

Fiji coups retrospective

1. The media and the coup leader: Sitiveni Rabuka

ABSTRACT

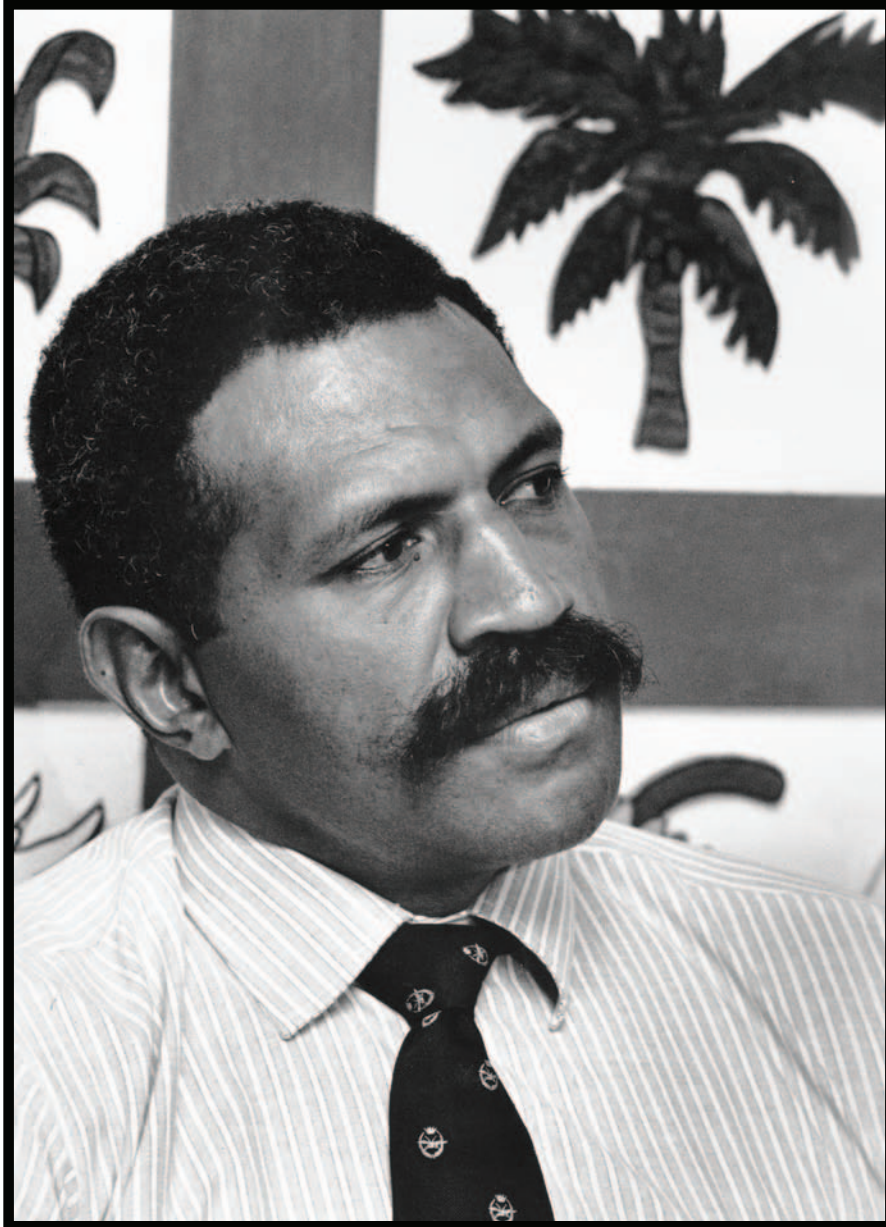
Brigadier-General Sitiveni Rabuka, the former prime minister of Fiji who gained notoriety for staging twin coups in 1987, has enjoyed a love-hate relationship with the Fiji and Pacific media for almost two decades. University of Canberra PhD student, Anthony Mason, interviewed Rabuka in the course of his research into Australian media coverage of the coups. He also interviewed the former editor of *The Fiji Times*, Vijendra Kumar. *Pacific Journalism Review* is publishing the transcripts of these interviews, where both Rabuka and Kumar reflect on the May 1987 coup and its aftermath—helping to put the May 2000 coup into perspective.

