



**Acting Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic
Planning, National Development & Statistics**

Pacific Media Partnership Conference 2025

11th February 2025

- Secretary General of the Asia- Pacific Broadcasting Union
- Deputy Chair of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation
- Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation
- Ministers and Assistant Ministers
- Distinguished Guests from the Media Organisations
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Bula Vinaka, Namaste and Good Morning to you all,

It is my distinct honour to share some thoughts with you today at the Pacific Media Partnership Conference.

Some of you may know of my longstanding interest in and involvement with the media — both through my writings in local dailies and my

scholarly contributions, including co-editing two books and a journal on media and development in the Pacific with Professor Shailendra Singh.

For the Coalition Government of Fiji, hosting this important event on our shores is especially meaningful. We are unequivocally committed to democracy and freedom.

In 2023, the well-known civil liberties organisation, Freedom House, ranked Fiji the most improved country in the world for civil liberties as a result of the change in government¹. That is no accident.

In opposition, we had promised the people of Fiji they would be free – and we kept that promise.

One of our first acts in Government was to repeal the oppressive Media Industry Development Act. We also ended the business of exclusive Government contracts to selected media favourites.

As a government we are criticised for a lot of things, both in mainstream and social media. Some of that criticism is justified – we are far from a perfect government. Some of it we feel is a bit unfair, but I suppose all governments feel that way sometimes.

However, I want to assure people of one thing. As a political group, all the parties in the coalition are strongly committed to the freedom of Fiji's people, including freedom of expression. And if we are sometimes

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict/regional-trends>

annoyed by the things people say, we perfectly understand that it is the price we pay for being in power.

To those who criticise us, I say, keep holding us to account. But remember how you became free enough, and informed enough, to do that. The newspapers you read, the TV news that you view – they are all free to tell you whatever news they uncover. And those freedoms came to you only after a new government came into office.

Who can forget the days when the former *Fiji Sun* editors waited every afternoon to be told by the Government what the following day's headlines would be? The price for their subservience was a multi-million dollar exclusive advertising contract – all the Government business and all the business of Government-owned companies and statutory bodies, all dictated to by the Government.

Even the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation – the government-owned broadcaster – now regularly runs news that is critical of the government. Think back to three years ago, when a government stooge controlled FBC and everything that went through its newsroom. Those days are over. This government will not interfere with FBC's independence.

Only last week was *The Fiji Times* finally freed from the burden of an appeal against its acquittal for sedition in 2018. As their editor described it last week, that prosecution in 2017 was an act of vengeance by the Bainimarama government against one of the last independent media voices to survive under their rule.

And this freedom of expression operates in a wider environment of freedom.

Our institutions are independent and open to scrutiny, even as some of them face internal and external challenges. Controversies are currently swirling over the offices of the Director of Public Prosecutions and FICAC. Indeed, I am personally accused of wrongdoing in the FICAC saga.

In the controversy of the Director of Public Prosecutions, a panel of judges issued a ruling clearing him of wrongdoing. In the FICAC controversy a Supreme Court judge is now inquiring into it and will issue a public report.

These inquiries take place because we now have an independent judiciary. Who can imagine this occurring under the previous government?

When the Cabinet holds a meeting the Prime Minister now tells the country about the matters it discussed. Most Fiji journalists would agree that he makes time for the news media and is very accessible to them – sometimes, I told the Hon Prime Minister that in my view, he is way too accessible!

And as you know the Government is now engaged in a public consultation on freedom of information laws, which should be something of interest to all of Fiji's news media organisations.

To suppress the media, as the previous government did, in a deliberate and sustained way, is to suppress debate and discussion, stifle ideas, and thus to block our progress and development.

This is the kind of State interference in newsrooms through management of news organisations that at one time saw Fiji ranked the lowest of Pacific Island nations of Samoa, Tonga and Papua New Guinea in media freedom in a report released by Reporters Without Borders. That is now history.

Whatever laws that are reviewed or enacted, this Coalition Government will never even attempt to muzzle the media.

Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: -

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through the media regardless of frontiers”. This freedom and right is reposed in the people, which the State and politicians must respect at all times”.

A free, fair and unregulated media is absolutely vital for true and genuine democracy as well to amplify the voices of not only Government but also the Opposition, without fear.

Many young people in our country, who grew up in the culture of the 2006 coup and its aftermath, still believe that asking questions can lead only to trouble. Many employers, academics and activists warn me that, as a result of this, there is a lack of critical thinking in our next generation.

Yet, without that critical thinking, we will not be able to resolve our pressing national problems, modernise antiquated practices and challenge wrong-doers, including those in positions of power.

