

## The Campaign and the News Media

### The Campaign

When we arrived in Fiji Islands the campaign was well under way but we were still able to attend several rallies. In the major cities banners and A4 size candidates' posters were liberally pasted on street furniture, roundabouts, in trees and anywhere else they could be attached. The Suva City Council complained that it was difficult to apprehend people illegally using council property such as lamp-posts for election purposes. There does not appear to have been significant destruction and vandalism directed towards opposition advertising. Vehicles covered in posters and bedecked with party colours, flags and posters were used extensively.

There were no obvious restrictions on parties holding rallies. However we felt that the campaign was subdued. Party representatives and people across the country said that compared to two years earlier the campaigning this time round was not as vigorous. They thought this was due to lack of money and perhaps also because the last campaign was only two years ago. Other people said the lack of large gatherings was partly due to fear following the events of May 2000. The media commented that some parties were spending a lot more money than others. It is not unusual for a government to increase public expenditure in the run-up to an election and there was no exception here.

Voters said that they attended rallies and meetings to hear the candidates' views and also to partake of inducements offered. These included free food, the opportunity to meet leading sports stars and to listen to some of the leading bands in the country. Voters commended agents who, while promoting their parties in the villages and cities, provided information not available elsewhere. We did see some glossy leaflets but there was not much printed party literature distributed, particularly in public places. Manifestos, when they were published were issue orientated and highlighted different concerns to what was reported in the press.

Much of the campaigning was done at the immediate village and community level with agents providing *yaqona*<sup>6</sup> and talking about their candidate. Traditional leaders were consulted for support in the rural areas and for permission to campaign in the villages. In some areas they declared their support for one party and in others they ordered the parties to share campaign sheds.

There were very few reports of campaign violence. We spoke to party representatives and voters across the country and they agreed that it had been a peaceful campaign. The press reported that the police were investigating an incident in which a man was alleged to have been beaten up at a Fiji Labour Party (FLP) rally. A rather more worrying development was the letter we received from the FLP drawing our attention to a leaflet that they characterised as intimidatory. This stated that a vote for Labour was a vote for bloodshed. We sent a copy of this leaflet to Walter Rigamoto, the Supervisor of Elections, and he told us that he had referred the matter to the police.

.....  
*There were very few reports of campaign violence. The Observer Group spoke to party representatives and voters across the country and they agreed that it had been a peaceful campaign*  
.....

<sup>6</sup> The roots of the yaqona plant (*piper methysticum*), popularly known as kava, are ground and mixed with water to make a relaxing drink that is very popular in Fiji Islands.

The campaign was not heavily regulated – essentially it began whenever the parties wished. We noted that there are no regulations covering campaign funding and the Supervisor of Elections told us they had not been needed before.

### Issues Covered in the Campaign

The political parties issued detailed manifestos. Party funded advertisements in the print media were the clearest way of getting a summary of their goals. According to a local economist fulfilling these pledges would cost upwards of F\$70 million, which could raise national debt to unsustainable levels. Some of the manifesto pledges became issues in the campaign; other campaign issues were raised in response to press articles. We noted reports in the press alleging that the Methodist Church was backing the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL). It was noticeable that there was no significant mention of gender issues during the campaign.

**Race:** It was not possible to ignore the issue of race given the history of Fiji Islands. This ugly issue reared its head in the campaign with leaders of two major parties accusing each other of being racist but accepting that if either party won the minimum number of seats stipulated under the Constitution the winner would have to invite them to join the Cabinet. One party leader is alleged to have said India was his motherland and this was seized on by his opponents as evidence that he did not have the interests of Fiji at heart. The refusal of another leader to condemn some racist language used in a document was cited as proof that he shared those opinions. Each party with strong support among the ethnic Fijian community made repeated claims that it was the best party to defend the interests of their race and therefore all ethnic Fijians should vote for them.

.....  
*It was not possible to ignore  
the issue of race given the  
history of Fiji Islands*  
.....

**Campaign financing:** The donation of a large sum of money by a convicted Australian fraudster, Peter Foster, to the New Labour Unity Party (NLUP) was raised in the campaign. Dr Tupeni Baba, the party leader, admitted that his party had received the money but declined to elaborate on how large the donation was. He said it would not affect his party's policies.

Documents purporting to show that the FLP had deposited US\$195,000 in an external bank account were circulated. The FLP leader claimed that these documents were fakes and was supported in his assertion by the manager of the bank where the money was alleged to be. Mr Chaudhry said that he had given the police the names of the people responsible for the incident. Further allegations surfaced that FLP had received F\$160,000 from overseas donors and these were also denied by the party. In order to halt allegations that he had misused money collected overseas the FLP leader revealed that he had received F\$82,394.88 during his overseas trip after his release from Parliament following the coup of May 2000. Later in the campaign Mr Chaudhry called for all parties to file with the Supervisor of Elections a statement of donations received which should be open for public scrutiny. The Supervisor of Elections told us that there was no Code of Conduct for candidates and parties but that this may be considered for future elections.

