

MARC EDGE

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Blog wars in Fiji: Soft power in a South Pacific dictatorship

ABSTRACT

Authoritarian governments have increasingly hired US-based public relations companies to improve their image in the twenty-first century. These services were pioneered by Hill+Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller in the 1950s and the 1960s, but recently Washington-based Qorvis Communications has emerged as a popular choice. From its initial client base at the millennium of mostly oil-rich Middle Eastern dictatorships, Qorvis has branched out, including to the South Pacific. It was hired in 2011 by the military dictatorship in Fiji in advance of a constitutional review and elections there in 2014. Following a 2006 coup by military commander Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama, the regime suppressed domestic media with the threat of fines and prison terms contained in a repressive 2010 Media Decree. Blogs thus emerged as an underground press, and under Qorvis a pair of pro-regime blogs began to attack regime critics in an attempt to silence them. This case study examines their discourse involving three parties. Bruce Hill of the Radio Australia programme Pacific Beat came under regular criticism for his reporting on the regime by Fiji-born Australian blogger Graham Davis and retired New Zealand professor Crosbie Walsh. Constitutional Commission chair Yash Ghai was discredited in a smear campaign on these blogs and in the pro-regime Fiji Sun newspaper after delivering a draft constitution that would have restored human rights and reduced the role of the military. The author, who was then head of journalism at the University of the

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South Pacific, was forced to resign at the end of 2012 following similar attacks after he criticized the regime.

Ever since the power of propaganda to influence public opinion became apparent in the First World War, journalists have worked with governments in the opaque arts of public relations (Lippmann 1922; Ewen 1996). The post-Cold War insight that 'soft power' could be just as effective as military action, and without the need for casualties, made the battle for hearts and minds central to international relations (Nye Jr. 1990). The power of 'perception management' to alter reality in the public mind was never more apparent than in the publicity effort to promote the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. A senior adviser to President George W. Bush described the phenomenon aptly when he told a journalist: 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality' (Suskind 2004). The role of private contractors in planting stories in the press was exemplified in that campaign by the operations of the Rendon Group, which mustered dissembling sources to spread allegations that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (Bamford 2005).

Information mercenaries proliferated after World War II, and their operations have become increasingly sophisticated, secretive and arguably effective in the Internet age. Even before Russian operatives distributed 'fake news' online, creating an issue following the 2016 US presidential election, armies of mostly American PR personnel worked worldwide on behalf of foreign governments. One fertile ground for their operations was the Middle East, where oil money paid for slick campaigns designed to whitewash authoritarian regimes (Foer 2002). While they cost millions of American dollars, rich governments considered the money well spent. Even poor countries began to engage in such practices, spending scarce national revenues in pursuit of victory on the information front.

One eager adopter of these tactics was the military dictatorship in Fiji of army commander Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama, who seized power in a bloodless 2006 coup and severely restricted human rights, especially freedom of the press. Bainimarama sought to remake the country's policy framework in favour of autocratic control, but his agenda encountered regional resistance from Australia and New Zealand. He first promised a return to democracy with elections by 2009, but his planned reforms stalled amidst a constitutional crisis and Fiji was suspended from both the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum.

Bainimarama then set 2014 as a target for elections, in advance of which he ordered a new constitution, the country's fourth since independence in 1970. Washington-based PR firm Qorvis Communications was hired in 2011 to improve his regime's image. Soon a new form of warfare was being waged online as the Bainimarama regime and its information foot soldiers countered critics in a quest for legitimacy. A PR nightmare ensued when the government repudiated in late 2012 a draft constitution written by an independent commission that would have restored human rights. In the end, however, Bainimarama held onto power by winning the 2014 election, largely by dominating the information war and marginalizing critics, but at a considerable cost to the notion of democracy in Fiji. This case study analyses the PR effort that worked on behalf of the Bainimarama regime by examining online

discourse in the run-up to the 2014 election. This is then considered in the context of theoretical approaches to soft power, persuasion and the manipulation of public opinion.

SOFT POWER AND SMALL STATES

When Joseph S. Nye Jr. first enunciated the principles of soft power, he observed that the effective use of communications could level the playing field between large nations and small, with power passing from the 'capital-rich' to the 'information-rich': 'New elements in the modern world are diffusing power away from all the great powers [...] On many issues, private actors and small states have become more powerful' (Nye Jr. 1990: 160). Since the mid-1990s, authoritarian regimes have increasingly embraced the concept of soft power as part of a larger paradigm of public diplomacy, in which governments communicate not so much with each other as with each others' public (Barr et al. 2015). According to Christopher Walker, an authoritarian backlash against democratic values began in the mid-2000s when leading illiberal regimes 'hijacked' the concept of soft power to create 'a more malign mirror image' of it (2016: 61). He observed that their use of legal and regulatory measures to restrict freedom of expression and obstruct the emergence of democratic pluralism caught democratic countries flatfooted.

