

Silence in Paradise

Address to the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia by ~

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you for the introduction and the invitation to be here.

On television this morning there was a huge marketing campaign attempting to draw visitors to Fiji.

Over the course of about two hours a series of advertisements found their way into Australian homes, portraying Fiji as an excellent destination where people are friendly and there is plenty of sea, the sand and sun.

Yesterday, a colleague showed me a piece on Fiji written by a blogger – an Australian national and former television presenter – who visited my country not long ago.

She described the current ruler of Fiji – Commodore Frank Bainimarama – as being not so bad after all.

Indeed, she suggested that as far as dictators go, Bainimarama is probably the best around.

Dictatorships are, perhaps, exercises in relativity.

Fiji's dictatorship is better, relative to Idi Amin's in Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s or the rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile in the same period.

But a dictatorship is – purely and simply – illegal.

Earlier this year the the Appeals Court in Fiji ruled that the removal of Laisenia Qarase's government by the army and its shadowy group of supporters was illegal.

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The three judges declared not only that the takeover was illegal but that the President appoint a caretaker prime minister to lead Fiji to democratic elections within a suitable time frame.

Hours after the judgment was handed down, the interim Prime Minister, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, agreed on national television to abide by the ruling and uphold the law.

The next day he was reappointed by the President – this time to head an interim government of the same people who had lead Fiji prior to the declarations of the court.

Immediately, a Public Emergency Regulation was put in place to ensure that there would be no opposition to Bainimarama's regime.

In a nutshell the regulation prohibits public gatherings for the purpose of political meetings and – under Section 16 – stops the media from broadcasting or printing material which may incite the people.

This rule gives the Permanent Secretary wide-ranging and arbitrary powers to decide what may cause incitement. There is no requirement for this public servant to declare why the decision has been made to prevent a particular news item from being made public.

On the afternoon of Bainimarama's return to power, the Permanent Secretary for Information told news editors that as part of the regulation, each media organization would be allocated a censor and that each censor would be accompanied by a police officer in plain clothes.

The police officer – we were told – was to protect the censor.

We were not told from whom the censor would need protection.

In Fiji it is often the case that rules can change from day to day without warning or explanation.

As days and weeks passed, the number of censors increased, as did the number of police officers.

These enforcers of the law are no longer in plain clothes and sometimes take on the duty of the censors, deciding what we are permitted to print.

Now we have a situation where it is the police who are the censors.

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This means that no story involving the police will see the light of day if it involves corruption or officers breaking the law or even.

Two months ago the police took on a serial offender – a violent robber – as a special constable as part of a Christian Crusade to minister to criminal elements.

This man has a number of outstanding cases – I believe there are eight – before the court.

He was to have appeared in court to answer charges relating to one of these cases but was not in court on the day – a clear case of contempt. The magistrate asked the prosecutor why the accused person was in court.

The prosecutor blamed the Crime Officer at a police station on the outskirts of the capital, Suva.

Infuriated, the magistrate ordered that the accused policeman and the Crime Officer appear in court on Monday morning.

Sensational, great read. But nobody's read this story because although we wrote it, the censors would not allow publication.

On Monday the court sat and the magistrate called the case. The Crime Officer was there but the accused special constable was nowhere to be seen.

Even more sensational, an even greater read. This story remains unknown to the people of Fiji as does the whereabouts of the accused cop to the court.

This incident illustrates the impunity of the courts to prosecute people who are protected by the regime.

And this is not happening in some African nation. It's happening four hours from here in your backyard.

It's happening in a nation which you and your friends or relatives visit for its friendly people and sandy beaches.

It's happening in paradise.

Not too long ago, members of the Commonwealth Broadcasters Association met in Fiji to discuss a number of matters – presumably in a free and forthright manner.

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The CBA espouses the values of freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

Ironically, delegates at the CBA Conference were served by hotel staff who do not have these rights once they leave the hotel complex.

And what was most disturbing was the fact that parts of this conference were presided over by the Permanent Secretary for Information – a lieutenant-colonel – who is in effect Fiji's chief censor.

May I be presumptuous at this stage and say that Australians appear to have no idea just how lucky they are to have a voice through the media organizations which operate freely in this country.

As journalism students, you must know that your colleagues but a plane ride from this city are under enormous pressure to succumb to the demands of an illegal regime.

Unfortunately, many of your colleagues have buckled under this pressure because their editors or publishers have chosen to take the easy way out and sell their ethics.

This administration wants a particular message to go out to the people.

They want the public to think that all is good.

Let me tell you, that message is far from the truth.

The danger however, is that without a free media, people will begin to believe in the lies.

So what are we permitted to print?

Basically any story on government must put the interim regime in a positive light or it will not be permitted.

No views contrary to those of the interim government are permitted – even if balance is provided in the form of a comment from a minister of state or a senior public servant.

Censors did not allow the publication of the reactions of the Commonwealth and the United Nations to the reappointment of Bainimarama as interim prime

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minister by our president who, now that his usefulness to the regime is at an end, has been put out to pasture.

We were not allowed to publish news of street protests in Thailand or the assassination attempt on US President Barak Obama.

Censors entered our newsroom on the evening of the day that the President ordered Bainimarama's reinstatement.

Of course we had dozens of stories from all across the political spectrum showing reactions to this event.

We were not allowed to publish any of these stories.