IN THE May 1987 coup, did you have any preconceived plans about how to deal with the international media?

No. In 1987 I had no idea at all about how the media would react. And in fact if you look back at the first few hours of 1987, you'll probably realise that I was very open with the media. I was very frank with them. And personally, I had nothing to hide from them about what I was doing at the time. I was hoping that by being really open with them and being really frank, they would quickly see that although what I did was unconstitutional— and illegal—and internationally unacceptable, they would at least see that there was some reason. Whether it was enough reason or not, it was a reason from our point of view as indigenous Fijians at that time.

Had you ever done any media training?

No. I had no training at all about how to handle the media. My whole military career up to that time had been always under a headquarters which handled media—all the media releases were coming out of my headquarters,



MATT MCKEE

Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987: 'Personally, I had nothing to hide from the media.'

here in Fiji and in Lebanon. There was no direct contact between the field commanders, the battalion commanders, and the media. The only media we were exposed to in Lebanon were our own United Nations media, who were already soldier friendly and UN friendly. The media in Fiji up to that time were also very RFMF [Royal then Republic Fiji Military Forces] friendly.¹

How long did it take you to realise that you had to think about the media and what they were up to?

As soon as I appointed my military cabinet, which was in the first few days—and the cabinet was to be disbanded quickly after that to hand over back to the former Governor General. At that time, the politicians I had brought into my cabinet advised me, ‘Look, let the Minister for Information handle the media’. I was still uninformed enough to be open to the media directly, which could have been embarrassing for my own Minister for Information. But at that time my perception of a leader was that he had nothing to hide. [I was] still pretty open with what I said to the media.

But you moved quickly on the local media.

Yes, that’s right. We decided to shut [them] down.² My advice in fact, from the Minister of Information was to open the media, or to reopen the newspaper. The military was adamant. The people in the military with me said, ‘Look, let’s just shut it down’. The civilians that I’d brought into the military cabinet were the ones who were, as I said, media wise, and said that they could be manoeuvred so that they became more friendly.

With the international media, particularly, did you feel like you needed to control them?

No. We really didn’t want to control... I didn’t even try to control the international media. What I was more concerned about was the very hostile information facility that was available to the University of the South Pacific at that time. They were in direct contact with their overseas counterparts through the university’s channels and continued to use that. It was also used by the opponents of the military coup, who used that channel to get overseas. We were getting a lot of very hostile media coverage overseas and that very quickly changed my attitude towards the media as a whole. I became more guarded after that.

Did you get to see any of the overseas coverage?

Yes. We had those who were sympathetic to us overseas who sent us video tapes. They recorded the coverage, news items. We got the newspaper

cuttings sent to us. We started reading about what they were saying about us, which was in fact a good thing because I then told my team working with me, 'Alright let's use that as a thermometer— to find out whether we're fine, or we have a fever or we're sick or something, and try and adjust accordingly'.

So you never considered kicking the international media out?

There was one fellow, I think he was roughed up a bit and sent away— Stephen somebody.³

Overall, how did you think the international media treated you? Did they respect you?

I don't know whether they had any agenda but a lot of them were going around with the international feelings about what was going on in Fiji. Whether they had any political urging from the Fiji Labour Party, the Australian Labor Party and the New Zealand Labour Party at that time — particularly Australia and New Zealand, they were Labour governments at that time, and the Fiji Labour Party was in the coalition—they might have had some more sympathetic considerations which could have influenced, which could have been put on the media in those areas, in those places, to be more sympathetic to Labour, the victims of the 1987 coup—that I do not know. But because of that we felt that the media from Australia and New Zealand were really hostile. They had a subjective view of the events in Fiji because of their association with the Fiji Labour Party. Perceived association.

Do you think they had enough background on Fiji?