In an unanticipated twist, the authoritarian regimes, both large and small, have turned the tables on the democracies. Rather than reforming, most of these repressive regimes have deepened their authoritarianism.
(Walker 2016: 49)

Walker claimed that this backlash against democracy has gained momentum and intensified over the previous decade as repressive regimes have learned from each other how to 'choke off' independent civil society.

Authoritarian governments have gone to extraordinary lengths, Walker pointed out, to stifle political pluralism using ever more sophisticated and insidious methods of soft power. As he wrote, '[i]n recent years, trendsetting authoritarian regimes have adopted a cascade of laws restricting the civil society sector' (Walker 2016: 55). Most effective have been means of control that subtly – or not so subtly – encourage journalists to self-censor. According to Walker, repressive regimes are not only committed to preventing the competition of ideas within their own borders but also to making their viewpoints heard abroad. Some, such as Russia and China, built worldwide media outlets that enabled them to project their messages into the global marketplace of ideas. 'Authoritarian-backed media have become intertwined with the world of normal news, especially online' (Walker 2016: 60). A recent key to this communication effort has been managing and censoring the Internet, which illiberal governments see as a growing threat.

The authoritarians can deploy a potent combination of censorship and propaganda, allowing them to dominate the media space and create an unchallenged alternate reality for their audiences. In the online realm, for example, these regimes rely on trolls, cyberattacks, and disinformation to achieve their objectives.

(Walker 2016: 58)

This trend has coincided with the rise of mostly American private communications contractors who specialize in offering their services to repressive regimes worldwide.

INFORMATION MERCENARIES

The first major American PR firm to take its services offshore was Hill+Knowlton in the 1950s, followed by Burson-Marsteller in 1961 (Bruell 2012). Under the 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which was passed after Germany and Italy hired PR specialists in the United States to represent fascism there, they were required to disclose their clients and fees. Hill+Knowlton helped to repair China's image after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of pro-democracy protesters (Taylor 2003; d'Hooghe 2005). It was also paid US\$1.2 million by Turkey from 1990 to 1992 to whitewash human rights abuses there and US\$14 million in 1991 and 1992 for services rendered to Peru, Israel, Egypt and Haiti. It also represented the repressive Duvalier regime in Haiti (Carlisle 1993). It was paid more than US\$10 million by the Kuwaiti royal family to promote US military intervention following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990. That campaign famously saw false testimony given to a Congressional committee to the effect that Iraqi troops had ripped Kuwaiti babies from incubators and left them on the floor to die (Carlisle 1993; Stauber and Rampton 2002; MacArthur 2004).

Burson-Marsteller's clients included the Nigerian government in the 1960s after reports of genocide during the Biafran war; the Argentine junta in the 1970s after the disappearance of 35,000 civilians; and the Indonesian government in the 1990s after massacres in East Timor (Benady 2014). It was also hired by Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in the 1970s and later by the former Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovych in 2012 to conduct a smear campaign against jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko (Corporate Europe Observatory 2015). In 2011, it emerged that Burson-Marsteller had solicited journalists to write articles critical of Google on behalf of its client Facebook (Robinson and Halliday 2011).

A more recent entrant to the international PR arena has been Qorvis Communications. It was founded in 2000 through a merger of several small agencies, including two run by a former deputy press secretary to President George H. W. Bush and a former executive director of the Texas Republican Party (Isikoff 2002). Following its 2014 acquisition by the Paris-based Publicis Groupe, it became known as Qorvis/MSLGroup and now describes itself as the fourth largest PR agency in the world and the largest in Europe, China and India (Qorvis Communications 2018). Qorvis was hired by the Saudi government following the 9/11 terrorist attacks to help repair that country's image. It ran an intense campaign of media and government relations, grassroots activities, Internet communications, research and advertising that resulted in press conferences, events and countless media appearances by Saudi officials (Kumar 2005; Al-Yasin and Dashti 2009). It also generated controversy when federal agents raided Qorvis offices in a FARA investigation into radio and television advertisements that were covertly funded by the Saudis. Qorvis received US\$14.6 million for the campaign over a six-month period in 2002, which was reportedly the largest amount ever received by a US firm to represent a foreign government (Pigman and Deos 2008; Burnham 2013). It was soon followed by the departure of three of the firm's founding partners, according to the *New York Times*, over their 'deep

discomfort' in representing a government that had 'turned a blind eye to terrorism' (Shenon 2002: A12).

