

# Social media and democracy

## The Fiji 2022 National Election

**Abstract:** Since the 2014 Fiji General Election, social media political campaigning has continued to be a consistent feature in the country's politics. This was evident in the 2022 National Election with many more political parties engaging in creative and innovative ways to campaign and engage voters. Since the 2018 elections, there have been a number of developments that led to the formation of new parties and declining popularity of the ruling FijiFirst party. This has provided a new context for social media political campaigning. Building on reviewed work around social media political campaigning from the 2014 and 2018 national elections, this article examines social media use in the 2022 General Election. It discusses some of the emergent trends and patterns of campaigning that are likely to prevail in social media use and Fiji elections.

**Keywords:** analytics, case study, digital ethnography, digital media, elections, Fiji, framing, mixed methods, politics, social media

*JOPE TARAI*

*Australian National University, Canberra*

### Introduction

Fiji's 2022 General Election date was set for December 14 with an announcement made by the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission, Mukesh Nand on October 30 (Nand, 2022). There were nine registered political parties: All People's Party, FijiFirst (FFP), Fiji Labour Party (FLP), National Federation Party (NFP), New Generation Party, People's Alliance Party (PAP), Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Unity Fiji and the We Unite Fiji Party. With a total of 693,915 registered voters as of 31 October 2022, the stage was set for the third election under Fiji's 2013 Constitution. Since the 2018 national election, there had been a number of noteworthy political developments that helped set the stage for the 2022 national elections. These developments affected social media political campaigning through the formation of new parties, approaches and outcomes.

The shifts in political actors began with internal tensions in Fiji's main opposition party, SODELPA. Internal personality and political clashes against the then party leader, former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, led to his departure from the party, at the end of 2020 (Tarai, 2021). A few days after his departure as a SODELPA party member and leader of opposition, Rabuka, announced his

intention to form a new party for the 2022 national election (Tarai, 2021).

He subsequently registered his new party, the People's Alliance Party (PAP) in 2021 (Waqairadovu, 2021), which saw major politicians shift from SODELPA to this new group. These included Lynda Tabuya, Ro Filipe Tuisawau, Filimoni Vosarogo, Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu and Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. These shifts in political actors not only divided opposition party votes, but amplified broader opposition fractures. Evidence of these broader fractures can be seen in the formation of smaller parties such as the New Generation Party, All Peoples Party and the We Unite Fiji Party. The COVID-19 global pandemic exposed FijiFirst's governing capabilities, debt management and health public sector management structure (Tarai, 2020, 2021). The recovery efforts saw legislative measures such as an 'No Jab, No Job' policy and airline worker layoffs among other measures that pressured the wider society. The government was hamstrung by its authoritarian, non-bipartisan and heavy-handed approach that weakened the FijiFirst's political standing in the lead up to the elections in 2022. In early 2022, the FijiFirst government was vague about the election date and appeared reluctant to go to the polls. Their reluctance was fuelled by Prime Minister Bainimarama's declining health condition and this was compounded by the party's declining popularity in the opinion polls. All of these developments created conditions that reshaped the social media political landscape.

As such, these developments framed the context for social media use in political campaigning for the 2022 national elections. The given context provides for an examination and discussion of the how social media was used in political campaigning and how it had changed from the 2014 and 2018 national elections in Fiji.

### **Methodology and methods**

The methodology undertaken in this research article is digital ethnography, which is facilitated through the two methods of onsite field observations and quantitative social media analytics. Digital ethnography is an iterative-inductive research approach, which accommodates the role of theory and the researcher, in mediated contact or connection with the human actors involved (Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016). An iterative process of qualitative data analysis is underpinned by inductive reasoning (Barbour & Barbour, 2003). Inductive reasoning examines observable patterns that relate to a tentative hypothesis and subsequently a theory (Neuman, 2000). Mediated contact typically refers to the digital technologies serving as a conduit and mediator between the human actors and interactions observed (Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016). Sustained mediated contact and observations are focused on the human actors' contexts or daily lives, cultures and realities (O'Reilly, 2009; Pink et al., 2016).