**Donations made by political parties:** Some parties offered free entertainment and yaqona at their rallies as well as food. The press singled out one party, NLUP, more than the others for its donations of food and rugby



**SPREADING THE WORD . . .**  
 (above and right) campaign posters of various political parties. The Observers stated that “there were very few reports of campaign violence. We spoke to party representatives and voters across the country and they agreed that it had been a peaceful campaign”

balls at rallies. Photographs of the donations of food parcels by the party leader with accompanying articles appeared in the press. The Supervisor of Elections told us that he had written to the Chief of Police to ask if this was an offence under section 130(2) of the Electoral Act.

One FLP candidate promised six-month work visas to poor farmers who wanted to work in New Zealand. According to him the first 40 farmers would leave Fiji before mid-September and they would be able to return with savings of F\$15,000 at the end of six months. Under the proposed scheme 100 farmers would go to New Zealand every six months.

The conversion of an interest free loan to the Fijian Affairs Ministry worth F\$20 million into a grant by the Interim Government was alleged to be an attempt by the SDL to influence ethnic Fijian voters.

**Ownership of land:** The issue of land was frequently brought up in the campaign. The ownership of land, the renewal of leases and the payments being made to previous owners by the government were the main concerns over land. More than 80 per cent of land in Fiji is owned by ethnic Fijians. Some of this is under the control of Indo-Fijians who have 30-year leases, many of which have expired or are close to expiry.

The preamble to the Constitution quotes the Deed of Cession of 1874 under which the High Chiefs of Fiji ceded their country to Great Britain. The proposal to have this Deed recognised by an Act of Parliament under which compensation could be claimed by Fijians for their land and other resources lost through the actions of the state and that of the colonial government was a campaign theme.

One party, NLUP, proposed to pay each landowner F\$33,400 if they renewed tenants’ leases on their land. Another party, the Party of National Unity (PANU), promised landowners who took over their land upon the expiry of leases a payment of cash and assistance worth F\$20,000. The same party said it would pay F\$28,000 to the evicted farmers for resettlement and it wanted land sold under duress or through ignorance during the colonial period to be returned to ethnic Fijians. The Girit Heritage Party wanted the new government to give each displaced farmer up to F\$60,000.

The proposed payment by the Caretaker Government to the Fijian community that owned part of the land on which Nadi Airport was built was covered in the press. Shortly before the election the press disclosed that the amount to be paid was F\$1.1 million for the 434 acres. The Government, under a compulsory purchase order in 1944 for £7,985, had bought the land for the public purpose of establishing an aerodrome. Part of it was not being used for that purpose and was returned to the community in 1999 and this payment was supposed to be for goodwill for government use of this land between 1979 and 1999. According to a senior government spokesman, because the land was not being used for the original purpose for which it was acquired the validity of the previous landowners' claims had been considered. There are duty free shops and other commercial enterprises on the land. The press alleged that this was a vote-buying exercise. The Caretaker Government said it was a long-standing grievance that had not been resolved previously and the community that owned the land stated that their compensation claim had been considered and partly approved by the Rabuka government and then endorsed by the Chaudhry government. The execution of the payment was delayed by further legal wrangles and a court decision was not expected to be effected before November 2001.

**Constitutional changes:** The SDL said it wanted to change the Constitution to increase the number of communal seats reserved for ethnic Fijians and to repeal the Agricultural Landlord Tenants Act (ALTA), which governs the terms for the use of land.

A proposal to reconstitute the Senate so that its membership was the Great Council of Chiefs was made by several political parties.

**Misuse of government funds and property:** Several parties and newspapers highlighted what they termed to be the misuse of F\$9 million from the Ministry of Agriculture's Agricultural Assistance Scheme. Examples of alleged abuses included the donation of outboard motors, farming implements, generators and fishing implements purchased under the scheme and given to voters. Some parties alleged that the merchants supplying these goods were funding the SDL campaign. The Caretaker Government set up a committee to inquire into how the funds were spent. The results of this were not available at the time of writing this Report.

The press reported that some candidates were using vehicles owned by the state, through the Fijian Affairs Ministry. In their defence the candidates said that in their capacity as traditional Chiefs they were entitled to use these vehicles.

**The ruling on the application of Value Added Tax (VAT):** According to the Caretaker Government, Value Added Tax was reintroduced on tinned fish, flour, powdered milk, edible oil, rice and tea in 2000 to make up for revenue decreases elsewhere. Two days before voting started, a High Court judge ruled that the Caretaker Government had no authority to reintroduce VAT on these items after the deposed FLP-led government had removed it. The FLP welcomed this decision while the Caretaker Prime Minister said that the decision was politically motivated. The Chief Justice was reported as saying that the delivery of the judgment was badly timed.

