
Editorial Culture and conflict

ONE OF the many ironies of Fiji's recent general election was the demise of one of the "godfathers" of the indigenous Taukei movement, Apisai Tora. The man who was once a firebrand trade unionist and who jointly led the 1959 oil workers' strike, later became an indigenous nationalist and helped unleash the forces that overthrew the first Labour Party coalition government in two military coups in 1987.

He was also a key leader of the indigenous protest movement last year against the Labour government, led by the first Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, which climaxed with George Speight's rogue military backed rebellion on May 19.

Tora was one of many established Fijian leaders and chiefs — of all political views — who were swept away by younger people and bureaucrats in the new tide of nationalist fervour. (But he was made senator).

Party leaders Dr Tupeni Baba (New Labour Unity), Filipe Bole (SVT), Adi Kuini Speed (Fijian Association Party), Ponipate Lesavua (PANU) and Tevita Momoedonu (Bai Kai Viti) — all Fijians — and the traditionally Indian-dominated Na-



Photo: BEN BOHANE

Apisai Tora: Swept away.

tional Federation Party leader Attar Singh were all defeated. The irony wasn't lost on Australian freelance photojournalist Ben Bohane who has carved out a reputation for his insightful, even courageous, reporting on Melanesian indigenous and custom land struggle over the past decade or so. He spent some time with Tora shortly before the election and among his many pieces on Fiji gave

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a glimpse of the military trying to exorcise the ghosts from the past (*see page 69*) — the 1987 double military coups and the passive and divided response to the Speight crisis with many senior officers clearly openly for the rebellion.

The Fiji news media earned a pat on the back from the non-government organisation Fiji Media Watch for its election coverage. Coordinator Swasti Chand noted:

From the day polls began and until the announcement of all results, media played a very crucial role by providing the people with information flow ... For the first time in our nation's history, consumers of the media had a lot to choose from. All media outlets had something new to offer. Political leaders and commentators also played a key role in imparting the valuable information on issues related to the well being of the nation.

But this was a huge improvement over the performance of the local media at the time of the attempted coup just 15 months earlier when there were serious questions about the impartiality and ethics of some news media and journalists. Reaction by newsmedia to criticism was very defensive and there was a reluctance to debate the news media role. Ironically, it took the NGO Media Watch to organise a workshop to tackle the issues — “Steering Fiji Back to Democracy: A Challenge to the Journalists of Fiji”. This workshop was led by Honiara-based Australian political journalist Mary-Louise O’Callaghan.

In December 2000, O’Callaghan raised questions about the role of the Pacific media during crisis in an article in *The Australian* entitled PARADISE EXPOSED: “As coups, mutinies and assassinations have romped their way through the island states” she wrote, “foreign TV crews and correspondents have flocked to report on *Paradise Lost*, most departing before they’d had a chance to discover that it never was, nor is it ever going to be, paradise in the Pacific.” She went on to ask how much of the responsibility for the region’s tumultuous events should lie at the feet of the Pacific’s own Fourth Estate?

Articles backgrounding this year’s events in the Pacific cite racial and ethnic tensions, chronic corruption, administrative incompetence, political manipulation and declining standards of living in the island states but how culpable is the media itself for the particular mix of domestic tensions which saw what most Australians had presumed to be docile if diminutive democracies come so spectacularly unstuck this year?

Answers to this question are the theme of this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* — and the responses are divided. According to veteran Agence France-Presse Michael Field, whose growing banned list stretched this year to include Nauru:

While the local media have been good, indeed at times plain sensational, some doubts remain about the objectivity of some, and indeed honesty. The credibility of some local journalists faded when their at times remarkable foresight at being where rebel stories were about to happen plainly came about as they were participants, not spectators. Sadly some of them don't even know their cover has long since been blown.

Jale Moala, then (he now lives in New Zealand) arguably the most experienced editor in Fiji with stints in the editorial chair on almost all the major publications — *The Fiji Times*, *Daily Post*, *Pacific Islands Monthly* (now closed), and *Islands Business* (now merged with *Pacific*) — says:

The coup polarised the races in Fiji — or so it seemed, thus creating a situation in which many reporters found it difficult to focus on the issues from a totally impartial point of view. They were swept away by the euphoria of the moment and the tension and the emotion that charged the event. This was true of both indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian reporters. Fear may have also played a role.

Criticism, it seems, was okay, providing it was “in the Pacific family”, but a conference paper of mine presented at the Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference in Mooloolaba, Queensland, in early December drew a hysterical response from a handful of media executives who wanted to protect their patch. This controversial paper, *COUP COUPLAND: THE PRESS AND THE PUTSCH IN FIJI*, isn't reproduced in this edition, but it can be read in the journal *AsiaPacific MediaEducator*.

