate relationship? Would it have convinced the two men to get to the negotiating table? I am sceptical that this would have happened. But there would have been no harm in trying. Everybody would have been the winner had this boycott of coverage of the military/government

saga worked. On the other hand, if it had not worked, the only losers would have been the two antagonists themselves. They would have missed a great opportunity to resolve their disturbing and very unsettling public row, thereby allowing the nation to fall yet again into the vicious and painful coup cycle the nation had been trying to break away from.

So what was the role of the Fiji news media in the lead up to the coup? It was the traditional role of reporting the deteriorating relationship between the Fiji military and the government it helped install after the 2000 coup.

Did we make a good job of it? Perhaps. Although I believe we could have done the job better by being critical of how we do our work. The ability to think outside the box and look at the bigger picture – the role of the news media in a developing, emerging democracy like Fiji – would have assisted our work greatly.

But what about the belief that it was the media that fuelled the stand-off between Bainimarama and Qarase? I used to hold this belief. Now I am not sure whether or not either man, particularly Bainimarama, would have changed his mind or the course he had decided to take, even if the media had slapped a ban on covering his fight with the other.

Was profit – as argued by Fatiaki way back in 2001 – the driving force in the news media's coverage of the military/government nasty row? Maybe.

Was it the hope of the news media that, by their coverage of the row, the two institutions and the two men who led them, would meet and resolve to set aside their differences for the sake of the nation? I hope so.

Or would it have been better for the news media if it had taken a less reactive approach – either through a news blackout or through other means – in order to seriously and genuinely assist the attempt of others, such as former Vice-President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, to get Bainimarama and Qarase to reconcile and get on with the job of nation-building? I certainly wish it had done so.

I know what some will say. That this is not the role of the news media. You are the mirror, you reflect society, not try to engineer it. But my point is, who set that role? And who said that this traditional role of the media can not be changed or adjusted to meet the peculiar needs of a young democracy like ours? Of course I am not for a moment proposing that we turn the news media into a fully fledged lobbying movement. We have plenty of those around.

Think about it; the news media in Fiji has in the past taken on such a role. Until the general election of May 2006, the Fiji Media Council had organized national and healthy debates through its editors' forum.³ Its 'adopt-a-flag initiative' is another good example.⁴ The same is true when you look further afield. The media of our good neighbours in Papua New Guinea, through their own media council, has been a key player in the fight for greater transparency in that

country.⁵ Some of its senior journalists have also joined the movement against illegal arms smuggling.⁶

We reflect society, yes, but we can also influence society for the common good. The end justifies the means. If taking a principled stand had meant avoiding the coup, then we would have achieved our objective. That, I think, is what responsible journalism should be about.

The role of the media after the coup

The transition from pre- to post-coup coverage for the Fiji news media did not go down too well. Late on the evening of the coup, *Fiji One News* went off air. The following morning, *The Fiji Times* was not published. This boycott, triggered by the military's attempt at media censorship, was effective in some ways because the authorities – we were told – relented, and *The Fiji Times* came out with an afternoon edition that same day, and *Fiji One News* went back on air for their main 6pm evening news.⁷

That short-lived boycott showed how hopelessly disunited and divided the local media was. Whilst *The Fiji Times* refused to publish on the evening of the coup, the *Fiji Daily Post* and the *Fiji Sun* went ahead as normal. The *Fiji Sun* said the order from the military for news on the coup to be censored came too late.⁸ Both radio networks, as well as all online news services, also proceeded as normal. Clearly, any hope of getting the news media to work in unison and truly become a force to be reckoned with – especially important in any fight to protect the freedom of the press provision of Fiji's 1997 constitution – was lost.

Although Prime Minister Qarase and his family were flown into exile on his island home in Lau, and armed soldiers patrolled the streets, for the local news media, it was to, a large extent, business as usual. In keeping with its traditional role of being the mirror of society, the military – and the regime it installed – began to dominate the daily news scene. Not for a moment did the news media in Fiji pause and think: The political landscape had undergone a dramatic, if not revolutionary, change, so should the 'business as usual' kind of reporting continue or should the change in landscape require a change in approach?

There have been some disturbing trends. The *Fiji Sun* newspaper had a scoop when it reported and photographed one former ruling party official undergoing interrogation at the military camp. The story contained very damaging allegations of corruption levelled against the official, including the supposed admission of the offence by this party official.⁹ My question is, where is the balance in the story? Even if the former political party official had admitted the offence, does it mean that he really did it or was he coerced into admitting the wrong? As if to rub salt into the wound, this same edition almost boastfully reported in its gossip column how its reporter had caused a stir in the army's officers' mess when he accepted an invitation to have a meal there – and then used his fingers,

not a fork and knife!¹⁰ Where is the impartiality in the story? Was the newspaper condoning a trial by media?

