

Fiji Times hits back at PM's allegations

'Most of the Prime Minister's statements consisted of sweeping generalisations or statements of opinion dressed up as fact — ironically, the very sin of which he accused the media.'

By *THE FIJI TIMES*

THE PRIME MINISTER, Mahendra Chaudhry, did neither himself nor his office any favours when he launched the Fiji Media Council's Code of Ethics. In a rambling diatribe riddled with contradictions, half truths and untruths, Chaudhry warned that he would legislate to make the media more accountable.

More accountable to whom, he did not specify — but it is not too difficult to imagine.

This is precisely what many in the media industry had expected. For the past six months, Chaudhry has been escalating his attacks on the media — in particular the country's most successful news organisation, *The Fiji Times* — in an effort to create a climate in which the public would be softened up for his draconian legislation.

Most of his statements consisted of sweeping generalisations or statements of opinion dressed up as fact — ironically, the very sin of which he accused the media. Few, if any, of Chaudhry's statements and accusations were supported by facts. Indeed, in a speech that was more in keeping with an outburst than a well considered and researched set of comments, he offered little of substance.

Chaudhry accused this newspaper on three specific issues.

□ He claimed that we had distorted the facts on renovations at his private residence to suggest they would cost \$200,000 when the cost was "a mere \$15,000".

Wrong. *The Fiji Times* reported that \$104,000 was originally sought for the Prime Minister's home and that \$24,000 has been spent. The latter figure was confirmed by his own son and Private Secretary, Rajendra Chaudhry. It is uncertain how the "mere \$15,000" is arrived at.

But in any case, whether the amount was \$15,000 or \$15 million, it is vital that any public money spent on a Prime Minister's home be minutely accounted for. It is entirely likely that, had it not been for *The Fiji Times* report, the money would have been spent and nothing said.

So much for transparency.

□ He then accused this newspaper of creating fear and racial tension by reporting remarks by the Marama Tui Ba, Adi Senimili, warning of bloodshed if anyone tried to take her people's land. *The Fiji Times*, he said, chose not to run her denial while Fiji Television and the *Daily Post* did. In fact, Fiji TV, the *Post* and FM96 all quoted the Prime Minister as saying she had denied it.

The Fiji Times refused to run the denial for the simple reason that she never denied it, as was confirmed by Adi Senimili as recently as Thursday.

□ Then the Prime Minister castigated this newspaper over what he called a "screaming headline" regarding threats to MPs' security with a smaller headline saying that he had called for more security. Senior police officers have confirmed that a number of MPs and ministers have sought extra security.

However, a police officer in the report was misquoted as saying the Prime Minister had called for more security.

Unlike the Prime Minister, *The Fiji Times* admits its errors and has already corrected this (twice) and apologised.

We look forward to the same courtesy from the Prime Minister over his baseless allegations on the reporting of his home renovations and Adi Senimili's statements. We do not, however, suggest any holding of breath.

Chaudhry says "there is no doubt" media credibility is dropping. On the contrary there is every doubt. The most recent independent survey, carried out last year by a reputable professional market research team, found journalists came high on a list of people who the public felt they could trust. Politicians, by comparison, came marginally above second-hand car salesmen.

We would be surprised if that public perception has dramatically altered but would be willing to fund a further survey if we felt it would stop Chaudhry from making such baseless statements.

The same politician then berates reporter Margaret Wise who he accuses of

writing “nothing but” anti-government stories. Apart from being plain nonsense, his accusation conveniently ignores the fact that all reporters, and not just those working for *The Fiji Times*, seek out news that other reporters have not yet discovered. If that news happens to portray the government in a bad light, it is hardly the fault of the reporter.

Chaudhry goes further. He implies that too much prominence is given to “anti-government stories”. That is a news judgement made by the editor on the day — and if circulation figures are any guide (many would argue they are the most important guide), *The Fiji Times* provides the public with what it wants to know about.

The Prime Minister goes on to attack this newspaper over articles on such items as the threat by Housing Authority tenants to march in protest, threats to close down water supplies, and other unnamed threats. As Chaudhry said, none have come to fruition.

