

What is a vibrant democracy? And what does it mean for Fiji?

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On the recent anniversary of the 1987 coup we hosted a panel discussion about the way forward for Fiji and were fortunate to hear the perspectives of several prominent local thinkers. It was something said by one of these speakers that was the inspiration for this evening's discussion; in his talk Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi argued that the people of Fiji should work towards making this country a vibrant democracy. Those of us in SGDIA – staff and students – who enjoy thinking and arguing about Fijian politics - decided that it was important to engage in a wider conversation about the meaning, merits and requirements of this ideal in a Fijian context. I foolishly volunteered to speak.

I say foolishly because a quick glance at the literature on vibrant democracy revealed that the concept is poorly defined, and that its advocates do not make useful suggestions for its implementation in a situation like Fiji's.

Despite the not very helpful literature, it became evident that vibrant democracy does not mean politicians punching each other in the parliamentary chamber or constantly launching motions of no confidence against incumbent governments. What makes a democracy vibrant is a high level of citizen engagement in the democratic process and influence on political decision-making. Political leaders in vibrant democracies allow citizens to articulate their concerns and interests without fear of reprisal and then take these concerns and interests into account when crafting legislation and formulating policies.

Democracies can only be truly vibrant if the rule of law exists to protect citizens' rights to political engagement and cannot be discarded or bent in the interests of the powerful. They can only be truly vibrant if avenues for the discussion of political ideas, processes and policies exist in the shape of a free and plural media. They can only be vibrant if those competing for political power and in political office are truly committed to serving their country. And they can only be vibrant if the threat or use of armed force does not hamper or disrupt its evolution.

Fiji does not have the same political problems that have given rise to calls for vibrant democracy in the United States in other developed countries, where low voter turnout is seen as indicating a sense of futility and cynicism about the likelihood of producing meaningful change and influencing government politics. The central aim of advocating a vibrant democracy in those countries is to reinvigorate enthusiasm for politics and restore the political ideal of popular sovereignty.

Fiji does not have the same political problems as some developing countries where vibrant democracy is advocated as an alternative to autocratic rule or to the self-serving and self-enriching rule of democratically elected but undemocratically inclined elites. The central aim of advocating vibrant

democracy in those countries is to improve the lot of citizens whose interests are ignored and rights trampled unless their own patrons happen to be in power.

Between 1970 and 2006 people in Fiji happily engaged in the electoral process in the expectation that they could influence government policy with their vote and during its periods of democracy Fiji has not suffered from the excesses of political corruption and repression that have made democracy such a bad joke in so many countries.

The problem in Fiji is not that democracy doesn't work as it should but that it has not since 1987 given it a chance to work at all. This may seem blindingly obvious but it is this political problem that provides the starting point for thinking about the merits and requirements of a vibrant democracy for Fiji.

The fact that Fiji has had three or four coups since 1987 (depending on your definition of a coup) suggests that the main challenge in Fiji is that many lack a real commitment to democracy. Fiji would not have had one, never mind four, coups if the military had been faced with a resolute insistence on the unfolding of the democratic process by Fiji's politicians, traditional and religious leaders, business elites and the community at large.

Some people in all of these groups have believed their interests to be better served by throwing elected governments out of power than by allowing the democratic process to take its course. But as they have discovered, coups have negative consequences. They breed more coups, setting a precedent for political short-circuiting by those who fear that particular electoral outcomes will threaten their power, status, income, institutional or group interests. Recurring coups breed insecurity and fear, leading to a decline in investor and local confidence and a consequent decline in economic activity. Capable, experienced and qualified local people leave in search of more secure and prosperous environments, creating problems in maintaining infrastructure and services, further slowing development, and contributing to frustrated aspirations and rising crime.

Coups also allow their supporters to impose on everybody their policies, their laws, their visions without the kind of dialogue, negotiation, and compromise entailed in governing in a democracy. This is all very well when the coup-makers aims resonate with your own preferences but is not so much fun when you disagree.