This underscores the importance of observing and understanding the context

which constitutes the field site. In this case, the political, media and societal context of Fiji, especially in its current state is crucial. As such, field observations were undertaken during the elections period, during the months of December 2022 and January 2023. In addition to field observations, social media analytics was used to derive publicly accessible social media data from political party campaigning pages. Social media analytics is understood as the process of capturing and examining social media data to draw inferences that provide actionable insight (Dawson, 2020). The social media analytics were used to observe and collate data from the political party pages during December. This was because, the announced election day was in December and because the social media campaigning began to peak closer to the polling day. Social media analytics is pre-dominantly a quantitative method, while field observations undertaken were more qualitative in observing online and offline interactions and instances during the elections period. Therefore, the research was informed through a mixed methods approach within the methodology of digital ethnography.

### **Background: ICT, undersea cables, media and social media in Fiji**

The expansion of the information communication technology (ICT) sector in the Pacific was predicated on the deregulation and reform of telecommunications in the early 2000s (Cave, 2012; Minges & Stork, 2015). This opened up the market to greater competition and accessibility for consumers with varying conditions in the Pacific (Watson, 2021a). For Fiji, its first undersea cable launch in 2000 saw the initial stages of cable related internet access (Minges & Stork, 2015). Undersea cable access has since flourished across a number of Pacific countries, resulting in wider internet access and use (Watson, 2021b). Social media uptake was immediately evident across the Pacific and especially in Fiji. Facebook was and continues to be the most accessed and used social media platform in the Pacific and in Fiji.

The foremost seminal work on social media use in the Pacific was undertaken by Cave (2012), in a report titled 'Digital Islands: How the Pacific's ICT Revolution is Transforming the Region'. The report surveyed the emerging digital landscape at the time and its varying implications. These implications included the increasing use of mobile phones and a rise in social media use. First, the report detailed a 60 percent mobile phone use rate across the Pacific (Cave, 2012, p. 1). Second, the rise in social media use was speculated to have significant impact on democracy and governance, with what was termed as the emerging 'digital generation' (Cave, 2012, p. 1). Third, it highlighted the hidden potential in crowdsourcing, which Pacific governments, the private sector and donors could invest in, to usher in better service delivery (Cave, 2012, p. 1).

In many ways, the report captured the ongoing governance issues unfolding at the time. A range of these related considerations were highlighted by Logan

(2012). Logan (2012) critically highlighted the potential impact of ICT on politics in Papua New Guinea. These impacts included ICT access being instrumental in facilitating information flows, increasing efforts towards transparency, the emergence of collective identities and wider political participation of new actors (Logan, 2012). Finau et al. (2014) examined instances of social media use and civic engagement in politics. The article examined social media use on Facebook specifically for Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands (Finau et al., 2014).

In Fiji, the use and expansion of social media began in the 2010s. This was predominantly due to Fiji's most recent coup d'etat of 2006, led by former head of the armed forces, Voreqe Bainimarama. The coup severely restricted and constrained the mainstream media. This constraint was facilitated initially through direct military censors in newsrooms, controlling and dictating what was deemed appropriate for publication. This constraint and control was later facilitated through legislation, which effectively cultivated a culture of self-censorship. The constrained political context saw the emergence of blogging as a means of disseminating restricted information that would have conventionally informed news reporting. However, it was not long before blogging became contentious as questions were raised about its accuracy, credibility and evidence. As a result, the impact of blogging as an alternative to the restricted media environment, waned not long after. In addition, the script format of blogging platforms, which were pre-dominantly desktop-based, limited the demographic reach. This was in stark contrast to social networking sites like Facebook, which was more interactive, accessible via handheld devices and instantaneous.

