

## Storms in the Pacific

### The Volatile Mix of Democracy, Politics and the Media in Three Island States

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When, in early June 2006, Fiji took out its maiden International Rugby Board (IRB) Sevens series title beating England to second best by 22 points, national coach and star player, Waisale Serevi, in a brief but telling overflow of spontaneous emotion, said the following to an international television audience:

We would like to say thank you very much to the people back home for supporting us, for the prayers; even though everyone is not here, but we can feel that your prayers and support is with us. We've have just elected our new government in Fiji. Things are alright in Fiji. If you people are watching or listening, you have to come to Fiji—that is the way the world should be ...

The then Prime Minister of Fiji, Laisenia Qarase, expressed his deep gratitude for those words from the Sevens maestro. Qarase claimed: “Yes, we have a new government that offers fresh hope and promise. Yes, things are alright with us.” With the May 2006 General Elections returning his party to power, and with the multi-party cabinet recommended by the 1997 Constitution in place, like Qarase, many people felt optimistic about Fiji's political future.

But the optimism was short-lived when a mere six months later, Fiji's military commander, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, staged the country's fourth coup in less than 20 years. Citing the “doctrine of necessity” the army commander removed Qarase's democratically elected government on 5 December 2006. Apart from allegations of corruption, racism and general inefficiency, Bainimarama was upset by the government's attempts to bring in controversial bills he said caused deep divisions within society. He was also angry at the early release from prison of those involved in the May 2000 coup.

This is a revised and updated version of the paper delivered at the 15th AMIC Annual Conference in Penang, Malaysia, in July 2006, (and published in the *Pacific Journalism Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2, September 2006) to account for the dramatic changes that have occurred in the three countries since then.

Barely two months after the death of Tongan King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV in September 2006, hundreds of youths went on a rampage in the capital Nuku’alofa, destroying buildings and looting shops. The November 16 riots were triggered by government delays in implementing democratic reforms. Six rioters were burnt to death after becoming trapped in a building. The event, while destructive and tragic, was not unforeseen. Protest marches calling for greater democracy had been gaining momentum since August and September 2005. The mood seemed to hold that major constitutional changes could no longer be delayed.

The 18 April 2006 riots in the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara, while causing millions in damages, exposed what commentators said were the weaknesses in Australia’s intervention in the country, and drew attention to the accentuated need for a re-think and re-direction of the policy. While the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which commenced on 24 July 2003, brought an end to the fighting between different ethnic groups, dissatisfaction with a flawed political system and corruption boiled over as people took matters into their own hands. Since then, diplomatic relations between Australia and the Solomons has worsened instead of getting better.

This paper looks at three South Pacific Island nations—Fiji, Tonga and the Solomons—in terms of some landmark changes occurring in their political arenas.

TABLE 6.1  
Intra-regional Pacific conflicts: A selection

<i>Country or region</i>	<i>Conflict or rebellion</i>
Vanuatu	The Santo Rebellion, intervention by PNG at the request of the Vanuatu government, 1979–1980
New Caledonia	Ethnic turmoil concerning independence from France, 1980s
Fiji	Coups d’etat, 1987, 2000 and 2006
Papua New Guinea	Insurgency in Bougainville, 1990s; independence movement for Oro; “tribal fighting” in the Highlands; mutiny, including the Sandline Affair
French Polynesia	Riots and burning of Papeete, 1990s
Solomon Islands	Ethnic conflict in Guadalcanal, 1999–2000; riots, 2006
Tonga	Attacks on Chinese and Asian immigrants; demonstration against the king, 2006
East Timor	Secession from Indonesia, 1999, following a 25-year struggle for independence; factional violence leading to arson and looting, 2006
West Papua	Independence movement
Hawaii, Kiribati, Rotuma, Tuvalu	No overt conflict, but independence movements and threats of secession

Sundar Harris (2004), adapted from Seward (2002) and updated (2007)

Fiji, beset by racial and political problems, was experimenting with a bold multi-racial, multi-party cabinet when it was rudely interrupted by the 5 December coup. Ironically, unlike the three preceding coups, this latest one was staged in the name of multiracialism. With the coup fancifully dubbed as a “clean-up campaign” by the coup-makers, the catch phrase found ready support from a number of quarters who perceived the Qarase government as corrupt.

Tonga, a Polynesian monarchy, has seen an unprecedented number of protest marches against the ruling elite in the last few years, culminating in unprecedented rioting, burning and looting in Nuku’alofa, reducing most parts of the capital to smouldering ruins. In hindsight, the palpable democratic changes demanded by the commoners should have been seen as dire warning signals.

