Media, Civil Society and Democracy

20. Keynote Address — Keeping the Information Flow Open: A key condition for good government in Micronesia

Father Francis X. Hezel

The crusade for good governance

Good governance has become a catchphrase today. It is commonly seen as the standard by which nations are measured in the balance, the axle on which any nation's wheel turns. It is as if the whole planet has used its collective force to mount a global campaign for good governance. Development banks, lending institutions and international organisations, not to mention large donor countries, have earmarked good governance as the essential condition for granting foreign aid. However many oilfields or gold mines a country might possess, without good governance it is consigned to a status of mediocrity or worse.

Just what is good governance? Even if a suitable technical definition could be found, good governance is probably best defined by what happens in its absence. Without good governance, public services are substandard and little is done to arrest further deterioration. Businessmen find that the most effective way to get things done is by making under-the-table deals with government officials. Cronyism abounds, with a small group of individuals seemingly holding unlimited power over resources. Meanwhile, of course, government leaders make frequent calls to their overseas banks and invest in real estate abroad, which they would never have been able to afford on their salaries alone. Laws are understood to apply to 'others', not to those who make them or enforce them. But the 'others', quick to follow the precedent their leaders establish, find no reason why they should be trammelled by laws that are not enforced. As foreign investors lose confidence in the country's ability to guarantee legal protection and social order, they pull their money out, fuelling a downward economic spiral.

Good governance, then, touches every aspect of a nation's life. Without it a country can count on nothing — not international aid, not foreign investment, not a strong economic system, not good schools and hospitals, not civil order.

As the theory goes

Good governance is not simply an accident of history or culture, today's theory holds. In what amounts to a thorough reversal of the position Western countries took a century or more ago, the present day theory rejects the old notion that

certain cultures are naturally capable of governing themselves, while others are inherently unable to do so. Of course, this belief was often drawn on to legitimate the Western colonialism rampant at the time. Today, however, the reigning theory of good governance, rooted in our contemporary understanding of democracy, is that public pressure is what keeps the government in check and makes it responsible and responsive to its citizens.

Unless people know what the government is doing, there will never be any public accountability. Hence, the government is obliged to lift the veil that conceals its inner workings so that citizens can peek in, if they care to, and find out what is happening in government. To the extent that the government removes the barricades at the door, throws open its windows, and provides information to its citizens, it can be said to practice transparency — another catchword of our day.

The supposition is that, even if few individuals will take the trouble to acquire such information on their own, a small group of professional snoops are prepared to do the necessary legwork and to present the information in an understandable form to the rest of society. This is why the media plays such an important role in a modern society. It has the resources and interest, despite the delays and rebuffs from officials, to convey to the rest of us what's going on in government. The media not only offers the means to convey this information to the public — at least in most societies — but it also represents a group of dedicated information-seekers who will doggedly pursue officials who don't return their calls and keep knocking on doors that are slow to open.

The theory, then, is that good governance depends heavily on a steady flow of reliable information on government workings to the public, most of this coming through the media. If the media functions as it should, people will act on this information and vote corrupt or ineffective leaders out of office and replace them with a better lot. This, of course, supposes that people have the power and the will to do so. It supposes that the country enjoys a political system in which the people have their hands on the controls in some way: through free elections, open challenges to the administration, a fair court system, and laws that really work.

In other words, the conditions for good governance come down to just a couple of basic requirements. The first is a functioning political system that offers people real choices over who their leaders are and how they will be governed. The second is a good flow of reliable information from the government to the people, without which they would never be able to make an informed judgment on the performance of their leaders. Given these two conditions, any nation should be able to achieve good governance, whatever its cultural milieu.

The machinery of government

Micronesian nations, like most other Pacific Island states, have been quick to adopt the machinery of a modern political system. They have legislatures and chief executives at the helm of their governments, supported by an administrative bureaucracy and the body of law that is generally required of a government today. Top public officials are chosen through elections run in accordance with international standards. Most of these nations have public auditors whose role is to examine financial statements and flag dubious expenses. These governments have incorporated into their political systems the checks and balances that are meant to ensure responsible leadership. Even beyond this, if the ADB or another international institution should insist on new legislation deemed necessary to encourage investment, more often than not it is promptly enacted.

The premise on which foreign consultancies sponsored by international financial institutions seem to operate is that once the apparatus for good government is in place, the rest will take care of itself. But this does not seem to be the case. Underneath these trappings of a government system lies a set of down-home attitudes very different from what Westerners might expect. The way of conducting business, informed as it is by attitudes stemming from a small island society, might even pose a greater threat to what is called good governance than wanton corruption or deliberate abuse of the system.

