

Digital *buturaki*:

Government-sponsored

blogs assail critics of Fiji's

military dictatorship

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A series of coups beset Fiji following its independence from Great Britain in 1970. Some blamed the press, segments of which had been critical of the government, for fomenting a coup in 2000 (Singh, T.R., 2011). According to Robie (2003: 104), 'Many powerful institutions, such as the Methodist Church in Fiji, and politicians in the Pacific believe there is no place for a Western-style free media and it should be held in check by Government legislation'. Self-regulation of the press by the Fiji Media Council was criticized as ineffective (Robie, 2004). A clampdown on press freedom by the military, which took control of the country in a 2006 coup, saw a new type of publication emerge in response. Enabled by websites such as blogger.com which offered free software and hosting of personal diaries, web logs or 'blogs' became popular at the millennium. Pro-democracy blogs in post-coup Fiji were almost exclusively anonymous, however, as anyone caught spreading anti-government sentiment risked being arrested and beaten by the military. It detained several suspected bloggers and also put pressure on the country's telecommunications provider Fintel to block blogger.com. In response, a group of bloggers from New Zealand offered to host Fijian blogs on their servers (Fiji Times, 2007). According to Foster, by cracking down on press freedom, the military 'unleashed' the blogs. The resulting 'public relations nightmare', she concluded, proved worse for the regime's image than a free press would have.

The blogs' no-holds-barred approach to military criticism picked holes in media coverage of the crisis, with blogs running stories detailing alleged military abuse as well as releasing several confidential documents (Foster, 2007: 47-48).

Not all political blogs in post-coup Fiji were anti-regime, however. In early 2009, New Zealand resident Crosbie Walsh began a blog he called Fiji: The Way it Was, Is and Can Be, partly in response to what he saw as biased reporting on Fiji in the mainstream media of his country. A retired professor from the University of the South

Pacific (USP) in Fiji, Walsh also published a study in 2010 which catalogued 72 known political blogs in Fiji, of which 42 were active. ‘Fifty-three were anti [-government] – 19 extremely so; 15 were more or less ‘neutral’, and three were pro-government’ (Walsh, 2010: 164). Walsh deemed his own blog ‘mildly pro-government’, compared to blogs such as Coup 4.5, which actively incited unrest. ‘The anti-government blogs, hailed by coup opponents as advocates of democracy, are little more than agents of uncritical dissent’ (Walsh, 2010: 174). Coup 4.5 was among the most popular blogs, noted Walsh, with a ‘staggering’ 60,000 visitors in November 2009 compared with 30,000 visitors to his own blog over a longer period (Walsh, 2010: 158).

In April 2009, Fiji’s Appeal Court ruled the 2006 coup unconstitutional, prompting the government to abrogate the constitution, sack the judiciary, declare martial law, and clamp down on civil rights. Several foreign journalists were deported and censors were installed in newsrooms to prevent negative news about the government being published. Blog activity spiked in an attempt to fill the news vacuum, prompting a renewed government crackdown. The pro-regime blog Real Fiji News published the names of several prominent Suva residents it claimed were behind the anti-government blog Raw Fiji News, including the editor of the *Fiji Times* and three Suva lawyers, who were arrested and detained briefly for questioning (Merritt, 2009). In 2010, the regime appointed former Fairfax Media advertising executive Sharon Smith Johns as Permanent Secretary for Information, making her admittedly the country’s ‘chief censor and media strategist’ (Davis, 2010). A Media Industry Development Decree (Media Decree) was enacted by the military government the same year. It provided for fines of up to F\$1,000 for journalists found in contravention of its

guidelines, which increased to F\$25,000 for publishers or editors and F\$100,000 for media organisations (Foster, 2010; Singh, S. 2010).