But just as Qarase ignored repeated warnings of a takeover, albeit from the military, Tonga’s rulers made the same judgemental error. Feelings against the government had also been running high in the Solomons, where the strong desire for a fairer political system was manifested in the popular upheavals in Honiara. It caught RAMSI napping and brought into question the scope and sufficiency of Australia’s intervention policy in the country.

The media has been a key player in these momentous events. Regularly accused of adding fuel to fire in its coverage of crises, the media is often caught in the crossfire of those elites who want to cling to power, and the masses clamouring for political change and better living standards. In all three countries in the study, the media faces the constant threat of government regulation. After the latest coup, the media in Fiji resolutely faced down fresh attempts at censorship by the military. This paper argues that while media coverage can exacerbate conflict situations, the primary sources of discontent and instability are the self-serving leaders clinging to outdated political systems that no longer fulfil the requirements of the people. What is needed is political reform, not media control.

## **Fiji: The coup culture sets in**

Let us begin with Fiji. The sense of optimism that resulted from the formation of multi-party cabinet following the 2006 elections has not been a regular feature of Fiji’s recent history. With four coups to brag about, Fiji has not always been the paradise a lot of people wish it to be. Pope John Paul II’s wishful words, “Fiji – the way the world should be”, took on a heavy ironic meaning after the two coups in 1987 and then again in 2000 and 2006.

A multi-ethnic nation of over 850,000 people made up of indigenous Fijians and Fiji Indians (descendants of 60,000 indentured labourers), Europeans, part-Europeans and others of mixed descent (the last three categories collectively known as the General Electors), Fiji was a British Crown colony for 96 years before independence in 1970.

This was achieved in a smooth, orderly manner without the prolonged period of nationalist struggles often associated with Asian and African countries. As historian Professor Brij Lal says, the “consensus” Constitution of independent Fiji did not make any radical departure from the colonial past; in fact, it “entrenched the same prin-

ciples that had governed Fiji's colonial politics". The three ethnic groups were seen as the balancing legs of a "three-legged stool". Fijians owned and provided the land, the Indians provided cheap labour, and Europeans contributed skilled manpower and capital. In actual practice, the three groups did not enjoy equal status, privileges or access to power. Through this so-called balancing exercise, the following three principles were entrenched in the Constitution of independent Fiji: the *paramountcy* of Fijian interests, the protection of European *privilege* and the Indian demand for *parity* in political representation.

Elections to the House of Representatives (the Lower House) were based on the principle of racial representation. While the parity of representation was recognised with respect to Indians and Fijians, each having 42.3 per cent of the seats, the General Electors were given a disproportionate 15 per cent of the seats with only four per cent of the national population.

It is interesting that in the 1987 elections, the manifesto of the Labour Party led by Dr Bavadra said: "Our aim is the creation of true democracy in this country and to put an end to the many undemocratic features that dominate the political life of Fiji".

Fiji's fifth General Elections since Independence, in 1987, caught almost everyone by surprise when the Alliance Party (which had ruled for 27 years since Independence) lost to a new coalition party. As Lal says:

For the first time, the politics of "race" was being openly challenged by the politics of "class", and the philosophy of "democratic socialism" was being pitted against Fiji's long legacy of "communalism" enshrined in the Constitution (Brij Lal, 1988: 38).

But the National Federation-Fiji Labour Party Coalition government was cut short by military strongman Sitiveni Rabuka's coup in May of that year. Many losing politicians welcomed Rabuka's coup when it happened. In the first press conference after taking over power, Rabuka candidly admitted he had been in touch with a number of Alliance politicians before and during the elections. In short, as Lal suggests, "the Fiji coups were the culmination of a convergence of various wounded egos and aggrieved interests" (1988: 58). Lal goes on to claim that the "most popular and also misleading view" of the 1987 Fiji coup is that "it was simply the culmination of a long festering racial conflict between Fijians and Indians" (1988: 65). Fly-by-night overseas journalists, facile local journalists and those others who found it convenient, for one reason or another, to believe in such a myth, perpetuated this misleading view.

Up until this momentous occasion, the press in Fiji was allowed to do more or less what it wanted. But with the coup, Rabuka accused the critics of the regime of spreading misinformation to "arouse world opinion against those in control in Fiji". Strict self-imposed censorship was to be utilised—even with overseas opinions. (See the review of Rabuka's first book by Prakash—a review for which the reviewer was incarcerated in the Army Barracks and subsequently placed under house arrest—without trial).