I think they had enough background on the international standards or the international expectations of what should be happening in Fiji, of what should not be happening in Fiji. But my main bone of contention was that it was a Western type media looking at an indigenous problem in an Asia Pacific area, that was basically run by Western values, that are now the values of Australia and New Zealand because of the dominance of the European communities in those two countries. Because of that I felt that it was a patronising attitude. Given the treatment of the indigenous Maori and the indigenous Aboriginal people by the media and the people in the countries themselves, I felt that we would be subjected to the same sort of prejudice.

Looked down upon?

Yes. If we became more aggressive towards them and became anti-media in our utterances and our actions, it could be that we felt that they were condescending in their attitude. We were reacting by refusing to be looked down upon and thereby became aggro in our reactions.

Did it make a difference to you, how you were portrayed in the international media?

Yes, because I felt it was not giving enough coverage to why we did it. It was only concerned about why we should not have done it.

Do you think the reporting was accurate?

The reporting was accurate. But there was some very, very blatant and fraudulent reports because the composers of the reports knew they were telling lies. Those about tanks being used in Fiji. What I did was unethical but I felt that in the international media was very unethical.

I think it was a New Zealand TV station. And they also used footage of the ANZ Bank.⁴

Yes, the ANZ Bank coming down. Yes, the Bank of New Zealand was being demolished. Yes at that time we felt it was isolated, something that somebody did for us, against us in Fiji. But when you look at the incidents now happening in Iraq and the allegation against the editor [Piers Morgan, *Daily Mirror*] in the United Kingdom who has been sacked. So it is not something that was done only to Fiji. How many more of these might have been done to other events around the world. The so-called satellite photographs of the mobile laboratories in Iraq itself is another example of doctoring and the use of IT to suit their own political agenda.

Would you have done anything differently in how you dealt with the international media?

If I had any prior knowledge of how the media could have twisted events and scenarios, I might have dealt with them a bit better, in the sense that I'd be friendly towards them, in the sense of, 'Look, this is what's happening here—you don't have to manufacture anything'. If you show it the way it is the international media will probably see and agree that it's not right but report it so that our recovery period would be shorter.

Were you surprised how quickly some journalists left Fiji?

Yes. They came in, then out. Something more interesting happened somewhere else. Then they just used their footage over [and over]. The thing is that the situation might have moved on but they did not cover it. So they used their same bad pictures of the crowd—it's the same with Iraq. At that time, we didn't have any TV here, so all we were hearing from our relatives abroad was that these things had come on.

Since 1987, do you think the Australian reporting of Fiji has improved any or do you still have that same kind of condescending attitude?

I think they have basically ... well ... There are two sides to a situation where one feels the other is condescending. One could be the big brother, or the bigger guy looking down at the smaller guy. The other, I think, is that the smaller guy just feels intimidated, so he feels the other guy is bigger. So you've got to look at it from both sides. I think the Australian media just recently understood what has happened in Fiji. [The attempted coup in] 2000 was perhaps an eye-opener for them, that Rabuka was not acting alone, not trying to invent something. George Speight and the big crowds of 2000 were doing exactly the same, although the Rabuka movement had ended with the re-engineering of our constitution, putting down the platform for a more balanced, multiracial society. It showed the indigenous people were still not prepared to accept things, even when it was championed by the guy who started 1987.

Do you think the reporting was better in 2000?

Yes, it was better. In fact, at times I felt that Speight was the hero in a lot of the things that were going on. Maybe it was his visibility, to put his view across, and the fact that he was more friendly to the media, some of whom lived in the Parliament with him. Perhaps they felt threatened because they were closed in and couldn't just come away with their reports.

Did you deliberately pick and choose who you were going to talk to in the Australian media?

I didn't have any personal knowledge of any of the Australian media. The Minister of Information had a good rapport with this girl from the Solomon Islands—Mary-Louise O'Callaghan—and there was another one from Canberra.⁵ They had known each other from Alliance days and by using them, they spearheaded the more accurate reporting and assessment of indigenous/non-indigenous relationship in Fiji.

2. Fiji journalism pioneer remembers: Vijendra Kumar

CAN YOU start by telling me about your heritage?

