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sites. It is simple, often simplistic, direct and confrontational, full of passion and erupting anger. But it is all short-lived. The need to express their opinion satisfied, people move on. Another day, another topic, another set of responses.

I brought the wrath of the cyberspace warriors upon myself with some comments I was invited to make on a Radio Fiji news program, which was published, without my permission, on *fijilive*. Before I knew it, my views were carried by the major newswire services reporting on or from Fiji. Comments made in a telephone interview, taken out of context, became a major news item. That is the nature of the beast, I realise. We live in a borderless world.

I am not a 'media tart,' to use a popular Australian characterisation of Queensland premier Peter Beattie. Most academics are not. In fact, most exhibit an instinctive aversion to media exposure and to the sound bites that reduce complex issues to simple declarations without nuance, qualification or shaded meanings. But I have not been able to escape the media ever since serving on the commission to review the Fijian constitution a decade ago. Since then, I have been hounded for comment and analysis on Fiji politics. It is an obligation and a responsibility I cannot avoid, although fulfilling them while doing intense scholarly work unrelated to the field of Fijian politics does take its toll.

The unfolding events since the December 2006 coup have been the source of much confusion among the public, and the media has understandably sought comment and clarification from experts and others intimately associated with events in Fiji. For many in Fiji, I am in that category. My views were sought on a number of issues. One important issue facing Fiji was the threat of sanctions from the European Union if Fiji did not honour its undertaking to hold parliamentary elections before the mutually agreed date of March 2009. Will elections be held by that date, I was asked. My response was no, or very unlikely. If elections were held in that time frame, Laisenia Qarase's party would be returned to power with a thumping Fijian majority, an outcome totally unpalatable to the military and to the Interim Administration. Moreover, Commodore Bainimarama has promised not to relinquish power until his so-called 'Clean Up Campaign' is completed and the President's Rawled Mandate achieved. The Fiji Labour Party which is part of the Interim Administration, has endorsed that position.

What about the constitutionality of the President's Mandate, I am asked. My response is forthright. The President has no mandate to give in the first instance. In the Westminster system adopted in Fiji, the executive acts on the advice of the elected government. His powers are carefully circumscribed in the constitution. If the President has one important responsibility after he has assumed executive power in a situation of emergency when the



Caught in the Web Public Discourse in the Age of Electronic Communication

Brij V. Lal

Visit the *fijilive* website of 20 and 21 August and you will find the following animated and often acrimonious posts on me. One says that 'Dr Brij Lal is a man of the past. He is no longer relevant. He is one person who should be blamed for giving Fiji a lousy Constitution which is race-based.' Another says that 'Brij Lal was an architect of a constitution that has made a mockery of Fiji legal rights. Brij Lal is a scholar who is still in a colonial country. Can he live in Fiji under this Constitution? No. He is frightened for his life and that of his family.' A person who identifies himself simply as Sharma adds that 'It's time for Brij Lal to shut up. His comments are of no value to the current govt. Commodore Bainimarama has people much expert-ended in his team to clean up Fiji and make it a better nation for all people of Fiji.' For Vikash Ram, 'Only people living and working in Fiji should have a deeper say in its governance not people living abroad and working overseas who used to call Fiji home. It's easy to say many things from a distance.' Tui Viti says that since I have no interest in Fiji, I should not be allowed back in to Fiji!

On the other side of the divide are these. From Emosi: 'I think Dr Lal is right. Let truth and justice prevail. No one is above the law.' From Some One Away, 'Finally someone is willing to stand up and tell the truth! Dr Lal, Fiji needs more people like you.' Finau Mere adds: 'Get them to face the consequences. Brij, thank you for your contribution. It is valued by the majority who dislike the illegal behaviour we the people of Fiji are victims of.' Finally, Diana Mogolaki says, 'I am not surprised about the comments on Dr Brij Lal because these are the same people who condemn the previous coups and they see it fit to embarrass [embrace] this 2006 coup because it suits them and their agendas. All coups are wrong whether it suits you or not. They must be condemned and held accountable to the law.'

I have reproduced the comments generously to give the reader a sense of the tone and temperature of the responses one normally finds on Fiji web-

tunistic, converts to democracy. In 2000, they were safely and quite publicly ensconced in the George Speight camp. They welcome any support they can get from whatever source.