But although people in Fiji have learned that coups have serious negative consequences not everybody is now committed to a democratic future. Some in Fiji still think that 'democracy is a foreign flower' and that it should adopt some other kind of political system. Some would prefer a benevolent dictatorship, others a system that allows for some kind of customary group representation and rule. The problem with both of these preferences is that their workings and implications are not fully understood and thought through. Few people who advocate such alternatives to, or modifications of, democracy, have taken the time to investigate whether these have operated well in the past or in other countries. Nor have they thought about how these might play out in Fiji's unique contemporary environment or in Fiji's relations with the wider world.

Until someone makes a convincing and agreed case for an alternative to democracy in Fiji, the best way to avoid future coups is to make a commitment to democracy, to learn that defeat at the ballot box does not mean the end of the world, and to learn how to influence political decisions, not just at election time, but between elections.

Not every decision made by government is universally popular in democratic countries but democracy as a system for deciding who has the power to rule still has wide appeal. It is rather like the way people all over the Pacific think about their traditional political systems. Some in the Pacific grumble about the behaviour, performance or decisions of individual customary leaders but it is important to most of them that their traditional political systems be maintained, not just out of attachment to the known but because those systems are thought to serve a valuable social purpose.

What are the valuable purposes that democracy serves? Well, democracy allows everybody a say in the running of their country and is the best political system for holding political leaders accountable for their decisions and actions and for limiting the arbitrary deployment and abuse of power. By providing opportunities for the defeated to return to power at a not too distant date, it contributes to orderly and peaceful political transitions.

If people in Fiji decide for democracy, how do they maintain it and make it work for them? First and most fundamentally people must all learn to speak up and to ask for answers, something that does not come naturally to many, especially young people, women, and people in situations where persons of rank are present. Habits of silence and deference have their cultural uses but they discourage the development and exchange of ideas and suggestions about how to shape the future. They also allow politicians and governments to avoid explaining their political strategies and their policies and to treat the population as subjects to be manipulated before elections and administered between them rather than as citizens whose interests they should represent.

How to instil the confidence to participate in discussion? Perhaps people could practice by asking questions and seeking satisfactory explanations from those whose decisions affect their daily lives – from doctors, from school boards, from utility providers, from union officials, from employers, retailers, developers, and even university lecturers. Perhaps they could seek opportunities for the exchange of views and discussion of ideas that are free from inhibitions related to social expectations. Perhaps they could press their political representatives to establish temporary or ongoing forums for public discussion on issues of concern.

It is perfectly possible to operate by different rules and to seek different types of outcomes in the traditional and modern political spheres. Ratu Sukuna was the most obvious example of many in Fiji who have understood and successfully met the different requirements of the two worlds.

People would have more confidence to speak and question if they felt informed about the issues they care about. Being informed allows people to expose false or self-serving arguments, to ask the questions that matter, to understand the implications of their own and others' proposals, and to make useful suggestions. And it is no longer difficult to arm yourself with information and useful analysis, thanks to the students' best friend, the internet.

Developing a voice is the first step towards meaningful political participation. But people do need to think carefully about the way in which they articulate their concerns and interests. There are very divergent political views in Fiji and these can harden into extreme positions. The problem with extreme positions is that they can lead others to default to opposing extremes. An ever more strident repetition of apparently irreconcilable positions drives out acknowledgement of each other's concerns and interests, discussion, negotiation, compromise and creative thinking about the future. A key part of learning to speak with authority and impact is to learn to be a careful listener.

Many opportunities exist for people to influence the actions of elected governments. There are a number of ways to make individual or group representations to members of parliament who have an interest in listening to future voters or to government ministers. There are also many indirect ways of influencing government and opposition, for example by articulating views and making suggestions through the media or by creating or joining non-governmental organizations and thereby reminding politicians of public concerns and interests.

Democracy has not always and everywhere functioned to the satisfaction of the citizenry but it is a political system that allows for its own reform and improvement. Such reform, improvement, adaptation, may take time but it will happen if people develop a commitment to the ideal of popular sovereignty and actively and continually work towards realising that ideal. For that commitment and that engagement to take hold in Fiji, people need to feel they deserve a voice in the country's affairs, need to develop that voice, and need to appreciate that getting their voice heard and understood takes more than speaking. It also takes a willingness to learn and to listen.