He might have have, but didn't add that we also covered his promise to reduce interest rates for all Housing Authority borrowers, that TV covered the statement by his Housing Minister that the 6 per cent interest rate would apply to existing tenants earning \$6500 or less “within the week”.

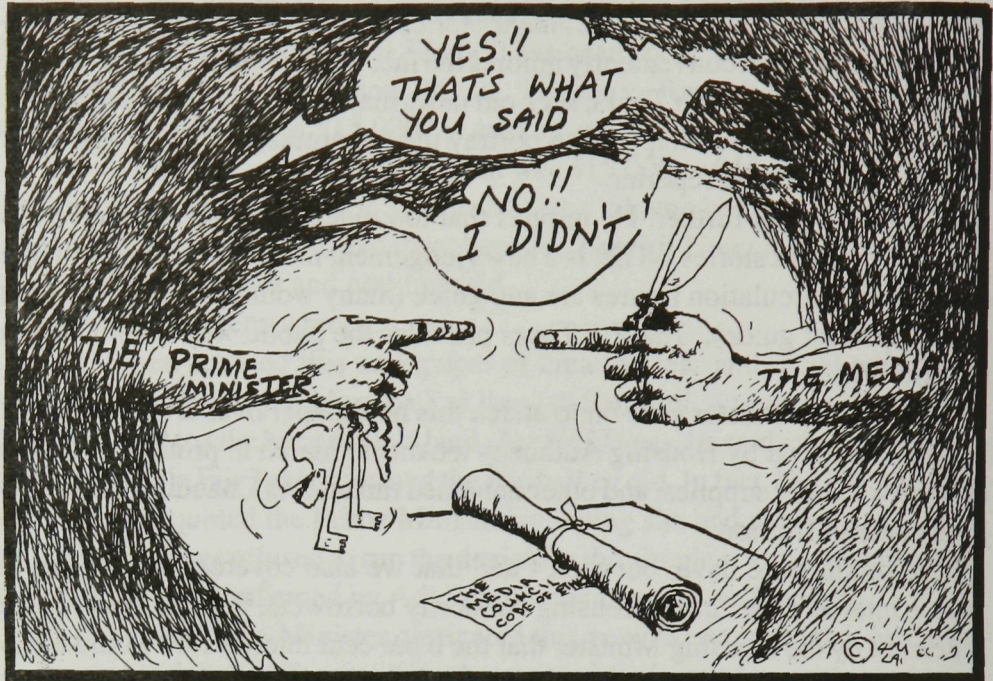
Should the fact that these promises have also not come to fruition prevent us from reporting them? Apparently not.

For a politician, Chaudhry talks long and earnestly about ethics. “Facts, conjecture and opinion are often blurred together to create a certain desired effect.” While that's a recipe that will sound familiar to any politician, Chaudhry again offers not a solitary fact to support his allegation. He attacks columnist and acting editor Netani Rika over remarks in his column, again without offering specifics. He may be interested to know that he is the only one who has formally complained.

He claims that *The Fiji Times* has mounted “hysterical” attacks on the Prime Minister in its editorial column and refused to publish his reply. Again, he does not specify. However, if he is referring to a letter that criticised what was not stated and was a thinly-disguised political speech, he is right. We refused to publish.

“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.” Again, most politicians will find this familiar.

But Chaudhry reveals his true mission with the statement: Is *The Fiji Times*



Cartoon in *The Fiji Times*, 31 October 1999.

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carrying the torch for people engaged in seditious activities?... Is it not “fanning the fires of sedition and communalism by giving undue prominence to stories that are really non-stories?”

The Prime Minister wants to tell the media what is important to its readers, listeners and viewers and, what is not. And this is the heart of his ambition. The high-sounding statements about protecting the innocent from media mis-treatment can be dismissed. This is about control.

Chaudhry’s legislation will aim to force the media to publish items that suit him and his purpose. It will be a serious and determined attack on the freedoms enjoyed by every individual in this country, disguised as a law to protect them.