The battle in the cyberspace broadly divided into these two diametrically opposed camps. There is no concession to the opponent's viewpoint, no admission of doubt. There is no common ground. Privately, individuals may concede a point or two. Some may say they approve the outcome but not the method used to achieve it. Yet others may concede that, in hindsight, certain policies of the deposed government might have been misconceived or misguided, but to admit it publicly in the heat of the battlefield is to concede ground: a risky proposition.

Then there is the related matter of who should be 'allowed' to comment on the current affairs of Fiji. Many feel that outsiders should refrain, or be forced to refrain, from commenting on public matters; they left the country, their commitment to Fiji is suspect, and they want to have the best of both worlds. Most of those who espouse this position are on the side of the Interim Administration. The irony is that these very people were among the most vocal, seeking outside intervention at the time of the previous coups. On the other hand are those, like the members and supporters of the deposed government, who are more interested in the message, not the place of residence of the messenger.

The anti-foreign angst is understandable. Foreign commentators with little commitment to principle or place can wreak havoc without bearing any responsibility for their actions or utterances. Their loyalty to their place of birth is suspected, their motives questioned. Having spent my entire professional life working on Fiji in a range of capacities, including as member of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission whose report forms the basis of Fiji's barely-surviving 1997 Constitution, I cannot, nor should, be counted in that category. But foreign voices cannot be shut out. Nor should they be.

There was a time when physical boundaries were real, when ideas travelled slowly, and when it was possible to control or restrict access to unpalatable information. That was the case in 1987, for instance, when the military could ban the publication of newspapers and shut down communication with the outside world. The world of communication has been revolutionised since then. It has become a much more porous place now. National boundaries can be crossed with the click of the button and cherished sovereignty breached in myriad ways.

The internet is a great leveler of hierarchy. Anyone who has access to a computer can roam the world for information. Chat sites enable free, open and anonymous dialogue in the cyberspace. Personal blogs post information which may not find its way into the mainstream media, and often does not, because its source cannot be verified or because the material is inflammatory

elected government is unable to discharge its responsibilities, it is to return the deposed government to power as expeditiously as possible. He cannot use his 'reserved' powers to authorise an extra-constitutional rule for an unspecified period of time.

I am asked about the purported suspension of the Great Council of Chiefs. The GCC, I respond, is a constitutionally recognized body, and it cannot be suspended, as an institution, so long as the constitution is still in place. Its membership can be reviewed, but that is a secondary matter. What are my views about the Interim Administration's view that the GCC is an 'arm of the government,' as Fijian Affairs Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau asserts. That it is not, nor should it be. Instead, the GCC should have as much fiscal and administrative autonomy as possible so that it can become, as it wants to, the guardian of the national and not only Fijian interests.

And so it went. These comments, offered within the span of a few days, invited the above comments.

What do they tell us about the current state of affairs in Fiji and about wider trends in public communication in the electronic age? There are several things to note. The comments come from those with access to the internet. I suspect they are the professional types (civil servants, people in private employment), and so their views may not necessarily be representative of a wider cross section of the public opinion. But for the purposes of this essay, let us assume they are. We don't know whether the cyberspace warriors live in Fiji or abroad. Cyberspace has no precise physical location, no singular identity. That is its strength as well as its limitation.

Clearly opinion is divided. There are, on the one hand, those who wish Fiji to be left alone to manage its affairs without external interference. They quietly support the coup, or at least its stated aims. 'Give chance to the army to do something which never happened. Things will be better for Fiji,' says one writer (Anand). It is a view shared by a significant section of the community, especially by those who were victims of the Qarase government's racism, motivated affirmatively action and other discriminatory policies. They resent any suggestion that the prospects might not be as bright as they hope, that the road ahead might be rockier than anyone expects. If things are not going to be as rosy, they don't want to know. Their mind is made up; it is no use confusing them with facts. Nothing is rotten in the State of Denmark.

