

SAMISONI PARETI

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.*

COVERAGE OF CRISES 5

Controversial Close-Up

Fiji Television's *Close-Up* programme on 28 May 2000 featured an outspoken media analysis of the insurrection and this led to the attack on the station's studio and offices by a mob of Speight supporters. This is a transcript of the discussion chaired by reporter Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and featuring political columnist Jone Dakuvula and Communications Fiji Ltd managing director William Parkinson.

Compiled by ALISON OFOTALAU

FIJI TV (Sayed-Khaiyum): One of the reasons we hear about the media not adequately covering this [crisis] is that it is too sensitive, too close to the people who are covering it, because of an excuse that is also being used by authorities that everyone is related and everyone knows each other. Fiji is a small place and there is also the fear factor.

DAKUVULA: That shouldn't be a sensitive matter because these people who have conducted this coup have caused some gross insensitivities as Fijians themselves. They have disagreements with the Great Council of Chiefs, they have disagreed with the President's offer of pardon. They want everything — they want power, they want the President to be removed, they want to form the government without any election. They are going against the Council of Chiefs and that is going to lose them a lot of support. People who otherwise were sympathetic towards them now know what they really are. They are just a group of people who are greedy to occupy offices in the Government Buildings without any election.

FIJITV: Do you think George Speight has been given too much prominence — there's talk of that within some media circles that maybe he's been given too much prominence because we have the overseas media here, they want to be the first ones to talk to him and take pictures of men with guns within the Parliament complex?

PARKINSON: Well, there's the overseas coverage and there's the local coverage. From a local point of view, I think the local media was obviously in the drama of the initial events and the focus was very much on covering the events as they went along. And yes, George Speight got a lot of coverage as a result of that. But I think as time has gone on the local media has started to see some of the issues ... and is taking a step back and taking some critical analysis of it. But some of the viewers may not realise this that actually in the Parliament complex over the last week or so, George Speight has called countless news conferences — at one stage it seemed he was doing one every hour. And as a new batch of foreign journalists would come in again, another news conference ... another news conference. We were really regurgitating the same thing over and over again, so the local media has started to take a slightly more critical perspective on that and probably is not running quite as much as it used to. I think as time goes on they [are] going to back away from that as we see the same stories coming out.

From the foreign point of view, yeah, obviously we have to deal with the fact that we had dealt with in 1987. The foreign journalists come with a totally different view of the whole thing. This is another dramatic story from [what] I believe a Brisbane newspaper referred to Fiji as "coup coup land". So this is another dramatic story of this strange land. Here's this character that is very attractive on TV, says all these dramatic things, guns and all that kind of thing, ignoring the fact that we are going to live with this for the rest of our lives.

FIJI TV: Jone, in terms of the coverage given to George Speight and the people in there, do you think there's been too much coverage, or should maybe Parliament have been sort of closed off and all access denied to any media, or anyone else for that matter, right from the beginning?

DAKUVULA: I think this coup is a typically a Fijian coup which is handled in a Fijian context which is open to the media. Overseas, they would have handled this differently. They would have closed off the parliamentary complex and the public would have had no access to Parliament. Negotiations would have taken place very secretly and then announcements are then made of the results to the media. Here, it's been different and I think it's probably a legacy of 1987 which was also a fairly open coup with the media having access to those people who actually conducted the coup and it just carried on to this one.

FIJI TV: We also saw in 1987 that once the media started making reports that are critical of the coup makers, the media was shut down in the process. Do you think there's any chance of that happening?

PARKINSON: I think one of the lessons that we will learn from 1987 was that when you have a situation like this, I mean you can say, "Yes, this is strictly a hostage-taking situation", but the reality is it's not. The hostages have been taken, crimes have been committed. But also you have to acknowledge ... the support for Mr Speight and his followers — at least from certain areas of the country — you can't deny that. So under these circumstances where media ethics would normally say NO, we will not participate in providing a platform for someone who has committed a crime, [here] if we were to deny him that platform it could lead to further violence with his supporters taking place. It could lead to them expressing their opinion, if they're denied access to the media it could lead to them expressing their opinions in other ways, maybe further demonstrations, further violent acts and other things. So in this situation, I believe its better for the media to provide that voice under certain conditions.

FIJI TV: Where's the cut-off line?

