

# Paradise exposed:

## Is the region's Fourth Estate up to it?

Should the local press bear some of the responsibility for the political turmoil that has engulfed the South Pacific, asks this article in the first of a series of regional perspectives on crises and how the news media have handled them. Great news is rarely good news for the countries involved.

By MARY-LOUISE O'CALLAGHAN

IT HAS been a great year for news in the South Pacific. As coups, mutinies and assassinations have romped their way through the island states, 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.

But "great" news is rarely good news for the countries involved and while George Speight strutted his stuff night-in and night-out for the 56 interminable days of Fiji's television-hostage crisis, local journalists in Fiji were having a very different experience to their foreign counterparts. There, and in the Solomon Islands, the home-grown media were faced with the peculiar challenge of reporting not just the fall of their own democratically elected governments, but fast-moving, often dangerous events that took their nations to the brink of anarchy.

In Papua New Guinea, less violent but almost as disruptive political manoeuvrings have threatened to do the same thing, while in Samoa the conviction of two ministers for the assassination of one of their cabinet colleagues has rocked the community and on Bougainville, where a tentative peace has held for the past three years, violence is threatening to erupt once again.

In Solomon Islands at least four journalists went into hiding, fearing for their lives, while *PHOT*, one of the country's two newspapers, was forced to

close after escalating threats culminated in an armed raid on its offices. In Fiji, two radio journalists were recently taken into custody for a day of "questioning" by the army and another two formally charged for their actions in covering a mutiny. Yet in both countries some journalists and publications have also attracted criticism for seeming to promote and even endorse the actions of the coup-makers.

So how much of the responsibility for these tumultuous events should lie at the feet of the Pacific's Fourth Estate? With the royal exception of Tonga, the region's only constitutional monarchy, and the remaining French colonial territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, most Pacific countries have inherited systems of government based on the Westminster model which relies on the scrutiny of an independent and active media as one of the crucial elements involved in delivering responsible, accountable government.

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?

"We have to take some of the responsibility," says Russell Hunter, editor-in-chief of *The Fiji Times*, when asked about Fijians' lack of understanding of their new constitution, thrown out during the May coup. It was this fundamental ignorance of the safeguards for indigenous interests that were enshrined in the 1997 Constitution that Speight and others played upon to justify their assault on Fiji's democratic institutions.

"All the media here have to cop that, it was one of our failures. We gave the debate over the constitution massive coverage but we never explained properly what actually ended up in there, so we should take our share of the blame," says Hunter, who prior to moving to Fiji four years ago was chief subeditor on *The Australian* and in the seventies the founding editor of a ground-breaking weekly newspaper in Papua New Guinea, *The Times*.

Perhaps just as significant, was the souring of relations between the Chaudhry Government and the Fiji media that occurred soon after the 1999 elections. So poisonous was this relationship after just five months in office, Mahendra Chaudhry, a seasoned user of the media while in Opposition, began mooting the introduction of special legislation to "make the media more responsible".



Certainly an environment of scare-mongering and emotional rhetoric played out in the local media in the months leading up to the coup now appears to have in part laid the ground for George Speight's actions.

Then in October last year the Prime Minister specifically accused *The Fiji Times* of encouraging sedition asking if it was not "fanning the fires of sedition and communalism by giving undue prominence to stories that are really non-stories?"

Certainly an environment of scare-mongering and emotional rhetoric played out in the local media in the months leading up to the coup, now appears to have in part laid the ground for Speight's actions. But Hunter, who had been forced to leave Fiji shortly before the May 19 coup after the Chaudhry Government refused to renew his work permit, says that with the benefit of hindsight, there is not a lot he would change about *The Fiji Times* pre-coup coverage.

"The media in Fiji can hold its head up reasonably high, I think. It was a very sensitive time and I think we probably pulled some punches but there is always that dilemma, how far do you go at a time like this? You can't just ignore issues. There are a

couple of times when it might have been better to have gone in a bit softer," Hunter says, citing one of the examples that so vexed Chaudhry. Hunter now says that it may have been more prudent not to have given prominence to a story quoting a senior Western Fiji chief when she warned that there would be bloodshed if the government encroached too far into Fijians' control of their traditional lands.