Another Qorvis client was the dictatorship in Bahrain, which hired it after riots began there in 2011 as part of the regional Arab Spring uprisings. Qorvis publicly downplayed the killing, torture and 'disappearing' of protesters and human rights advocates. When Bahrain's rulers crushed a protest and attacked hospitals, Qorvis issued press statements condemning Médecins Sans Frontières, after its doctors treated dissidents (Field 2011). The advocacy efforts by Qorvis on behalf of Bahrain were largely online, according to New York-based Human Rights Foundation. 'Beyond disappearing bloggers and rights activists, Bahrain also tries to disappear criticism', noted Thor Halvorssen (2011). He added that '[m]ost of the US-based fake tweeting, fake blogging (flogging), and online manipulation is carried out from inside Qorvis Communication's "Geo-Political Solutions" division'.

More so than intimidation, violence, and disappearances, the most important tool for dictatorships across the world is the discrediting of critics [...] Oppressive governments are threatened by public exposure, and this means that it's not just human rights defenders but also bloggers, opinion journalists, and civil society activists who are regularly and viciously maligned.

(Halvorssen 2011)

Qorvis was paid US\$70,000 a month by Equatorial Guinea and its military dictator to email out, in the words of one study, 'a steady stream of news releases highlighting all manner of heartwarming news' about the oil-rich but corrupt African regime (Silverstein 2011). Again, however, its work on behalf of such questionable clients prompted an exodus from Qorvis ranks. The *Huffington Post* reported that more than a third of its partners left the firm over a period of two months as a result. 'I just have trouble working with despotic dictators killing their own people', said one partner (Baram 2011).

BATTLEGROUND FIJI

A series of coups beset Fiji starting in 1987 following its independence from Great Britain in 1970. Ethnic tensions between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians fuelled the instability, and the military repeatedly seized power after Indo-Fijian parties won elections. Some blamed the press, segments of which had been critical of the government, for fomenting a coup in 2000. As David Robie writes, '[m]any powerful institutions, such as the Methodist Church in Fiji, and politicians in the Pacific believe there is no place for a Western-style free media and it should be held in check by Government legislation' (2003: 104).

Bainimarama seized power in late 2006 because he disagreed with numerous policies of a government that was dominated by indigenous Fijians. He installed a system of censorship, which brought worldwide protest and led to the nightly Fiji TV newscast going dark and the *Fiji Times* printing pages with missing stories. A court ruled Bainimarama's overthrow of the government unconstitutional in 2009, so the regime abrogated the constitution, sacked the judiciary and declared martial law. The clampdown on press freedom in Fiji saw numerous political blogs emerge in response. They served as an underground press and were even printed out and photocopied for

distribution in villages where Internet adoption was low. The pro-democracy blogs were almost all anonymous or pseudonymous, however, as anyone caught spreading anti-government sentiment risked being arrested and beaten by the military. By cracking down on press freedom, the regime unwittingly unleashed the blogs, according to Sophie Foster (2007). The resulting public relations nightmare, she concluded, proved worse for the regime's image than if it had allowed a free press because

The blogs' no-holds-barred approach to military criticism picked holes in media coverage of the crisis, with blogs running stories detailing alleged military abuse as well as releasing several confidential documents.

(Foster 2007: 47–48)

Crosbie Walsh catalogued 72 political blogs in Fiji, of which 42 were then active. 'Fifty-three were anti [-government] – 19 extremely so; 15 were more or less "neutral", and three were pro-government' (Walsh 2010: 164). A retired professor from the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, Walsh started a blog in 2009 that he called *Fiji: The Way it Was, Is and Can Be*, partly in response to what he saw as biased reporting on Fiji in the media of New Zealand, where he lived. His study deemed his own blog 'mildly pro-government' compared to anti-regime blogs such as *Coup 4.5*, which actively incited unrest and even violence. Walsh observed that '[t]he anti-government blogs, hailed by coup opponents as advocates of democracy, are little more than agents of uncritical dissent' (2010: 174). *Coup 4.5* was among the most popular blogs, with a 'staggering' 60,000 visitors in November 2009 compared with 30,000 visitors to Walsh's own blog over a longer period (2010: 158).

In 2010, a Media Industry Development Decree (also known as the Media Decree) was imposed by the military government. It provided for fines of up to F\$1000 for journalists found in contravention of its Code of Ethics and Practice; up to F\$25,000 for publishers or editors; and up to F\$100,000 for media organizations (Foster 2010; Singh 2010). That year the regime also appointed as Permanent Secretary for Information former Fairfax Australia marketing executive Sharon Smith Johns, making her the country's 'chief censor and media strategist', according to Australian journalist Graham Davis (2010).

