

# Fiji news media faces crisis of ethics

**In a long-running Government dispute with the Fiji news media over professionalism, accountability and training ever since the May 1999 general election, this speech stirred the controversy to new heights.**

**By MAHENDRA CHAUDHRY**

*Prime Minister of the Fiji Islands*

I THANK you for the opportunity you have given me to address you on a subject that is coming under increasing public scrutiny both here and abroad — and I refer to the subject of media ethics and responsibility. But before I speak on the subject, I wish to emphasise here the important place of a free, independent and unbiased media in the development of any democratic nation, and my Government's commitment to maintaining media freedom.

The Government is elected by the people to govern them with sincerity, honesty, accountability and transparency. Our Constitution and other laws enacted by representatives of the people in Parliament establish parameters with which Government must govern in the best interests of all citizens and the nation as a whole.

The fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and groups are defined and protected by these laws. They also stipulate requirements and standards for responsible behaviour in the collective interest of ensuring peace and harmony, law and order, and the good governance of our country.

There are also sanctions imposed by an independent judiciary for those found guilty by the courts of breaking these laws. In that context, the High Court in Suva last week ordered \$3000 damages to be paid by our latest newspaper outlet [*Fiji Sun*] for publishing false information relating to a criminal action. The newspaper duly published an apology but failed to report the damages award.

The media has traditionally been seen in democratic society as the voice of conscience of the community; the public watchdog that keeps a vigilant eye on government, business sector transactions and policies to safeguard the public interest and to ensure against abuse of power and privilege. Another function, which regrettably is often forgotten in the media's pursuit of the more juicy and sensational news, is the role to educate and inform the public on important national issues and developmental policies. So that people can make informed judgments and decisions in exercising their fundamental rights as individuals.

The media, therefore, is an important instrument of liberty and freedom without which no society can be truly democratic or truly informed. It has an important responsibility to help create well informed, enlightened and responsible public opinion. As such, media freedoms are enshrined in most constitutions around the world and zealously protected.

Basking under such privileged treatment, the media has become a very powerful world institution.

It must be remembered, however, that freedom cannot be absolute and that media freedom carries with it:

- Responsibilities to ensure accuracy, fairness and unbiased reporting.
- Responsibility to show sensitivity and even caution if circumstances demand it and to ensure that innocent people are not injured by its zeal to report.

In recent years public perception of the media has undergone a change.

- The power of the media to influence public opinion;
- its ruthless pursuit of sensational stories at the expense of truth, accuracy and fairness;
- and, more recently, a relentless intrusion into the private lives of public figures

has focussed a growing debate on the role of the media, and in particular the question of media ethics and accountability. Surveys in the United States last year showed that people are becoming suspicious of journalistic bias and regard the media as being "unfair, inaccurate and pushy". News accuracy in public opinion is down to 37 per cent.



### **Crisis of ethics**

Increasingly the question being asked is whether the media is facing a crisis of ethics? Faced with tight deadlines, competition and commercial pressure are journalists sacrificing basic principles of accuracy and fairness? Are the individual and corporate bias of journalists and media bosses being allowed to colour news stories through deliberate distortions and misrepresentation of facts; at times even concoctions?

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no doubt that media credibility is dropping. The public is becoming critical of media practices and its self-adopted watchdog role. The industry needs critical self-appraisal and a re-think of whether it is headed.

Fiji is not isolated from these developments. The media in Fiji also needs to take stock of how it is behaving and whether it is facing a crisis of ethics. Since taking office, my Government has had occasion to be extremely disgusted by the antics of some elements in the media who have used the medium of the newspaper and television to further their own personal agendas to discredit the government.

### **Breaches of media ethics**

When day after day a particular reporter writes nothing but anti-government stories with facts manipulated and distorted to discredit and embarrass the government, one is left in little doubt as to what the agenda of that particular reporter is. In the process, the reporter has seriously damaged her own credibility as a reporter and that of *The Fiji Times* which has given these stories prominence despite the fact they are often substantially lacking in any substance.

Let me refer to a few examples to illustrate my point. Take the series of front page articles and editorials that appeared in *The Fiji Times* on the upgrading of security facilities at my residence. They cost a mere \$15,000 — *The Fiji Times* twisted and distorted facts to make them appear to be \$200,000. The cost of renovations to the Vice President's house in Sukuna Road was very cleverly grafted into the story to create the perception that the work at my house was costing the taxpayer an astronomical sum.

Then there is the front page story that quoted Nailaga high chief Adi Seinimili of threatening bloodshed on the land issue. The story was alarmist, designed to create fear and racial tension. Adi Seinimili has since denied having



used the word bloodshed. *The Fiji Times* chose not to run her denial. Fortunately, Fiji Television and the *Daily Post* did — I am not sure about the radio stations.