In February 2011, Australian journalist Graham Davis began a blog he called Grubsheet after his production company Grubstreet. It covered a range of topics for its first year, but by early 2012 it began to focus on Fiji politics almost exclusively. Davis, who was born in Fiji, began that focus with a blog entry that criticised Coup 4.5 for alleging that Muslims were ‘colonising’ Fiji at the behest of Bainimarama’s right-hand man, Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who was a Muslim. ‘This grubby little offering isn’t just inflammatory but utterly false’, wrote Davis. ‘Simply put, Coup 4.5 – with this base offering – has become the local equivalent of a Nazi hate sheet’ (Davis, 2012a). The blog entry was reprinted in the pro-regime *Fiji Sun* newspaper, as well as on Auckland University of Technology’s Pacific Scoop and Pacific Media Centre websites, and on the blogs of Walsh and AUT journalism educator David Robie. ‘Who are these people?’ asked Davis of the contributors to Coup 4.5. A few wrote under their own names, he noted, including former *Fiji Sun* investigative reporter Victor Lal, who lived in England, and economist Wadan Narsey, who had been forced to resign his teaching position at the USP as a result of his outspoken opposition to the military government. Most, noted Davis, did not.

They’re always anonymous but are said to be a group of Fiji journalists running their site out of Auckland, with contributions from members of the deposed SDL government, ex civil servants and a hard core of anti-regime ‘human rights’ advocates. . . . The wonder is that some of 4.5’s content is written by respected journalists and academics who are Indo-Fijians to boot (Davis, 2012a).

Qorvis Communications

In October 2011, the Fiji regime contracted with U.S. public relations company Qorvis Communications at a cost of US\$40,000 per month. According to

Bainimarama (2011), the purpose was ‘to assist with training and support for our Ministry of Information – to ensure its operations take into account advances in social media, the Internet and best practices regarding the media’. New Zealand journalist Michael Field, who was among the journalists barred from Fiji for reporting critically on the regime, pointed out that Qorvis had a sinister reputation in other parts of the world where it operated. ‘Qorvis specialises in putting a spin on dictators like those of Tunisia and Egypt who resisted Arab Spring. . . . Hiring Washington spin-doctors is a well-walked road for dictators who work on their image in Washington and at the United Nations’ (Field, 2011). American journalist Anna Lenzer, who had been arrested on a recent assignment to Fiji, noted in the Huffington Post ‘the Fijian junta’s exploding internet and social media presence in the weeks since Qorvis began its work’ (Lenzer, 2011). The Huffington Post had earlier questioned the tactics employed by Qorvis on behalf of the dictatorship in Bahrain. ‘Beyond disappearing bloggers and rights activists, Bahrain also tries to disappear criticism’, it noted. ‘Most of the U.S.-based fake tweeting, fake blogging (flogging), and online manipulation is carried out from inside Qorvis Communication’s “Geo-Political Solutions” division’ (Halvorsen, 2011).

More so than intimidation, violence, and disappearances, the most important tool for dictatorships across the world is the discrediting of critics. . . . Oppressive governments are threatened by public exposure, and this means that it’s not just human rights defenders but also bloggers, opinion journalists, and civil society activists who are regularly and viciously maligned (Halvorsen, 2011).

The Huffington Post also reported in 2011 that an exodus of Qorvis operatives had taken place over the firm’s unsavoury tactics and clients. In a space of two months, it noted, more than a third of the partners at Qorvis had left the firm, partly because of its work on behalf of such clients as Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Equatorial

Guinea. ‘I just have trouble working with despotic dictators killing their own people’, one former Qorvis insider said (Baram, 2011).

The Fiji regime lifted martial law in early 2012, which resulted in censors exiting the country’s newsrooms. Numerous decrees, however, impinged on press freedom in addition to the Media Decree. A TV Decree enacted in 2012 permitted the minister responsible for communication to revoke the licence of any television station found to have contravened the Media Decree. It was enacted shortly after Fiji TV aired interviews with two former prime ministers who questioned the need for another new constitution. The broadcaster was reportedly then warned by the regime that its soon-to-expire broadcasting licence might not be renewed as a result (Ashdown, 2012). It was, but for only six months at a time instead of the usual twelve years. Soon a campaign began against critics of the military dictatorship. Following is an analysis of issues focused on by pro-regime blogs in Fiji subsequent to the lifting of martial law in early 2012 until elections were held in September 2014.