I'm a third generation Fiji-Indian. I was born in Nadi, Fiji. I was educated in Fiji. I did some courses in journalism outside Fiji—at the East-West Centre in Hawaii and also in Berlin, Germany.

When did you start working at The Fiji Times?

I joined *The Fiji Times* as a reporter in 1969. After a couple of years I was made bureau chief. Then I was transferred to Suva and made news editor. From news editor, I became editor in 1975.

What was it like working for the paper at that time?

It was very exciting because I was the first local Indian to be employed by *The Fiji Times* as a reporter. Since I was based in Lautoka it gave me a lot of opportunities to chase all sorts of stories that didn't normally get in *The Fiji Times* before then. It gave me a very wide area to cover all sorts of news.

What did that range include?

Court reporting, local council, political meetings, political rallies, industrial actions by trade unions—virtually everything that happened in my area I covered.

You became editor in 1975. What was the political situation like then?

In 1975, the Alliance Government was in power and had been in power since before independence. From 1975 onwards, Fiji was on the march. There was political stability and there was a Government policy of promoting racial harmony and peace. Everyone seemed to think that racial harmony was a solid basis for future development. Things were going well—the economy was booming, tourism was booming and Fiji was quite a nice place to live. There was a lot of investment flowing in, especially in the tourism sector.

Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was the Prime Minister. He was recognised internationally as a moderate leader and he was generally held in very high regard in Fiji as well. The Opposition was led by the National Federation Party, which was largely made up of Indian support but with a sprinkling of support from other communities—the Fijians and the part-Europeans and so on.



Vijendra Kumar: '[Local journalists] were far more clued up.'

When did you first hear about the coup in 1987? Where were you?

On 14 May 1987, I was actually driving away from Suva for a weekend holiday at Rakiraki. I had the car radio switched on to Radio Fiji and just as I reached Korovo, a town after Nausori about 50 or 60 km from Suva, the announcement came over [the air] that we should await a special announcement. And then Rabuka came on the air and announced that he had staged a coup and taken over the Government. That's how I heard of the coup.

And of course, I turned around and went straight back to Suva. By then our reporters had started gathering all the information that they could. So we were able to produce the next day's newspaper, the Saturday edition. And then after that we were shut down.

How long was the paper closed down?

After the May 14 coup, we were shut down for two to three weeks. I can't remember exactly how long.

Were your journalists still covering the situation?

We were barred from our newsroom—locked out of the premises. But we still kept tabs on things. We met every day and whatever was happening we kept track of it.

Can you remember the arrival of the international media?

The first one to break the news on the international scene was Jim Shrimpton. He was the AAP man based in Suva. So he was the first one to send a flash out before the army got in and started unplugging all the telephone lines.

Then over the next three or four days, the first to arrive were a lot of Australian journalists—then New Zealand journalists. And then as the news spread around the world we had journalists from other places. We had Americans, Canadians and Hawaiians. And of course the correspondents for British newspapers based in Australia also flew in.

Did the presence of the international media have any impact on the local media?

No. Because the local media was already shut down and the radio station [Radio Fiji] was in the hands of the army, so they couldn't broadcast anything freely. What did happen was that the local journalists, who were far more clued up on what was happening, became a sort of conduit of information for all the foreign journalists. A lot of them would come and talk to us and get background information and find possible contacts to talk to. That was how they went about getting their information.

How much did the international media know about Fiji?

They had absolutely no idea. Very few of them knew very much about Fiji, except that it was a South Sea island where they went for a holiday. Very few of them knew much about the political system or the names of the leaders. So it was a surprise for us, and I think it was a big learning experience for the Australian and New Zealand journalists. The New Zealand journalists had a little bit more knowledge about Fiji than the Australians, because New Zealand had closer contacts with Fiji. Fiji got a lot of coverage on New Zealand radio and in New Zealand newspapers even before the coup. But Australian newspapers never reported anything that happened in Fiji as far as I remember, unless it was something sensational.

In a way, the international media were lucky that the local media were unable to report?

