

# Civil society and media:

## The relevance in Fiji, Tonga and PNG

**PNG's Melanesian societies with Polynesian societies like Tonga and Samoa, which evolved the familiar authoritarian feudal structures, which are always in tension with democratic institutions. In Melanesia, those who gain political ascendancy and power must struggle for it.**

**By DAVID LEA**

FREEDOM of expression is guaranteed in the constitutions of many South Pacific nations and protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. John Stuart Mill saw freedom of expression as associated with freedom of conscience or thought, one of the fundamental liberties which the state was bound to protect. Mill saw the flowering of this liberty as an indication of a mature and self-fulfilled citizenry.

In this paper I discuss the state of the media in three South Pacific countries — Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga. Our focus will be the successes and failures of freedom of expression through media freedom in these respective nations. This is meant to be a comparative study, which formulates some general observations on the nature of civil society and the nation state, and their relation to the realities of democracy and freedom of expression. I begin with Fiji, because the political events in 2000 surrounding the Fiji coup have placed it in the centre of the media gaze. I could also have looked at the Solomons, where similar events have been unfolding, however, I believe Fiji is sufficiently representative of the dynamics which underlie media suppression in these similar cases.

### **Fiji**

As we know now, communications to Fiji were cut initially on May 19 of this

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year, an hour after seven men in civilian clothing burst into the Parliament Chamber, fired two shots and locked up Fiji's first ethnic Indian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry and his mixed race cabinet. Despite the fact that most phone lines were cut and other communication was down, information continued to leak out through a small internet site, **Fijilive.com** run by the internet service provider Webmasters. Less up to date was the Fiji government's own website. Fiji TV still managed to broadcast despite the cut telecommunications.

Similar events occurred in 1987 when Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew the elected government but he had no idea how to control the international and local media coverage of the events. In 1987, it took Rabuka a week to stop the international media which descended in full force on Suva. Finally, all telephone calls from Suva were cut as a reporter began to dictate copy. At that point, the media had established contacts to enable them to use marine, radio and teletype lines. Thirteen years ago there weren't any satellite phones, faxes, internet email and no direct dial phones out of Suva the capital. In May last year, the first thing the plotters did was to pull the plug on all international, satellite and cable telephones.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Rabuka initiated the second coup, he became more efficient at suppressing coverage. Rabuka had the Australian news coverage faxed to him before dawn the same day, which in one case, led to the arrest of several Australian reporters and their deportation on the same day. Later in December 1987, Rabuka relinquished military rule to an interim government. Gradually democracy and associated freedoms returned to Fiji until they were again repressed during the events of May 2000. Again the media faced the ire of coup makers and their followers. On the night of May 18, followers of the coup leaders staged an assault on Fiji Television headquarters in Suva, destroyed equipment and attacked members of the media. The coup leaders gradually lost their power and eventually faced the courts. Media freedom has returned but real democracy was still awaited in a general election in August 2001.

## Tonga

Turning to Tonga we find a history of media suppression, not from those who would seek to overthrow the established authority but from the authorities themselves. Events, which occurred in 1996, are particularly indicative of the level of freedom of expression and the underlying lack of democracy. In September of that year, MP 'Akilisi Pohiva, a broadcaster and publisher of a muckraking newsletter, *Kele'a*, was jailed with two journalists for thirty days

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for contempt of court. Pohiva had been waging a decade-long campaign for open government. Also during this period, he exposed the Tongan passport for sale scandal.<sup>2</sup> Pohiva had been jailed for contempt of Parliament after having leaked an impeachment notice against the Justice Minister; and the two Tongan journalists were jailed for publishing the leaked documents in the *Times of Tonga* (*Taimi'o Tonga*). At the same time King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV used his powers as absolute monarch to close the House after it voted to impeach the Minister of Justice. This meant that in 1996 the Legislative Assembly was suspended for the year on 4 October 1996, although it usually sits until mid-November.

Interestingly, the Tongan Legislative Assembly consists of thirty members, dominated by twenty-one unelected representatives of the kingdom's noble families; the nine remaining are elected representatives. Cabinet members are appointed by the King.

It may be safe to say that Tongan institutions offer an illusion of democracy, but in reality are structured so as to allow for the easy suppression of the media.

### Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea has a reputation for greater law and order problems than any other country in the South Pacific, or for that matter anywhere else in the Pacific. But PNG also enjoys greater freedom of expression. Sean Dorney, former longstanding representative of the Australia Broadcasting Corporation in PNG, attributes this to the country's "vibrant", "rampant democracy".<sup>3</sup> PNG is not a "repressive regime." On the other hand, many might also argue that PNG fulfills Plato's worst fears about what democracy really means — anarchy and disorder, rather than order and rational planning. But in any case, these are the conditions, which seem to allow for greater continuity in freedom of expression than in Fiji or Tonga. There has never been a one or even two party system, and

no individual or region has been able to dominate the government. Dorney mentions, for example, that 40 of the 109 elected members of parliament stood as independents in 1997. Many of the following examples, drawn from Dorney's recent account illustrate successful resistance to the government's efforts to suppress the media.

