

The saga of the Fiji Government’s proposal to change the design of the country’s flag sheds light on two key characteristics of contemporary political debate. First, it shows that the Fijian Government wants to engage with the public and win their support using social media. Second, it shows that, at the same time, the Fijian Government does not want social media to be used to express open opposition to government policy. Open to new forms of media, the government nevertheless fears unleashing a torrent of criticism. While democracy has returned to Fiji, the government remains wary of letting go of its reins on the public expression of opinion, even on so anodyne a subject as the design of the nation’s flag. This In Brief seeks to discuss and assess the public social media responses from the two main social media sites that were publicised by the Fijian government, for public feedback on the flag change proposal.

In his [2013 New Year’s message](#), Prime Minister Bainimarama announced that planned changes to Fiji’s national flag would ‘reflect a sense of national renewal’ and ‘reinforce a new Fijian identity’. The general public was encouraged to send in their designs for review by 1 May, to a 13-member flag committee headed by Iliesa Delana, Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports. By 9 June, the committee had selected 23 designs for public deliberation (Chandar 2015).

The government encouraged the public to provide their feedback, until 30 June, through text messaging, emails, radio call-in, mail, and social media (Naikaso 2015). Social media stood out in this initiative as the only medium that allowed instantaneous public responses that were open for both the authorities and general public to view. All feedback was to culminate with the unveiling of the chosen flag on Fiji’s Independence Day, 10 October 2015. However, on 30 June, 2015, [Prime Minister Bainimarama extended the deadline](#) to 31 December 2015. The two main sites for feedback were the Fijian Government Facebook Page and the Twitter account National Flag Comp. @NewFijiFlag.

Social Media Responses

On 9 June; the photos of the 23 designs were released on the Facebook page at precisely 6.28 pm. By 8:15 pm, within two hours, there was a total of 337 public comments. The wide-ranging comments have been grouped into common themes and tallied, as seen in Table 1.¹

Table 1: Fiji Government Facebook Page Comments on Flag Change Proposal

Themes	No. of Comments
Keep the original	135
Dislike all 23 designs	58
Support flag change but dislike 23 designs	23
Support the new flags	15
Comparing designs with other Pacific islands countries’ flags	11
Other issues are more important	5
Suggesting their own designs	5
Suggesting a referendum on the design	1
Vague–positive	7
Vague–negative	58
Vague–neutral	19
Total Comments	337

Roughly 80 per cent of the comments did not support the idea of a flag change, while 20 per cent appeared supportive of the initiative, and 77 per cent preferred the original flag to the 23 designs released.

Some of the comments that reflect the sentiments among online users are as follows:

All pathetic looking designs! I still PREFER THE CURRENT FLAG! (Luisa Waqa).

Change the government not the flag (Cephas Lomani).

Due respect to the designers, but NONE of these designs have inspired my pride or patriotism towards my country of origin — Fiji. Keep the current flag and reallocate resources and funding to finding innovative ways of creating jobs for the 42,000+ unemployed youths who were directed by minister of employment to return to villages and plant cassava (Jipa Taoba).

None of them appeal to our eyes ... vote 0 ...
(Mahezabeen Farzana Khan).

In contrast to the activity on Facebook, the National Flag Comp. @NewFijiFlag Twitter account had only 5 tweets. One was an announcement in relation to the progress of the flag competition, while the other four were endorsements of flag nos. 50, 49, and 46 respectively.

Government Response

Taken aback by the public response, on 16 June Fiji's Police Commissioner warned the public to be 'wary when giving their 'two cents worth' on the flag selection process via Facebook or other online media. He reminded people that 'cybercrime through social media is a concern' from which the Fiji Police has the ability to identify people and the content they post, and 'take steps against those people' (Vafōou 2015). A few days later, the government initiated the National Flag Protection Bill 2015, which has been described as 'being at odds with legal principles' (Radio Australia 21/6/2015). The Bill contains rules that would discourage citizens from criticising the newly chosen flag, such as 'using the flag to demean, disrespect or insult the state, the government, any member of the government or the general public, and threatens fines of up to 20 thousand dollars and prison terms up to ten years' (Ibid.).

Conclusion

The Fijian Government's inclusion of Facebook and Twitter in the public feedback process is an indicator of the growing prominence of social media as a tool for gauging public opinion and for open scrutiny. Facebook, with a total of 340,000 account users in Fiji, is the more popular platform

compared to Twitter. With 39 per cent of Fiji's population having logged onto Facebook, feedback on the flag change was intense.

With social media access, citizens were able to directly express and display their opposing views to the Bainimarama Government, which has been infamous for its low tolerance of open opposition. The intensity of the comments was unprecedented considering the nature and context in which the comments were made. The concise and candid nature of the comments has challenged the comfortable context of the Fijian Government Page. The police commissioner's warnings and the criticisms of the National Flag Protection Bill 2015 indicate the intention of the government to dissuade citizens from engaging openly. However, in spite of these tactics, citizens have, through social media, openly expressed dissatisfaction.

Author Notes

The authors are researchers based at the University of the South Pacific.

Endnote

1. The 'Vague' category included comments that were not making clear choices on the 23 designs. Comments that reflected frustrations were listed as 'Vague-negative', comments that alluded to accepting change were listed as 'Vague-positive', and senseless comments were listed as 'Vague-neutral'. The other themes reflected appeared to be clear, and were categorised accordingly.

References

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