For *The Sun* acting editor Samisoni Pareti, Moala and I are “dissenters”, but considering the range of personal responses in support I have received from independent quarters, our view would seem to be almost mainstream. Wrote Pareti in an anniversary reflective:

On the whole, the local media's coverage of the ... coup by George Speight and the crisis it triggered was not that bad. That is the assessment

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of newsroom executives *The Fiji Sun* spoke to. Diplomats like Australia's envoy in Fiji, Susan Boyd, and her outgoing New Zealand counterpart, Tia Barrett, have expressed similar sentiments.

There will be dissenters, of course. University of the South Pacific's journalism programme coordinator David Robie, for instance, was critical of the local journalists' coverage of the crisis, as was former *Daily Post* editor Jale Moala.

Apart from Fiji and the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea also faced two major crises in what Richard Dinnen dubbed the Year of the Gun. Reviewing the armed revolt at the Murray Barracks in March and the the shooting of four anti-privatisation protesters, including students, in June, ABC correspondent Dinnen wrote:

They were times of extra pressure on journalists and their media organisations, in a place where even a quiet news day can be a major challenge. Reporters faced danger, threats, intimidation, and were required to report on events in which the behaviour of two of their nation's disciplined forces were called into serious question. By and large, the crises were covered accurately and fairly, despite considerable obstacles. But many unanswered questions remain, from both events.

The challenge for journalists in the Pacific as the complexities of the economic, social and political problems grow, is to be able to provide analysis and the indepth background to make sense of the world. This was sadly lacking during the post-coup period. What analysis was published was largely contributed by local commentators, such as Jone Dakuvula and Sir Vijay Singh, and some foreign political scientists — and journalists.

But a sign of depth in the news media, is the ability of its own journalists to provide searching analysis. The improvement during the Fiji election perhaps augurs well for the future. Now the challenge faces the Solomon Islands media for an election in December, and the Papua New Guinean media for an election next June.

THIS EDITION of *Pacific Journalism Review* is the third to be produced in association with the University of the South Pacific journalism programme. **Mary-Louise O'Callaghan** opens the "Coverage of crises" theme with her piece on "Paradise exposed". **Michael Field** follows with "The Bure News-

room” in which he questions the quality of New Zealand media coverage of the Pacific. **Jale Moala** examines the cultural dilemmas.

Samisoni Pareti gives his defence of the local media while **Reggie Dutt** reports on a violation of press freedom. **Alison Ofotalau** compiled a transcript of the controversial Fiji Television *Close-Up* programme which led to the attack on the station by Speight supporters. **David Robie** gives the inside story on the closure of the *Pacific Journalism Online* website in the face of threats. **Anthony Mason** takes an academic look at the dilemmas facing the Pacific media.

Richard Naidu offers his guidelines for election coverage, delivered at the Media Watch workshop, while **Ben Bohane** has a look at the Fiji military trying to exorcise its ghosts. **Richard Dinnen** reviews what he calls Papua New Guinea’s Year of the Gun, and the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists’s **Kavita Menon** concludes the crises section by putting the Pacific troubles in perspective with an overview of the Asia-Pacific region.

An insightful perspective on Fiji’s political morass and the impact on the regional University of the South Pacific is provided by academic staff union president **Biman Prasad**. Divine Word University’s **Joe Weber** in Madang described how some of his students had a baptism of fire by reporting a series of kerosene lamp blasts. **David Lea** looks at the civil society and the media in Fiji, PNG and Tonga.

Steven Ratuva, himself a cartoonist of note at one stage on Fiji’s *The Review* examines the state of Pacific cartooning and concludes the region has some way to go before it produces a truly “Pacific style”.

Two student journalists from the University of Papua New Guine, **Wanita Wakus** and **Estella Cheung**, give their accounts, as published in their newspaper, *Uni Tavur*, of the circumstances of the shooting of students by police. The young women later testified before a Commission of Inquiry.

Anna Shadbolt examines trauma and reporting in the Pacific and also at the shortcomings of suicide reporting. ‘**Ana Tapueluelu** questions the closeness of reporters and the police. How close is too close?

Finally, University of the South Pacific student journalists Andrea Waqa and Noora Ali profile **Wainiki Waqa-Bogidrau** and **Tevita Momoedonu**, while *Fiji Times* features editor Bernadette Hussain adds a profile of often-banned **Michael Field**.

David Robie