In early 2011, Davis began a blog that he called *Grubsheet* after his television production company *Grubstreet*. It covered a range of topics in its first year, but by early 2012 it focused on Fiji almost exclusively. Davis began a long campaign on behalf of the Bainimarama regime by criticizing *Coup 4.5* for alleging that Muslims were 'colonizing' Fiji at the behest of the dictator's Muslim right-hand man, Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. 'This grubby little offering isn't just inflammatory but utterly false', wrote Davis, '[s]imply put, *Coup 4.5* – with this base offering – has become the local equivalent of a Nazi hate sheet' (2012a). His blog entry was reprinted in the pro-regime *Fiji Sun* newspaper, on the Auckland University of Technology journalism websites *Pacific Scoop* and *Pacific Media Centre*, and on the personal blogs of Walsh and AUT journalism educator David Robie. 'Who are these people?' asked Davis of the contributors to *Coup 4.5*. A few wrote under their own names, including former *Fiji Sun* investigative reporter Victor Lal, who lived in the United Kingdom, and economist Wadan Narsey, who had been forced to resign his teaching position at USP in 2011 for his criticism of the regime. Most, noted Davis, did not give their names:

They're always anonymous but are said to be a group of Fiji journalists running their site out of Auckland, with contributions from members of the deposed SDL government, ex civil servants and a hard core of anti-regime 'human rights' advocates [...] The wonder is that some of 4.5's content is written by respected journalists and academics who are Indo-Fijians to boot.

(Davis 2012a)

ENTER QORVIS

In October 2011, the Fiji regime hired Qorvis Communications at a cost of US\$40,000 per month 'to assist with training and support for our Ministry of Information – to ensure its operations take into account advances in social media, the Internet and best practices regarding the media' (Bainimarama 2011). Visiting American journalist Anna Lenzer noted the Fiji government's 'exploding internet and social media presence in the weeks since Qorvis began its work' and that '[n]ew websites, Twitter accounts and YouTube pages, and a steady stream of PR Newswire alerts about the military's excellence have appeared' (2011).

In early 2012, the regime announced that martial law would finally be lifted, but its 2010 Media Decree continued to have a chilling effect on journalism (Foster 2010; Singh 2010). Government advertising was withdrawn from the *Fiji Times*, which had been critical of the dictatorship. It appeared instead in the *Fiji Sun*, which was estimated to have benefitted from the decision by millions of dollars a year. The *Times* was also fined F\$300,000 for contempt of court in 2013 after reprinting in its sports section an article from a New Zealand newspaper that coincidentally questioned the independence of Fiji's judiciary (Loanakadavu 2013). The result was a timid domestic news media in Fiji that practiced strict self-censorship, with most political discourse taking place on the blogs.

Included in the regime's media strategy, as implemented by Qorvis and Smith Johns, were campaigns against several prominent figures, all of whom were foreigners. Enlisted in this effort were bloggers Davis and Walsh, who were by their later admission either hired by or otherwise remunerated by the regime and/or Qorvis. What follows are studies of the individuals and issues that were focused on by the pro-regime blogs subsequent to the hiring of Qorvis Communications in late 2011 and prior to the elections in September 2014.

1. Bruce Hill and Radio Australia

A favourite target of pro-regime blogs, especially Grubsheet, was the reporting by the ABC's foreign service Radio Australia and its influential *Pacific Beat* programme, in particular by its Melbourne-based reporter Bruce Hill. When the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) controversially held its conference in Fiji early in 2012, despite the country's restrictions on press freedom, Davis assailed Hill's reports of dissension at the event: 'It's pretty clear in the minds of conference organisers that Hill came to PINA spoiling for a fight, or at least to pursue his favoured narrative of a Pacific media umbrella in tatters by continuing division over Fiji', Davis wrote in a blog entry that was reprinted not only in the *Fiji Sun* but also in *The Australian* (2012b). He added that,

The AUT's David Robie observed that without Hill's presence, there would have been little dissention at PINA. Robie described the [...] fracas as a construct of 'western-style conflict journalism'. Hill, he said, had set out to generate controversy by seeking a contentious opinion and then using it to generate more controversy.