PARKINSON: For us, in my own media organisation [FM 96] we've established a cut-off point as being that we will not cover any cause for violent acts, any cause for demonstrations or gatherings under these circumstances. We also make extra effort to make sure that people who say they represent particular groups actually do represent those groups. There has been a remarkable splintering of the Fijian political parties in particular. We have often had two groups expressing two entirely different points of view, both claiming to represent the same political party. And also we have to say are we being used as a propaganda tool here, are we still making critical news judgements about what someone is saying? And I think most of the media have been able to maintain that kind of balance.

FIJI TV: Jone, do you think the media may be at times being used as propaganda tools? There are some journos who have been there since Friday, May 19, and obviously if you're in a certain situation, under a certain environment, you may get swayed to believe a certain cause, whichever that is. Do you think that has happened?

DAKUVULA: I think, right from the beginning it was evident that the media was quite naive in the way they handled this. They were beginning to recognise straight away that this was an "alternative government" until later on they learnt this was an attempted coup, which was not succeeding — and that the Government was still in place. The media also has been at fault in allowing some of the spokesmen for these people to speak, particularly on the radio. We've had Simone Kaitani, for example, who had been allowed to describe

what's going on in Parliament. That's the job of the reporter. I've complained quite a number of times to Radio Fiji about how they were allowing these people to make subtle appeals to the indigenous Fijians about their course. That shouldn't have been allowed — the reporter's job is to report what's happening, it's not the people supporting the coup to do the reporter's job.

FIJI TV: William, you have had someone from FM96 there since Friday... don't you think they should have come out, taken a break from that situation, and maybe go back again after a couple of days?

PARKINSON: Well, during the early period that was impossible because of the tension and if people left they won't be allowed back in again. Obviously, when we had journalists in they were reluctant to go out. Since there's been an easing of the restrictions, they have been going in and out, taking breaks and being able to get a better perspective. It's tough when you're locked up there in that compound to keep a perspective of what's going on outside and I believe there's a syndrome that has been identified called "Stockholm syndrome" in which those locked up with the people perpetrating the crime do inevitably start to sympathise — so we've been very conscious of that, I think most of the media have been conscious of that.

They're being careful and trying to edit that out. But I would agree that in the early phase in the excitement of the event, in the total confusion in that first day in particular, where Speight was claiming various things — and other people were claiming other things — there was a period of time of about seven or eight hours before the President came forward and made his statement. In that time young journalists got a little carried away and maybe "slips of the tongue" took place and they started referring to these "failed coup attempters" — as Jone has referred to them — as a legitimate government. These are some things that were learnt and I think the media has fallen back on that. But when this thing is breaking and you're making instantaneous editorial decisions, it's tough and you have to be very careful about that.

DAKUVULA: It's just a general wave of feeling, "Oh, we Fijians are under threat". And I think it's because those who have campaigned against the Chaudhry Government in the last year have effectively convinced people — especially the grassroots — that there's a real huge threat posed to Fijians and therefore we must get rid of this Government, otherwise we'll lose everything — we've lost political [power], we'll lose land and all that. That's the nature of the sympathy the Fijians have for this coup and that is going to wear off once the naked interest about this coup is revealed.

FIJI TV: What is the naked interest?

DAKUVULA: The naked interest is, a bunch of people who want to get to power through unlawful means, and they couldn't get it through the Constitution. Therefore they want it through a coup and they want to impose a system of government here in the name of indigenous rights. But it does not accord to the Fijian way of thinking, which is a peaceful and consensual way, give and take, listening and respectful ... This is very un-Fijian.

FIJI TV: But George Speight and his people have been pretty adamant that they want to get rid of the 1997 Constitution — they won't settle for slight changes, they want to get rid of the whole Constitution?

DAKUVULA: Well, George Speight is a two-day wonder who has just decided to champion indigenous rights for his own personal reasons in a matter of two days ... He has no real track record of fighting for indigenous rights.

FIJI TV: His supporters say he has only decided to fight for indigenous rights and he's doing it for the indigenous people.

DAKUVULA: He convinces people because he has a gift of the gab and all that, he presents himself well, but he was running away from all sorts of things in Australia, and his case here — he's been sacked. He had a lot of grievances against Chaudry's government, being sacked from Hardwood Corporation, Fiji Pine — he has seen the way he was going to lose a lot of business opportunities with this Government in power and there are people like that who are behind this coup.