On the other side of the divide are those for whom a military coup against a democratically elected government is unacceptable at any cost, a heinous crime. This view is expressed by many (but by no means all) academics and public intellectuals, human rights activists, lawyers and, of course, members and supporters of the deposed Qarase government. Mere Samisoni is prominent in the newspapers, and Rewa chief Ro Teimumu Kepa is shouting for democracy from the sidelines. There are many recent, oppor-

for a country. It breaches principles and values which humanity has embraced and for which people in their millions over the centuries have sacrificed their lives. There are certain principles worth defending anywhere, anytime. If the world had remained silent about apartheid in South Africa, to take only one example, that abhorrent regime might still be in place. Indigeneity or national sovereignty should never be allowed to kill genuine debate about issues of concern to all humanity.

In Fiji's case, there is a further consideration. Now, remittance from Fiji's former citizens and workers living in foreign countries is one of the largest sources of national income, exceeding that of sugar and gold and timber, and matching the income from tourism. As emigration continues, as it will without doubt do, the importance of this source of much needed revenue will increase. It seems hypocritical to seek financial support from abroad but deny its former citizens the right to express an opinion on the ongoing events in the country. The Interim Administration in Fiji wants the international community to assist in rehabilitating the country to parliamentary democracy, but bristles when it is asked to specify a time frame within which that process will take place. It breaches international conventions and condones treason, but then condemns its neighbours for their principled stance against its actions.

The internet facilitates unmediated a free flow of information. It is free-for-all in the cyberspace. Misinformation or simply blatant errors of fact get broadcast and people's characters get maligned, their reputations impugned. Briji Lal should be blamed for giving Fiji a race-based constitution, says a correspondent. Briji Lal was the architect of a constitution that makes a mockery of Fiji's legal rights, says another. Comments like these appear regularly on many web and chat sites, often stated as incontestable, self-evident facts. Unconnected, they assume the mantle of truth.

Although flattering to the ego, I am not 'the' architect of the constitution as critics assert. I was one among several who contributed ideas that went into the report which then formed the basis of Fiji's constitution. My fellow commissioners, Sir Paul Reeves and the late Tomasi Vakatora, contributed as much, if not more, than I did. It is hurtful that their contribution is demeaned and devalued for the sole purpose of attacking me. The actual constitution was drafted by a select committee of the Fijian parliament and it was endorsed unanimously by the Great Council of Chiefs. To lay the blame for the constitution's alleged failures at my door is manifestly unfair, not to say mischievous. How does the constitution make a mockery of Fiji's legal rights? This assertion makes no sense to me, and yet it gets published and circulated in the name of free speech. I am blamed for Fiji's race-based constitution whereas, in fact, I have been a public critic of this aspect of the constitution. I firmly

of defamatory. Newspapers have their own online reader-response sites which enable instantaneous reaction to breaking news. This feature was in its infancy in 2000, but is a regular fare seven years later. When technology now facilitates instantaneous access to information world-wide and transports information across national boundaries with unimaginable speed, should it really matter where the writer lives? What I write in Canberra can be posted on any website anywhere in the world and openly available to anyone except those without access to the computer.

Location and residence aside, opponents of 'free speech' invoke other spurious grounds for limiting commentary. Some invoke the archaic, almost sophistic notion that disciplinary qualification is necessary for commenting on contemporary events. In this view, a historian should remain the domain of political scientists and constitutional lawyers. I say archaic because the notion, in these post-modern times, of artificial disciplinary boundaries limiting or constricting the expression of human thought is too naive to require comment. The thrust of contemporary intellectual life is the transgression of boundaries. No one dismisses Naom Chomsky's critique of American foreign policy because he is a trained linguist, or Edward Said's advocacy of Palestinian issues because he was a professor of English and comparative literature. EP Thompson was a great Marxist historian who played a pivotal role in the disarmament debate in Europe. I am no Chomsky, Said or Thompson, but the principle is the same.

Then there are those who seek to restrict comment on cultural grounds. A 'non-native' should have no business commenting on 'native' affairs. I accept some limitations within bounds, but reject the authority of self-appointed gatekeepers to determine the limits and limitations of debate. Readers of this journal will recall the controversy it generated over its name when it was first launched. Some Fijian nationalists argued that it was an inappropriate expression of the name Fijian, which they contended belonged, and should belong, solely to the indigenous community. I am glad the publisher persisted. Nor should we accept ethnic groups and categories as homogeneous entities. They are intersected in various ways that defy simple categorisation. And then there is a larger question which must be asked: What becomes of a person's human right to comment on issues pertaining to other nationalities or ethnic groups? Why shouldn't western feminists be allowed to comment on issues of concern to their third world counterparts? The horrors of Rwanda, Cambodia or Kosovo are not 'national' problems but blot on the conscience of humanity.