(Davis 2012b)

In August 2012, Davis complained on his blog that Hill and Radio Australia did not report that the former governing SDL party had made a submission to the Constitutional Commission calling for Fiji to be declared a Christian state: 'To date, Bruce Hill and Radio Australia have chosen not to report this important development' (Davis 2012d). The submission, however, had been made only by a party committee and not by the SDL itself as official party policy. A former ABC and BBC journalist who had been born in Fiji, Davis said he decided not to lodge an official complaint with the ABC over what he felt was biased journalism because an earlier informal complaint of his had been summarily dismissed. Davis wrote that 'Pacific Beat has long displayed a jaundiced attitude towards Fiji but several recent reports fail to meet basic standards of journalistic practice, let alone the ABC's stringent editorial policies' (Davis 2012d).

A year later, Davis did lodge a formal complaint with the ABC regarding *Pacific Beat*. At issue was a speech by Julie Bishop, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, in which she signalled a normalizing of relations with Fiji if her party came to power in the upcoming elections. 'Here was the first significant change in official Australian attitudes towards Fiji in the six and a half years since Voreqe Bainimarama's takeover', blogged Davis,

By conventional news standards the world over, it signaled a dramatic change in Australian official attitude and deserved to receive the widest coverage. But Radio Australia chose to ignore it. Instead, it ran two items highly critical of the Fijian Government, both by the same reporter, Bruce Hill.

(2013a)

By this time, Davis had revealed that he was working for Qorvis on its Fiji account (Davis 2012e). He spent much of his time in Suva, he admitted, flying back and forth from his home in Sydney. The admission came in September 2012, two weeks after Davis had been named host of the Southern Cross Austereo network's weekly public affairs television programme *The Great Divide* (Jackson 2012). Ignoring Bishop's speech was such an egregious violation of journalistic principles by *Pacific Beat*, Davis announced, that it warranted an official complaint. 'Previous instances pale into insignificance beside evidence that Radio Australia is willing to subvert the political process in Australia', he wrote, '[t]he Australian taxpayer is now entitled to know by whose authority Hill, and the rest of the Radio Australia editorial team, chose to overlook a major shift in Australian attitude' (Davis 2013a). He continued,

It is more than a grave editorial lapse. It is also contrary to law. On the available evidence, it's a case of the publicly funded broadcaster taking a partisan position in a manner that contravenes every aspect of the ABC's Charter. This legally requires it – under an act of Parliament – to report without fear or favour in the interests of every Australian.

(Davis 2013a)

After *Pacific Beat* belatedly reported the Bishop speech several days later, Davis called for an inquiry into the matter. 'Bruce Hill needs to explain himself, as does the entire Radio Australia news team', he wrote, '[b]ecause without a doubt, it is one of the most blatant instances of censorship and news manipulation Grubbsheet has ever witnessed' (Davis 2013b).

2. Yash Ghai and the Constitutional Commission

The Constitutional Commission tasked by the regime with drafting a new constitution for Fiji ran into difficulties throughout 2012. Yash Ghai, a University of Hong Kong professor and leading expert on constitutional law who headed it, expressed concern for the consultation process early that year, and then complained of interference from Bainimarama. Finally, at the year's end he clashed dramatically with the regime. 'I have urged the government to actually undertake a review of laws which restrict freedoms without which good process cannot take place', Ghai told Hill in a March interview (Radio Australia 2012a). In July, the regime's non-negotiable precondition of immunity for the 2006 coup plotters became a sticking point with the commission. 'Our concerns are that first of all immunity of course promote the culture of coups that Fiji is trying to move away from', Ghai told Hill, '[b]ut the government has decided that they want immunity up front and there's not very much we can do about it' (Radio Australia 2012b). By November, relations between the commission and the regime worsened when it was revealed that Ghai had hired a regime critic as a consultant. This resulted in an amendment to the commission's enabling decree that required it to publish the salaries of all its staff members and consultants. In an interview with Radio Australia's Campbell Cooney, Ghai then revealed that there had been 'massive interference' with the commission's work by the regime: 'I get emails from the PM to do this or not to do that, and this is a kind of harassment' (Radio Australia 2012c).

The situation came to a climax in December 2012, after the commission submitted its draft constitution to the government. Ghai ordered 600 copies printed for distribution prior to it being considered by a special Constituent Assembly of citizens, which was planned to ratify or amend the draft. Police seized the copies over Ghai's objections before they could be distributed and even incinerated several proof copies while he watched. 'I have never been in a process where there has been such an attempt to hide the recommendations of a body which was set up by this very government', Ghai said to Hill (Radio Australia 2012d). The regime at first denied the seizure and burning, but pictures were soon posted online (Bhim 2013). Davis was unusually silent on the issue, having recently informed readers that he was bowing out of the blogging fray because he had been hired by Qorvis. 'I have a clear conflict of interest when it comes to commenting on political matters in Fiji, and especially partisan politics in the lead-up to the election', he admitted. 'I am now spending much of my time in Suva working on the Qorvis account that services the Fijian Government' (Davis 2012e).

