



Dialogue on **SOCIAL COHESION**

26 – 27 September, 2019
Pacific Harbour, Fiji



Communique

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Introduction

The Dialogue on Social Cohesion (DOSC) was held from 26-27 September at the Pearl Resort in Pacific Harbour. Organised by Dialogue Fiji, under its “Participative Democracy and Accountability” project funded by the European Union, the DOSC had the participation of heads of state institutions, political party leaders and MPs, academics and researchers, civil society leaders, media representatives, faith based organizations’ leaders, community leaders, youth and gender activists and international development partners.

The following topics were deliberated upon during the two day dialogue:

- Electoral Systems & Processes in Divided Societies
- Analysing the Trends and Implications: 2018 General Elections
- Hate Speech and Fake News
- Building Social Cohesion

There were 4 panel discussions held over the course of the two days which featured a range of actors presenting on different aspects of the above topics. Following each panel discussion and Q and A, dialogue participants then deliberated in groups on issues, responding to the following triggers for deliberation:

- Deliberate on whether the current threshold of 5% for gaining representation in Parliament should be reviewed? If so, what would be a suitable threshold (%) and why?
- Deliberate on what should be the desired electoral objectives in a divided society like Fiji.
- Deliberate on how public trust and confidence in electoral institutions and processes be strengthened?
- What are some of the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) recommendations that Fiji needs to adapt?
- Deliberate on the emerging trends relating to national elections and its implications on social cohesion.
- Deliberate on the role of political parties in addressing social cohesion.
- Discuss the key divisive issues which emerge prominently during elections and how they can be addressed.
- Deliberate on the pragmatics of power sharing and inclusive policy and decision making in the Fijian contexts. Is it desirable? Can it be achieved and how?
- Discuss the impacts of hate speech and fake news on Fiji’s society. What are the major consequences and how can they be addressed?
- Deliberate on how social media can be made more accountable?
- What roles would different stakeholders play in addressing hate speech and fake news, misinformation and disinformation?
- Are limits on free expression desirable? Or necessary? Or are they not? Why?
- How can social cohesion be achieved in a divided society like Fiji?
- Deliberate on the role of faith based organizations in fostering social cohesion.
- What are some of the challenges in achieving social cohesion? If so, how can we address them?
- Deliberate on how political leaders can work together to achieve social cohesion.

The DOSC considered the said issues and resolved as follows:

Electoral Systems & Processes in Divided Societies

1. The DOSC noted that electoral systems and processes in divided societies can have profound impacts on efforts to build a cohesive society. Elections in Fiji have a very polarizing effect on society and the DOSC noted that some degree of electoral engineering is necessary to ensure desired electoral outcomes to mitigate negative consequences of divided societies.
2. The DOSC calls on legislators, Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), political parties and relevant state institutions to consider the following relevant reforms (3-11 below)
3. Consider constitutional review to reduce to 2.5% or completely remove the election threshold (currently 5%) for getting allocated a seat in the legislature, to ensure inclusion of different political interests.
4. Consider adopting the (modified) Sainte-Laguë method for allocating seats, in favour of the current D'Hondt method.
5. The parliament should consider instituting caretaker conventions to ensure that abuse of incumbency in future elections can be regulated.
6. A separate media regulation body for election time reporting should be set up to address the overt media bias experienced during elections.
7. The DOSC calls on CSOs, political parties, cultural/religious leaders, media, and other non-state actors to contribute towards building public trust and confidence in election institutions and processes, by not unduly and without just cause, undermining the integrity of these.
8. The DOSC urges CSOs and EMBs to work together in creating public understanding of constitutional and legislative arrangements relating to elections, safeguards for independence of electoral institutions and the international benchmarks and standards for election processes.
9. The DOSC strongly calls for the review of s.115 of Electoral Act 2014, and for the definition of "campaign" to be clarified, and harmonized with internationally accepted definitions of campaign in electoral legislation.
10. The DOSC urges political parties to develop internal mechanisms for screening candidates, ensuring that capable/credible candidates are given party tickets, and set internal quotas for at least 30% of all party candidates to be women in future elections.
11. The DOSC recommends that the implementation of the following recommendations in the MOG Final Report on 2018 elections need to be prioritized – 1,8,10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21.

