

Pacific media freedom: an update

by Amanda H A Watson and Shailendra B. Singh

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Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka being interviewed by a national media outlet

Photo Credit: Fiji Times

This is a further instalment in the [Pacific Family Matters series](#).

Media freedom is a crucial element of a functioning democracy. In the Pacific Islands region, media freedom levels differ. This post analyses the latest media freedom rankings for Pacific nations and suggests two ways the re-elected Albanese government could add to its support for the Pacific media sector.

In May every year, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [updates the rankings](#) of 180 countries with respect to their media freedom levels. The [latest figures](#) reveal that the four Pacific Island countries included are situated in the top half of the rankings. Of the four, [Fiji](#) performed the best in 2025, followed by [Samoa](#) and [Tonga](#). Papua New Guinea's ranking is [well below](#) those of the other three Pacific countries included in the index.

Much has been made of Fiji's [improved ranking](#) following [the repeal](#) in 2023 of the punitive 2010 Media Industry Development Act, which was [widely regarded](#) as the harshest media law in the region. While RSF rankings since then signal progress, underlying threats to media freedom are not reflected.

United Nations representative Hieke Alefsen recently described [the repeal of the media act](#) as a “critical turning point” but emphasised that legal reforms must continue in Fiji, especially regarding [sedition laws](#), under which news executives were prosecuted in 2017.

Indeed, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, while assuring the media that the dark days of oppression are over, has [also noted](#) that “with our recent history, let us not take this freedom for granted”.

Samoa is not far behind Fiji in RSF's index. Quality print outlets are said to [provide a solid foundation](#) for Samoa's diverse media sector. Media freedom in Samoa [faces challenges](#) and there are concerns that [recent online harassment](#) of journalists could dent the public's faith in the news media.

Tonga sits just two places behind Samoa on RSF's index. Legislation **restricts media freedom** in Tonga, even though it is **enshrined in the constitution**. The law, **passed in 2020**, is viewed as **being detrimental** for media freedom, although **the government denies** this is the case.

The Tongan government is a **key source** of advertising revenue for media businesses in Tonga. Indeed, media outlets in many small Pacific states have a similar reliance on their governments for such income. When three Tongan broadcasters **were suspended** from their jobs in 2020, **accused of bias** against the government, the incident **spread fear** among journalists and demonstrated the challenges media workers can experience.

In Papua New Guinea, media freedom has been considered to be “**reasonably healthy**” but vulnerable. Last year, Papua New Guinea's RSF ranking **dropped** substantially after a draft **media policy** was announced. The first version raised a **great deal of concern** about its negative implications for media freedom, **with comparisons** made to Fiji's now-repealed law. Following a consultation process, the fifth version of **the policy** was approved **by cabinet** in January this year.

Concerns remain about what regulation of the media sector could mean for media freedom in Papua New Guinea. The country's RSF ranking is worrying. And in March 2025, the PNG government took the unprecedented step of **shutting down Facebook** for a day, nationwide. Even so, PNG is well above the poorest performing countries, which include Myanmar, Afghanistan, Iran, China and North Korea.

Most Pacific Island countries are not included in RSF's index. A valuable resource that addresses this gap is the **Pacific Islands Media Freedom Index**, launched last year. **The index** includes 14 countries. The criteria for ranking countries bear some similarities to RSF's, although a gender category has been added in an attempt to take into account **the challenges** faced by female journalists.

The Pacific index draws on the perspectives of media professionals working in Pacific Island countries. Of the 14 countries included, the top two are Palau and Niue. The bottom two are Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

All media workers in Nauru are **public servants** because there is **no independent media**. Foreign journalists face **difficulties securing visas** to enter, despite or perhaps because of international interest in Australia's offshore asylum processing centre in Nauru. According to **Amnesty International**, the centre was holding 100 detainees in January 2025. Facebook was **banned in Nauru** for nearly three years, from May 2015 to January 2018.

The area referred to as West Papua by independence supporters is not included in

the RSF or Pacific indices but it is important to note that there is **limited media access** to the area, which has perhaps **the most egregious** level of media freedom in the Pacific.

Media freedom is essential in democracies, enabling citizens to be informed. Media professionals should be able to conduct investigations without fear of reprisal. Media freedom is not guaranteed in the small island states of the Pacific region. It is worth advocating for media freedom and striving to protect it.

The Australian aid program has supported the media sector in the Pacific region for years, primarily through a **Pacific-wide program** and a **Papua New Guinea-focused program**, both of which are run by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's **international development arm** (ABCID). In addition, **internships are offered** and **groups of Pacific journalists** are invited to visit Australia to **meet academic experts**, visit **Australian media organisations** and learn about Australia's **democracy and lifestyle**.

ABCID's work in the Pacific region has included media capacity building, strengthening national media associations, empowering female journalists, and delivering practical training in specific priority areas. It produces research, **including reports** on the state of the media landscape in Pacific Island countries.

The re-elected Albanese government would do well to continue this support and implement two specific recommendations.

Typically, journalists in the Pacific are **less educated** than those in other regions. The first tangible way in which Australia could support the Pacific media sector would be to assist journalism education programs offered by universities such as the University of the South Pacific, the University of Papua New Guinea and Divine Word University. To date, Pacific journalism schools have received little attention from the Australian aid program.

The Pacific's small media environments generate marginal returns on investment, making it difficult to retain staff or reinvest in infrastructure. The Fiji Media Association General Secretary, Stanley Simpson, **recently stated** that some Fiji media organisations were only a month or two away from shutting down.

Given the financial difficulties of operating media businesses in states with small populations, a second option for Australia would be to consider direct support to media businesses. To ensure that the editorial independence of media outlets is maintained, such grants could perhaps be administered by media industry associations. For example, in Samoa, there are **two organisations** that may be suitable: the Media Council and the Journalists Association of Samoa. If such an

approach were to be adopted, the industry associations might need financial assistance to hire staff to administer grant processes.

Media freedom can never be taken for granted. It would be prudent to collaborate with and support journalism training institutions and media businesses as part of Australia's existing long-term strategy to promote media sustainability and resilience in the Pacific region.

This is part of the [Pacific Family Matters blog series](#) which explores priorities for the re-elected Labor government's engagement on development issues with the Pacific Islands region. The series draws on the expertise of the [Pacific Research Program](#), a consortium led by the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU), in partnership with ANU's Development Policy Centre and the Lowy Institute.

Disclosures:

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