Around 2010-2011, the prominence of blog sites began to diminish as social media uptake in Fiji began to rise, especially with Facebook as a key platform (Tarai, 2019). This led to the formation of Facebook groups and conversations that were more or less an outlet for views and discussions opposed to the regime at the time (Tarai, 2018, 2019). In spite of these developments, the regime was more focused on regulating the media industry in order to regularise positive Voreqe Bainimarama regime publicity. As such, the regime formulated the *Media Industry Development Decree 2010* to regulate the media while amplifying its positive publicity (Singh, 2010, 2017; Singh, 2020). Four years since direct military censorship, the transition to legislative control was secured by the *Media Industry Development Decree*. The decree at the time had legislated significant ministerial powers with threats of fines of close to F\$100,000 for media organisations and close to F\$25,000 for publishers and editors (Perrottet & Robie, 2011; Robie, 2014; Singh, 2010, 2015). Sweeping ministerial powers emphasised 'content regulation' in pursuit of maintaining the public interest, public order and national interest, which effectively limited investigative and independent journalism. Media organisations were operational without military censors but were toeing a fine line with the Media Industry Development Decree

2010, hanging over them (Robie, 2009; Singh, 2010, 2015). This resulted in the practise of media self-censorship, which diminished the value and availability of critical journalism and balance (Morris, 2017; Singh, 2015, 2017).

At this point, blogging content and activity began to transition to other platforms, especially onto Facebook (Walsh, 2010). This culminated in online groups forming within Facebook that were pre-dominantly focused on freedom of expression, especially in political discussions around 2011. Earlier instances of these were Facebook groups called *Letters to Editor Uncensored (LEU)* and *The Fiji Free Speech Experiment*. These groups were initiated by civil society and media personality actors that were passionate about creating online spaces for free, open and responsible speech. For instance, LEU as a group was focused on publishing materials or information that would have been suppressed as a result of the media laws and subsequent self-censorship (Tarai, 2018; Letters to the Editor Uncensored, 2011). LEU was also very particular about harmful online content that was deemed aggressive or non-constructive by the administrators. In a way, *The Fiji Free Speech Experiment* became something of a response to the LEU's rules for online decorum by encouraging its members to post whatever they wanted, just as long as they were not fake or unidentifiable accounts.

The expansion of internet access through undersea cables, ICTs and social media was operating within and outside of Fiji's constricted media environment. The period from the 2006 coup to 2010 saw the transition from direct media censors to the practice of self-censorship marked by the introduction of the *Media Industry Development Decree (later Act) 2010*. This saw the emergence of social media from 2010-2011, specifically on Facebook as the alternative avenue for expressing free speech and political discussions.

### **Social media political campaigning in Fiji**

Political campaigning through social media began in 2014, when Fiji was due to have its first national elections under the then recently promulgated 2013 Constitution (Tarai, 2018, 2019; Robie, 2022). However, before 2014 there was a gradual but steady increase and frequency of social media activity and engagement. This was mainly underpinned by two political sagas. First, the 2012 Yash Ghai draft process that abruptly came to an end with the Bainimarama regime accused of burning the constitutional draft and deporting Professor Yash Ghai (Ghai, 2017). Second, in the following year in 2013, the Bainimarama regime quickly fast tracked processes and superficially subsumed public submissions to construct and promulgate the 2013 Constitution (Madraiwiwi, 2015). These two instances unfolded in a highly pressurised and constricted media and political environment, saw many Fijians take their frustrations and concerns to social media. As such in the buildup to the 2014 national elections, the Fiji social media user total rose steadily (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015).

While Facebook in Fiji was the only most populated and active social media platform in 2014, Twitter had a considerably lower level of user interaction and engagement. In January 2014, there were an estimated 260,000 active users in Fiji, which rose to 298,000 in the polling month of September (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015). Close to 18,000 new Facebook accounts were created in the space of a month from August to September. These escalating figures were predominantly underpinned by the constrained and pressured media and political environment. More and more people in Fiji were actively creating Facebook accounts to access more political information and content. In addition to this, more than 70 percent of the active online users were young people or people who were stipulated in Fiji's youth policy to be within the ages of 15-35 (Tarai et al., 2015).