1. Bruce Hill and Radio Australia

A favorite target of pro-regime blogs, especially Grubsheet, was reporting by Radio Australia, the foreign service of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and its influential Pacific Beat programme. One regular target of Davis was Pacific Beat reporter Bruce Hill. When the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) controversially held its conference in Fiji in early 2012 despite the country’s restrictions on press freedom, Davis assailed Hill’s reports of dissension at the event. ‘It’s pretty clear in the minds of conference organisers that Hill came to PINA spoiling for a fight, or at least to pursue his favoured narrative of a Pacific media umbrella in tatters by continuing division over Fiji’, Davis wrote in a blog entry that was reprinted not only in the *Fiji Sun* but also in *The Australian* (Davis, 2012b). Hill interviewed a

delegate from one South Pacific country who claimed it was not the job of journalists to oppose governments, then filed a story that highlighted the comment, which drew criticism from Davis.

The AUT's David Robie observed that without Hill's presence, there would have been little dissent at PINA. Robie described the . . . fracas as a construct of 'western-style conflict journalism'. Hill, he said, had set out to generate controversy by seeking a contentious opinion and then using it to generate more controversy (Davis, 2012b).

Davis lodged a formal complaint with the ABC in 2013 after Pacific Beat ignored what Davis called 'the biggest change in Australian official attitude towards Fiji' since the 2006 coup (Davis, 2013a). Deputy Leader of the Opposition Julie Bishop gave a speech that signaled a normalising of relations with Fiji if her party came to power in upcoming elections. 'Here was the first significant change in official Australian attitudes towards Fiji in the six and a half years since Voreqe Bainimarama's takeover', blogged Davis. 'But Radio Australia chose to ignore it. Instead, it ran two items highly critical of the Fijian Government, both by the same reporter, Bruce Hill' (Davis, 2013a). Davis claimed that Radio Australia was trying to 'subvert the political process in Australia' by ignoring the Bishop speech. 'The Australian taxpayer is now entitled to know . . . by whose authority Hill, and the rest of the Radio Australia editorial team, chose to overlook a major shift in Australian attitude' (Davis, 2013a).

It is more than a grave editorial lapse. It is also contrary to law. On the available evidence, it's a case of the publicly funded broadcaster taking a partisan position in a manner that contravenes every aspect of the ABC's Charter. This legally requires it – under an act of Parliament – to report without fear or favour in the interests of every Australian (Davis, 2013a).

In a subsequent blog entry, he called for an inquiry into the matter. 'Bruce Hill needs to explain himself, as does the entire Radio Australia news team', he wrote. 'Because without a doubt, it is one of the most blatant instances of censorship and news

manipulation Grubsheet has ever witnessed' (Davis, 2013b). By this time, Davis had revealed he was working for Qorvis Communications on its Fiji account (Davis, 2012d). He spent much of his time in Suva working for Qorvis, he admitted, flying back and forth from his home in Sydney and staying at a leading local hotel. The admission came in September 2012, two weeks after Davis had been named host of the Southern Cross Austereo network's weekly public affairs television programme The Great Divide (Jackson, 2012).

2. Yash Ghai and the Constitutional Review Commission

A Constitutional Review Commission that was tasked by the regime with drafting a new constitution for Fiji ran into difficulties throughout 2012. Yash Ghai, a University of Hong Kong law professor who headed the commission, first complained of interference from the head of the military government, then clashed dramatically with the regime at year's end. In a November interview with Radio Australia's Campbell Cooney, Ghai revealed there had been 'massive interference' by the regime with the commission's work. 'I get emails from the PM to do this or not to do that, and this is a kind of harassment' (Radio Australia, 2012a). The situation came to a climax after the commission submitted its draft constitution to the government just before Christmas. Ghai ordered copies printed for distribution prior to it being considered by a special Constituent Assembly of citizens, which was planned to ratify it. Police seized the copies over Ghai's objections, however, and incinerated several while he watched. 'I have never been in a process where there has been such an attempt to hide the recommendations of a body which was set up by this very government', Ghai told Hill in an interview (Radio Australia, 2012b). The regime at first denied the seizure and burning, but pictures of the incident were soon posted online. Davis was unusually silent on the issue, having recently informed readers of