The same newspaper, some weeks later, published another exclusive: How two senior managers of the country's largest financial institution were supposedly abusing company regulations by taking loans for themselves.¹¹ It was a great story, it surely would have boosted sales that day. But the story was one-sided, quoting from a report leaked to the newspaper by someone with an agenda. To be fair, the newspaper did say that it had attempted to contact the two senior managers for their comments, but had not succeeded. In normal times, this would be fine. You can say the two managers have only themselves to blame. But the problem is, these were not normal times in Fiji. We had just had a democratically elected government overthrown, and the military was in power. What would have happened had the two senior managers given their response to the newspaper, even going to the extent of paying for a full page advertisement to clear their names?

Well, someone before them, who had had a similar experience of trial by media, did try to clear her name, and where did she end up? Inside one of the cells of the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, where she underwent – rumours have it because she has declined to speak openly about it – very humiliating and inhumane treatment.¹²

There is another dark side to such developments. In obtaining information that is available only to the military regime and those who support it, what did the newspaper offer in return? My only hope is that all the newspaper offered was fair coverage, nothing more, nothing less.

Another disturbing trend as I see it is the gullible nature of the local media industry. Obvious questions remained unasked, and anything and everything that falls from the mouth of coup instigators and supporters is taken almost as gospel truth. Explanations are left unchallenged, distortions lie undetected, and lies masquerade as facts.

Sadly there are numerous examples of this. I give only two.

Mahendra Chaudhry, leader of the Fiji Labour Party and currently interim finance minister in Fiji's military government, is one politician who appreciates the power of the media, and, like the shrewd politician he is, knows how to use it for his own good. Before and after his return from Brussels in April 2007, where he had accompanied interim Foreign Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and interim Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Chaudhry told national television that the request for F\$350 million from the European Union (EU) to fund reforms in the country's sugar industry had been assured.¹³ In repeated interviews to other local news media afterwards, Chaudhry repeated the claim

that the EU had assured him that Fiji would get the \$350m, and reforms in the sugar industry would go ahead.

But no reporter ever told the Fiji public that the \$350m Chaudhry boasted about was never requested by him nor by the military regime. Worse still, the EU is not giving Fiji \$350 million, and the local news media knew about this even before Chaudhry left for Brussels!¹⁴ They should know that Fiji is not going to get \$350 million because one of their own, *Islands Business* magazine, had reported in its April edition, complete with quotes from the EU document, that Fiji was getting far less.¹⁵ Confirmation of the magazine story, which I had written, did not come from the European Commission until May.

On 30 April 2007 the Fiji Australia Business Council circulated a press statement that called on the Australian government to lift the travel ban it had slapped on members of the Fiji public who took up positions offered by the military regime. That statement, released under the name of council president Caz Tebbutt Dennis, spoke of the desire of many of her members, who, though not responsible for the coup, wanted to move the country forward.¹⁶ That statement got widespread coverage in both local and overseas media.

Yet, not once did I read or hear a news report that asked Dennis why she wanted to move the country forward now? Who moved it backwards in the first place and whose decision was it in the first place to move the country backwards? Australia's then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had to ask questions that journalists failed to ask Dennis: If you have a problem about the travel ban, then aren't you barking up the wrong tree? Weren't you supposed to re-direct that question somewhere closer to home?¹⁷

It does not take a genius to figure all this out. Day in day out, you see gross examples of stories that raise more questions than answers.

Is this the result of working in an environment of fear, of persecution and harassment? I do not know. I suspect the answers would be many. It could relate to poor training, the rush to meet deadlines, inexperienced reporters and reporters who feel too intimidated to ask the questions that need to be asked.