Not satisfied with that, the Prime Minister then turns to the work permit issue, despite the fact that this falls exclusively within the ambit of the Minister for Home Affairs. He is aware that “capable, experienced journalists have been denied promotions based on things like personal prejudices. We will be wary of any scheme to recruit expatriates when we have experienced local journalists who are being denied opportunities and jobs.”

Who and where are these people?

How the paper sees the facts

PRIME MINISTER Mahendra Chaudhry's threats against media freedom have generated more controversy and debate than any other statement by the Fiji Islands Government.

The Chaudhry Government has highlighted a number of publicised issues bringing to the fore questions that need immediate answers.

According to Chaudhry, recent reports by *The Fiji Times* and others have prompted the Government to look at ways, by way of legislation, to make the media more immediately accountable.

But as soon as he was elected, and in keeping with his People's Coalition manifesto, Chaudhry made a public statement vowing not to legislate or license the media.

"We won't bring in any legislation, no licensing, but I hope there will be training in media organisations," he said shortly after being sworn in as Prime Minister on 21 May 1999.

Chaudhry alleges that reports highlighted in *The Fiji Times* have been manipulated and distorted to discredit and embarrass the Government.

For example:

Statement: Chaudhry says that "a mere \$15,000" was spent in upgrading "security facilities" at his Suva Point home.

Fact: Documentary evidence shows that a little more than \$24,000 has already been used on works to his family home while the Public Works Department sought a further \$87,000 to complete improvements. His son and private secretary confirmed and supplied documentary evidence to show that \$24,000 had been used on his family home, for which he is being paid a \$10,800 per annum housing allowance for choosing to remain at his residence.

Statement: Nailaga high chief Adi Senimili Cagilaba denied statements she reportedly made relating to ALTA.

Fact: Adi Senimili says she did not speak to Chaudhry and has not retracted her statements. "I don't even know the man — let alone speak to him," she said.

Adi Senimili said she was aware her statements and the reporter were

☞ *Continued overleaf*

HOW THE PAPER SEES THE FACTS

☞ *From previous page*

under police investigation. She has refused to speak to the police but said she would leave it to the Government to decide on what she should be charged with. Her statements, she said, were made in relation to land she owned.

“I was talking about property that I own and I can’t understand why the Government is trying to accuse others of being racists. They should look at themselves and the policies they have introduced — like the huge disparity in the assistance given to the Fijian landowners and the Indian tenants,” she said.

“I am not giving any statements to the police (she and *The Fiji Times* are under police investigation as a result of her statements). If they want to charge me then that’s their decision. But what they must remember is that I have been representing the feelings of the majority of my people who want their land back. So it will actually be a charge against all of my people.”

Statement: *The Fiji Times* was the only media organisation to report a meeting of Fijian civil servants belonging to the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers. Only seventy people attended the meeting.

Fact: The meeting began as the 170 quorum requirement was met. Proceedings were also reported by the *Fiji Sun* the next day. A *Daily Post* reporter was there but left before the meeting started.

The *Fiji Times* did not report a speech by a former Cabinet staff member transferred to the Immigration Department, who stunned members with claims about how Fijian staff at the Prime Minister’s office were being treated.

Statement: Media credibility is dropping.

Fact: The latest available independent survey shows that the public trusts journalists far more than it trusts politicians.

Statement: I am reliably informed that there was an instruction from (*Fiji Times*) head office to staff in the West not to bother too much about covering government activities there.

Fact: No such instruction exists, nor will such an instruction ever exist.

☐ *Fiji Times, 30 October 1999. Republished with permission.*

Again, Chaudhry does not say.

But above all, Chaudhry demeans himself by his baseless personal attacks in support of his deep-seated need to control all that goes on around him. For an individual that is unfortunate but acceptable. For a Prime Minister it is far from acceptable.

Mahendra Chaudhry has demeaned his high office with this disgraceful attack. He should read the Media Code of Ethics he purported to welcome, follow its advice and issue a correction and an apology.

□ Fiji Times, 30 October 1999. This article is republished with permission.

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