There have been a series of other articles carrying all sorts of threats of protest marches, threats to close down water supplies and of other disruptive activities - none of which have eventuated. Front page articles on the threat by some elements to close down the Labasa water supply — did it eventuate?

Stories about a big protest march by unhappy Housing Authority tenants — what happened to it? The whole thing was politically motivated by some anti-government elements and defeated politicians. There were no tenants. The plot failed because as usual there was no support.

There have been a number of articles on Taniela Tabu breathing fire and brimstone along racial lines, making all kinds of threats and allegations not backed by facts. Yet *The Fiji Times* continues to pose this man whose own credibility is questionable, having frittered away \$4 million of union membership funds that he can't explain, as the saviour of the Fijian civil servant.

Where did the Taniela Tabu meeting take place? How many people attended the meeting? Isn't it media convention to say where a meeting was held and how many people attended the meeting which claimed front page prominence in *The Fiji Times*?

It wasn't until I raised this question in my reaction to *The Fiji Times* report that the paper started saying there were 100 people at the meeting. My information is that not even 70 people attended that meeting!

Also how come the only reporter present was Margaret Wise of *The Fiji Times* since none of the other media reported anything on this meeting. It makes one wonder whether there is not a conspiracy at work here between that particular reporter and these anti-government elements.

The manner in which these stories have been handled show serious breaches of media ethics. Facts, conjecture and opinion are often blurred together to create a certain desired effect. Hard news and opinion pieces should be quite distinct aspects of journalism but you will agree with me that recently the two have merged. News articles these days quite often carry comments and opinions of the journalist writing it.

### **Fanning the fires of sedition**

But I am afraid the matter is even more serious than a breach of media ethics and my Government is quite concerned at what is happening. Is *The Fiji Times*





Report in the *Fiji Sun*, 27 October 1999.

carrying the torch for people engaged in seditious activities? The newspaper needs to take a serious look at where it is headed. Is it not fanning the fires of sedition and communalism by giving undue prominence to stories that are really non-stories?

Has the paper lost all sense of proportion and perspective in its agenda to undermine this government?

If these stories are as important as the paper makes them out to be, why is it that the *Daily Post* and the radio stations have not given them similar coverage. I wish to take this opportunity to commend the editor and staff of the *Daily Post* in the restraint and the remarkable sense of responsibility they have shown in handling these elements of destabilisation.

The *Daily Post* is maybe partially-government owned but as, no doubt, the editor and its staff will bear testimony, there has been no Government interference in the paper's editorial policy. It has been critical of Government at times. At the same time, it has shown a degree of maturity and sense of perspective in handling stories that could create a false picture of instability.



The two radio stations have also been fairly balanced and responsible in their handling of such issues.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Fiji Television. At least one TV reporter has been guilty of manipulation of news and distortion of facts although not as blatantly as *The Fiji Times*. I am also reliably informed that there was instruction from head office to staff in the West not to bother much about covering government activities in the West. Is this the attitude of a neutral media?

Some of you may think I have been unduly harsh in my criticism. If I have, it is because of the crucial role the media plays in society in disseminating news and information and in forming public opinion. The media has a responsibility to be unbiased, fair and accurate in disseminating information.

### **Responsibility in a multi-ethnic society**

The responsibility of the media in a multiracial society is even more demanding. It must at all times ensure that it does not, either intentionally or unintentionally, perpetrate racial prejudices and animosities or fan the fires of racism. It must also act within the ambit of the *Public Order Act* which prohibits public statements and utterances which could incite racial ill-will in a plural society like ours. So in Fiji the media carries the added onus of being extra sensitive on issues relating to race-relations.

I am pleased that your Code of Ethics does emphasise this. And I quote from the section on discrimination in the booklet:

Press and broadcasting media should avoid discriminatory or denigratory references to people's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation or preference, physical or mental disability or illness or age.

How many times has the Netani Rika column in *The Fiji Times* been guilty of this breach of media ethics?

The Code of Ethics goes further:

While press and broadcasting media are free to report and comment on all matters of public interest it is their duty not to publish material in a form likely to promote or encourage racial hatred or discord.

*The Fiji Times* once again needs to be wary of not breaching this particular code.



## MAHENDRA CHAUDHRY

I also note that the Code of Ethics gives the right of reply top priority. And I read again:

Every press or broadcasting organisation has an obligation to give a fair opportunity to reply to any individual or organisation which the newspaper or broadcasting organisation itself attacks editorially.