Some political parties were adapting to the changing communication landscape and were already equipping themselves with social media marketing teams, strategies and eventually campaigning. These included Bainimarama's own FijiFirst party, which was the most well financed and resourced social media campaigning team. Bainimarama's offline populism and rhetoric about his 'coup to end all coups' and rooting out corruption translated well onto the party's online social media strategy. As a result, FijiFirst compared to all other parties and independent candidates had the largest social media audience with an estimated 63 percent of Fiji's total estimated social media audience (Tarai et al., 2015).

In contrast, other parties, such as the main opposition party, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) had only 15 percent of the estimated total social media audience. It was evident that the main opposition party at the time had struggled with understanding and adapting to the social media landscape. A number of candidates did not have any social media presence, which in a highly restricted media and political environment, further diminished the effectiveness of their publicity and campaigning during the election period. Other parties such as the longest operating party in Fiji, the National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji Labour Party, One Fiji Party and Fiji United Freedom Party had well below 15 percent of Fiji's collated social media audience at the time (Tarai et al., 2015).

FijiFirst's social media approach in 2014 resulted in what appeared to be a multiple page and personification strategy. The party organised a variety of Facebook pages that personified Bainimarama as their party leader in a variety of roles. This included one page depicting Bainimarama as something of a statesman and a serious looking politician in formal attire. Another page depicted Bainimarama as a fatherly and grandfatherly figure embracing his family and grandchildren. Perhaps the cleverest social media portrayal was the depiction of the former coup leader as a common, everyday Fijian, wearing a bula shirt at a local corner store setting. In contrast, the other parties appeared monotonous in their social media portrayals. The main opposition party, SODELPA relied heavily on its traditional

and cultural representation and as such, most if not all of its social media aesthetic was saturated with formal indigenous settings of hierarchy that lacked multicultural diversity (Tarai et al., 2015). Other parties projected a formal working professional attire and posture in their online aesthetic, which had little common connection with the electorate.

In 2018, the total estimated social media users in Fiji was estimated to be a little over half a million active accounts (Tarai, 2019). Facebook was still the most popular and populated platform, with at least 60 percent of its estimated audience being situated in the Central Division. Once again, the youth were the largest social media audience, constituting more than 50 percent of the total estimated social media users (Tarai, 2019). The FijiFirst party once again dominated Fiji's social media landscape with greater creativity and coordinated engagement not only on Facebook and a variety of platforms. These included a coordinated social media campaigning effort on Twitter and YouTube. On Twitter and YouTube, FijiFirst was adamant about repeating its offline religious rhetoric titled 'Embrace Godliness. Reject racism and bigotry' online (Tarai, 2019; Ryle, 2020). It was evident that FijiFirst's social media approach was expanding to encompass multiple social media platforms beyond multiple Facebook pages, as it did in 2014. In addition, it was amplifying an issue based social media focus, for this case a religion against racism issue, expanding beyond the 2014 Bainimarama personification of the FijiFirst party. In spite of this evolution, the social media reactions were predominantly negative for two main reasons. First, FijiFirst's Facebook popularity was not shared or holistically cultivated on the other platforms. This was specifically the case for Twitter. Twitter in Fiji is estimated to have around 24,000 active accounts, with key influential figures being ardent critics of the FijiFirst establishment (Tarai, 2022). These include the likes of prominent lawyer, former journalist and political critic Richard Naidu, civil society actors and media personalities. As such, Twitter as a platform in Fiji was littered with more FijiFirst opposition and criticism. Second, FijiFirst's messaging and campaign frames around religion against racism, exposed a significant contradiction (Ryle, 2020). This contradiction was because of the fact that the FijiFirst government has often promoted and asserted the need for secularism but was campaigning using religion in its rhetoric. Thereafter, YouTube campaigning for FijiFirst did not do much more than compiling snippet videos of campaign rallies.