In his absence, Walsh took up the Bainimarama regime's case against Hill. He accused him of 'making a mountain out of a mole-hill' and deconstructed Hill's interview with Ghai line by line. 'It shows how a supposedly neutral interviewer reveals his true colours', concluded Walsh. 'No one could possibly be in doubt about his feelings during the Yash Ghai interview. There was no attempt at neutrality' (Walsh 2012a). Walsh pointed to amendments made to the commission's enabling decree that 'expressly forbade' the commission

from distributing the draft before its consideration by the Constituent Assembly and claimed that Ghai was thus acting illegally: 'The amendment was a result of increasing Government concerns that the Commission had not maintained its neutrality as required in the original decree' (Walsh 2012a). Walsh followed this with another blog entry two days later. 'Government's intention was never to prevent public discussion on the draft decree [*sic*]', he wrote, adding '[t]he whole Ghai-police incident and its fallout is unfortunate, inflated, and has been largely misinterpreted, by the media mainly unintentionally, by anti-Government bloggers deliberately' (2012b).

In a third successive blog entry on the subject in early 2013, Walsh speculated that the seizure came because the regime had lost confidence in Ghai's neutrality. 'There were so many stories of Yash Ghai socialising with known Government opponents [...] I can well understand why government was concerned: a commission whose key member was no longer neutral was also no longer independent' (Walsh 2013a). The *Fiji Sun* then ran a story under the front-page headline 'ACCUSED: Neutrality of Yash Ghai's Commission Questioned' (Bolatiki 2013). It repeated Walsh's speculation and outlined in detail the military's objections to the Ghai draft, including that it would restore the indigenous Great Council of Chiefs, which the regime had earlier abolished (Bolatiki 2013). Walsh objected that the *Fiji Sun* had been selective in reproducing his analysis. 'The Sun did not misrepresent what I said but it only published half of it – the half sympathetic to Government' (Walsh 2013b).

By then the Ghai Commission's draft constitution had been published on Fijileaks, a new blog started by Victor Lal that specialized in publishing leaked documents similar to Wikileaks (Republic of Fiji Constitution Commission 2012). The draft constitution would have repealed or rewritten decrees that limited numerous human rights, including press freedom. It would also have provided a role in Fiji politics for NGOs and greatly reduced the role of the military. Despite his promise to refrain from commenting on Fiji politics, online publication of the draft constitution prompted Davis to weigh in. He charged that it was a 'patently flawed formula' for achieving democracy and required major revision. Davis quoted an anonymous 'friend' of Ghai, who speculated that his 'emotions may well have got in the way of his better judgment'. Ghai had a 'distinctly romantic notion about finally being able to resolve the intractable "Fiji Problem"', according to this friend, and had come to believe that he could be 'just as big a saviour as Frank Bainimarama' (Davis 2013c). Basing this account on a single source, Davis claimed that Ghai had been disappointed when he was criticized on anti-government blogs as a stooge of the military government and as a result set about correcting that assumption by courting elements known to oppose the regime. Ghai then went over to their side, claimed Davis, deciding to 'go rogue' and 'thumb his nose at due process' (Davis 2013c). The Ghai draft was then rejected by the regime, which wrote its own constitution that expressly permitted its restrictive decrees, excluded NGOs from the political process and provided a continuing political role for the military. It also cancelled the planned Constituent Assembly (Anon. 2013).

3. Myself and USP

As the expatriate Head of Journalism at USP, I also became the subject of pro-regime blog attacks in 2012. In a Radio Australia interview with Hill in April of that year, I corroborated Hill's account of dissent remaining within South

Pacific media despite a lack of open conflict at the PINA conference. Davis, who, along with the AUT's David Robie, had promoted a 'Pacific media at peace' meme following the conference, called the interview 'the biggest crack at revisionism in recent Pacific media history' (Davis 2012c). Davis claimed that '[o]ur recollections of what took place are so vastly at odds that I wonder if we were on the same planet, let alone at the same venue in the same country'.

In mid-2012, I began a blog called Fiji Media Wars to focus on media issues in Fiji, on which I openly admitted my identity. Included as topics of media analysis were threats made to Fiji TV's broadcasting licence and the subsequent enacting of a Television Decree, which threatened stations that violated the Media Decree with cancellation of their broadcasting licence (Edge 2012a, 2012b). 'It does seem like a bit of double jeopardy', I observed of the Television Decree (Edge 2012b). 'Not only are TV stations subject to fines for violating the Code of Ethics and to having their journalists thrown in prison, now they can be put out of business as well' (Edge 2012b). This brought a complaint to USP from the government, as a result of which I put Fiji Media Wars on hiatus for more than two months.

