

Commerce and Confusion: Reporting the 2018 Fiji Election Results

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In Brief 2018/28

Elections provide extensive commercial opportunities. Campaign material including banners; articles of clothing; advertising in newspapers and on television, radio and electronic media; transportation and providing food at rallies — all these open spaces for firms and individuals to benefit commercially from what have become the signal events of capitalist democracy.

The November 2018 election in Fiji was no different, except in one major aspect: the Fijian Elections Office (FEO) introduced a further note of competition into the commercial sphere by using a major international firm, Facebook to announce results as well as the locally produced television and radio programs.

This In Brief explores one consequence of the innovation, not simply instances of what is now known as ‘fake news’ (*Fiji Sun* 16/11/2018) that resulted in confusion which in turn opened space for rumour-mongering and allegations of election rigging in favour of the successful FijiFirst party. Allegations regarding the forthcoming election had been prominent for months before the poll was held. The way results were reported added to existing doubts. Confidence in the accuracy of vote counts is important to political stability anywhere, but especially in Fiji, where the election was only the second election held after a long period of military government following the 2006 coup.

Under the process required by Fiji’s electoral law, votes were initially tallied at places where voting occurred. These tallies were submitted to the central FEO location in Suva by telephone when most of the voting finished at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, November 14. Votes were then aggregated by party and candidates. Election information was provided as provisional results to be published and broadcast by the various media, including radio, Facebook, newspapers and Fiji’s two television stations, Fiji One and Fiji Broadcasting Corporation. Both television stations initially showed poll results during the broadcast of normal programs by means of

sidebars. Results were also broadcast at different intervals in news reports. FEO also developed an application that enabled up-to-date information to be downloaded on smart phones. The immediacy of Facebook, with its considerable reach in a country where a substantial majority of the population has regular access to tablets and smart phones, meant that results invariably appeared in this format before they appeared on television, and were also updated more often and faster.

The initial aggregation of votes cast represented provisional results from only 1715 of a total of 2173 polling locations. Partly this was because some polling stations did not report before tallying of provisional results ended on the Wednesday evening while voting at some other polling stations was suspended because of inclement weather.

At that point it was obvious that voter numbers were well down on the 2014 turnout. Although FijiFirst and Prime Minister Bainimarama were in front, significant changes occurred in the votes cast. Both the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) and the National Federation Party (NFP) were polling above the votes received at the previous election, while FijiFirst had lost ground. No party had attained more than 50 per cent of the votes cast.

At this point FEO made its first major mistake: no statement was provided about which votes were not yet included so it was impossible to assess the significance of the substantial reduction in the difference between votes obtained by FijiFirst and SODELPA. Again unlike the 2014 election, neither television station had a panel of commentators with expertise in elections who could interpret the possible implications of the important missing information (MacWilliam 2016:222–23). Whether this absence resulted from an atmosphere that restricted the expression of opinions or from other factors, including the loss of advertising revenue, is unknown to the author of this In Brief. However, this deficiency would recur for the remainder of the election results period — people simply did not know what the effect of votes not yet tallied might be.

As ballot boxes were received, counted and recorded at the central FEO location, this information was provided to the media as a final result rather than a recount as it was variously described. While television stations continued their normal programming — a Bollywood special here, a religious documentary there — they continued to run earlier provisional results in top-, side- and bottom-bar format throughout Thursday and into Friday.

As final count figures became available, Facebook provided continuous updates that initially suggested a close contest between FijiFirst and the SODELPA-NFP alliance, with no party as yet gaining over 50% of the vote. At this moment rumours began to flourish, as the final count in progress and posted via Facebook appeared to suggest at least uncertainty over the relative position of the parties. Once again, the absence of any commentary from FEO or on the different media outlets, which might have explained the significance of changes as votes from distinct parts of Fiji were counted — fuelled confusion among the population not attuned to such matters, but simply relying on what they were obtaining via social media. Immediacy began to have a price.

As counting continued through 16 November, two days after the poll had closed, near-final count figures appeared on Facebook. These figures seemed to confirm what the provisional results had suggested — a victory for FijiFirst, but with a reduced majority, down from 32 seats out of 50 to 27 seats in an enlarged chamber of 51. Once again, television channels carried 'old news' for much of Friday and even into Saturday. Screens superimposed over various regular programs showed out-of-date results. Again, no clarifications were provided, while television news reports muddied the waters even further. Viewers began to ask what had happened to the reduced gap between FijiFirst and SODELPA shown on Facebook. At the same time, four parties lodged complaints with FEO, demanding recounts of votes even before the first official final count was completed or voting at weather-affected stations was carried out. Social media flourished in the gaps created by the confusion (*Fiji Sun* 16/11/2018).

In these circumstances, the Multinational Observer Group's initial all clear did little to quell suspicions (*Fiji Times* 17/11/2018). Rumours multiplied when members of the overseas group had limited linguistic skills, little experience or detailed knowledge of Fiji and did not supervise the transportation of votes from polling stations to the central tally room. The absence of vital information, including on the turnout by administrative and/or geographic divisions, on FEO's Facebook page, even as this In Brief is being written (almost a week after the election), is unlikely to ease suspicions, even if many of these are based

upon misunderstanding and lack of information rather than fraud and vote rigging.

What occurred in the reporting of the 2018 Fiji election cannot be explained in terms of nationalistic sentiment ('multinational bad, local good'), vote rigging, corruption or censorship by an authoritarian regime. The contest between different forms of media created confusion and uncertainty. FEO's reporting of results without the appropriate clarifications in the most up-to-date electronic formats as well as in the 'old media' — principally radio and television — created space for deliberate misrepresentation, rumour and innuendo. In this case, the media produced not one message, but several.

Author notes

Scott MacWilliam became a Visiting Fellow in SSGM, subsequently the Department of Pacific Affairs, from July 2012. He researches and writes on a wide range of development topics and countries, including Papua New Guinea and Fiji in the south-west Pacific. His most recent research is on the 2018 Fiji election, for which this In Brief is the first of three intended essays.

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