I have drawn particular attention to this provision in the Code of Ethics because it is yet another grievance I have against *The Fiji Times*. The paper has on several occasions mounted hysterical attacks on me through its editorial column yet has refused to run our response to these attacks.

One that I recall, in particular, was a scathing attack on me for not keeping my election promises to the people, distinguished more by its emotionalism rather than any balanced and rational reasoning. Despite repeated approaches by my office, the newspaper refused to run our reply to this editorial attack.

To attack someone and not have the courage to give that person a right of reply is to me sheer cowardice. It is a bullying tactic, at the very least. And I hope editors will take this code of ethics seriously.

It is unfortunate that a few elements in the media have placed a stamp of stigma on the entire industry. *The Fiji Times* I am told has its own in-house code of ethics which its editors and journalists have repeatedly violated in the manner in which they have handled stories.

Today's *Fiji Times* gives a classic example of the news doctrine that I have been speaking of. This morning the paper carried screaming headlines, THREATS ON MPs: CHAUDHRY WANTS MORE SECURITY: this is sheer concoction. I have not asked for security at my house to be increased. In fact, I feel like a prisoner surrounded by all these police officers.

Worse still, the officer quoted by the paper, Peter Blake, denies having made any such statement to *The Fiji Times*. His correct statement is in *The Fiji Sun* today. I have a letter here from Inspector Blake which categorically denies making that statement.

I also wish at this stage to refer to concoctions that have been published in *Islands Business* magazine about Government activities. In its latest issue, the magazine claims it was told by a Fijian Association Party source that His Excellency, the President, had asked me to step down for two years and I had refused. There is absolutely no truth in this report. It is a load of rubbish. In fact, you may recall that soon after the elections, when a faction of the FAP



# War of words with publisher

By **FREDERICA DELAILOMALOMA**

THERE WAS a war of words between Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and a senior journalist at a media function last night.

The launching of the Media Code of Ethics by the Media Council drew a small crowd of media representatives and executives.

Chaudhry claimed there was no truth in a story [*see below*] written by Robert Keith-Reid of *Islands Business*.

When Keith-Reid yelled out from the audience that the story had come from a reliable sources, Chaudhry told him he (Keith-Reid) was suffering memory lapse.

The majority of the crowd left immediately after Chaudhry's speech.

President of the Pacific Island News Association William Parkinson expressed grave concern on issues raise in Chaudhry's speech against *The Fiji Times*.

"[Chaudhry's] attacks against the media were draconian to say the least. We have not had these threats made since the military government in 1987, and as a member of the Fiji media I'm very concerned," Parkinson said.

Chaudhry said the code of ethics was a positive indication that the media had recognised the need for a blueprint to provide a measure to gauge standards.

His speech left many stunned.

Amid jeers from parts of the audience during his speech, Chaudhry said the onus was on the industry to enforce discipline and sound journalistic practice.

□ *Fiji Times*, 27 October 1999

□ *In an editorial in its November issue, Islands Business responded: "In view of [Chaudhry's] dictatorial assertions and virulently anti-media attitudes so nakedly displayed at such an early stage of his prime minister-ship, a question to ask now is: Has he already blown it?"*

approached the President to appoint a Fijian as Prime Minister, he sent them away with the advice that they cooperate with the Government. This was reported by the media at the time.



The same issue of *Islands Business* also carries a report titled IS CHAUDHRY ON TRACK?, claiming I thumped the table in a meeting with Government officials on cost calculations for my election promises. There was no table thumping, for the mere reason that the officials were wrong. My figures on costing were accurate and the officials had to concede this.

This is the kind of disinformation that is constantly being fed to the public by journalists who are too lazy to do their research, or are simply working to an agenda which does not involve telling the truth.

How can the media lay claim to integrity and credibility if it is going to fabricate stories like this? How can you in your professed role as the public watchdog be taken seriously when you yourselves are guilty of lying to your readers?

### **The state and the media**

My warning to the industry today is that if it will not act responsibly, then it must brace itself to face regulatory measures. The state has a duty to protect innocent people who are wronged by the media. The state also has a duty to preserve the fragile fabric of our multiracial society. My Government will not hesitate to impose restraints if we feel it necessary to protect public interest.

I reiterate my commitment to a free and unfettered media. At the same time, the media must act responsibly and honestly. It does not exist above the law.

I also draw your attention to section 30 (2) of our Constitution which sets out very clearly particular instances or considerations where in exercising our right to freedom of expression, we are to show greater sensitivity and responsibility. It is incumbent on all of us to refrain from writing or making statements which can be perceived as an attack on the dignity of any individual, group or community, or any respected office or institution, in a manner likely to promote ill-will between races or communities, or discriminate against a particular person or persons.