In September, I organized a two-day symposium at USP on Media and Democracy in the South Pacific. On the first day of the event, Davis posted a blog entry that referred to the event as 'Edgefest' and reported that it had prompted official consternation across the region. 'Dr Edge caused intense heartburn right from the start as he set about organising this conference', he wrote (Davis 2012f). Davis claimed that Fiji, Samoa and Tonga had 'formally complained to the University of the South Pacific' about the months-old Call for Papers, which compared pro-democracy movements in the Pacific to the ongoing Arab Spring uprisings. 'The USP subsequently ordered the posting withdrawn from its website', revealed Davis, adding '[u]nfortunately for the USP, its funding comes from some of the countries Dr Edge appears to be targeting' (2012f). Subsequent to the symposium, I revived Fiji Media Wars to discuss some of the issues raised during it, including journalistic standards and self-censorship (Edge 2012c). Davis then posted a blog entry that claimed I was clinging to my job by my 'fingernails' after 'official protests and open conflict with other academics' during the symposium (Davis 2012g). In an addendum to that entry, Davis admitted what many had long speculated: 'Graham Davis is now a part-time advisor to Qorvis Communications'.

In November, I posted a blog entry that summarized available information about Qorvis Communications. 'The more I learn about these rascals', I wrote, 'the more I suspect that I have been a victim of their black ops' (Edge 2012e). A subsequent blog entry questioned Walsh's ethics for going on a fact-finding trip to Fiji that was paid for by the regime and during which he avoided meeting government critics (Edge 2012f). Another regime complaint to USP resulted in a demand that I remove the blog entry about Qorvis. I did so but was stood down as head of journalism nonetheless by the USP administration. Both Davis and Walsh demanded that I be dismissed, however, as I remained at USP as a senior lecturer. 'The School is said to be irrevocably split between the brainwashed first years who worship Dr Edge and senior students who think he is bordering on the certifiable', wrote Davis, adding '[h]e has brought the USP and its journalism school into disrepute and the sooner he departs these shores the better' (2012h).

Walsh took umbrage at the criticism that he received from several bloggers for taking the paid trip to Fiji. 'The problems begin with him accepting what's called a "junket" in the journalism world', I noted.

As any first-year journalism student knows (mine certainly do), you will not have any credibility if you do not maintain independence from those you write about. From now on it will be hard not to believe that you, like Graham Davis, are beholden to the Fiji government.

(Edge 2012f)

Walsh claimed that the criticism was unwarranted and suggested that my work permit be cancelled. 'It says much for the tolerance of the government and the university that he is still able to publish partisan polemic exercises on his blog', he wrote. 'Others have their association with the university terminated, and their work permits cancelled, for less' (Walsh 2012c). Davis then leaked e-mail correspondence between USP administrators that showed my continuing presence at the university was the subject of disagreement and renewed his calls for my dismissal. 'He is abusing his office and it's high time that the USP brings this continuing farce to a halt' (Davis 2012h). As a result of these and other pressures placed on the university by the regime, I resigned my appointment at the end of 2012.

SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

Fiji suffered international opprobrium in March 2013 when a video surfaced online showing uniformed officers beating and burning with cigarettes two escaped prisoners, on whom they had also set dogs. The brutality was made worse, in the eyes of many, by Bainimarama's apparent condoning of the beatings after an investigation was called. 'At the end of the day, I will stick by my men, by the police officers or anyone else that might be named in this investigation', he said. 'We cannot discard them just because they've done their duty in looking after the security of this nation and making sure we sleep peacefully at night' (quoted in Siegel 2013). While not explicitly condoning the abuse, Davis (2013d) claimed that it was widely supported in Fiji. 'These individuals are violent, hardened criminals who had escaped from lawful custody and can hardly have expected to be garlanded when they were eventually tracked down', he wrote on his blog. He also wrote,

Doubtless many ordinary Fijians are fed up with the kind of lawlessness that saw much of Suva terrorised during the Naboro Prison mass break-out last September. They want a tough response against law-breakers and especially home invaders [...] In truth, many law abiding Fijians actually like being ruled with an iron fist if it means being able to sleep soundly in their beds at night.

(Davis 2013d)

Davis claimed that such beatings, which resulted in one of the escapees having a leg amputated, were a widespread practice in Fiji.