History shows that democratic transitions are not without difficulties. Countries like Nigeria and Ghana have experienced the complexities of moving from restrictive media environments to greater press freedom.

These are scenarios for reflection for us all and also well-documented in academic literature.

However, the learning from the past is also being challenged by the realities of the present. This includes the battle for hearts, minds – and advertisers – between mainstream and social media.

This, I know, is a major challenge for mainstream media organisations of the kind represented at this conference. Media audiences are easily attracted to alternative channels of information – often for reasons of cost and convenience. Increasingly, however, it is because many have a misplaced belief that reading and seeing only the information that conforms to their worldviews is the way to access critical information.

Much has been written about how mainstream media must regain public trust. This is particularly true in societies like ours, emerging from an environment in which many were deeply cynical of mainstream media and whether or not it had a hidden agenda.

Mainstream media is challenged by a set of rules which do not apply to social media – the requirement to be accountable under national laws, media and business, employment and environmental regulations and laws relating to defamation and privacy as well as to follow ethical standards of journalism. None of these laws apply to bloggers or so-called activists who push their often-half-baked ideas onto others from their keyboards.

And new challenges are emerging every day – including through state-sponsored disinformation deliberately aimed at destabilising the democratic societies of other countries. As our South Pacific islands, too, become key geostrategic targets for big power gamesmanship, we must equip ourselves as best we can to deal with these new issues, just as we must deal with artificial intelligence-driven robots dealing dishonestly with information to meet commercial or other goals which threaten our people's livelihoods and rights.

In this increasingly challenging environment, I do see a role for governments, particularly in public service broadcasting. This can be governments' contribution to trying to rebalance the increasingly unbalanced media environment for responsible and accountable media outlets. Unfortunately, in Fiji, for many years the term "public broadcasting" was a euphemism for a gross abuse of public funds for political propagandising. And, going forward, we must find ways to ensure the best possible governance of public broadcasting funds to ensure that these bad practices do not happen again.

On our part the government allocated a total of \$10.4m funding in the last budget for public service broadcast and already two private media organisations have received their grants. Development partners may also consider funding public service broadcasts and publications.

All of these issues are ones on which I know the government would further welcome your views and input. I am pleased that sessions which broadly accept some of these themes are part of the programme. I note the emphasis on the programme on the support that the media can provide in disaster warnings and resilience. These are critical issues and they remind us that the work of strong, free media organisations, protected by and not dictated to by national governments, can sometimes mean the difference between life and death. These are real-life issues that have a direct impact on the welfare of our people.

With regard to media training, as an academic, it will not surprise you that I firmly believe that learning never stops.

Media houses must look beyond daily routines and newsroom deadlines and desk rosters to reflect on and advance their industry and profession. Consequently, research into the media in Fiji and the Pacific is essential to inform and improve journalism.

This is why conferences like this are invaluable. They provide a platform to share ideas, reflect on media practices, and engage in debates.

International conferences expose us to global perspectives and allow us to learn from other nations. It is crucial to look beyond our own shores for ideas and inspiration. That is why our government proudly supports this event—it is an investment in our future.

Our Coalition government is not only a strong advocate for media freedom but also for academic freedom and knowledge creation.

Another of the early actions our government took was to restore the University of the South Pacific's annual Government of Fiji grant funding, which the previous government had halted. This anti-USP and anti-intellectual action, driven by political motives and the then Government's personal dislike of those who disagreed with it, I consider one of the most egregious attacks on academia, with far-reaching consequences not just for Fiji, but for the entire region.

The restoration of the USP grant has revitalized the university's academic culture, and through it our Government supported the USP journalism programme's international media conference in July last year.

I was honoured to be a speaker at that event, where we launched our book, "Waves of Change: Media, Peace, and Development in the Pacific", that I co-edited with some esteemed academic colleagues.

A chapter I co-authored is titled "Peace Journalism and Conflict Reporting in Fragile Pacific Societies: Challenges and Opportunities."

It argues that journalism in the Pacific region must be informed by the national and regional contexts, while taking a critical look at alternative reporting frameworks, such as conflict-sensitive reporting, to exist alongside and balance the media's watchdog role, which is important in the public interest, including holding leaders to account.

The USP's journalism programme is the only institution conducting regular research on Pacific media, which addresses a major gap in International understandings journalism cultures around the world.

The programme, is commended for its sterling efforts and for its service to journalism scholarship in the region.

So I hope over the next few days of your deliberations, reflection on some of these themes may be useful. On behalf of all of us in this room from Fiji, I would like to welcome all our overseas guests to our shores and to hope your stay here is a profitable and stimulating one and to wish you all the very best in your deliberations during this Pacific Media Partnership Conference.

Vinaka vakalevu, Dhanyaabaad and Thank you.