

The Fiji Times ONLINE

Dealing with corruption

Dr Joseph Veramu
Friday, July 24, 2015



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Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption manager investigation Niko Bukarau makes a submission to the Public Accounts Committee last month. A recent workshop on anti-corruption provided the opportunity for participants to meet members of the PAC a

THIS week we had the anti-corruption workshop for Pacific parliamentarians at Novotel in Nadi organised by Global Organisation of Parliamentarians (GOPAC), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

It was an opportunity to meet parliamentary members of the Fiji Public Accounts Committee, parliamentarians from other Pacific countries and anti-corruption agencies.

Fiji adopted the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2008 and was the only Pacific country to have set up an anti-corruption agency namely the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption

(FICAC).

Fiji has also been involved in reviewing three other countries under UNCAC.

One of the questions asked by an Australian parliamentarian was on the setting up of a standing committee on corruption in Fiji.

It was noted that the Fijian Constitution had provisions for anti-corruption agencies.

Investigations of corruption allegations required it to be dealt with apolitically and confidentially.

Standing committees would require bipartisan parliamentary membership and political maturity was an important prerequisite so that the proceedings of the committee did not deteriorate into political grandstanding.

Corruption is a concern in Fiji especially with the private sector. FICAC has jurisdiction to litigate against companies that have procurement arrangements with Government ministries on corruption allegations.

They deal with companies and workers only when there are allegations of fraud.

Corruption is such an issue in the private sector that the joke is that the richest people are purchasing officers who deal in procurements.

They have the biggest houses and the flashiest cars.

As the due processes will take place by the Judicial Services Commission to appoint the FICAC commissioner in due course, it is noted that FICAC has impressed with its anti-corruption investigations, advocacy, public awareness and litigation.

It has come of age in its recent successful case where they used their own expertise without relying on Queen's Counsels.

At the workshop it was reported that in Fiji, the Government was looking at a network of laws that complement each other in terms of anti-corruption.

Under the Companies Bill 2015, business concerns are divided in different categories based on their turnovers.

They have to disclose annual returns and this can be crosschecked with filings on individual returns, for example.

This is one means of keeping tabs of irregularities.

At the workshop, the civic society organisations were represented by Transparency International Fiji and PNG. Both TI groups have a policy of "constructive engagement" with their governments.

The point made was that they were anti-corruption not anti-government.

This soft power approach has enabled constructive inputs into policy work in Fiji and PNG. In the case of PNG, the Government there requested TI PNG to be part of the review team under UNCAC reviewing other countries.

There was mention of integrity pacts in the Pacific parliamentarians workshop as a means of curbing corruption among private companies with Government procurement contracts.

Corruption in this sector is getting sophisticated given that Government uses a cash-based accounting system as opposed to the accrual system used in the private sector.

This leaves room for unscrupulous business people to game the system.

* Dr Joseph Veramu works as a consultant on economic policy planning and is a board director at Transparency International Fiji. The views expressed here are his and not of this newspaper. For feedback, email: oa@transparencyfiji.org or director@transparencyfiji.org.