It's a fair bet that everyone in that [video] clip was raised as a child to expect a 'hiding' – the traditional form of discipline in most Fijian homes for even relatively minor infractions [...] The *buturaki* – the premeditated

beating – has always been the traditional method of enforcing order at village level.

(Davis 2013d).

Davis blogged infrequently and not always on Fiji in the following year leading up to the Fiji election, which saw Bainimarama elected as Prime Minister in a landslide. In a December 2013 blog entry, he responded to a comment noting his months-long absence online. Davis claimed that he had ‘gone quiet primarily because my work is done [...] Everything that I set out to achieve when I started Grubbsheet at the beginning of 2011 and began high-lighting the Bainimarama revolution’s achievements has been accomplished’ (2013e). His absence from the blogging fray, however, may have instead been a result of a complaint that I lodged with Southern Cross Media Group CEO Rhys Holleran, in late 2012, about Davis simultaneously acting as a television host for SCA and as a propagandist for a regional dictator (Edge 2012g). In 2016, a memo was leaked online in which Davis scolded *Fiji Sun* editor Peter Lomas for attacking regime critics too crudely. ‘Who benefits from these sneering, petty ad hominem attacks on the government’s opponents? They do. Because they illicit [*sic*] sympathy for them and contempt for the attacker’ (Davis 2016).

Walsh announced in late 2013 that he was putting his blog on hold because he had ‘run out of new things to write about’ (2013c). He was later briefly active during the 2014 Fiji election campaign defending Bainimarama from critics and urging Fijians to vote for the leader. In mid-2017, however, he re-titled his blog *New Zealand and Fiji: How Much Fairer They Could Be* and focused it on issues of political and social concern across the Pacific Islands, explaining, ‘[m]y previous focus on the political situation in Fiji has now largely served its purpose’ (Walsh 2017).

In March 2017, Qorvis was awarded a F\$4.7 million contract by the Fiji government to provide public relations services to the COP 23 UN climate change conference without tenders being called. Fiji had been voted the COP 23 presidency late the previous year to organize and preside over its November 2017 conference in Bonn, Germany. In July 2017, the leader of Fiji’s opposition National Federation Party claimed in Parliament that he had ‘evidence in writing to prove that Qorvis is meddling in local affairs’ (Taoi 2017). In late 2017, ABC’s Radio National reported that two former Fiji public servants claimed that Qorvis had attempted to influence the country’s diplomatic relationships with Australia and New Zealand on numerous occasions (Cohen and Webb 2017). A former Permanent Secretary for Communications and Information Technology said that he was sacked after refusing to sign a letter to the editor castigating a Fiji newspaper for unfair treatment of Bainimarama. It had been drafted by Qorvis, he claimed, which ‘calls the shots’ on all government communications, not just public relations. The report also quoted a former senior diplomat, who claimed that, in his capacity as a Qorvis consultant, Davis had attempted to influence and even ‘destabilize’ relations with other countries, including Australia and New Zealand (Cohen and Webb 2017). This expansion of the role played by Qorvis in Fiji suggests that it may have gone beyond traditional public relations or even public diplomacy into what has been called ‘private diplomacy’, or the outsourcing of diplomatic representation. In this phenomenon, governments employ private individuals and firms to represent them officially to other governments rather than using “in-house” diplomatic personnel’ (Pigman and Deos 2008: 94).

CONCLUSIONS

The use of soft power in Fiji succeeded in the short term by stifling dissent and allowing the military dictatorship, which then ruled the country, to impose its agenda, including a constitution that permitted the limiting of human rights. However, whether it can succeed in the long term is doubtful. Fiji is now on its fourth constitution since being granted independence in 1970 and it has suffered from four coups since 1987. Some small states may be more powerful on some issues than large ones, as Nye Jr (1990) argued, but those that achieve such power are undoubtedly more homogeneous, prosperous and united. Fiji is poor and fractured ethnically, with an indigenous majority that feels economically exploited by a more prosperous minority, and now politically oppressed by an authoritarian government. Whether such a divided society can be kept together by such means for long remains to be seen.

Fiji is an excellent example of the authoritarian backlash seen by Walker against democratic values that uses a more malign form of soft power achieved by insidious legal and regulatory measures that restrict freedom of expression and obstruct political pluralism. Most effective of all in Fiji has been the imposition of the Media Decree, which encourages journalists to self-censor and thus prevents any competition of ideas. Ironically, however, even one who assisted in imposing this hegemony now exhibits a kind of buyer's remorse. In re-focusing his blog on New Zealand and the South Pacific, Walsh (2017) expressed misgivings about the system of repression that he helped to install in Fiji, where he admits that 'many improvements are still needed in freedom of expression'.

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