One of the best known symbols of justice shows a blindfolded woman holding scales to indicate that the justice system, and the government of which it is a part, is not a respecter of personal status or other individual characteristics. But how can this sort of impartiality be expected in an island society in which interpersonal dealings were always conducted with an eye to the status of each party? Any public official is bound to be dealing on an almost daily basis with high-titled persons, close relatives, and individuals to whom favours are owed or expected. In a small society in which there is virtually no such creature as a faceless citizen, an even-handed justice system can be an elusive ideal.

Reciprocity is the norm in small societies everywhere. Favours are given and received, with a sense of indebtedness incurred by the recipient. It is incumbent on any modern state to enact legislation that attempts to draw boundaries beyond which a government official may not go in paying back favours. But making this legislation effective is another matter altogether. A public official indebted to his brother-in-law or uncle might not be able to hire him for fear of violating the norms against nepotism, but there are other ways in which he can and will use his government position to take care of such persons.

Even with the apparatus of government in place, the process of good governance can be subverted in countless ways. For instance, some of the state courts in the FSM, although adequately staffed, are reluctant to preside over critical land disputes in their jurisdiction because of the emotional intensity of the issue

among the contesting parties. These cases are put off until tempers subside, often delaying the court appearance for years. If there is any truth to the old adage that 'justice delayed is justice denied', the dispensation of justice in these states is seriously imperilled. Similarly, public auditors can produce audits of government bureaus, flagging questionable expenses as they should, but their work is in vain unless there is follow up in the Attorney-General's Office or by the Public Prosecutor. Elections are regarded as a necessary instrument to allow competent office-bearers to emerge. Yet, if the island populace casts its vote simply on the basis of ethnic or kin affiliation, the purpose of elections will be unrealised. The modern political apparatus is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for good governance.

What foreigners can do to help

People will grow into their governance systems in time, we are told. There is certainly a good measure of truth to this claim, as the history of the new Micronesian governments shows. Undeniable progress has been made in the past 20 years as island people have adjusted to the new forms and norms of their governments. True, the response from Micronesian leadership to the demands of international financial institutions and foreign governments for better governance has been querulous at times, and now and then even strident. Voices in the local governments will lash out at US infringement on the sovereignty of the island nations and construe proposed reforms as yet further instances of neo-colonialism at work. The truth is, however, that a great number of Micronesians understand full well the need to make their political machinery more effective, just as they subscribe to many of the reforms that are proposed by international organisations. For various reasons, political and cultural, local people might not wish to voice their sentiments, although they will silently applaud when others take up the standard.

One of the most important functions that foreigners can serve in Micronesia today is to articulate positions that many local people might embrace but are unwilling to endorse publicly. International financial institutions such as the ADB are in an especially favourable position to promote such reforms under the aegis of good governance and the investment opportunities and economic benefits that might result. Such institutions might serve as convenient scapegoats for government reforms that are already endorsed by the silent majority, providing they are not overly sensitive to criticism from their clients. Beyond this, these institutions could assume a pivotal role in nation-building if they better appreciated the need for continuing support for reform-minded elements in the local governments. This could entail a radical departure from the normal way in which the ADB and other such institutions assist developing Pacific nations. It would probably mean fewer short-term consultancies and more long-term colleagues residing in situ to assist with the inevitable political battles that

reforms will provoke. I have made the point elsewhere that foreigners can do more than impart managerial expertise; they can build political will, a task at least equally important. Finally, the timing for the reforms should be informed by the real but unarticulated need that local people might feel for a particular change. This means that more of the initiative for a program ought to come from the Islanders than from the bank.

There remains much that foreigners and foreign institutions cannot do, of course, but this is a given in the Pacific today. If outsiders in partnership with Pacific nations can act as a catalyst for reforms and an excuse for mobilisation, much of the burden of public education will fall to local people. They will bear the responsibility for educating their own leaders and alerting fellow citizens that their best interests cannot be well served unless their modern political structures are utilised as intended. Their reaction to government reforms, reflecting as it does subtle changes in the attitude of Islanders, can be a useful gauge for the proper timing of these reforms.

Yet people can carry out this task only if they are aware of what is happening in government. This, then, brings us to the second and perhaps even more important condition of good government: public access to information.

Knowledge as a valued commodity

Some years ago a congressman, who was smarting at the accusation that FSM Congress fund were being misused, presented me with an interesting challenge. He asked me to check on his own special projects money for the past five years to verify that the money had been spent legitimately. I immediately sent out an older American with time on his hands who had volunteered his help to obtain the information we needed. Armed with a list of projects funded, he spent a month or more visiting offices and talking to officials. When he returned to report on what he had accomplished, he was frustrated and seemed beaten. The government officials he visited weren't rude to him, but they were clearly reluctant to release the information he needed for our little study. 'Why do you want to know this?' was the most common response he encountered. The long delays and the endless chase from one office to another were as effective as if windows had been slammed shut. In the end, we had to abandon our project, to the dismay of the congressman and myself. We had been defeated by the unwillingness of government functionaries to release the information we needed.