Well, yes. Our hands were tied but they had quite a bit of freedom, at least for the first week. They were able to telex their stories through or phone their stories through. Then, of course, the army censors got in on the act and they shut down all the lines. [The journalists] had difficulties sending stories after that.

Would you say that without the assistance of the local media, the international media would have been really struggling?

Yes. They had absolutely no idea who to talk to. One of our reporters arranged for a Melbourne *Herald* reporter to interview Colonel Rabuka.⁶ Rabuka wanted to talk to the press as much as he could, but he was still being selective. He wanted to put his case to the world, particularly the Australian and New Zealand media, whose governments were opposed to the coup.

Did you see any of the coverage by the international media?

Not much, because I didn't get any Australian newspapers in Fiji. But some of the copy that was filed through our offices I had a chance to look at, especially the copy filed by the News Ltd journalists. They were not bad, largely because of the cooperation from us. I think they were a little bit more on the ball than the others, who did not have that kind of resource to fall back on.

Were the international media able to access a wide range of sources?

Not really. For example, they were not able to get hold of the Opposition people. I don't think any of them were able to get hold of Dr [Timoci] Bavadra, for example, and have a full interview with him. They were able to talk to Rabuka and a few other Ministers in his military government. Some of them did go out into the villages and into the rural areas to try and gauge the reaction from the people. I think they got a mixed bag of reactions.

Do you think the local media learned anything from the international media? Was it a two-way learning experience?

I can't say that. The overseas media, of course, were far more aggressive and they had no idea of local protocol or sensitivities. Some of them really got into some pretty tight situations with the army fellahs. The local media, if we'd been free to report and publish things, would have taken a slightly different approach. We would have respected the protocols and sensitivities of people involved, and still go ahead and report what was worth reporting.

What was your overall impression of the international media?

My impression of the foreign journalists was that they had a very slim idea of what Fiji was about—about our political system, about the reasons for

the coup, about the racial makeup of the country, about the land situation—they had no idea about all of these things. Most of them were expecting to see violent demonstrations and upheavals of the worst kind. I think quite a few of them were disappointed there was no bloodshed.

Do you think that if they understood Fiji a little better, that it might have had an impact on Fiji in the long run?

Yes, definitely. I think so. If these journalists had a little more knowledge about Fiji's complex political situation and the undercurrent of tension that had always been there, I think it might have had a different sort of impact on world opinion.

References

¹ For details of Rabuka's military service, see Dean, E., and Ritova, S. (1987). *Rabuka: No other way*. Sydney: Doubleday.

² Two local newspapers, *The Fiji Times* and *The Fiji Sun*, were closed down following editorials critical of the coup published on May 15—the day after the coup. News broadcast by Radio Fiji was monitored by military censors. There was no local television network in 1987.

³ The only Australian journalist deported in 1987 was Trevor Watson of Australia's Radio National. Watson believes coup leaders deported him for two reasons: he helped broadcast a secretly taped message from the imprisoned Dr Bavadra; and Radio National could be picked up on short wave radio within Fiji, and was therefore more of a concern for coup leaders.

⁴ A TV station in New Zealand showed footage of tanks in the streets of Suva. The problem was that the Fijian military didn't have any tanks. The footage was obviously from somewhere else. They also showed images of the partially destroyed ANZ Bank in Suva. These images turned out to be taken during recent renovations to the building. From: Thomson, P. (1999). *Kava in the blood*. Auckland, NZ: Tandem Press.

⁵ The Minister of Information in Rabuka's cabinet was the late Dr Ahmed Ali.

⁶ The Melbourne *Herald* reporter was Lynne Cossar, who was criticised for her coverage. See Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their banner: Nationalist struggles in the South Pacific*. Sydney: Pluto Press, p. 227.

Anthony Mason is a University of Canberra PhD student who is researching Australian media coverage of the Fiji coups in May 1987 and May 2000. He has interviewed many Australian journalists who covered the coups for organisations, including ABC Radio and TV, Radio Australia, Australian Associated Press, Agence France Presse, The Australian and The Sydney Morning Herald.

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