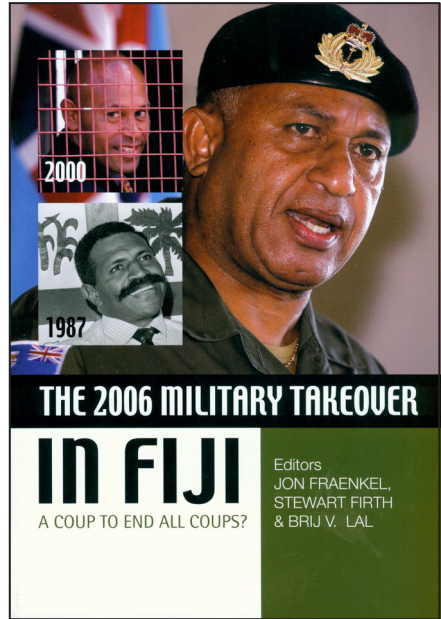


DR SCOTT MACWILLIAM, formerly of the University of the South Pacific, lectures on development policy in the Crawford School at the Australian National University.

## ‘Short views’ on Fiji coups fail to answer key media questions

***The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A coup to end all coups?***, edited by Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Studies in State and Society in the Pacific, No.4, Australian National University, 2009, 472 pp. ISBN 978-1-9215-3650-2. Also available through ANU E-Press at: [epress.anu.edu.au/coup\\_coup\\_citation.html](http://epress.anu.edu.au/coup_coup_citation.html)

THE FIRST premier of the People’s Republic of China, Zhou Enlai (1949-1976), when asked about the impact of the late eighteenth century French Revolution, supposedly responded that it was too early to tell. Apocryphal or not, his ‘long view’ always needs to be borne in mind when trying to evaluate recent events, including the 2006 coup in Fiji. In the meantime how-



ever, ‘short views’ will continue to be made and this collection of essays by 24 contributors forms part of that process.

The *2006 Military Takeover in Fiji* essays are also partisan, seeking to affect what occurs in Fiji. The collection is framed largely around the spurious premise that there are only two defensible positions, either for or against the current military regime. In the numerical make-up of the collection, those in favour of or at least empathetic with the military’s actions—including Mahendra Chaudhry—are in a small minority. The majority position is that the takeover is unlawful and a retrograde

step for Fiji's future. The collection is primarily a defence of what is termed the 'rule of law', where the law to be defended is constitutional law and the 1997 Constitution the embodiment of constitutionalism. Consequently none of the essays comes to grips with the central dilemma which faces conservatives and liberals alike, how to change an undemocratic constitution which entrenches in power those who stand to lose by the changes. All the advocacy in the collection for means rather than, or above ends, does not do anything to resolve this ideological difficulty.

While most contributors are largely sympathetic with the overthrown government, even if critical of some of its behaviour, there is no detailed criticism of the central elements of the Constitution which gave the Laisenia Qarase government its legal basis. Nor do any of the contributors care to recall that after Qarase came to power in mid-2000 with military support, the interim Prime Minister derided those who wanted democracy in the foreseeable future in Fiji. Would a government he led, or indeed one headed by the previously deposed Fiji Labour Party, have introduced the necessary constitutional reforms, such as an elected President, reducing the power of the Great Council of Chiefs, making the Senate elected, having

one vote one value as the basis of the electoral system etc? Even to list the necessary reforms to make Fiji a democracy which substantial liberals or social democrats should defend is a sufficient response to the rhetorical question.

The lack of any suggestions as to how such a dilemma can be resolved is characteristic also of the two contributions in the section termed Media (pp. 267-288). These are by Samisoni Pareti, a journalist with extensive radio and print journalism experience, and Russell Hunter, former publisher and managing director of the *Fiji Sun* newspaper, who was deported in early 2008 by the Fiji government (and is now with the *Samoa Observer*). Both at different moments come to grips with the central difficulties of their occupations, but then provide responses which are not solutions but extensions of the dilemma just described.

Hunter poses the intensely political problem faced by all who work in the media—this reviewer is an ex-journalist and now academic with personal experience of what Hunter faced. Hunter describes the media's response to the takeover in terms which would appeal to the most economically deterministic: the media could not take a united stance opposed to the military's

ensorship measures because of the competition between outlets, and the private firms they represented. Hunter states that about December 2006-January 2007 self-censorship, rather than outright opposition, even if it led to closure of the newspapers, became the norm. Why? 'There was neither arrangement nor agreement on this; it was simply born of fear for the safety of personnel and the survival of individual businesses' (p. 281). That is, the connection between particular people, employees and profits meant a unity of purpose. Keep the enterprises running at all costs, even if doing so exposed the shallowness of principles in which journalists are supposed to believe as the basis for their actions.

Pareti is clearly very uncomfortable with this dilemma but unable to advance any solutions either. He repeats such phrases as the media are 'the mirror of society', reflecting but also able 'to influence society for the common good'. What if the common good also is contested, contradictory, subject to the overriding determination of profit? What if, where individual commercial purpose dominates both private and state media outlets, and the Constitution represents the rule of law which guarantees that domination, there is primarily private good or profit? Pareti clearly recognises his attach-

ment to liberal constitutionalism without seeing the contradiction inherent in the position. He laments: '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' (p. 271).

Yet, as critics of Fiji's press have frequently asked: was this 'freedom' and how it was exercised a contributing factor in preparing the groundwork for the overthrow of each of the civilian governments which have been deposed in Fiji? To what extent did the media (and some academics) contribute to the overthrow of the Chaudhry government, including by questioning its legitimacy and then applauding the Speight takeover as justifiable reaction by ethnic Fijians? To what extent did the media play a part in installing and then supporting the military-backed Qarase regime? These questions will remain as other 'short views' expose further what occurred from May 1999 in Fiji and elsewhere.