SODELPA, as the main opposition party, had, by 2018, begun to appreciate the utility of social media in expanding publicity and access. More and more of their candidates not only had individual Facebook pages, but also had expanded onto Twitter with personalised accounts. However, in spite of the wider adaptation of and adoption of social media by Fiji's main opposition party, it still trailed significantly behind the ruling FijiFirst government at the time, in terms of social

media audience. Despite this, it is instructive to note that the main opposition party did not build on the party's Facebook page, but focused on branding and promoting candidates' own individual Facebook pages. This led to significant rates of engagement from prominent party figures such as Lynda Tabuya and Sitiveni Rabuka (Tarai, 2019). In fact, Lynda Tabuya had the highest recorded rate of most loved content during the campaigning period, compared to any other candidate or party on social media (Tarai, 2019). This trend marked a shift in social media engagement through specific reactions. It highlighted that social media reactions were a form of active engagement on specific content beyond passive social media audience behaviour.

Interestingly, FijiFirst's most actively engaged reaction was angry emoticons. This was a startling revelation that for the first time a section of FijiFirst's own audience were expressing active discontent. However, FijiFirst's social media support and campaigning on Facebook was still comparatively more significant than any other political party.

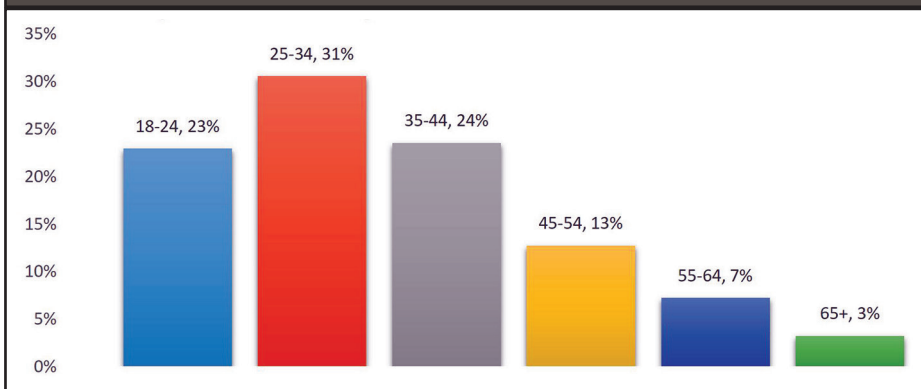
### **Fiji social media landscape and 2022 national elections**

#### *Social media landscape and registered voters*

In the early part of 2022, Fiji's total estimated social media users numbered just over 649,000, with around 556,000 active Facebook accounts (Tarai, 2022). The other 93,000 accounts were collective estimates of social media accounts on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat and YouTube. Once again, Facebook continued to be the most popular and heavily populated social media platform as Fiji was gearing up to its third elections under the 2013 Constitution. As in previous years, young Fijians constituted the majority of social media users, with more than 53 percent being estimated to be within Fiji's voting age of (18-35) (Tarai, 2022). In terms of specific location, the highest estimated accounts were recorded around the capital city of Suva, within the Central Division of Suva, followed by the city of Lautoka in the Western Division. An interesting trend that was noted earlier on in the year was the surge in the number of female identified accounts. In fact it was noted that female identified accounts were estimated at around 51 percent, to 49 percent male identified accounts (Tarai, 2022). This marked an intriguing turning point because in the history of Fiji's social media, male identified accounts had always outnumbered female identified accounts.

The Fijian Elections Office released the national register of voter statistics as of 31 October 2022. The register indicated that at that point, there were a total of 693,915 registered voters, with the Central Division registering a total of 297,649 voters (FEO, 2022b). This was followed by the Western Division with 260,801, Northern Division with 99,658, Eastern Division with 26,359 and the Overseas Division voters at 9,448 (FEO, 2022b). The distribution of registered voters



**Figure 1: Fiji Facebook - Age % distribution**

Source: Adapted from Audience Insight

indicated that the majority of the electorate focus for campaigning was within the country and saturated within the major divisions of the Central and Western Division. Interestingly, these two divisions are also noted divisions with the highest estimated totals of social media use as previously mentioned (Figure 1).

