

Media and the coup

The accessibility of key players during the crisis was helped in no small measure by the availability of mobile telephones. Thirteen years ago, Vodaphone was yet to exist. During the crisis, Speight, Tarakinikini and others were just a phone call away.

By SAMISONI PARETI

A JOKE that was making the rounds went something like, “How does a journalist cover a *coup d'état*?”

“By going to Fiji.”

Sadly, within the humour lies a basic truth. No newsroom teaches coup coverage in its in-house training programme, nor is it offered in journalism schools. Only when it happens do journalists get a chance to learn. And Fiji — with three coups to its name — is fast becoming a good learning ground.

On the whole, the local media's coverage of the 19 May 2000 coup by George Speight and the crisis it triggered was not that bad. That is the assessment 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.

Compared to the media's coverage of the 1987 coups of Sitiveni Rabuka on May 14, and again on September 25, factors like accessibility, mobile telephones and relative freedom to work assisted journalists in reporting the May 19 crisis.

“George Speight was a media person's dream” was how *Fiji Times* acting

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editor Netani Rika summed up accessibility. "He was very media conscious and knows the value of the news media in disseminating his information and propaganda, as some would like to call it."

So conscious was the US-trained business executive that he allowed journalists — both local and overseas-based — to set up camp inside the parliamentary complex. He never seemed tired of talking to journalists, fond of calling three to four news conferences a day, some of them convened even late at night on the parliamentary bure! (In one of these late night conferences, Speight asked for my dinner of curry chicken and ate it while taking questions. I later wrote a story on the incident, only to attract the ire of Speight supporters who accused me of holding their leader to ridicule and implying that there was a shortage of food inside Parliament!)

Not to be outdone, the military were equally accessible. Their official spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini was

an instant hit among journalists and became Fiji's face of calm and reason, both locally and internationally, in those tumultuous days.

The two men's accessibility, as well as that of other key players during the crisis, was helped in no small measure by the availability of mobile telephones. Thirteen years ago, Vodaphone was yet to exist. Last year, Speight, Tarakinikini and others were just a phone call away and reporters generally had easy access. It can work to a journalist's favour in "mysterious ways" too!

A radio journalist was in ecstasy during one of his telephone conversations with Lt Col Tarakinikini — the officer did not switch off his mobile phone properly. To the journalist's delight, he had a clear feed of the army's negotiations with Speight for a number of minutes.

"The thing that strikes me the most was to hear Speight talking English," the journalist told me. "I mean he was claiming to be fighting for indigenous Fijians and yet he can't even negotiate in our language!"

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In contrast to the 1987 coups, no media organisation was forced to close nor underwent military censorship during the May 19 crisis. But this is not to say that covering the coup was without its dangers. The trashing of Fiji Television on the night of May 28 is well documented and Speight supporters assaulted a number of journalists, including *The Sun's* Sitiveni Moce (*see breakout*) and Leone Cabenatabua.

Lives of many reporters were threatened, and a good number lived outside of their homes in the first few weeks of the crisis. Reporters at Radio Fiji had to refrain from mentioning their names when answering telephones at one time after being repeatedly abused by anonymous callers. Armed soldiers had to be posted as guards at national radio and television stations.

Threats came in other ways. Some lost their jobs as newsrooms underwent cost-cutting measures like every other organisation and business in the country. Staff at the *Daily Post* suffered a 50 percent pay cut while it was 16.5 percent for those in *The Sun*. Casual employees were laid off at Communications Fiji Ltd and permanent staff had their pay reduced as well. Better off were journalists at *The Fiji Times*, Radio Fiji and Fiji Television since cost-cutting measures for them were in other forms like a freeze in recruitment and travel.

□ *Samisoni Pareti is editor of The Sun. At the time of the May 19 coup, he reported a scoop on the gunmen sealing off Parliament for Radio Fiji. He later reported the crisis for the Pacific region through Pacnews. This article was part of a special retrospective supplement published in The Sun on 19 May 2001.*