## The News Media

.....  
*There is a vibrant media sector in Fiji Islands with radio and television stations as well as daily newspapers and a small number of news based websites*  
.....

There is a vibrant media sector in Fiji Islands with radio and television stations as well as daily newspapers and a small number of news based websites. Radio, the main means of information dissemination, reaches the whole country. The print media is largely restricted to the larger urban areas due to logistical challenges and commercial considerations. Television has a greater reach than the print media. Some of the popular election news websites receive up to 10,000 visitors daily and are an important news source for people with an interest in Fiji Islands who are outside the country. There is no censorship over what the media can report. However the media tries to respect the cultural sensitivities of the country's communities.

### Overview of the Media – Radio

There are two radio broadcasters – the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), which operates five stations, and the privately owned Communications Fiji Limited, which operates three stations. Both broadcasters have separate stations that broadcast only in one language: English, Fijian or Hindi. The privately owned stations reach only the main towns and cities in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

The Fiji Broadcasting Corporation commenced operations in 1954 and has been operating as a corporation for four years. Its shareholding is equally split between the Ministry of Public Enterprise and the Ministry of Finance but the Ministry of Information is responsible for its line management. The Corporation is governed by the Broadcasting Act (1954) and, since corporatisation, by the Companies Act and the Public Enterprise Act. There are some contradictory provisions in these Acts such as the need for disclosure as a broadcaster and the privacy of information as a corporate company. The policy for the FBC is set by a seven-person board of directors appointed by the Minister of Public Enterprise. The Chief Executive Officer of the FBC is an *ex officio* board member.

The Corporation's stations cover the whole country. Radio Fiji One and Radio Fiji Two are operated as public service broadcasters and are funded by a grant from government while Bula 102 FM, Bula 100 FM and Bula 98 FM are run as commercial stations with their costs being met by advertising revenue. The stations broadcast in the following languages: Radio Fiji One – Fijian; Radio Fiji Two – Hindi; Bula 102 FM – Fijian; Bula 100 FM – English; Bula 98 FM – Hindi.

Communications Fiji Limited is a publicly owned company whose shareholders include businessmen, an insurance company and Fijian Holdings. It broadcasts in English on FM96, in Hindi on the Navtarang station and in Fijian on Viti FM. All the stations carry music based programmes and hourly news.

### Overview of the Media – Television

The publicly owned Fiji Television commenced operations in 1994 and has a monopoly in this medium. The majority shareholder with 51 per cent is Yasana Holdings, which is owned by the 14 provinces or *tikinas*, with the balance being held by the public. The Board of Directors determines

operating policy and it is run as a regular business without any interference from the shareholders.

## Overview of the Media – Print

- The *Fiji Times*: This daily newspaper is part of the News International group. The *Fiji Times* is an English language newspaper while its sister papers *Shanti Dut*, published in Hindi, and *Nai Lalakai*, published in Fijian, are weekly.
- The *Fiji Sun*: This daily is owned by two businessmen with extensive interests and Fijian Holdings. Fijian Holdings was established in 1984 and now has a majority shareholding of 76 per cent owned by 654 individuals with the balance being held by groups. These consist of the 14 provincial councils, village councils and family companies. The estimated value of Fijian Holdings is F\$200 million.
- The *Daily Post*: This daily is owned by Fijian Holdings and the government.

## The Role of the Media in the Campaign

**Regulations covering the media:** The Media Council meets once a month and regulates the press in Fiji Islands. There is also an adjudication panel, whose members are not on the Media Council. This meets when required to judge complaints against the media. The media adhered to a self-imposed code that they would not feature interviews with party representatives from the day before voting until the voting was over.

**Overview:** The media played a considerable role in covering the electoral process. It is not possible to single out any particular broadcasting station or newspaper for more commendation than the others. The newspapers gave background analyses on the run-up to the current political situation and their editorials constantly urged all the participants in the electoral process to move beyond ethnic divisions. During the voting and counting the media always sought interviews with us and were constantly present at the poll and the count to break the news.

There is no Code of Conduct for election coverage by the media, but they played an extensive and commendable role in educating the public about the electoral process. Our overall perception is that the media had been reasonably balanced in the coverage of the election and the issues that surrounded it. Sometimes they bought into the arguments between various candidates. But this does not, in our opinion, appear to have been prejudicial to any particular candidate or party.

The media made an effort to keep race out of their campaign coverage but they told us that it was a major issue in election meetings or rallies. According to them it could take at least a generation to heal the wounds caused by the 1987 coups.