If Rabuka was responsible for the racist 1990 Constitution, he was also responsible for the multicultural 1997 Constitution. In May 1999, Fiji went to

the polls under the new Constitution, producing a historic result. The People's Coalition won the elections and for the first time Fiji had an Indian prime minister in the shape of Mahendra Chaudhry. It was in power for a year when it was ousted in a coup led by George Speight. For the year the People's Coalition government was in power, it had a mixed reaction. While it achieved many things in its short lease of life, there were many criticisms from different quarters. The government began to view the media as insensitive, arrogant and siding with its opponents. In response, the media saw the government's attack as a strategy to divert attention away from the problems it was facing (see Norton's incisive analysis of the 1999 Fiji elections).

Speight ousted the Chaudhry government on its first anniversary, 19 May 2000. The People's Coalition had won 58 out of the total of 71 seats in the Lower House. Chaudhry's Labour Party had won 37 seats in its own right. So in democratic terms, there was no question about the legitimacy of the governing party. But in Fiji, where we have two different ethnic groups in almost equal numbers, and where voting is based on race, the situation is more complicated—especially when rebels like Speight had access to guns and a dubious nationalistic “cause” to parade before gullible and/or opportunistic supporters.

Once the coup was in effect, Speight managed to exploit the media rather cleverly to spread his message of hate and rally support for his indigenous “cause”. For a while, even the more seasoned overseas correspondents were taken in by his clever words and stances.

It took almost two months to free the hostages, through a difficult and prolonged negotiation. A civilian caretaker government was appointed by the military until the elections in 2001. In hindsight, it is interesting that Qarase was handpicked by both the military and the nationalists to be the interim prime minister. Later, his party narrowly won the 2001 elections. Hopes for a multi-party cabinet, as mandated by the Constitution, were dashed when talks fell through over the prime minister's allocation of token cabinet portfolios to the second largest party, the Labour Party.

It took another five years and a second general election for the multi-party cabinet to become a reality. Qarase won the 2006 elections with an increased majority, and therefore, perhaps with a greater sense of security, offered Labour Party ministers significant cabinet seats. Qarase, much like Rabuka earlier, seemed to have come of age. While the multi-party concept was not without its problems, many people on both sides of the racial divide saw it as a much better option than the adversarial politics that pitted one race against another in parliament. Fiji's vibrant media, criticised for its coverage of politics in the past, played a key role in the multi-party debate. The letters to editors in newspapers as well as the editorials urged the powers that be to make the multi-party concept work.

Evidence that the population had warmed to the multi-party cabinet could be seen in the surge in Qarase's approval rating in *The Fiji Times*/Tebbutt Poll (Qarase's most popular PM: July, 2006). Qarase, who was seen to be championing the multi-party concept, scored a 73 per cent approval rating for his performance as prime minister. This was higher than that achieved by any other prime minister since 1992.

While Qarase's approval rating was highest among ethnic Fijians (92 per cent), he also enjoyed a high rating, of 80 per cent, among other races. Indians were much lower in their rating but even so, more than half (53 per cent) approved of his performance.

On the other hand, Fiji Labour party leader Mahendra Chaudhry's approval rating declined to 36 per cent following drops in support from ethnic Fijians and other races. Chaudhry's party was experiencing a serious rift, and his opponents accused him of attempting to derail the multi-party cabinet, a charge he strenuously denied.

Fiji's population appeared to favour the multi-party cabinet and had it survived, Fiji could have been at the dawn of a new political era. But the December 2006 military take-over changed all that by ushering in yet another period of uncertainty. If Bainimarama's taking over the government and appointing himself as the Interim Prime Minister surprised many people, even more people, both within and outside Fiji, were surprised by Chaudhry taking on the posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister as he had been victim of three coups himself and was a professed champion of democracy. Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer, described Chaudhry's choice as "bizarre" (Fiji TV News, 11 February, 2007). While Bainimarama's so-called "clean-up campaign" struck a sympathetic chord with many people, there were many others who questioned the motives and possible consequences of the coup.