"But there are other times where I think we should have gone harder," Hunter said from Suva where he returned after having his work permit restored following the coup.

In the Solomon Islands, it appears to have been the media's sins more of omission that will in time be seen as its greatest contribution to the nation's troubles. The ethnic tensions which culminated in the armed takeover of the Solomons' capital, Honiara, in June came after years of mismanagement and quite blatant corruption on the part of several governments, which with one or



Kiribati publisher Ieremia Tabai on the front page of *The Australian's* Media section, 7 December 2000. See breakout on page 15.



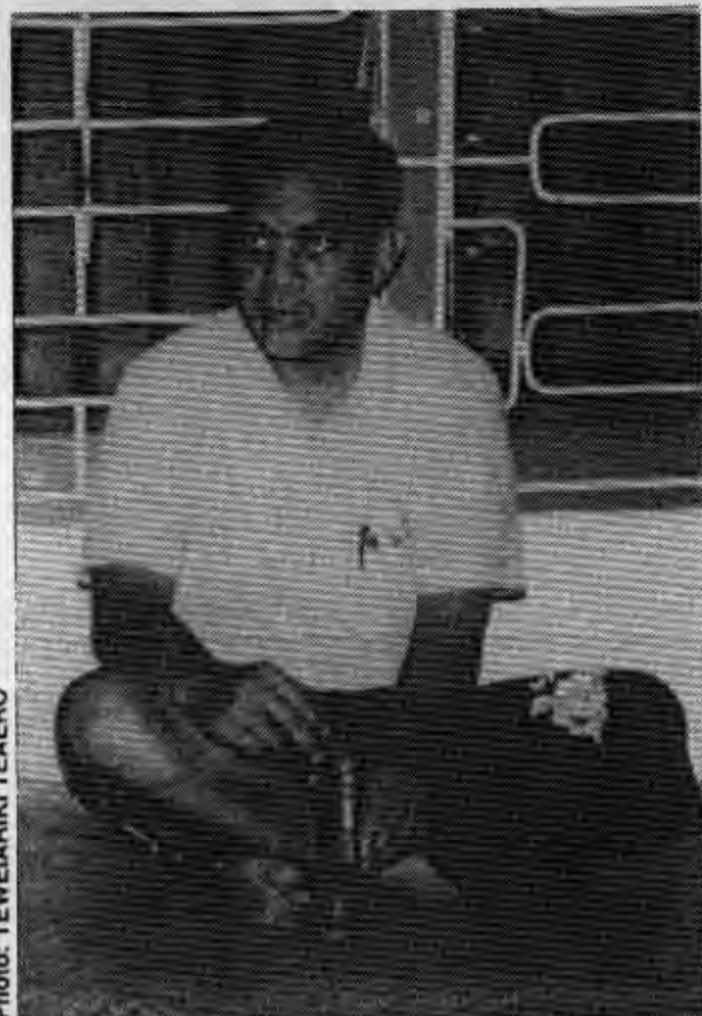


Photo: TEWEARIKI TEAERO

Ieremia Tabai: Beating the odds.

two honourable exceptions, went largely uninvestigated by the local media despite the steady and increasingly visible impoverishment of the country.

For years one of the key requirements of a liberal democracy, the scrutiny of an informed and active media, was simply not functioning in the Solomons where despite the best efforts of some individual journalists, news outlets seemed content more often than not to run statements verbatim or worse, uninformed, often highly biased opinion under the guise of news, issues of accuracy and balance seemingly ignored.

Although the freedom of the press has been enshrined in most independence constitutions, and provision made for national broadcasters, it was

beyond the powers of even the colonial masters to legislate for the future competency and diversity of the media in their former territories.

In reality for the smallest of the island states, countries such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, Cook Islands and even Samoa, the size of their micro-markets virtually guarantee a heavy dependence on government funded, if not, controlled media outlets, with little chance of a free and independent press being able to prosper, even before the politicians enter the equation.

Kiribati's former President, Ieremia Tabai who is currently engaged in trying to beat these odds, with his *New Star* national newspaper (*see breakout*) argues that the scrutiny provided by a competent, independent media, if anything, is even more crucial in young, under-resourced nations than it is in more established nations because other institutions are still weak and the safety-net of precedent is almost non-existent.