FIJI TV: So you're saying that once this is over, Mr Speight will slide into obscurity and the real players will come forward?

DAKUVULA: I think when this is over, they have to be accountable to the law. They have to go to court, get a fair trial, be convicted.

FIJI TV: It looks like they're going to get pardoned?

DAKUVULA: It has to follow the proper procedure under the Constitution which is being upheld by the President at present. If they release the hostages and give themselves up. Now they've been saying we are willing to go all the way, to die for what we believe. If they say they're willing to die for what they believe, why aren't they willing to go to jail for what they believe — it's a gross contradiction. How can people believe these sorts of people as champions of indigenous rights.

FIJI TV: And who do you think are the real players behind this?

DAKUVULA: I don't want to give names. I think it's obvious to most people — you see the nature of the Fijian party support who have not criticised

this coup, who are sitting there in Parliament showing their support for George Speight and his men — you know them, they are there. And there are others like (Iliesa) Duvuloco for example who just turned out from the wood-work and wants to be a minister now. He had fought elections five times and lost. Why should he become a minister? Why should these poor people from Wainibuka die for a person like that? Why should they die so that Duvuloco hold's a ministerial office up there in Parliament. This is what's so ridiculous about this situation. They've just mobilised poor Fijians who really don't understand what they're going for. They're genuine and they are feeling — well, this is really a cause for Fijians, we must support this. But they don't know the agenda of these people who have actually manipulated them to support the coup.

FIJI TV: We saw a report by a BBC reporter who is in the country at the moment [Jonathan Head] and he said the majority of the Fijians support the actions of George Speight. This may be true, this may not be true. But do you think this is something that should be reported in the light that overseas journalists have not talked to the other side of the country?

PARKINSON: This is why the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) issued a statement last week expressing our concern about some of this type of foreign coverage ... This is not the first time that the South Pacific region has suffered from this type of reporting. There are a number of foreign journalists who have a long standing relationship with the South Pacific — many have lived here, they come back and they cover the South Pacific on a regular basis, and they're not the problem.

The problem is those who come in suddenly and try to cover a South Pacific story. Whether it's here in Fiji, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Samoa — our concern is that they try to cover very complicated stories involving traditional politics which is often very subtle. It's not up-front like the western style of democracy and so you don't have players making loud statements and pushing different forms of ideology. And they rush in here — we've dubbed them "parachute journalists". They arrive, instantly start, trying to meet deadlines and making pronouncements about situations that they had no background on — and they don't even bother to research properly. This is something that PINA is very concerned about because the impact of that is that type of material comes to our region, our people see that type of journalism and realise it's factually incorrect. It comes from respected media organisations and then they start to say, what's this media freedom all about — is there a value in media freedom?

FIJI TV: So do you think they're taking the the easy option out ... in this case

the race issue, good/bad- Indo-Fijian/Fijian?

PARKINSON: Yes, well that's what happens when you're not doing your research and not making the local contacts and you're not doing that kind of work.

DAKUVULA: I think it's understandable that people who come from outside would have a very shallow view of what's happening. But I think it's the responsibility of the journalists here to cover the more complex part of it. But overall, I think the local journalists have done a good job ... I've been reading also some of the overseas journalists reports and they're not bad.

FIJI TV: In terms of things of that nature, what I talked about saying the majority of the indigenous Fijians support something like this. Do you think there should be more of a push from people in the country to encourage these people and say, "Look! Suva is not Fiji — why don't you go to the west or to the north of the country and talk to people there and see what they feel?"

DAKUVULA: I don't know where they got this idea that the majority of Fijians support this coup. We only have about 1000 people sitting at Parliament — there are about 400,000 Fijians.

It's very simplistic to use words like majority or minority because you can't actually base it on any real knowledge about what people out there in the rural areas feel. Most ordinary people are just watching and observing what's happening — they're not active participants in this coup. □

□ *Alison Ofotalau was a final-year Solomon Islands student journalist at the University of the South Pacific at the time of the Fiji political crisis. She transcribed this FIJI TV Close-Up programme, and her compilation was first published on Pacific Journalism Online and later widely published internationally. She is now working for the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC).*