My own position is clear. There are issues that transcend national boundaries about which we cannot remain silent. A military coup against a democratically elected government is never, in my books, an 'internal matter'

believe, as the Reeves Commission recommended, that Fiji needs to move away from its race-based politics to embrace a non-racial future. To that end, the Commission recommended that two thirds of the seats in parliament should be contested on an open, non-racial basis and one third on a racially-reserved basis but only for a period of time before being abolished. The parliament reversed our recommendation. So the politicians, and not Briji Lal, should be held responsible for the constitution's racially orientated electoral system.

In a more conventional forum, such as a book or a journal article, I would have the opportunity to present a considered response. But this is not possible when dealing with the cyberspace. The window of opportunity is limited to a day or two at most. Then, discussion moves to other current topics of the day and interest in the controversy is lost. It has been suggested that I should have a website of my own to publish my ideas and respond to debates. But I have neither the time nor the skill nor, to be perfectly honest, the taste for this. I am a product of my time and age whose facility and fascination with technology is limited.

Uncorrected and unrefuted, the internet exchanges are archived, though for how long and in what condition it is difficult to say. What use or sense will future researchers make of the mass of conflicting, controversial information? How will the history of the present be written fifty years hence? In the past or even at present, historians could look to the archives for traces of the past in documents. But under-funded and poorly resourced, many archives are simply unable to perform their essential function of preserving records. Certainly, they are unequipped to archive electronic information, which includes much of the cyberspace material. The transitory nature of electronic data is a source of concern as is the publication of material of dubious veracity.

The public expects responsibility and a degree of accountability from its public intellectuals. But do those cyber hosts who broadcast information of the type I have mentioned have a responsibility too, especially to those who are the targets of venomous but anonymous criticism? I have been accused on a website of running a Fijian Studies Department at the Australian National University whose intention is to dispossess indigenous Fijians of their cultural identity. I was alerted to this post long after it had appeared on the website. The damage was done; there was nothing I could do to remedy the situation. Should the host have demanded verification from the writer, or asked me for a response? On another website, my professional work was being discredited by a former academic with hardly any publication. I was being called names, challenged on this point or that, and I was not even aware of what was going on. I accept that a cyber host has a responsibility to broadcast information and comment freely, but he or she also has the responsibility

to protect the reputation of innocent parties caught in the cyberspace cross-fire. At the very least, the identity and purpose of the websites should be clearly labelled so that readers are made aware of their true function. A gossip site should be clearly differentiated from a site for scholarly exchange of views.

What, finally, should be the role of public intellectuals at a time of grave crisis, such as that facing Fiji at the moment? Should they accept the strictures imposed on them on the basis of gender, ethnicity or place of residence and refrain from commenting on contemporary political events? My firm answer is no. Put simply, it is the message that is important, not the identity of the messenger. Killing the messenger will not make the problem disappear. This is so self-evident yet so overlooked.

Further, whatever else may be the case, the reality of globalisation must be confronted. As I have said many times before, Fiji is an island, but an island in the physical sense alone. Fiji cannot breach international norms of human rights and expect to escape with impunity. A military coup against a democratically elected government cannot be an internal matter for a country, as I have already said, just as genocide and other heinous crimes against humanity are not. Any breach of international norms will bring with it retribution. If Fiji does not hold elections before a stipulated date, March 2009, the European Union will withhold the much needed funds for the re-structure of the country's ailing sugar industry. This is the truth, whether it is spoken from Canberra or Korovou.

Public intellectuals not only have a right but, perhaps more important, a moral and ethical responsibility to speak up when guns curtail the freedom of speech and induce a sense of self-censorship among citizens. They should do so with sensitivity and care, but without fear or favour. We must be true to our calling. We should freely transgress the increasingly porous boundaries of academic disciplines and the nation-state, not bow to the strictures they impose and demands they make. We should be the voice of the oppressed and the voiceless. Nothing human should be alien to us.

Acknowledgement

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