Put simply, if the voters don't even know what their government has been doing, if there is little informed public debate on issues of good governance, the politicians can hardly be expected to work it all on their own.

## Champion of the free press

By MARY-LOUISE O'CALLAGHAN

STRING thirty three coral atolls together and you have Kiribati, one of the smallest countries in the world. Scatter these scratches of coral across an area of the Pacific Ocean equivalent to the United States of America, and you start to comprehend the immutable obstacles facing this precarious little nation's existence just north of the equator.

It is here, in Kiribati's splendid isolation that you will find Ieremia Tabai, a man who has done more than most to advance not just his people's quest for a better life but all the Pacific island states. These days the Pacific elder statesman, clad in a t-shirt and shorts, can usually be found inside a modest concrete block building about 100 metres from the sea, helping to put out possibly the smallest national newspaper in the world — the *Kiribati Newstar*; circulation 1700.

With a cover price of 60 cents, the *Newstar* hits the street (there is only one road in the capital, Tarawa) on Friday mornings, its national distribution achieved when Tabai and his wife, Meleangi, stop off at the South Tarawa post office on their way home from a night of folding and inserting the A4-sized paper, to post copies to the outer islands.

One of three media projects Tabai has set up this year — a *Newstar* website and FM radio station, New Air, are close to being launched — production of this little newspaper — Kiribati's first independent media outlet — is surrounded by an air of excitement and enthusiasm akin to fording a new frontier.

"Until now all the media in Kiribati has been controlled by the Government," Tabai said a recent interview. "The [Government] paper and the radio will never put out anything critical of the Government. If they do, it is by accident," he says with a laugh.

Kiribati's first president following independence in 1979, Tabai's steady 12-year stewardship of the former British colony, the Gilbert Islands, is widely credited with keeping the tiny nation on the right side of viable. Especially significant was his careful management of a trust fund established by the British in 1956 with royalties from phosphate mining which

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has given the island nation a head start compared with most of its cash-starved neighbours. Now worth \$630 million, the fund is equivalent to an incredible 10 years import cover for the 90,000 odd people of Kiribati even though they are heavily dependent upon imports.

Following his second term as President, Tabai became the South Pacific's chief bureaucrat for six years, retiring in 1997 after two terms as Secretary-General of the region's peak political body, the Pacific Islands Forum. A post at the United Nations, Commonwealth Secretariat or another major international organisation seemed the inevitable next step in such a career, but instead Tabai returned home to contest and secure a seat in Kiribati's national Parliament.

No longer interested in serving in Government, Tabai says becoming co-owner-publisher of the *Newstar* is a logical development of a lifetime of service to the public, rather than a departure from it.

"When I entered government first in 1978, I believed it was bad for the state to monopolise the news — it probably had to do with my exposure to New Zealand," says Tabai who was educated at Wellington's Victoria University.

"The first thing I did when I got into government as chief minister, was to make the broadcasting unit, which then was just a division of the ministry, a statutory body. Later when I was working in Fiji [at the Forum Secretariat] and as I travelled around, it was always in the back of my mind that one day it would be possible to have an independent media here because I have a basic belief that you can't have democracy without it."

Tabai's partners in his media ventures include his brother and a Melbourne based I-Kiribati woman, Siau Smith, who between them have managed to keep *Newstar's* start-up and the installation of a state-of-the-art FM studio debt free. It's a fact that's helping to keep the company afloat despite the recent withdrawal of most Government advertising.

"I am on the wrong side of politics," Tabai, officially a member of the Opposition, says abruptly. "My initial plan was to have the radio up and ready in time before the last general election in 1998...but they applied the

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"In Australia (the scrutiny of) a paper is taken for granted, but here if there is no independent media there is nothing to force our leaders to be accountable and raise the standard of behaviour expected of our leaders," says Tabai.

Russell Hunter believes that on the whole the Fiji media "performs averagingly well as the Fourth Estate — we've come a long way since the days of obsequiousness to Ratu Mara".