his blog that he was bowing out of the Fiji political fray because of his work for Qorvis. ‘I have a clear conflict of interest when it comes to commenting on political matters in Fiji, and especially partisan politics in the lead-up to the election,’ he wrote. ‘I am now spending much of my time in Suva working on the Qorvis account that services the Fijian Government’ (Davis, 2012e). Walsh accused Hill of ‘making a mountain out of a mole-hill’ and deconstructed his interview with Ghai line by line. ‘It shows how a supposedly neutral interviewer reveals his true colours’, wrote Walsh. ‘No one could possibly be in doubt about his feelings during the Yash Ghai interview. There was no attempt at neutrality’ (Walsh, 2012a). Walsh followed that with another blog entry two days later. ‘Government’s intention was never to prevent public discussion on the draft decree [sic.]’, he wrote. ‘The whole Ghai-police incident and its fallout is unfortunate, inflated, and has been largely misinterpreted, by the media mainly unintentionally, by anti-Government bloggers deliberately’ (Walsh, 2012b).

Walsh then speculated that the cause of the seizure was that the regime had lost confidence in the neutrality of the Commission. ‘There were so many stories of Yash Ghai socialising with known Government opponents. . . . I can well understand why government was concerned: a commission whose key member was no longer neutral was also no longer independent (Walsh, 2013a). The *Fiji Sun* then ran a front-page story under the screaming headline ‘ACCUSED: Neutrality Of Yash Ghai’s Commission Questioned’ (Bolatiki, 2013). It repeated Walsh’s speculation and outlined in detail the military government’s objections to the Ghai draft, including that it would restore the Great Council of Chiefs, which the regime had earlier abolished (Bolatiki, 2013). Walsh objected in a subsequent blog entry that the newspaper had been selective in reproducing his analysis. ‘The Sun did not misrepresent what I said but it only published half of it – the half sympathetic to Government’ (Walsh, 2013b).

By then the Ghai draft had been published on Fijileaks, a new blog by Victor Lal that specialized in publishing leaked documents *à la* Wikileaks (Fijileaks, 2012). In addition to restoring the Great Council of Chiefs, it would have repealed or rewritten decrees such as the Media Decree which restricted human rights, provided a role in Fiji politics for NGOs, and greatly reduced the role of the military. Despite his promise to refrain from commenting on Fiji politics, Davis charged that the Ghai draft was ‘a patently flawed formula’ for achieving democracy that required major revision. ‘If you dissect its provisions, Fiji would wind up with an elite of non-elected representatives and hereditary chiefs whose numbers would far exceed those directly chosen by the people. And what – pray tell – is democratic about that?’ (Davis, 2013c). Davis quoted an anonymous ‘friend’ of Ghai who speculated that his ‘emotions may well have got in the way of his better judgment’. Ghai had a ‘distinctly romantic notion about finally being able to resolve the intractable “Fiji Problem”’, according to this friend, and had come to believe that he could be ‘just as big a saviour as Frank Bainimarama’ (Davis, 2013c). According to Davis’ single anonymous source, Ghai was disappointed when he was initially criticised on anti-government blogs as a stooge of the military government and set about correcting that assumption by courting elements known to oppose the regime. Ghai then went over to their side, according to Davis, deciding to ‘go rogue’ and ‘thumb his nose at due process’ (Davis, 2013c). The Ghai draft was rejected out of hand by the regime, which wrote its own constitution that expressly permitted its restrictive decrees, excluded NGOs from the political process, and provided a continuing political role for the military. It then cancelled the Constituent Assembly that had been planned to ratify it (The Economist, 2013).