Analysing Trends & Implications: 2018 General Elections

1. The DOSC acknowledged that race and related issues have an overbearing impact during elections and on electoral outcomes.
2. Gender and LGBTIQ issues are not given the due treatment during election campaigns.
3. The high incidence of fake news and hate speech on social media has a negative impact on people's choices during elections.
4. The DOSC discussed that political parties and contestants have an important role to play in shaping election issues and curbing negative rhetoric during elections.
5. The DOSC noted that false claims and promises were made by politicians on all sides.
6. The DOSC calls for further deliberations on a code of conduct for political parties, and for civil society and other independent non-state actors to work together in undertaking civic education, and facilitating meetings and discussions between political parties, EMBs and other relevant actors to address destructive rhetoric around elections.

Hate Speech & Fake News

1. The DOSC noted that the notion of fake news should be approached with caution, and observed that fake news usually denotes leaders discrediting mainstream news media by levelling charges against them. Misinformation and disinformation are the preferred terms to cover the activities of governing parties, opposition supporters, general public and media. “Disinformation” is the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false information in order to mislead. “Misinformation” is the act of sharing information without realizing it's wrong.
2. The DOSC noted with concern the high incidence of hate speech on social media, and discussed that it was a reflection of the degree of radicalization that the Fijian society is undergoing.
3. The DOSC observed that the rise in blogsites, social media pages peddling disinformation and hate speech, etc. is, in part, a consequence of the restrictions on free speech, and the general lack of critical commentary and investigative journalism by the mainstream media. It was noted that hate speech should not become pretext for censorship to silence legitimate views.
4. The DOSC agreed that further restrictions on free speech were not desired at the present time in Fiji, however, it held deliberations on how social media could be made more accountable.
5. The DOSC resolved that the best practical solution to the problem of hate speech and disinformation is civic education and information literacy which needs to be carried out at all levels of society. CSOs, government, independent state institutions, media organisations, political parties, private sector actors like ISPs have the responsibility to collectively deliberate upon and carry out interventions to address hate speech and fake news in Fiji, without resorting to further restrictions on speech.
6. State institutions such as Online Safety Commission needs to work closely with a range of civil society actors to ensure greater success in creating a safe and conducive online environment for social interaction.
7. DOSC calls upon the Ministry of Education to consider including Information literacy in the formal education curriculum from the primary school level to ensure that future generations are better equipped to deal with disinformation and hate speech.
8. DOSC calls for a national level awareness campaign on hate speech and disinformation to be initiated by government but carried out by a range of civil society actors to ensure that it is not perceived as being state propaganda or advancing a particular political agenda.
9. The DOSC advances that Media experts be engaged in providing trainings for government departments, military, politicians, CSOs, community leaders and media to strengthen their capacities to address misinformation.

Building Social Cohesion

1. The DOSC noted that perceptions of marginalization were an important factor contributing to growing radicalization of the Fijian society. The DOSC resolved that inclusivity at various levels (national level political governance, local level policy making, etc.) and accommodation of different political views and interests would be instrumental in addressing radicalization.
2. The DOSC agreed that political leadership had a significant impact on the cohesiveness of society. Divisive leadership styles were greatly detrimental to prospects for a peaceful and cohesive society.

3. The DOSC resolved that political party leaders should strictly sanction party politicians and members who engage in hate speech and follow an internal policy of intolerance of such views and sentiments.
4. The DOSC emphasized that faith based organisations exercise significant influence over their membership, and urged FBOs to take concrete steps to promote multiracialism, tolerance and racial harmony which are critical for building a cohesive society.
5. The DOSC calls for further dialogue, involving actors from across political, racial, religious divides on issues polarizing the society. In order for it to be successful, the participation of high level political leaders from all sides who are important influencers of political opinion is critical.



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