Indeed, there are those that argue that Fiji today is paying the price for the timidity of the country's press during the 15 years following independence in 1972 that Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was Prime Minister. A traditional chief and autocratic leader, Ratu Mara brooked no criticism of his government, and the local media's compliance with this is one of the factors which helped delay any change of government. When Ratu Mara finally lost office in 1987 elements of Fiji's ruling political, military and business elite found it hard to accept the election of a Labour-led Government. Six weeks later it was deposed in the country's first coup.

In this, Papua New Guinea's politics and press has a markedly different history, regular changes of government having been accepted even if resented and a good part of the reason for this has been the robust coverage of national affairs provided by the PNG media.

"This is largely due to the inheritance by the press in PNG of the 'stropky Australian', don't-come-the-raw-prawn-with-me school of journalism," says Ian Boden, executive editor of one of Papua New Guinea's two daily newspapers, *The National*.

"That has been the sole model and experience of our senior Papua New Guinea journalists. The early papers constantly challenged the colonial administration's line. There's been a generation since then that has overlaid it with a

'Early newspapers constantly challenged the colonial admin's line. There's been a generation since then that has overlaid it with a PNG approach but you can't overestimate that early influence.'

IAN BODEN, executive editor of *The National*



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law in such a way that it would delay the whole thing. If the government was going to use the state radio for their news then other people could use ours and they realized that of course.

"When I recognised that it was going to take us a while to get it started, I said OK, let's get the newspaper going."

Published in Kiribati vernacular, *Newstar* is modest in its efforts, offering up a mix of local and foreign news. Taking as its lead story in the week the Pacific Island Forum came to town, the annual regional heads of government meeting, followed on page two with a good-old fashioned police rounds story about a man knifed over a land boundary dispute. The paper also sports a joke column, crossword and a features page which this particular week profiled a well-known local composer.

But Tabai is anxious for the paper to go much further.

"My only regret so far, is that we have not done any stories like the Peter Reith [phone card controversy] story in Australia, I think in time we will cover more interesting stories. Right now we need more experienced reporters.

"What we can say, is that we have already had an impact on the Government paper, they are working much harder too, generally things they would not accept there, we will run, like letters complaining about Government."

Tabai brushes his hands across a dozen or so foreign newspapers and magazines spread across a bench.

From the front page of one Sydney tabloid, Peter Reith screams: "I AM NOT A LIAR". Alongside it *Fiji's Daily Post* declares allegations of corruption against a Government now deposed.

"This is my collection, but people keep borrowing them," Tabai says ruefully.

"Putting out a newspaper, is something I really love to do. I've been in government, I've worked in the region, but for me, I believe this will be my major contribution to my country, it really is as important as that." □

Papua New Guinean approach but you can't overestimate that early influence, I believe it is one of the truly positive inheritances to have come out of the colonial era.

"And the latest generation coming up now are extremely stropky too, I don't think they are going to readily give in to attempts to shackle them, provided they are overt attempts."

The Papua New Guinea media has so far been successful in warding off at least three attempts to introduce legislation, which would have tightly controlled the media.

More of a threat these days, says Boden, are the commercial realities of producing papers or running a FM radio station on such narrow margins that the cancellation of a single advertising account in a small market can be enough to tip the books against you.

While Boden believes that on the whole the scrutiny of PNG's media is working "exceptionally well", he says investigative journalism is the big exception.

"There is a lack of training, a lack of tradition here of the sort of painstaking, watertight investigative reporting that uncovers the big lies."

In *The National's* case, Boden concedes, the paper's ownership by the Malaysian logging and newspaper giant Rimbunan Hijau has also hindered its willingness to explore issues such as corruption in the logging industry.

Traditional values too, are often enlisted in attempts at taming the media. Those with the most to lose from being scrutinized are fond of pointing out that it is not the "Pacific Way" to offend "big men".

In reality there is little evidence to suggest traditional life supports such a premise. Indeed there is probably no office more accountable than that of village leader, his decisions and actions open to the scrutiny of the entire community twenty four hours a day.

□ *Mary-Louise O'Callaghan is Pacific correspondent for The Australian. She lives in Honiara. She won a Gold Walkley for her exposure of PNG's Sandline mercenary affair in 1997. Her 1999 book on the issue, Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Sandline Crisis: The Inside Story, was reviewed in PJR, 6(1)185-188. mlouise@welkam.solomon.com.SB*