Some voters (primarily though not necessarily Indo-Fijians) felt that media coverage had been biased against Mr Chaudhry, the leader of the FLP. This was attributed to an alleged fear of another Indo-Fijian led government and also perceived bias against the Western Division, particularly by the main newspapers which are printed in the Eastern Division, in Suva. We did not personally see this and the newspapers say this is a long-standing perception that is exploited as a campaign tool by some politicians.

.....  
*The media played a considerable role in covering the electoral process*  
.....

.....  
*It was noticeable that certain parties had better access to funding and were utilising the media to get their message across through paid advertising*  
.....

It was noticeable that certain parties had better access to funding and were utilising the media to get their message across through paid advertising. This potentially distorted the playing field but the overall impact of this on the election is difficult to measure. Certain individuals and candidates used the media to pursue personal issues with other candidates.

**Radio:** The Fiji Broadcasting Corporation has an advertising and editorial policy that covers political and party election broadcasts. The policy, drawn up in August 1998, was also used to govern broadcasts for the 1999 election. The policy states that broadcasts must fulfil four fundamentals, namely “fairness, independence, reliability and sensitivity”. The policy also states that FBC is “empowered to determine for itself to what extent and in what manner political matters will be broadcast. The Company will not allow external forces to influence political and election broadcasts.” According to the FBC, during this election it did not receive any complaints from the parties about its programmes.

Once the election was declared the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation wrote to the political parties inviting them to participate in a series of special election programming. All political parties participated in these programmes, which were broadcast mainly on Radio Fiji One and Radio Fiji Two. The main programmes were *Meet the People*, where candidates were interviewed by a studio audience from their constituency; *Talking Point*, where the presenter questioned the candidates about their party manifestos; *One on One*, where controversial politicians were questioned on their views; *Talk Back*, where party leaders participated in live phone-ins; and *Candidate Profiles*. With the exception of *Talking Point* similar programmes were broadcast during the 1999 election. In addition there were hourly bulletins on all five stations and these featured news about the electoral process. Paid political advertisements were broadcast as well as Electoral Commission funded civic education programmes. The Fijian and Hindi editions of the programmes on the method of voting were repeatedly broadcast on the appropriate language services.

**Television:** Fiji Television broadcast advertisements paid for by the political parties. Many of these were at prime time. Two days before voting commenced the station broadcast *Leaders Forum*, an unprecedented two-hour live debate between leaders of the seven political parties fielding more than 15 candidates in the election.

The comments made by the politicians on the programmes were printed in the newspapers the following day. Several parties that contested the election were new to the political process and due to the proliferation in parties not all of the leaders could be selected. Voters we spoke to said they found this debate useful, but they would have preferred to have several such debates. One criticism of the programme was that the parties that had a lot of support among the Fijian communities in Ba and Tailevu were not featured.

In addition to this unprecedented live debate Fiji Television offered each party three 10-minute slots for airing party promotional material. This proved popular with the parties, with only five not taking up the offer. The station’s two regular current affairs programmes, *Close Up*, broadcast in English, and *Talanoa*, broadcast in Fijian, had increased election coverage in the run-up to the polls.

**The Print Media:** The three main newspaper groups covered the campaign and election regularly and thoroughly. Their language was measured and, in our opinion, their coverage was balanced. On occasion, however, their reports

were inaccurate and stories sometimes had unattributed sources and headings that had nothing to do with the articles. In addition to their coverage the papers also printed political party advertisements, the frequency and size of which increased as the start of voting approached. These advertisements featured famous sports stars, quotes from famous leaders, criticism of other parties' policies, responses to allegations made by opponents and excerpts from manifestos. In addition to the advertisements, the press published supplements that encouraged women to vote.

The print media published civic education advertisements, paid for by the Electoral Commission. These included full-page application forms for voting by postal ballot and how to vote, i.e. above the line and below the line.

There are no provisions that the newspapers have to declare who paid for advertisements. One advertisement printed in a newspaper featured a report printed in the *Fiji Times* more than 20 years ago, about a fatal hit and run accident involving the FLP leader. The political affiliation of the person that paid for this advertisement was not published along with the advertisement.

The general advertising policy for the newspapers was to decline advertisements that were obviously distasteful and not to publish political advertisements once voting commenced. All advertisements were paid for before publication, including those by the Electoral Commission to educate the population on the voting and counting procedures. The papers tried to cover as many rallies by all parties as possible and to avoid personal attacks.

More than a month before voting started they increased their editorial space to cover civic education. Special supplements educating people on the voting method, the candidates and their constituencies and the policies of the parties were published. Some editorial staff received complaints from all the parties about their coverage which, according to them, means that they were achieving balanced coverage. None of these were formal written complaints, but rather telephone calls.