There is probably no one in Micronesia who has not had an experience like this. Sometimes we are told that the computer is down. Often we might be told to wait until the office supervisor returns so that he can authorise the release of the information we need. To protest that what we seek is 'public information' will be of little avail. In practice, public information is a rare commodity in Micronesia today. Even when there is nothing to hide, people seem reluctant to

share information. This often confounds Westerners, for the same Islanders who are so generous with food and material things can be astonishingly reserved with knowledge.

Some of the reluctance to release what Westerners see as public information can be traced to traditional cultural attitudes. The Pacific stance towards passing on knowledge has always been guarded. This is especially true of certain types of knowledge — such as local medicine, navigational chants, genealogies and even favourite fishing spots — for they are seen as the valued possession of those in the know. This type of knowledge can be parlayed into personal prestige. This might explain why many government officials who are in command of a database of any sort are reluctant to share the information they possess with those who could use it for their own work. It might also help explain why bureaucrats who have attended a conference abroad so often return to their office and resume their work without breathing a word of what they learned to anyone else in their department. The specialised knowledge they have acquired at such conferences and workshops is quietly added to their fund of personal expertise, enhancing their value and making them irreplaceable in their job.

Even a little knowledge is a dangerous thing

Knowledge is not just a valued possession; it can be dangerous. In my experience, Islanders are very slow to say anything, even in personal conversation, that might reflect badly on a third party. A large part of this reluctance is owing to the fact that personal relationships are easily damaged in a small island community. Understandably, no one wants to say anything negative that could get back to the person and create ill will. It's one thing to do that sort of thing in a large American city, but quite another to risk this enmity in a small society where day-to-day encounters with others are almost guaranteed.

The problem is compounded in an age in which new channels of communication carry messages instantaneously to large numbers of people. If certain information were to fall into the wrong hands, it could be used to mount a public attack on a government official. Even if no malice was intended, the information could be misinterpreted by those who gained access to it and reflect badly on the government. Worse still, its release could be traced back to the one who surrendered the information, with damaging effects for this individual and his job. I'm sure that this was why my colleague, who went from office to office seeking information on congressional funds, was met so often by the question: 'Why do you need this information?'

Micronesians are no less eager than the rest of us to protect their national reputation. When I went public with my article on the 'Chuuk Problem' many people wrote in to object, some of them quite angrily, to what they considered an assault on the reputation of Chuuk. 'Why would anyone want to hang out

their dirty laundry in public?' one of them asked. I could protest that the laundry was already on the line before I got there, or that the purpose of the article was not to vilify Chuuk, and certainly not to smear the reputation of any individuals, but simply to get people thinking and talking about how they could best deal with what were undeniably their problems. Yet, these people were simply reflecting a strong Islander gut reaction to public criticism, while I was the typical Westerner in my insistence that such public criticism was the best way to ensure better performance by public officials.

I have to admit that the reluctance to criticise openly is one of the many qualities that I find endearing in the Pacific. I regard the desire to spare the feelings of others as admirable. (Well, I should, because I myself have profited from this forgivingness many times over.) The issue is not whether the attitude is good or not — that is taken for granted — but at what point it must give way to another, more demanding approach in a modern government system. How do we get a government to work properly if everyone is forgiven everything and not a word of criticism is ever heard in public?

Enter the media

The establishment of the media with its roving band of news hawks has made government officials all the more wary of releasing information to the public. While most island governments appreciate the need to issue press releases on newsworthy events, they are much more reluctant to offer the unedited facts to newspapers and other media outlets for fear that they will put an unfavourable spin on the information. Pacific Island governments, in their desire to control the release of information, do not easily embrace the idea of others gleaning what they can to present their own interpretation of events. One Marshallese congressman recently complained: 'Some people access government information and distort the truth to mislead people.' He added that, while he believed in transparency in government, 'something needs to be done to safeguard information so that not just anyone can access it'.

The position he is reflecting is a common one in Micronesian government circles: the danger of twisting information so as to misrepresent the government is serious enough to justify withholding such information altogether. A striking but by no means isolated example of this occurred two years ago after the conclusion of the FSM Constitutional Convention. In its zeal to ensure a perfectly balanced, objective presentation of the proposed constitutional amendments, the FSM Government submitted the script of a video program to one committee after another to be screened for errors or any hint of bias. When the committees had scrupulously examined the material and finally okayed it for release two days before the referendum on the proposed amendments, it was too late to air it. The program might have passed the close scrutiny of the committees as

sufficiently sanitised and harmless to all concerned, but it never reached the people it was supposed to educate.