## Tonga: People's power

Tonga's normally staid capital, Nuku'alofa, was the scene for some unsettling events in August and September 2005 when around 10,000 people protested in support of striking civil servants who wanted the government to reconsider huge disparities in salary increases between junior and senior staff. What began as a protest by 4,000 civil servants for fair treatment became a rallying cry for democracy with banners declaring, "The people want a new government of the people, by the people, for the people", "Let Freedom rule" and "The Kingdom is ours" (Tongan protest marchers call for political reform, 2006). Prior to this, protests had been rare and the last of any significance was in 1991 when 1,500 people marched against the sale of Tongan citizenship to non-Tongans (Thousands march on Tongan Parliament, 2003). Around 10 per cent of the population had turned out for each of the two big marches.

The mood seemed to hold that major constitutional changes must occur. The people seemed no longer willing to put up with a system under which they were unable to choose their government directly and under which corruption and patronage seemed to thrive. The popularity and respect enjoyed by Tonga's octogenarian monarch, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, was said to have stopped the protests from boiling over into violence. On the other hand, the royal children, who were perceived to have used their privileged positions to take over national assets, were not so popular. They were also the targets of the marchers' anger.

Crown Prince Tupouto'a, 57, the late king's eldest son was sworn in 24 hours

after his father's death. Shortly afterwards, he announced that he would sell a power company that was the supplier to the state. But he was also expected to face increasing calls for democratic reforms, which had been previously muted out of respect for King Tupou IV.

Following a period of mourning for the late king, the calamity many had been warning about took place. On November 16, hundreds of youths destroyed buildings and looted shops in Nuku'alofa after complaining about government delays in implementing democratic reforms. Six rioters were burnt to death after being trapped in a building.

In earlier protests, four government-owned vehicles were set alight with students threatening to burn the government buildings. Such open displays of hostility towards the monarchy were unprecedented. The few lone voices of the Tongan democracy movement of the 1970s had become a deafening crescendo, which the establishment could no longer ignore, as acknowledged by the Princess Regent, Salote Mafile'o Pilelevu, in her address to Parliament on 1 June 2006:

Change is a fact of life, and thus political changes or reforms are inevitable [and] must be discussed thoroughly by both the public and the government. (Tonga must avoid political disaster, 2006)

### **Landmark changes**

Tonga's unicameral Legislative Assembly is controlled by the royal and noble families. It consists of nine nobles who are elected by the 33 hereditary nobles of Tonga. The adult voting population elects the nine people's representatives. The Constitution, often described as a mixture of Tongan, Christian and Western values, has undergone only minor changes in the 131 years it has been in existence. Inundated with protests, petitions and the looming threat of violence, the King, before his death, made some landmark political concessions. He appointed the kingdom's first full-time commoner Prime Minister, Dr Fred Sevele. The country's first official political party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), was allowed to register as an incorporated society. Cabinet, which had been the domain of nobles, saw two ministers appointed from the nine elected people's representatives. Another sign of the changes sweeping across Tonga's political landscape was the formation of the National Committee on Political Reform in October last year to hold consultations with local and overseas Tongans.

### **End of an era**

Ratuva (2006) succinctly describes the late King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV's reign, the challenges he faced, his successes and his shortcomings:

The passing away of (Tupou IV) represents the end of an era, an era characterised by the sometimes calm and sometimes turbulent relationship between the waning old and the robust new, between loyalty to the traditional order and popular demand for socio-political transformation. When the King ascended the throne in 1965, he was hailed as the awaited modernisation messiah for Tonga, to catapult the tiny South Pacific Kingdom into the twentieth century. One of his first visions was to modernise

and transform the country through education. He did this with utmost zealously and by the 1990s Tongans had become some of the most highly educated people on earth (Ratuva, 2006).

But Ratuva adds that the paradoxical reality was that this achievement did not necessarily translate into high economic growth or open democratic governance. The King, by keeping the lid on political, social and economic reforms, and by controlling economic resources, caused many brilliant Tongans to leave. Others found themselves powerless cogs in a big monarchical wheel, with limited chances of upward social mobility, restricted space for political self-expression and absence of conditions for economic accumulation. Most of the opportunities were limited to those with hereditary status. This naturally brewed grievances, which were initially latent but increasingly became manifest and relatively violent (Ratuva, 2006).

The November 16 riots were indeed more violent than any protest in Tonga's modern history. By the second week of January 2007, over 900 suspected offenders had been arrested and charged. They included several opposition politicians and democracy campaigners alleged to have instigated the riots for personal political gain (Two prominent Tongans charged with sedition, and abetting damage or arson, 2007). The wrecking and ransacking destroyed about 80 per cent of the Nuku'alofa business centre and angered people who do not condone violence as a way of solving political problems.

