

Overt and covert media censorship in Fiji (Part 1): the PIDF bungle

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International eyes are on Fiji to see whether the planned September 2014 elections will be “free and fair” in the eyes of the media—local and international.

One would think that the Bainimarama Government and its belligerent Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA) would be doubly cautious to give no hint of media censorship by the regime. But no.

They and their spokespersons continue to engage in niggling and not so niggling behavior that media owners and journalists can easily construe as fear-mongering tactics.

Behind the tensions about media censorship in Fiji are strong links to regional geopolitics, where powers like China, and now Indonesia, are challenging the influence of Australia and NZ. Organisations like the [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat](#), the newly formed [Pacific Islands Development Forum](#) and the [University of the South Pacific](#), are the new battle-grounds for winning influence with Pacific countries.

In this two-part analysis, I will discuss recent examples of media censorship in Fiji: the first involving the Pacific Islands Development Forum, and the second, journalism educators at the University of the South Pacific.

The PIDF bungle

A few weeks ago the Bainimarama Government organised its own Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), presented as an alternative to the Forum Secretariat, which it alleged is over-influenced by Australia and NZ.

With Forum Secretariat meetings accused of being “closed shops” attended by governments and donors, Bainimarama proudly [announced](#) that: “For the first time, we have brought into the room those most affected by government decisions—the grassroots through their representatives in civil society and business” (*The Fiji Times*, 23 June 2014).

One would have then thought that such a forum would be glad to have prominent media journalists, especially those officially representing regional business and churches, present at the meeting to explain the PIDF proceedings to the public at large. But no.

Two well-known and experienced journalists, Samisoni Pareti (newly appointed Chief Editor of the influential *Islands Business*) and Netani Rika (an independent communications expert, former Chief Editor of *The Fiji Times*—driven out of his job—and more recently employed by the Fiji Conference of Churches) were refused

accreditation.

Permanent Secretary for Information Sharon Smith-Johns lamely [explained](#): “In the case of Netani Rika, his application was lodged five days after the official deadline for accreditation.”

But what precisely was the purpose of setting official deadlines for accreditation? Were they expecting a flood of applications? Were they planning the red-carpet treatment for each and every journalist and so needed advance notice?

Or was it the case that Rika’s employer, the Fiji Conference of Churches, has been actively supporting the liberation movement for West Papua from Indonesian neo-colonialism, and the Indonesian President had been invited to be the keynote speaker for the PIDF conference?

The Indonesian President naturally returned the favor by making a “small donation” of US\$20 million to PIDF to add to the substantial aid given by China to this competitor of the Forum Secretariat.

In the case of Samisoni Pareti, Smith-Johns explained that “he was not registered as a journalist with the Media Industry Development Authority—as is required by law—at the time of his application”. But MIDA director Matai Akauola said MIDA was not involved in the accreditation process for journalists at the PIDF.

But why would you need some “accreditation” process to be applied to a senior journalist from a respected regional business magazine, who would be expected to report authoritatively and responsibly on the PIDF proceedings to a region-wide audience?

Smith-Johns claimed that the Ministry of Information had told *Islands Business* it could send another journalist, but Pareti said no such offer was received.

Fijian Media Association president Ricardo Morris said: “Unless media workers are breaching the code of conduct and laws we work under, there is no reason why all journalists cannot be given equal and free access to events without prior restrictions or limitations.” Yes indeed.

But Fiji’s Ministry of Information did not think so, and Netani Rika was visited several times by the police during the episode.

It is quite ominous that earlier this year the police also warned prominent Fijian musician Seru Serevi about protesting against an Indonesian visit after he had [launched a song](#) (*Let the Morning Star Rise*) celebrating the independence struggles of the West Papuan people. The song’s launch was attended by the Pacific Conference of Churches.

The police [again](#) got into the act when an Indonesian delegation took part in a panel discussion at The University of the South Pacific, by getting USP security guards to warn students against wearing t-shirts or displaying banners protesting about the Indonesian occupation of West Papua.

For the record, Smith-Johns not too long ago pleaded with journalists at a USP media conference not to practice self-censorship. But USP itself has cast a pall of censorship over its own journalism academics.

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