One subject on which the state expects extra sensitivity and cooperation from the media is [over] the *Agricultural Land Tenure Act* (ALTA). The Government is trying to find an amicable solution to this important national issue for the benefit of everyone concerned — the landowners, the tenants and the nation as a whole. Unfortunately, irresponsible elements in the media have turned this into a racial issue. We now have to grapple with this seemingly insurmountable issue of race which the media continually portrays the ALTA debate to be.



I call on you all in the media to get your perspectives right on the ALTA issue. Focusing on our combined interests and our collective good must surely be seen by you as being vitally important to nation-building in our multi-ethnic society. The emphasis must be on selective considerations and common interests that draw us together and not differences that divide and separate us.

### **Code of Ethics**

It is in this context that I welcome this very timely launching of the media code of ethics, in setting for our media standards that we consider appropriate for Fiji. I welcome too, the fact that in compiling this code, there was wide consultation within the media, with the Government political parties, civil society organisations and individuals. This ensured that the code reflects the concerns of society and is neither biased towards the media nor tending to support only segments of our society.

One of the hallmarks of any profession is a code of ethics and the powers with which to enforce that. It must go beyond "how to run our business to avoid conflict" rules. How many members of the public look at parts of the code? Do I, as a member of the public, really believe that members accept the standards, rejecting sensationalism or misleading emphasis in any form?

Do I trust editors to make sure that they clearly label what is opinion and what is commentary? To promptly acknowledge and correct errors?

To ensure that the code is strictly enforced? Because in the final analysis the responsibility to ensure enforcement lies with editors and publishers. Editors can no more shirk this responsibility than can individual journalists.

Ethics, professionalism, standards and training — these are key elements of the industry that need serious attention. Failure to address these issues has put the integrity of the entire industry in question. As Minister of Information, I am quite aware of the fact that inexperienced people have been put in senior positions and this is affecting standards.

I am also aware that capable, experienced journalists have been denied promotions based on things like personal prejudices. My ministry is prepared to look at proposals for training requirements and we will help in whatever way we can. If it is necessary to get expatriates to help out in training programmes on a temporary basis this will also be given consideration.

But we will be wary of any scheme to recruit expatriates when we have experienced local journalists who are being denied opportunities and jobs. While government is being told that local journalists are not capable of handling



To deal with cases of defamation where members of the public have been personally injured, maliciously or unfairly, or subjected to character assassination, Fiji's Government is considering setting up a Media Tribunal.

positions of editorial responsibility here, we are aware of the high regard in which our local journalists are held in the media world overseas.

We are therefore not willing to accept unsubstantiated claims that local journalists are not up to handling top editorial jobs. Both *The Fiji Times* and the *Daily Post* have long had very capable local editors who maintained high standards and were sensitive to local issues and feelings. I refer to Vijendra Kumar and Nemani Delaibatiki. It should be appreciated that the state is bound by provisions in the Constitution to ensure jobs and equal opportunities for all its citizens.

It is the duty of media organisations to ensure local journalists are trained to acceptable standards. As already stated, Government is prepared to draw on its resources and provide assistance in facilitating this.

### **Media legislation**

Government is working on changes to the *Media Act* and the industry can rest assured that it will be fully consulted on this. We intend to give the Media Council teeth to impose fines where it finds that the media code of ethics has been breached by media organisations.

Ancillary legislation connected with the media review includes the *Newspaper Registration Act* which will be retained for the purposes of identifying owners and publishers of newspapers. However, one amendment to the Act is envisaged to include appropriate penalties for infringement of the proposed *Media Act*.

To deal with cases of libel and defamation where members of the public have been personally injured, maliciously or unfairly, by media reports or subjected to character assassination, Government is considering setting up a Media Tribunal.

The state believes that the aggrieved in this respect has the right to swift



justice rather than wait for years to go through a long drawn out process in the conventional courts of law. The Media Tribunal will have powers to adjudicate and impose damages.

Repeal of the *Fiji Broadcasting Act* is long overdue. This will be replaced by a comprehensive *Broadcasting Act* which will take into account relevant provisions of the Fair Trading Decree.

With regard to television, provisions of the 1992 Decree will basically be retained. But I want it clear that Government will remove the monopoly Fiji Television Limited currently enjoys. We have received numerous complaints regarding programmes and standards of service provided.

Any law of exclusivity which militates against public interest, is in my view, not enforceable.

Other positive moves on-stream include the new *Freedom of Information Act* to replace the *Official Secrets Act*. New provisions for freedom of expression under Section 30 of our Constitution go a step further by including specific provisions for "freedom of written press and other media". Government is doing its bit to update media legislation and bring them in line with modern developments.