The evident public disenchantment set back the democracy movement somewhat. Whether the movement has been dealt a temporary or lasting blow remains to be seen. In the meantime, it remains to be seen whether Tonga's successor King and nobles use the time and opportunity to consolidate their positions, or to take the riots as a signal to start the reforms without much delay.

## Tongan media

The Tongan government has a heavy presence in the print and broadcast media. It owns one of the three newspapers and runs the national television and radio station. The state-owned media and website tend to tow the government line. Privately-owned broadcast media, until recently, mostly aired foreign programmes, music and news. The Tongan government's attitude towards the media is characteristic of Robie's observation (2003) of Pacific Island governments which, while claiming to be democratic, tend to behave autocratically towards the media.

Politicians frequently speak out on how the media ought to be "responsible", i.e. either self-censor to the benefit of the government of the day, or propagandise on its behalf. Normal independent reporting and questioning by the media is often seen by some politicians as tantamount to subversion. Thus politicians are often tempted to impose gagging or licensing laws (Robie, 2003a).

A leading critic of the Tongan establishment, newspaper publisher Kalafi Moala, has been at the receiving end of such gagging attempts. Moala, now a media advisor to the government, set up Tonga's leading bi-weekly newspaper, *Taimi 'o Tonga*, in 1989. In February 2003, the government banned the importation of the biweekly, alleging that it was "foreign", had a "political agenda" and put up with "unacceptable



journalistic standards". The government went to the extraordinary length of amending the Constitution and passing legislation to keep the newspaper out, but in both cases, the Supreme Court overthrew the amendments.

The *Taimi O' Tonga* practises what can be described as "radical journalism". This is journalism that seeks to bring about change, overcome exploitation, corruption and human rights violations, or to improve the living conditions of ordinary people in order to achieve just societies. Such journalism does more than passively report news events or interpret them—it attempts to expose destructive or oppressive situations and helps "clean them up" (Robie, 2006: 9). The Tongan elite sees this form of journalism as confrontational, disrespectful, and alien to Pacific culture. But ordinary Tongans think otherwise. The government's efforts to silence the *Taimi o' Tonga* through legislation resulted in Tonga's first big protest march, which snowballed from then on. On hindsight, it was one of the government's biggest miscalculations as it kick-started the protests and heightened popular demands for democratic reforms, culminating in the 16 November riots.

### The Internet and democracy

The Internet, with its unique qualities, has invigorated national debate in Tonga. According to the Internet World Stats website, Tonga had 3,000 registered users as of November 2005. The Internet has had the greatest impact on overseas Tongans by making news available to them virtually instantaneously. It is a far cry from the days when overseas Tongans, who number over 100,000, received the newspaper well after the news had become stale. The reach of the Internet in Tonga's case is staggering. While the *Taimi o' Tonga* has a circulation of 9,000, Tonga's leading news portal, Matangi Tonga Online, had over 43 million hits for the year ending 31 May 2006 (Matangi Tonga Online Advertising Statistics, 2006). Unencumbered by space restrictions, the Internet allows Tongans a greater say in national affairs than newspapers. Between 2 May and 6 June 2006, Matangi Tonga Online published 26 letters from overseas Tongans. All but three were commentaries on governance, the royal family or politics. They ranged from a few paragraphs to a full-blown response to Princess Pilolevu's speech in Parliament on 1 June.

A letter entitled "Commoners need to become leaders not followers" by Ms Tupou Layton (2006) was typical of the sentiments expressed. She wrote that change would be difficult because Tongans were easily persuaded to be followers, and that in order to get out of poverty, commoners needed to stop "fearing" the royals. She accused the royals of taking all the wealth and only picking their relatives and friends for all the jobs. Tama Foua (2006), writing from the United States, lamented about rising taxes, saying the accepted government wisdom seemed to be that workers should "be more cooperative, work harder, take pay cuts, pension cuts, benefit cuts, and smile".

### The Solomon Islands: Honiara in flames

A United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) early warning report monitoring levels of peace and conflict in the Solomon Islands from August to December 2005 warned of the country's vulnerability to renewed conflict. While

acknowledging the gains made by RAMSI, it said that some of the underlying causes of the ethnic conflict of a few years ago remained unresolved. In the context of the 2006 elections, the report predicted that while the Solomon Islands stood at a point of great potential to move forward, there was also the potential for renewed conflict. (Monitoring Peace and Conflict in the Solomon Islands: Gendered Early Warning Report No. 2, 2005: 1).