Since there were around 549,000 estimated active Facebook accounts and 693,915 registered voters, political campaigners could easily access more than 70 percent of their registered voters via social media (Tarai, 2022). The challenge was going to be how politicians and parties could engage with the registered voters in the lead-up to polling day. This was especially important considering the varying levels of political apathy and low youth voter turnout in the 2018 national elections. The varying levels of political apathy was revealed in the 2022 pre-election voter survey report, which highlighted around 52 percent taking ‘a little’ interest in politics (FEO, 2018, 2022a). The 2018 General Election Voter Turnout and Survey Report, released in 2021, was more telling in highlighting that the two main youth age cohorts 18-20 and 21-30, were among the lowest in voter turnout percentages (FEO, 2018, 2022a).

### *Social media campaigning*

All of the nine registered political parties primarily situated their social media campaigning on Facebook. The ruling FijiFirst government continued to prove its dominance in commanding the largest estimated social media audience of 40 percent of the total online users. This was followed by prominent parties such as the National Federation Party (around 25 percent), the People’s Alliance at 16 percent and SODELPA at eight percent as shown in the following table and graph. The inclusion of more recent parties such as We Unite Fiji, All People’s Party and New Generation Party saw a greater distribution of the social media audience (Table 1).

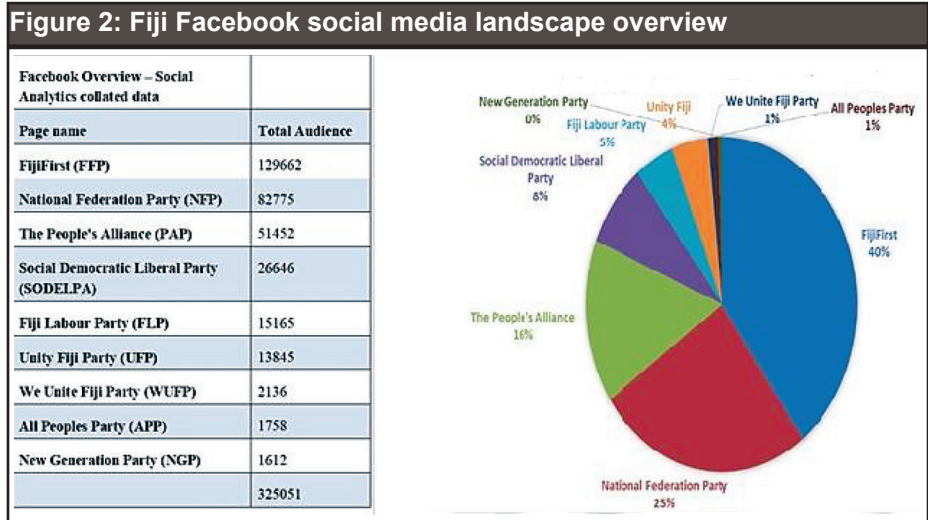
However, despite FijiFirst’s social media audience size, the two main

**Table1: FEO national register of voter statistics, 31 October 2022**

Ages	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
18-20	17,745	18,340	36,085	5.200205%
21-30	78,661	77,402	156,063	22.49022%
31-40	81,927	76,855	158,782	22.88205%
41-50	65,317	61,048	126,365	18.21044%
51-60	52,508	51,262	103,770	14.95428%
61-70	34,563	37,084	71,647	10.32504%
71-80	13,731	17,515	31,246	4.502857%
81+	3,897	6,060	9,957	1.434902%
Total	348,349	345,566	693,915	100%

opposition parties, the National Federation party and the People's Alliance, were engaging more active reactions and online interaction. As shown in the following tables, the two key opposition parties at the time garnered considerably more interactions than the then ruling FijiFirst government (Figure 2, Table 2). The sum of online interactions is a referenced average of the sum of comments, page posts, post shares and the specific reactions from respective online users (Table 3). These reactions can be expressed through the use of emoticons indicating, a like, laughter, sadness, anger and love. On the category of sum of interactions and comments, the National Federation Party and the People's Alliance stood above all the other parties in engagement. This indicated that both of these party's Facebook content engaged significantly more comments and reactions. Furthermore, the National Federation Party and the People's Alliance accumulated the most number of posts, most liked and most shared content during December 2022. In terms of the emotive reactions which ranged from *love*, *laughter*, *sadness*, *wow factor* and *anger*, the three main political parties of FijiFirst, The People's Alliance and National Federation Party featured prominently.