The next day our Sunday paper – which is now a collectors' item – was published with white space in place of the stories which the censors – both trained journalists and one of whom had worked in the mainstream media - had culled.

We carried bold notices in those spaces declaring that the newspaper had been prevented from publishing the stories under the Public Emergency Regulations.

It was a sensation and drove home to the people of Fiji the point that we were powerless to tell the truth, powerless to tell the country what it needed to know, powerless to carry out our duty to the nation and provide free speech.

And it brought home to them the fact that media freedom is intrinsically linked to their right to know and their freedom of expression.

Unfortunately the interim government was not amused and the Fiji Times management was summoned before the Permanent Secretary for Information to be told that white space was not allowed under the Public Emergency Regulation.

What, then, do we do next?

We have decided to go about our daily assignments in the normal manner.

Our journalists and photographers cover every possible assignment attempting to get as many sides of the story as possible.

Yes, we continue to cover stories which do not portray the interim government in a good light.

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Those stories are assigned to pages and go to the censors each day. More often than not these stories are declared unfit for consumption by the people and are knocked back by the censors.

The next day we cover every assignment again – including the stories which the interim government does not want – and inundate the censors with copy.

Sometimes the stories get through, at other times they are spiked.

It is an extremely frustrating exercise.

Two months ago a domestic airline was forced to close because of financial difficulties which are not linked to the current regime.

Our business writer prepared comprehensive coverage, covering all angles of the story, providing fact files, historical background – a masterpiece from a young journalist.

The censor on duty did not allow our reports to run unless we carried a quote from a specific minister.

We refused and pulled the story.

The following day we placed the same stories in front of a different censor – No worries, the issue was covered, albeit a day late.

It is safe to say that the greatest challenge we face with censorship is inconsistency.

What we may or may not cover is at the discretion or more often the whim of the censor on duty.

Last month the Public Emergency Regulation was extended for a further 30 days and this went unreported.

The Permanent Secretary for Information declared that the media was now reporting responsibly.

In my view, Fiji's media has always tried to report responsibly.

Unfortunately, all of our country's rulers since independence in 1970 believe that responsibility means no anti-government stories.

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The people know of our inability to provide a truly independent view of what is happening in our home.

Those who can use shortwave radio to find a link to the outside world and news broadcast on Radio Australia or Radio New Zealand.

A plethora of blog sites has sprung up spewing Fiji stories, rumour, gossip and speculation into cyber-space.

Most of this news is accessible only to the small portion of the community which has access to the Internet.

Unable to halt the onward march of the bloggers, Fiji's rulers have resorted to ordering the closure of Internet cafes from 6pm each evening in an attempt to stem the tide.

But how does it stop the coconut wireless which for generations has provided steady – if not entirely factual – news in countries around the region?

To say that Fiji's media has been under fire since December 2006 is no exaggeration.

We have been threatened, bullied and intimidated. Our cars have been smashed, our homes firebombed.

Despite this, our staff have remained committed to the ideals of a free media, telling the stories that must be told, exposing the weaknesses in State policies and also covering human interest assignments.

It is because of their commitment and refusal to detract from the cause that the interim government has been forced to gag the media.

It is important in these trying circumstances for senior journalists and managers to maintain a brave face and communicate constantly with their staff, offering support and protection.

It is also imperative that we offer guidance and direction and stress the importance of the role of a vibrant, free press in a democracy.

Training, upskilling and mentoring are also important.

At the Fiji Times we have found that our people – and many of them are young – understand the complexities of the situation we face.

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How do we build their courage?

Simply, by not backing down.

We continue to cover the issues which are important to people – water, roads, food prices, housing, superannuation, health services, governance, accountability, transparency.

Every story is covered in detail as if we were working in a truly democratic country without the current restrictions.

Each day we challenge the censors by putting every possible news item before them.

Sometimes we are lucky and the occasional story slips through the net.

On those days we celebrate quietly.

The danger is that under the current circumstances, journalists may start to censor their own stories.

We must not allow that to happen.

It is vital – indeed it is our duty – to ensure that journalists continue to make every attempt to cover the issues that matter to the people, even if the stories we write do not portray our rulers in a good light.

Our leaders must learn to deal with criticism from the electorate.

For journalists it is frustrating to spend the day covering issues and then writing reports which cannot be printed.

To their credit, however, our team at the Fiji Times continues to cover the issues, continues to test the censors, continues to push the boundaries of the regime's regulations.

That takes true immense courage.

In our a situation it would be easy to roll over and practice self-censorship or get out of journalism because it's just too hard.

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To their credit, however, our journalists have risen to the challenge, continued to report without fear or favors and remained objective.

They have bravely stood up to intimidation, rejected censorship and recognized that when a nation is controlled by usurpers it is imperative that the public's right to know is protected at all costs.

And they are determined to break the culture of silence which so often surrounds our leaders – elected or otherwise.

I am proud of the journalists with whom I work and their colleagues in Fiji's media industry. They are a tribute to the profession we all love so much. I pray that you will never face the situation my staff and some of our Fijian colleagues face today.

Every time you open newspaper or turn on the radio or television, be thankful for the right to know what is happening in your country.

You may not like what's happening. At least you have the information to enable change.

Be thankful for the journalists who bring you that information.

And as you give thanks, spare a thought for the journalists in Fiji and their battle every day to give the people a voice in paradise.

I thank you for your patience.