Four months after the report was released, the Solomon Islands took a turn for the worse. The rioting that shook Honiara on April 18 following the announcement of controversial politician Snyder Rini's appointment as prime minister had been a ticking time bomb that caught RAMSI unawares.

The force, made up of soldiers and police from Pacific Island countries under the command of Australia, was a partial success in that it stopped the ethnic war between Malaitans and the people from Guadalcanal, seized 3,400 weapons, arrested 600 people and lay 1,000 charges in the first five months of the operation (RAMSI and the strife in the Solomons, 2006).

But in its fervent pursuit of politicians and militants charged with offences during the civil unrest, RAMSI overlooked, or at least underestimated, the level of discontent among the general population. Many of those who rioted were ordinary people fed up with the state of affairs in the country, particularly the machinations of their political leaders and business interests. The UNIFEM report identified indicators presenting a high risk of conflict as follows:

- Corruption in government
- Women's lack of participation in government processes
- Dissatisfaction with provision of government services
- Inability to participate in government decision-making
- Lack of trust between political groups
- Frequency of disputes concerning land
- Women's lack of involvement in community resolution of land disputes
- Economic inequality within the population
- Social and Ethnic Relations

Of all indicators, corruption in government had the highest risk score. Corruption often features among the issues that trigger conflict, the report emphasised. It also highlighted a "pervasive sense of exclusion from government processes and decision-making", pointing to a "lack of linkages and engagement between government and its citizens". Dissatisfaction with the provision of government services is high, it said. (Monitoring Peace and Conflict in the Solomon Islands: Gendered Early Warning Report No. 2, 2005: 4–6).

The pent-up fury manifested in the violence of 18 April was, as alluded to by the UNIFEM report, caused by years of political instability and corruption. Local resentment against some wealthy Chinese businessmen who are buying up property in the Solomons (and were suspected of funding corrupt politicians) has been used to explain the riots. Rini's appointment as Prime Minister was said to have triggered the violence, as he was perceived to be one of the beneficiaries of the Chinese largesse. If anything, the riots threw the spotlight on the effectiveness or otherwise of RAMSI.

Hameiri (2006) believes that RAMSI was but a temporary respite. It was successful when it came to disarming and prosecuting former militants and thugs but much less so when it came to putting in motion governance reforms:

From the outset, Australian policymakers have identified poor governance as the root cause of conflict in the islands. Therefore, the promotion of good governance was seen as the key to sustainable economic development as well as to long-term peace building (Hameiri, 2006).

The University of Hawaii academic, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2006a), says that there are lots of lessons that Australia (and the rest of the RAMSI participating countries) need to learn, not only from the April riots, but also from previous years of operation in the Solomons. Kabutaulaka defines the Australian approach as focussing on (i) accelerating economic growth, and (ii) fostering a functioning and effective state. While both are worthwhile issues to be addressed in post-conflict situations, the Australian approach conceptualises economic growth in an aggregate manner. This means that economic disparity and its social consequences are of little concern with the assumption that increases in GDP will trickle down, providing opportunities for all. Past experiences both in the Pacific Islands and elsewhere have demonstrated that this is rarely, if ever, the case, notes Kabutaulaka:

Building and strengthening state institutions is in itself not a bad thing. However, it becomes problematic when it assumes that institutions should be built in a particular way, or (should be a) particular kind of institution. In this case it should be an institution that reflects neo-liberal values that work in Australia and other developed countries. There is often no questioning whether they will work in the Solomons or East Timor (Kabutaulaka, personal communication, 2006).

Kabutaulaka (2006b), believes that the rioters reacted to what they perceived was a “corruption of the democratic process; in particular, concerns about the process of selecting a prime minister, and how ‘business interests’ allegedly influenced the formation of governments.” He questions how, against the desire of many Solomon Islanders, Rini managed to win the contest for prime ministership and bring back into power the “old guard”, and blames the weakness of party systems, the fluidity of political alliances, and the process of selecting a prime minister (Kabutaulaka, 2006b).

Kabutaulaka suggests that the Solomon Islands could learn from neighbouring countries Fiji and Papua New Guinea, which have adopted regulations to prevent party hopping. Unless similar changes occur, getting into parliament, selecting a prime minister, forming governments, and acting in the national interest will continue to be a tricky business. In light of the riots, Kabutaulaka recommends a review of the nature of the “partnership” between Solomon Islands and Australia:

At the moment, the partnership is dictated by, “Australia says, Solomon Islands does”. Australia must learn to genuinely listen. They often say that Solomon Islanders are not talking, not expressing themselves. How can Solomon Islanders express themselves when Australia never stops talking, or does not sit quietly and listen for a change?