3. Participant observation

The author also became the subject of by attacks by pro-regime blogs starting in mid-2012 while Head of Journalism at the USP in Suva. In a Radio Australia interview with Hill in April of that year, I corroborated his account of dissent remaining within South Pacific media despite a lack of open conflict at the PINA conference. Davis, who along with the AUT's David Robie had promoted a 'Pacific media at peace' meme following the conference, called the interview 'the biggest crack at revisionism in recent Pacific media history' (Davis, 2012c). His blog entry was reprinted in the *Fiji Sun* and on Walsh's blog, and was the subject of a news story on AUT's Pacific Scoop (2012). 'Our recollections of what took place are so vastly at odds that I wonder if we were on the same planet', he wrote, 'let alone at the same venue in the same country' (Davis, 2012c). The conference was boycotted by numerous delegates because PINA decided to hold it in media-managed Fiji. 'Yes, there were people who stayed away from PINA because it was being held in Fiji', admitted Davis. 'Yes, a breakaway organisation, PasiMA, was formed after the debacle in Vanuatu of mainly Polynesian delegates opposed to Fiji's coup. Yes, one or two delegates . . . made their displeasure felt'.

But for one of the region's most prominent journalistic educators to seek to exacerbate that division when others are trying to build bridges speaks of a man who simply doesn't grasp the subtleties and nuances of island relationships (Davis, 2012c).

In mid-2012, I started a blog called Fiji Media Wars. 'It does seem like a bit of double jeopardy', I blogged about the new TV Decree. 'Not only are TV stations subject to fines for violating the Code of Ethics and to having their journalists thrown in prison, now they can be put out of business as well' (Edge, 2012a). That brought a government complaint to USP, as a result of which I put Fiji Media Wars on hiatus for more than two months after posting only a few entries. In September 2012, I organised a two-day symposium at USP on Media and Democracy in the South

Pacific. On the first day of the event, Davis posted a blog entry which referred to the event as 'Edgefest' and claimed it had caused official consternation across the region. 'Dr Edge caused intense heartburn right from the start as he set about organising this conference', he wrote (Davis, 2012e).

He appears to have set out to be deliberately provocative. In the first draft of the program placed on the USP's internet website, the list of speakers included two journalists formally banned from Fiji. . . . There was also general astonishment when Dr Edge posted the following [Call for Papers] to the conference comparing certain Pacific countries to the repressive regimes in the Middle East that sparked the 'Arab Spring' (Davis, 2012e).

Davis claimed that Fiji, Samoa and Tonga had 'formally complained to the University of the South Pacific. The USP subsequently ordered the posting withdrawn from its website. . . . Unfortunately for the USP, its funding comes from some of the countries Dr Edge appears to be targeting' (Davis, 2012e). Subsequent to the symposium, I revived Fiji Media Wars to discuss some of the issues raised during the event, including journalistic standards and the problem of self-censorship by Fiji journalists working under the Media Decree (Edge, 2012b). Davis then posted a blog entry that claimed I was clinging to my job by my 'fingernails' after 'official protests and open conflict with other academics' during the symposium. 'Grubsheet understands that the USP has triggered formal internal disciplinary proceedings that could lead to the dismissal of the Canadian-born academic. He has evidently been given a formal warning'. It was in an addendum to that blog entry that he admitted what many in the blogosphere had suspected: 'Graham Davis is now a part-time advisor to Qorvis Communications' (Davis, 2012f).

In November 2012 I posted a blog entry which summarized available information about Qorvis Communication. 'The more I learn about these rascals', I wrote, 'the more I suspect that I have been a victim of their back ops' (Edge, 2012c). A

subsequent blog entry questioned Walsh's ethics for accepting a trip to Fiji that was paid for by the regime and designed to provide material for his blog (Edge, 2012d). Another regime complaint to USP demanded that I remove the blog entry about Qorvis. I did so, but I was nonetheless stood down as Head of Journalism by USP administration. I remained at USP as a senior lecturer, however, and both Davis and Walsh repeatedly demanded that I be dismissed. 'The School is said to be irrevocably split between the brainwashed first years who worship Dr Edge and senior students who think he is bordering on the certifiable', wrote Davis, who also complained about a joke I made about Qorvis at the annual USP Journalism awards night. 'He has brought the USP and its journalism school into disrepute and the sooner he departs these shores the better' (Davis, 2012g).

