A Fiji Diary: Reminiscences and Reflections of a Newsman

By Dr Shailendra SINGH

Kumar expresses disappointments and regrets without rancour. His measured analysis demonstrates an astute knowledge of Fiji politics and a deep respect for Fiji culture. “The Fall of a Titan” was his tribute to Ratu Mara after his death in April 2004.

Kumar notes that the Rabuka coup not only signalled the death of democracy, but also the fall of a titan in Ratu Mara, who hastened his own demise by falling first to condemn the coup, and then, by leading the post-coup regime.

Coup leaders are by nature replete with irony. Mara was accused of being behind the coup very coup that, in the eyes of many, tarnished his record. Despite this, Kumar’s sympathies lay with the coup leaders, who he felt had been betrayed and by the coup’s unseemly powerbrokers.

In Kumar’s view, Ratu Mara “dedicated his life to his country” and will be “kindly judged by history.” The Pacific Island states have produced no greater son,” he writes. But Ratu Mara critics, who accuse him of a litany of sins — ranging from racism to corruption, and cynicism to capitalism to political opportunism — would strongly disagree with Kumar.

Like many a leader, Ratu Mara was a controversial figure. The team of reporters that Kumar headed did not spare Mara, even though Ratu Mara had been Kumar personally. If Kumar’s portrayal in the book sounds more forgiving, it’s probably because of hindsight and reflection. His evaluation possibly stems from a more holistic analysis of Ratu Mara’s political reporting — from “healthy skepticism” to an “independent, adversarial relationship” and “hyper-adversarial” posture.

Academics like McNair and Fallow have drawn attention to the emergence of an “independently adversarial relationship” between media and political leaders, which Kumar highlights as a political reporting tradition. This attitude explains why Kumar was a highly-regarded newspaper editor, even in the face of growing skepticism about the ethics of media hyper-adversarialism.

Journalism as just a theory. But even as a theory, media hyper-adversarialism is pertinent for a vulnerable market-driven media, increasingly locked into a hyper-adversarial “independent, adversarial relationship” with political leaders considered its targets. This trend marks a wide paradigm shift in political reporting — from “healthy skepticism” to “corrosive cynical and hyper-adversarial” posture.

Media researcher Spiess calls it “attack dog journalism” — an aggressive reporting strain with “independent, adversarial relationship” and building a stronger democracy.

Kumar highlights a number of such political weaknesses, which he believes are crucial for public trust and confidence, and a healthy, independent media. This is no doubt the silent prayer of many a coup leader. Kumar then poses a poignant question: “Can Fiji go against the tide of history?” That is no doubt the silent prayer of many a coup leader.

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