I welcome, therefore, the move by the media to clean up its own house by launching this professional Code of Ethics. It is a positive indication that the media itself recognises the need for a blueprint which will provide a measure to gauge standards, and which can be used by the Media Council to adjudicate fairly on complaints by aggrieved parties.

Finally, I wish to stress that if journalism longs for greater respect, then the onus is on the industry to enforce discipline and sound journalistic practices. It must ensure a well-trained cadre of professionals who will be a credit to this noble profession.

I congratulate and thank the Media Council for its role in putting out this Code of Ethics. It is an initiative the government side fully supports.

With great pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, I launch this Code of Ethics for the Media in Fiji.

□ *Fiji Islands Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry gave this address at the launching of the Fiji Media Council Code of Ethics in Suva on 26 October 1999.*



ADVERTISEMENT

# Government responds to Media hysteria

*Measures do not curtail media freedom, says PM. They are designed to ensure greater media responsibility in a multi-racial society.*

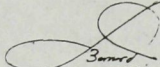
**FIJI POLICE**

**NEWS RELEASE    PRESS RELEASE    PRESS RELEASE**

**26/10/99 - 3.30pm**

The Fiji Police refutes the news carried by the Fiji Times on its front page on Tuesday, 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1999. ASP Peter Blake denies the story written by Rosemary Baleiverata.

ASP Blake's release has been taken out of context and mischievous in the extreme.



Siva Bernard (SGT)  
Public Relations Officer  
for Commissioner of Police

5. Fiji Police Press Release refuting Fiji Times story

4. A ASP Blake's memo to Commissioner of Police on 26 10 99

To: COMMISSIONER OF POLICE  
 From: A/ASP P.D.Blake  
 Date: 26/10/99  
 Re: FIJI TIMES ARTICLE 26/10/99 "THREATS ON MIN"

PH no. 312 222  
 File No. Admin

- Re: A. Our conversation dated 26/10/99, 0900 hrs  
 B. Fiji Times Article, 26/10/99, "Threats on min"  
 C. Conversation with Hon. Assistant Minister of Home Affairs, 26/10/99, 0840 hours.

Sr,

I refer to the article at that I written by Fiji Times reporter Rosemary Baleiverata, in regards to alleged comments I made conveying the Prime Minister's dissatisfaction of security, which was being provided for him.

None of the comments reported regarding the Prime Minister's "dissatisfaction with the number of Police officers posted at his residence" nor comments relating to "teething up security for Cabinet Ministers... after recent threats against them" or the number of men we can or can't provide the Prime Minister which were stated by me.

The press were invited to attend the opening of the course on Monday 25/10/99 via an official Police Press Release. A short interview was conducted by Miss Baleiverata of Pecal Hall, in Nasese at of approximately 1030 hrs on Monday 25/10/99. Several interviews were conducted by the visual and written media on the 25/10/99. The course was opened by His Excellency the US Ambassador Mr. Siddique after which he was interviewed by TV 1. I was also asked for an on-camera interview which ACP/TC requested I do. This I did. The Fiji Sun was also present and a short photo session conducted. The Fiji Times reporter arrived late and had to be kept waiting till lecture sessions conducted by Mr. Iwerit Sotiari, Regional Security Officer for the US Embassy, were completed. At this point I was interviewed first and Mr. Sotiari followed.

Comments I made to the Fiji Times were general in nature and non specific. These comments were on the Sponsorship of the course, the assistance of the US Government in this initiative, the location of the course, the number of participants, general comments on the importance of this training for police, and plans to set up a Diplomatic/VP Training Unit at PMF on completion of the overseas course.

No comments were made regarding the Prime Minister "wanting more security" or any comments made or attributed to the Prime Minister. I was especially carefully not to make any reference of this course linking government involvement and treated it solely as ongoing operational training for police officers.

What was reported in the opening paragraphs of the Fiji Times was totally false and plainly mischievous. I can only speculate on the intentions of the writer. Judging by the cartoon on page 6 and the angle in which they have chosen to portray this course indicate their motives for writing the article were not altogether sincere.

The Fiji Sun and TV 1 reports were accurately portrayed and without incident. The Fiji Times choose to adopt a more hostile angle.

I regret and apologise for any inconvenience and embarrassment to the Prime Minister which may have been caused by this article and will in future refrain from interviews with the Fiji Times.

(P.D. Blake) ASP  
 VP Course Contingent Commander

**Fiji Sun, 30 October 1999:** Part of an eight-page paid advertisement voicing Chaudhry's complaints against the media.