However, interestingly the two main opposition parties of the People's Alliance and the National Federation Party appeared to garner the most positive emotion. For instance, the People's Alliance accumulated the most love reactions online, followed by the National Federation Party. Likewise both these parties garnered significant sympathy in terms of the sum of sad reactions. The ruling FijiFirst party page appeared to have significant comic entertainment value, as



it attracted the most laughs with a considerable margin of difference compared to the other parties. Likewise it also attracted significant angry reactions.

**TikTok and YouTube**

The rising prominence of TikTok, especially among first time voters in their late teens and early twenties, was observed during the 2022 national elections. In late November, early December, the political party leaders of FijiFirst, the

**Table 2: Facebook overview - sum of interactions and comments**

Page name	Sum of interactions	Sum of comments
National Federation Party	237491	30772
The People's Alliance	194637	25053
FijiFirst	112140	18001
Social Democratic Liberal Party	26554	3198
Fiji Labour Party	15509	2552
Unity Fiji	4589	538
All Peoples Party	835	399
We Unite Fiji Party	722	36
New Generation Party	9	0

**Table 3: Facebook overview - sum of shares, likes and posts**

Page name	Shares	Likes	Posts
The People's Alliance	15801	85801	268
National Federation Party	11658	141833	251
FijiFirst	4436	65681	80
Social Democratic Liberal Party	1859	11978	73
Fiji Labour Party	1031	10248	76
Unity Fiji	726	2292	46
All Peoples Party	91	230	16
We Unite Fiji Party	48	422	14
New Generation Party	1	5	3

People's Alliance, the National Federation Party and the Labour Party began escalating their TikTok use in campaigning. This was a first for Fiji in social media campaigning and it created an avenue for the politicians to fully express their personality beyond the confines of political formality. Since the social media app platform format is more video, music and dance based, it provided avenues of creative expression and personalised campaigning. For instance, the People's Alliance leader was often seen dancing with party supporters at events or doing chores in his home while casually addressing the electorate with short messages. As these videos began circulating, it instigated a TikTok video response from the FijiFirst leader, who retorted, 'I'm not here to dance ... leadership is serious business, it matters to young people who want better jobs in high tech industries' (Fennell & Faa, 2022).

Based on digital ethnographic observations, TikTok use as a platform for campaigning is still in its infancy. It has yet to grow to the extent that Facebook has within Fiji. However, its accessibility and appeal towards much younger voters was evident. In addition, politicians were having to adjust to the medium because it involved a more creative, casual and entertaining format than Facebook or most of the other social media campaigning platforms. As TikTok use grows in Fiji, it is likely to become added and a dynamic platform for social media political campaigning in the future.

Another notable trend was the use of YouTube to launch political songs or remixed songs. This was done by National Federation Party general secretary

and candidate Seni Nabou (Nabou, 2022). Releasing five YouTube audio tracks in the lead up to December, 2022, Nabou's message targeted two specific aspects of Fiji's politics. The first is the sense of empowerment for the voter in tracks titled 'We Can, We Will, We Must', 'The Power Is in Your Hands' and 'When We Say No' (Nabou, 2022). The second was a specific reminder for the voters, regarding the ruling FijiFirst establishment and its draconian and authoritarian tendencies. This can be heard with the two tracks aptly titled 'Dagger to the Neck' and 'Drunks in The Club' (Nabou, 2022). Seni Nabou's tracks and use of YouTube marked a new beginning in social media political campaigning in Fiji. The use of YouTube has often encompassed formal political speeches, gatherings or discussions. However, it may be that Seni Nabou has opened up a new creative arena for social media political campaigning, considering the youth affinity for social media and music.