The media comes under still more suspicion because of its insatiable appetite for news, even news that is not fit to print. It's often regarded as a stray dog that will devour any scrap of information with gusto, only to leave a smelly pile of manure on your backyard lawn afterwards. There is a shared understanding in Micronesia that some things, even things that are known by everyone, should not be discussed publicly. The paternity of an important public official, for instance, or his sexual preferences or past indiscretions might be generally acknowledged, even though it is tacitly understood that they are not to be mentioned. Some of the champions of a very free press, however, are seen as challenging this pact by their assertion: 'If it's news, then the people have a right to hear about it, even in a public forum.' It's hard not to credit criticism of the public media today when we look at the way in which invasion of privacy has rolled back the private lives of government leaders in other parts of the world. Even so, we must come to terms with the question: are we better off with the media, for all its excesses, than without it?

Perhaps we have no choice in the matter. The media, which is assuming an ever-larger role in even the off-the-beaten-path parts of the world, seems to be an essential component of society today and an indispensable condition of good governance. Whatever might have happened in the past, today the flow of information from the government to the people takes place through the media: television, radio, newspapers and, increasingly, through the Internet. The media, then, is the means through which people in modern societies find out what their government is up to.

The media as a watchdog

Building an effective media system to relay information to the public is a serious need, one that must be addressed but is not going to be easily resolved. Even apart from the gaping holes in the media umbrella in a country such as the FSM, there is the additional problem of presenting to a linguistically diverse population the workings of a national government that is beyond their field of vision because it operates at a level or two above the local politics people are most familiar with. The public in any state might be aware of what the state government is doing, especially if the state legislature's sessions are broadcast in the local language, but their knowledge of the Congress of FSM is likely to be scant.

Admittedly, public interest in the National Government surged in 2004 when the FSM Congress introduced several measures, one of them the infamous 'Amnesty Bill', that were construed as bald attempts to protect its own interest. This happens from time to time when word of controversial bills gets out to the public. But Congress, like most other government institutions, would prefer to

conduct its business far from the public eye. When an enterprising local man set up his video camera in the congressional chambers to record a session some years ago, a policeman was ordered to position himself in front of it to block shooting. The attitude of the Congress might be exemplified by a statement that one of its members once made: 'My people elected me because they trust me. They're willing to let me make the judgments on what's good and bad for them. They don't have to know what goes on in the sessions.'

If the media is supposed to be the watchdog of the nation, it might still be a toothless puppy in some Pacific nations. The construction of an effective media system will take time and more resources than any single institution has at its disposal, but we can at least begin to change the cultural attitudes that block the flow of information. We can hold these attitudes up to the light and let the public see them for what they are: a remnant from an earlier day that can no longer be maintained because they impede the workings of a modern government system. That puppy will eventually grow to a full-sized dog, but we might want to ensure that the dog doesn't remain leashed in the garage.

Conclusion

Some Micronesians profess to yearn for former times, before the arrival of the mass media, when the traditional attitudes towards information ruled and villagers knew just how to approach their leaders about their reaction to decisions. They know, however, that this will never happen because our societies are pointed forward rather than backward. The world demands conformity to certain standards of governance, and so do our own people. This is part of the price of nationhood in today's world, just as it is the effect of decades of exposure of Micronesians to new and higher political expectations. Deep in their hearts, Islanders recognise that life in splendid cultural isolation from the rest of the planet is a chimera.

Good governance requires more than adoption of the proper political institutions, notwithstanding the exclusive emphasis placed on this by some reform movements. Good governance, as it is universally understood today, demands accountability of government to the people it serves. This depends on those conduits of information that we call the media, but it in turn depends on a reliable information flow from the government, which allows everyone an X-ray view of what government is doing. The current position taken by government on dispensing information is understandable, particularly in view of traditional Pacific attitudes to the possession of information, but it is counterproductive in a modern government. Without information flow between the government and the people it serves, there can be no government of and for the people.

References

Goodenough, Ward H. 2002. *Under Heaven's Brow: Pre-Christian Religious Tradition in Chuuk*. Philadalphia: American Philosophical Society.

Hezel, Francis X. 1998. 'Why Don't Our Government Offices Work?' *Micronesian Counselor,* 22.

Hezel, Francis X. 2002. 'Settling Dispute.' *Micronesian Counselor,* 39.

Hezel, Francis X. 2003. 'Power or Partnership? Making the New Compact Work.' *Micronesian Counselor,* 45.

Hezel, Francis X. 2004. 'The "Chuuk Problem": At the Foot of the Political Pyramid.' *Micronesian Counselor,* 50.

Hezel, Francis X. 2005. 'Peeking into the Public Process.' *Micronesian Counselor,* 54.

Larmour, Peter. 2005. *Foreign Flowers: Institutional Transfer and Good Governance in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Metzgar, Eric H. 1991. 'Traditional Education in Micronesia.' PhD dissertation, UCLA, Los Angeles.