

Fiji Times News Awards: Campaign of the Year

Some rights are so fundamental to our way of life that we can become careless and take them for granted only truly appreciating them when they are taken away.

Democracy was taken away from the people of Fiji at the point of a gun in December 2007. The campaign mounted immediately by the Fiji Times for the restoration of democracy did not have a dincus or catch-phrase. There have been no front page pointers or ingenious marketing plans. The campaign became the heart of the Fiji Times in news, comment, editorials and cartoons. In paper and on-line.

In the past 12 months, despite verbal and physical intimidation; threats of violence, deportation and threats of closure, the paper continued its campaign by providing a relentless plurality of opinion.

If the test of democracy is the freedom of criticism then for the first eight months of the year our campaign was a resounding success. The contributed, in greater numbers than ever before, and in typically robust fashion, to the expanded letters page, to website blogs and to our social networking site Sotia Central.

Circulation soared, far outstripping any other newspaper. Website hits were at their highest level ever.

In April 9th 2009 the Fiji Times' campaign, the loudest and most relentless component of national and international lobbying, concluded with success. The Appeal Court handed down its verdict that the 2007 coup was illegal and ordered the reinstatement of democracy. For one day, Fiji celebrated.

The next day the assault on democracy became absolute. The Constitution was thrown out, a "new legal order" and censorship introduced. A new Fiji Times campaign began. The ultimate aim was the same: restoration of democracy. Circumstance dictated the strategy was different.

The Sunday Times of April 13th appeared with empty spaces where stories banned by censors should have appeared. Those white spaces carried the message "the stories on this page could not be published due to government restriction." The newspaper was a sell-out. The message resonated across Fiji and the world.

It was probably the shortest campaign ever mounted lasting exactly one day before the interim government ordered that any repetition would lead to the closure of the paper. By any standard it was a success.

We now have a new campaign. The ultimate aim again remains the same: the restoration of democracy. And circumstance dictates again that we adopt a different strategy. Despite commercial pressures, including the removal of government advertising, and on-going intimidation that has included physical assaults, we continue to practice the kind of good journalism that is the hallmark of any democracy.

If we cannot write our stories in a fair and balanced way, and so far more than three hundred stories have been rejected by the censors, we refuse to allow the censored version to appear.

Unlike most newspaper campaigns our does not have a scheduled end date. Its structure is fluid and occasionally ad hoc. Anything we manage to get past the censors we view as a success, however small.

There are two measurers of success in Fiji Times' campaign for a return to democracy in Fiji. One will be seen only when there is a removal of censorship and a return to the ballot box. The other is seen every day in the pages of the paper. Integrity, however high the cost.

Anne Fussell
Managing Director