### **Conclusion**

Social media use within Fiji's political landscape has come a long way, since the early days of the 2006 Bainimarama coup. It has been a tool that enables space for engaging in political discourse. The 2014 National Election saw the first use of social media in political campaigning. This was followed by the 2018 National Election. Both of these national elections saw a similar political landscape because of the main political parties that actively engaged social media. In these instances, FijiFirst, National Federation Party and SODELPA were the main parties that cultivated Fiji's social media political campaigning ecosystem. However, this shifted in 2022, with the addition of a new political party, the People's Alliance, established by the former SODELPA party leader, Sitiveni Rabuka. In addition to this major shift, there were broader fractures of division that saw new smaller parties emerge and engage for the first time. This underlying political context marked a distinction in the 2022 national elections, which saw its implication play out on social media. In addition, the rise of other social media platforms such as TikTok has created alternative and expressive avenues for political campaigning. This gave way to three overarching trends in social media political campaigning. The first trend is the expansive adoption of social media by all nine political parties, especially for the recently established parties. Second is the creativity and expression that platforms like TikTok have enabled and also obligated formerly rigid politicians to embrace. The final trend is the decline of the FijiFirst party's social media dominance that was held throughout the last two national elections.

All nine political parties appeared to understand the utility and accessibility provided by social media, especially for the recently established parties. All nine parties had active Facebook accounts with varying degrees of versatility and access. The three dominant social media political campaigning parties were FijiFirst, the People's Alliance and National Federation Party. These three parties

had an extensive and consistent social media presence and also a diversity of platform access spanning across rising platforms such as TikTok.

The rise of expanding creativity in social media campaigning, has been underpinned by TikTok and initiative of certain candidates like Seni Nabou on YouTube. This has demonstrated the diversified platform approach to social media political campaigning. In addition, it has also indicated the obligation of politicians to articulate political issues subject to the creative currency of specific social media platforms. For instance, TikTok overwhelmingly requires politicians to be less formal, casual and witty while allowing them to creatively express themselves through dance. The use of YouTube and TikTok indicates the need to creatively engage a much younger and often disaffected set of voters in Fiji's contemporary political landscape. This area of creative engagement on multiple social media platforms may expand within Fiji's politics in the coming years.

Finally, FijiFirst has been the most funded and well-resourced party in Fiji's contemporary political landscape. It has been reported that in 2018 the party spent F\$1.9 million on advertising and a little over F\$80,000 on social media political campaigning (Tarai, 2019; Krishnamurthi, 2019). The majority of these costs are paid to the international public relations company—Qorvis, with its local communications counterpart—VATIS (Davis, 2020a, 2020b). The social media efforts of the VATIS team was so valued that the general secretary of FijiFirst and FijiFirst government Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, in a parliamentary speech, openly acknowledged VATIS self-titled 'information architect' Damien Whippy (Parliament of Fiji, 2018). Whippy ran FijiFirst's social media campaign in collaboration with Arnold Chanel (Davis, 2020a, 2020b; Parliament of Fiji, 2018). During the 2022 national elections, political party sources revealed that for running social media accounts they were paid F\$28,000-\$30,000 each per month in the lead up to polling day. Despite these lavish sums, FijiFirst's social media profile and performance have been declining since 2018. This has been due to the somewhat vitriolic and at times naïve outbursts projected by the FijiFirst social media handlers. In addition, it was revealed that the social media managers were purchasing online likes and fake comments to boost the FijiFirst government's presence online (Naidu, 2022). This validated the declining appeal and rigour of the party's social media strategy. As discussed in earlier sections, the quantitative data indicates a massive audience for Bainimarama, but Facebook reactions in the month of December 2022 indicated significant angry reactions from online users. In addition, the party's social media frames and messaging became a source of comic relief for users that expressed a significant amount of 'laughing' reactions.

In sum, social media use in politics continues to grow in Fiji and is likely to expand with the versatility of emerging platforms such as TikTok. How this impacts or influences voting behavior is yet to be seen but it has proven to be a useful advocacy and campaigning tool in a media constricted environment like Fiji.

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*Jope Tarai is a Fijian doctoral candidate at the Australian National University (ANU). His research interests include digital politics, Fiji politics, Pacific regionalism, diplomacy and labour mobility.*

[jopetarai@anu.edu.au](mailto:jopetarai@anu.edu.au)

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