It is now common knowledge that, due to increasing harassment – and for some journalists, brutal and humiliating treatment at the hand of soldiers – media organizations in Fiji opted for self-censorship.¹⁸ Each newsroom has its own way of self-censoring. When I was with state radio during the coups of 1987 and 2000, every story was viewed by the news editor or the duty editor before broadcast. If the story was going to put the life of anyone – either a reporter or a member of the public – at risk, then that story would not see the light of day. Unverified stories, those that might be true but could not be confirmed or verified by two or more people, would also be spiked. You might still read or hear and view negative stories about the military and the interim regime, but as a general

rule, you would see attempts to balance those stories with reactions from the authorities concerned.¹⁹

In 1987, then a cadet reporter with state radio, I realized that censorship was easy to implement. We had, sitting next to our desks in the newsroom, fully armed soldiers. I would not say the 2000 coup was any better. We did not have soldiers in the newsroom then, which was an improvement, but I still won't forget the dash for life that I took from Broadcasting House to the Central Police Station in Suva one Sunday night to escape the deadly mob that had trashed the studios of Fiji Television and then gone on to shoot and kill a police officer near parliament house.²⁰

As in the coups of 1987 and 2000, the role of the news media in the 2006 coup remained the same. True, the original *Fiji Sun* newspaper closed its operations for good in 1987, in protest against military-imposed censorship, and the *Fiji Daily Post* closed for several days during the coup of 2000. But these reactions had been too individualistic to have any great impact. For such forms of peaceful protest to work, the local news media would have to work in unison.

Early in the days after the 2006 coup, a group calling itself the Movement for Democracy began to stage peaceful protests outside a house in Suva that they termed the Democracy Shrine.²¹ We all know that. What many of us do not know is that, prior to the coup, some of us journalists had been holding meetings in an attempt to revive a journalists' association. Our first meeting was held at that very building now known as the Democracy Shrine.

A day or two after the peaceful protests at the Democracy Shrine began, I received an email from a colleague with whom we had been planning this journalist association revival. She wanted the group to issue a statement in support of the pro-democracy protestors. I was among those who quickly shot down the idea. For one thing, I was so busy covering the coup, I had no time to be drafting and issuing press releases. Some of my other colleagues argued along ethical lines; we report the coup, not participate in it. After some thought, and after re-reading the arguments of the colleague who had proposed the idea of a press statement, I changed my position and supported the idea. I thought the trick would be in the way the statement was written. It need not sound too condemning, yet it could still express the hope and wish that, despite what had happened, the military would stay true to its promise of keeping the media free, and propose that harassing journalists as well as other media industry workers like radio announcers and comedians would do no one any good.

Our proposal was never carried out because it did not get support. But this reflected much of what happened in the news media in Fiji after the coup. There are many scared journalists and reporters in the country. True, the Fiji Media Council and the Pacific Islands News Association issued statements about the

military's harassment and intimidating tactics.²² But we all know that one or two press statements would not have had much impact.

Today, hardly a whisper is heard when a journalist is taken in by the military. Maybe editors think that the best way to handle the matter is to simply report the facts. But what good does that do? Does it in any way discourage the military from harassing more journalists? We have seen no signs of that.

Conclusion

I was struck recently by the candid and frank views of Netani Rika, news director of Fiji Television, who told Radio Australia's Pacific Beat program about his detention by the military.²³ What impressed me the most was his sheer honesty in relating what would have been a traumatic and scary experience for anyone. Rika's story made me wonder as to how I would have reacted had I been in his place. One thing is for sure, fear would almost kill me. Like Rika and most other journalists in Fiji, I did not become a journalist because I wanted to be superman. I couldn't even make it into our first 15 in rugby at the all-boys boarding school I attended in Tailevu.

But then, who am I if I no longer live up to and defend the ideals and principles of free speech, and the free and healthy flow of information, the prerequisites to a free press? How can I call myself a journalist if, when such ideals are threatened, I simply turn my eyes the other way and wish that all was well?

I think the time for the media in Fiji to take a good look at itself, on how it responds to the constant cycle of coups, is long overdue. It can no longer be 'business as usual', for the simple reason that it is NOT business as usual in Fiji right now. Perhaps that mirror we hold up to society ought to be turned our way, so that the news media in Fiji can take a good, hard look at itself. We have to follow another path to break the coup culture in Fiji. Staging a coup to stop future coups simply won't work. The solution I believe lies in the pooling of resources and in unity of purpose. Peacefully using the powers of influence it has been entrusted with, the news media can be a force for the good of all in Fiji.

ENDNOTES

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² Recollections of author.

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⁴ *The Fiji Times*, 9 April 2007.

⁵ www.cdi.anu.edu.au/CDIwebsite_1998-2004/asia_pacific/asia_downloads/PacFut.Aitsi.pdf

⁶ *Islands Business*, March 2007.

⁷ *The Fiji Times*, 7 December 2007; *The Fiji Times*, 8 December 2007.

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