Since the riots, the Australia-Solomons diplomatic relations have taken a turn for the worse, stemming from Australia’s scepticism with the Solomons Prime Minister’s

attempts to set up a police inquiry to look into the April riots. The expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole from the Solomons in September 2006 was followed by Australian threats to withdraw some visa privileges for Solomon Islands politicians.

Prime Minister Sogavare's attempts in February 2007 to form an armed police "close personal protection unit" was seen as an alarming development as all Solomon's police were disarmed in 2003 by RAMSI to restore order after years of ethnic violence. Episodes such as these have observers not only questioning Australia's policy, but also calling for a re-think and a redirection. Even the United States Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Glen Davies, chimed in. She urged the two parties to get away from this kind of boxing match and talk directly to each other, adding that the United States was concerned about the existing difficulties getting in the way of the process (US encourages Solomon's Dialogue, 2007).

### The role of the media

A veteran Solomon Islands journalist, Johnson Homemade, used the Media Freedom Day as an occasion to criticise his own profession, saying the country's media did little to impede the crime and corruption that took root during the civil crisis (Media rapped for weak role, 2005).

But in 2002, the Attacks on the Press report said that "despite a hostile political and economic atmosphere, the Solomon Islands' small but tenacious media managed to pursue controversial stories, including exposés of official misconduct and links between the government and ethnic militias" (Attacks on Press, 2002). Johnson's frustrations probably have more to do with the lack of change in the Solomon Islands despite the various scandals exposed by the media. Robie (2005) aptly sums up the challenge the poorly paid and trained Pacific Island journalists faced as the region was plunged into turbulent times when he said it takes raw courage to be a neophyte journalist (and) Pacific journalists continue tackling the political and cultural perils of their craft with guts and gusto.

Since 2004, the media has been able to operate in a less oppressive environment as RAMSI's presence improved security for local journalists. Some militia leaders who had threatened the press were put behind bars. In his book *Mekim News* (2004), Robie stresses the need for training and education to adequately equip Pacific Island journalists to fulfil their roles effectively:

Education for journalists and a professional ethos are a vital part of empowering the public in a democracy. Educated journalists are more likely to offer fresh and sustainable solutions (2004: 250).

The UNIFEM report also recommends capacity building for journalists to, among other things, enable the media to better understand gender issues. A media scan by UNIFEM of the *Solomon Star* carried out between 15 June and 25 November 2005 showed a strong bias against the representation of women. Also, in its analysis of 1,681 articles on peace and conflict issues, the report found slightly more articles concerning peace than concerning conflict. Only eight per cent of articles about peace

and/or conflict had a focus on women. Given the positive influence of women in conflict situations if given a voice and empowered with decision-making, the report said the results suggested a need to encourage and provide training for women's organisations to submit more press releases coupled with actions to enable those working in the media to better understand gender issues and the way they represent men and women.

## **Media: Security threat or champion of democracy?**

The media in Fiji, Tonga and the Solomon Islands is, paradoxically, described both as a national security threat and champion of democracy. This is not surprising given the complex socio-political conditions prevalent in the three countries with which the media has to grapple with. Credited with exposing corruption, as in the Solomons, and challenging the military government, as in Fiji, journalists are also commonly accused of lacking in cultural sensitivity, professionalism, educational standards, knowledge of political and social institutions, and having a questionable grasp of ethics (Robie, 2004: 9).

Rooney, Papoutsaki and Pamba (2004) point to the "blind adherence" to and acceptance of the Western style of reporting, which reflects the Western-influenced journalism training that journalists and editors receive. They argue that the Western style of reporting cannot be transplanted into a fragile developing South Pacific society and economy, and assume that it would serve the same purpose, meet the same objectives and be absorbed by the public in the same way.

While the media has developed and embraced new technologies, giving greater access and variety to the people, it has come at a cost. Singh (2004) highlights that the growth of the media in Fiji has been a double-edged sword with accompanying concerns about media freedom, cross media ownership and media consolidation. A common criticism is that quantity has not been matched by quality. Also, the numerical increase in news organisations had not necessarily strengthened media freedom, but may have actually endangered it in a country where politicians and leaders are unused to intense media scrutiny, and have reacted by trying to legislate the media (Singh 2004: 48).