Walsh took umbrage with my criticism of him for taking a trip to Fiji paid for by the regime. 'The problems begin with him accepting what's called a "junket" in the journalism world', I wrote. 'As any first-year journalism student knows (mine certainly do), you will not have any credibility if you do not maintain independence from those you write about' (Edge, 2012d). Walsh claimed the criticism by myself and other bloggers was unwarranted and suggested that my work permit should be cancelled. 'It says much for the tolerance of the government and the university that he is still able to publish partisan polemic exercises on his blog', he wrote. 'Others have their association with the university terminated, and their work permits cancelled, for less' (Walsh, 2012c).

Davis then leaked email correspondence between USP administrators which showed that my remaining at the university was the subject of disagreement among them. He also renewed his calls for my dismissal as a result of an email that I forwarded to

students, which he reprinted and deemed ‘an abuse of office’ on my part. The email was part of a series of satirical missives written by an anonymous author that mocked Davis and Smith Johns and were widely circulated in Fiji. ‘It’s staggering that Dr Edge thinks that it is appropriate for a senior lecturer at USP to pass on this drivel to those he is meant to be schooling in the serious practice of Pacific journalism’, Davis wrote. ‘In our view, he is abusing his office and it’s high time that the USP brings this continuing farce to a halt’. (Davis, 2012g) As a result of these and other pressures placed on the university, I resigned my appointment just before the end of 2012.

After his August 2013 attack on Radio Australia, Davis blogged infrequently and not always on Fiji in the year leading up to the election, which saw Bainimarama returned in a landslide. In a December 2013 blog entry responding to my noting his months-long absence, Davis (2013e) wrote that he had ‘gone quiet primarily because my work is done. . . . Everything that I set out to achieve when I started Grubsheet at the beginning of 2011 and began highlighting the Bainimarama revolution’s achievements has been accomplished’. His absence from the Fiji blogging fray, however, may have instead been the result of a complaint I lodged with SCA CEO Rhys Holleran in mid-2013 about Davis simultaneously acting as a TV news host and a propagandist for a regional dictator.

Conclusions

Fiji suffered international opprobrium in early 2013 when a video surfaced online showing uniformed officers beating and burning with cigarettes two escaped prisoners, on whom they had also set dogs (Siegel, 2013). While not excusing the abuse, Davis (2013d) claimed it was widely supported in Fiji. ‘These individuals are violent, hardened criminals who had escaped from lawful custody and can hardly have expected to be garlanded when they were eventually tracked down’, he wrote. ‘Many

law abiding Fijians actually like being ruled with an iron fist if it means being able to sleep soundly in their beds at night’ (Davis, 2013d). Such abuse was a widespread practice in Fiji, noted Davis. ‘It’s a fair bet that everyone in that clip was raised as a child to expect a “hiding” – the traditional form of discipline in most Fijian homes for even relatively minor infractions. . . . The *buturaki* – the premeditated beating – has always been the traditional method of enforcing order at village level’ (Davis, 2013d).

Political commentary in the U.S. has been likened to a ‘spin cycle’ or ‘echo chamber’ of like-minded pundits repeating and reinforcing pre-determined ‘talking points’ (Kurtz, 1998; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). This case study shows the same phenomenon imported to Fiji. The fact that Qorvis Communications was a U.S.-based public relations was likely not coincidental to the Fiji regime adopting an American-style system of ‘attack’ commentary. A cycle of attacks on regime critics by regime-friendly blogs such as those published by Davis and Walsh was amplified by their frequent reprinting in the pro-regime *Fiji Sun*, not to mention on other blogs and on several websites associated with the AUT. This not only gave their commentary wider circulation but also greater legitimacy. The online treatment of regime critics by pro-government blogs, while typical of Qorvis operations elsewhere in the world, assumed in Fiji a vicious nature not unlike the beatings meted out to pro-democracy advocates and escaped prisoners. This ‘digital *buturaki*’, as with the real-life beatings, served as a form of social, political, media, and even academic control. It proved a powerful deterrent to anyone who would dare to criticize the regime and a key component of its hegemony.

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