In order to demonstrate the dynamic, which has allowed for greater freedom of expression, one points to the specific past failures of government in its efforts to implement media control. In 1987, the government led by Paias Wingti sought to implement and set up a Media Tribunal whose job would be to license media with renewable licenses which would be renewed every twelve months. The proposal ran into opposition from the Catholic Church. Gabriel Ramoi, Communication Minister, responsible for drafting the legislation, never could get the numbers. Dorney reports that he was later jailed for misusing public funds.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting incident occurred in April 1994, discussed by Neville Togarewa, also in *Pacific Journalism Review*, in which the Information and Communication Minister decided to ban the National Broadcasting Commission from reporting the New Guinea Islands leaders Summit.<sup>5</sup> The action was allegedly justified by section 6(2)(c) of the *NBC Act* that enjoins the commission to take care in broadcasting material that may inflame racial or sectional feelings. The government defended itself on the grounds that the talks may have been secessionist in nature and might inflame secessionist actions as in the Bougainville case. In reality, the government wanted to introduce legislation to abolish provincial governments and was frightened that the Island premiers were meeting to construct a unified resistance to these moves. However, the NBC went ahead and defied the ban and no action was taken.

In 1996, Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan gave the Constitutional Review Commission the role of making the commission more accountable". He was supposed to consider constitutional changes to tighten up responsibility of "owners, editors and all elements of the media." Persons aggrieved by "media abuses" were to be provided with "accessible redress." Again the government's initiatives never bore fruit; it withdrew its proposals as a result of public opposition.

Dorney has pointed out that the impotency of the central government of Papua New Guinea in imposing its will may, at the same time, entail an inability to protect and maintain media freedom.<sup>6</sup> Parliament's efforts to regulate the media have been lacking in execution and it is not surprising to find a lax control

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of the other agencies of government who might be inclined to impose illegal or unconstitutional regulation of the media. As an example, Dorney mentions that in 1992 he was granted permission from the head of the Prime Minister's Department, chairman of the PNG's National Security Advisory Council, to visit the island province of Bougainville to do a story on the ongoing secessionist war. Despite permission from the PM's Department, he and his camera crew were rounded up shortly before dawn on their first night, and arrested at gunpoint by the PNG Defence force, and forced to leave on a chartered plane organised for the event. He also relates similar treatment by the defence force when he sought to cover an OPM incident along the Indonesian border, although again he had received advance permission from the PM's Department.

### Conclusion

We have briefly seen how media freedom and freedom of expression have fared in three different South Pacific nations. I would point out the most obvious, that relative levels of freedom of expression are very much related to democratic realities. More importantly, however, is the fact that the reality of democracy in each of these countries is very much a function of underlying cultural dynamics. All three of the nations we have seen have Parliamentary representation, and constitutions guaranteeing freedom of expression, but in two of the cases, institutional assurances have often been inadequate in the face of underlying racial, political and cultural struggles.

For example, in Fiji, the coups of 1987 meant the constitution had to be rewritten to guarantee that the majority of Parliamentary seats be held by indigenous Fijian. Even the rewritten constitution has proven to be insufficient. The 2000 coup has again resulted in renewed attacks on the media and the denial of constitutional freedoms. Turning to Tonga we note that the control of the Government by the King and the noble class remains close to absolute through

a constitution which guarantees the majority of seats for members of nobility coupled with the King's power to appoint cabinet ministers and dismiss Parliament. All amounts to an illusion of democracy. But the nature of democratic realities and related freedoms is rooted in the nature of a civil society.

This can be illustrated if we contrast the societies encountered in PNG, Fiji and Tonga. In contrast to Fiji and Tonga, in PNG the institutions designed to maintain democracy and freedom of expression, the constitution and Parliament, have suffered fewer violations. Unlike Fiji the racial and cultural divisions are far removed from the bipolar tensions between indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijians.

In Papua New Guinea there are roughly 800 different language groups, and cultural differences are widespread among diverse groupings drawn from the coastal, island, highland, and lowland groups. Papua New Guinea is a network of typical Melanesian societies living in roughly similar egalitarian conditions. A plurality of groupings ensures that power is widely dispersed among this plurality. The reality of a diverse cultural matrix has meant that unlike Fiji, no cultural group has dominated the political arena, and unlike Tonga, no individual has been able to exert a continuous dominating control.

We should also contrast PNG's Melanesian societies with Polynesian societies like Tonga and Samoa, which evolved the familiar authoritarian feudal structures, which are always in tension with democratic institutions. B.H. Farrell notes Melanesian societies exhibit "unilateral exogamous clans", the relevant characteristic of which is that of complete equality among all members, and subordination of the individual to the clan as a whole, in contrast to Polynesian societies where the group is subordinate to the leadership.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, one needs to understand the psychology of political leadership as it has evolved in Melanesia which is unlike that in many parts of Polynesia and Africa, where we find a hereditary chiefly or feudal system of political authority.

In Melanesia, those who gain political ascendancy and power must struggle for it and prove themselves through the demonstration of special abilities and powers. In many of the regions, one of the central avenues to successful leadership is through aggressive gift-giving. Under these societal conditions, individuals are often likely to question leadership rather than submit to authority, especially pretensions to absolute authority. All this has meant that democratic processes and freedom of expression have more easily flourished in this non-authoritarian cultural milieu. The downside has, of course, been that the central government has never achieved an effective authority capable of

ensuring and protecting media freedom when it is threatened by other groups or even the lesser agencies of government.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *Weekend Australian*, May 20-21, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Robie, David (1996), "The Contempt Case of the 'Tongan Three'," *Pacific Journalism Review*, 3(2):10-19.

<sup>3</sup> Dorney, Sean (1999), "Outwitting Repression of the Media in PNG," *Pacific Journalism Review*, 5(1): 99-106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Neville Togarewa (1994), "The NBC Gag," *Pacific Journalism Review* 1(1):16-19.

<sup>6</sup> *Op cit.*, p 104.

<sup>7</sup> Farrell, B. H. (1974), "Fijian Land: A Basis for Intercultural Variance," in *Themes of Pacific Lands*, M.C.R. Edgell and B.H. Farrell (eds), (1974). Victoria, Canada: University of Victoria Press, p.119.

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