Singh also expressed concern about the growing hostility between government and the media:

While the media and government have, historically, been at odds, which is to be expected in a bona-fide, functional democracy that Fiji claims to be, in recent years the level of antagonism has, on occasion, reached alarming levels. The level of the attacks in Parliament, the Senate and public forums are unprecedented in Fiji (2004: 48).

Another critic, newspaper publisher Kalafi Moala (2007), who made his name campaigning for democracy in Tonga, says the media has to shoulder some blame for the November 16 riots. Moala, now a government advisor, said the media used language not normally used in Tongan culture and criticised key figures who were not given a chance to respond (Prominent Tonga newspaper publisher says unbalanced reporting helped foment riot, 2007).

While the media shrugs off much of the criticism as a case of “shooting the messenger”, there are calls in some quarters for alternative models of journalism that are less adversarial, more representative and more geared towards national or local development. The concept of development journalism, largely unknown in this region, is widely practised in some parts of Asia. By focusing on development issues in a sustained and systematic manner, the media in some Asian countries have achieved tangible gains for the people.

While the West has shunned the concept because of a perceived fear of governments influencing and controlling news, development journalism can be constructive and effective, and claims of susceptibility to government infiltration may have been premature. Papoutsaki (2007) argues that despite the model’s weaknesses in terms of its possible use by governments to control media, its potential for alternative journalism practices is great if the model is revisited and re-developed along the new realities of the developing world today.

In fact, a widely held belief among proponents of development journalism is that in discarding the concept, the Western media may have been motivated more by market considerations rather than any notions of government control. Keeping in mind the fact that the media’s principal responsibility is to the people, journalists are duty-bound to educate themselves about the real problems that the local population faces. Only then can they report about these issues in an in-depth and compelling fashion, thereby helping bring about some relief. Peace journalism, for instance, can be classed as a branch of development journalism that could contribute to conflict resolution rather than exacerbate conflicts. But it is not a well-understood or practised form of journalism in this part of the world.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss out of hand what some people in the Pacific derisively refer to as “Westernised Journalism”. This brand of journalism may not be all good, and unpalatable for some. But it has some key strengths. Discarding it as totally unsuitable for Pacific Island situations would be committing the same mistake the Western media did when it threw out the baby with the bathwater in rejecting development journalism as a viable journalistic practice.

While journalism as practised in Western democracies may seem out of place in the Pacific to some, the core values that it is based on—transparency, equality and accountability—are not Western, but universally accepted principles and unalienable human rights. These values should not be discarded by journalists, regardless of which part of the world they are practising in. The reality in the Pacific is that culture and tradition are often used by politicians and leaders to abuse their power, exploit their people and hide their activities. It would be a sad day for journalism if the media were to fall for such clever tricks and plots, and stop asking questions in obeisance to the chiefs, or simply for the sake of maintaining the peace. Sometimes it is better for the journalist to be an adversary rather than an ally.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we have argued that the political systems in the three countries discussed have passed their used-by-dates and are a security threat. The situation is

compounded by self-serving leaders bent on clinging to these systems. In Tonga and the Solomons the people took matters into their own hands while in Fiji the military stepped in to take control.

In all three cases, the leaders failed to take heed of the warning signals. Tongans are now waiting to see in which direction the new King will take the country. In Fiji, the people want to move away from racial politics. But Prime Minister Qarase did not move fast enough, at least in the opinion of the military, which overthrew him. With four coups in 20 years, the coup culture appears to have taken hold in Fiji, with the military now an active player in national politics.

The media in all three countries are playing a key role in these developments. The claim that the media is a security threat and a Western imposition is made mostly by leaders who fear change, and the accompanying loss of privileges. But given the level and scope of conflicts in the region, and the media's critical role in development, it would do well for journalists to explore and consider different models of reporting that may be suited for the Pacific, such as peace journalism. Journalists, however, should not stop holding leaders and politicians accountable for the sake of keeping the peace, or in the name of culture and tradition. The public wants the media to play the watchdog role, and this was seen in Tonga when government efforts to silence the *Taimi o' Tonga* through legislation in 2003 were met by the biggest protest march in the country's history. In the Solomons, the media have over the years exposed government misdeeds. When this failed to bring about change, the people took extreme action, as seen with the rioting in Honiara.

Into this cauldron, throw big brother nations such as Australia that rush in with short-term, ill-conceived intervention policies that worsen the situation. The Australian government through RAMSI has been mostly dealing with the outcomes of the conflict. The Honiara riots reflect the need to focus on the underlying causes with much zeal if an enduring solution is ever to be found.

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