



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR  
P.O. Box 160  
Pohnpei, FM 96941



**Micronesian Counselor**

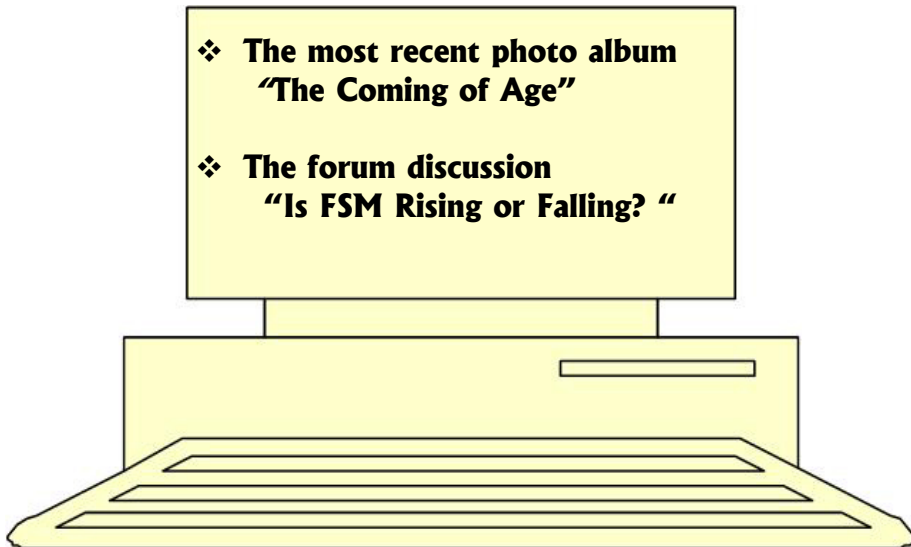
January 31, 2005

Issue 54

# Peeking into the Public Process

**Lots to see at [www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org)**

- ❖ The most recent photo album  
"The Coming of Age"
- ❖ The forum discussion  
"Is FSM Rising or Falling? "



Available now at [www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org)



*Francis X. Hezel, S.J.*

---

## The Crusade for Good Governance

Good governance has become a catchword 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 organizations, not to mention the 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 being 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 holding seemingly unlimited power over resources. Meanwhile, of course, government leaders are making frequent calls to their overseas banks and are investing in real estate abroad they would never have been able to afford on their salaries. Laws are understood to apply to "others", not 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 trammled 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, fueling 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. Mussolini in Fascist Italy was at least credited with making the trains run on time. In a "failed state," the abyss into which poor governance may lead, not even this claim can be made.

---

This depends on those conduits of information that we call the media, but they in turn depend on a reliable information flow from the government that allows everyone an x-ray view of what it's doing. The current position taken by government on dispensing information in understandable, particularly in view of traditional Pacific attitudes on information, but is counter-productive in a modern government. Other nations and the educated populace of the Micronesian nations themselves expect more.

\* \* \* \*

## Videos

---

### A Woman's Work Never Ends



A video drama comparing how the modern working women of Micronesia today deal with their many responsibilities both at work and at home and how it was in the old days. We're addressing the question of whether the workload of women has increased today as a result of modernization.

---

### Preserving Our Natural Heritage



This video looks at three main ecosystems in Pohnpei—the upland forest, the mangroves, and the coral reef—and examines what is happening to each of them. It documents some of the environmentally-friendly programs and projects that are now in place, and discusses ways each of us can do our part to help preserve Pohnpei's natural heritage. (This video is also available in Pohnpeian)



Feedback from the people they are meant to serve always makes government officials' work more complicated. It is understandable that they would prefer to tell the public to butt out, find something else to amuse themselves with, and let them get on with their work. Government officials are faced with the additional problem of passing on information to the public—information that can easily be twisted and turned to suit different interest groups.

It involves the frustration of watching people putting their own spin on this information—sometimes “misinterpreting” it, as the Marshallese congressman said—and the additional headache of appealing to their constituents to get it right. It also requires a change of heart in government officials so that they perceive the public as no longer “interfering” with the workings of government, but assuming the responsibility they were always meant to have in a representative government.

At the same time, the media bears responsibilities of its own, to the public it serves and to the government that protects its rights. Although it is supposed to pursue public information, prying open doors where necessary, it must always keep in mind that no one forfeits his right to respect, no matter how grievous and numerous his misdeeds. As strong as the temptation might be at times, the media should not carve up individuals and serve them for dinner to the public. Mutual respect is the bonding agent for all island societies. It is, as a participant in a conference on this issue once said, “what keeps people from one another's throats and prevents society from falling into barbarism.” Media may be indispensable in today's world, but it must still pay its cultural dues.

It might be easier if we returned to former times, before the arrival of media, when the traditional attitudes toward information ruled and villagers knew just how to approach their leaders about their reaction to decisions. We 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. Good governance, as universally understood today, demands accountability of government to the people it serves.



### *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 leaders in certain parts of the world are incorrupt and noble, while those in other places are sadly deficient in these qualities. Indeed, no one any longer believes that a government depends entirely, or even mostly, on the virtue of its leaders. This notion may have been in currency in Europe during the early age of nationalism, but it has faded away along with the divine right of kings. The reigning theory of good government, 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.**

---

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 the 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 in government—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. 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



stubbornly 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 flow 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 supposes, of course, 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 present 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 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. The second is a functioning political system that offers people real choices over who their leaders are and how they will be governed. Given these two conditions, any nation should be able to achieve good governance, whatever its cultural milieu.

### ***How Does This Play in the Pacific?***

**T**he theory of good governance, as laid out here, might seem to be another foreign-made burden laid on the shoulders of Pacific Island states already struggling to keep up with demands of the modern world. The initial response to this by island leaders might be querulous. "First they introduce foreign institutions, then the economy, then the style of government, then bring in radio and television, then the campaign for gender equality and the rights of children. Now they're telling us just how we are to run our own state. Will this foreign interference never end?" Here in Micronesia it might be seen as simply the latest manifestation of US neocolonialism, a last ditch effort for the US to work its will on island governments despite two decades of independence. Any outsider can sympathize with this frustration. Pacific Island nations are generally making a successful transition to modernization, but they can't be expected to do so all at once.



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 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 toothless puppy in some of our 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 holdover 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***

Years ago, when most Islanders had no idea how a government worked or what issues it faced, people may have had no option other than to entrust their elected leaders with a *carte blanche* to decide as they thought best. In those early Trust Territory days, government may well have been the business of the "pros"—those few Micronesians who had the education and experience to grasp the issues. Those were the days in which only a small fraction of the population had finished high school and few people understood how the larger world worked. Micronesia has come a long way since that time. The number of the schooled has grown enormously and people have come to expect a voice in their own government, not once every two or four years at election time but on a day-by-day and issue-by-issue basis. For them to look over the shoulders of their elected officials in a modern society is not only permissible, it is indispensable. In case officials hadn't noticed, we have passed from the age of government by a handful of "pros" to government by the people, even the ones who don't hold public office.



extensive news on the state legislature, sometimes even live coverage, but they offer almost nothing on the national congress. There is a single newspaper covering FSM, *Kaselehlle Press*, but it is only published biweekly and its readership is limited. Yap is the only state that has its own paper, *Yap Networker*, published biweekly. A growing number of Micronesians, especially the young, have access to the Internet.

There are a few government websites that offer official reports on activities (eg, FSM Public Information Office, Congress of FSM, and Pohnpei Governor's office), but there is only one private subscription service (BNN) that they can turn to for an independent view of the news.

### ***Media as a Watchdog***

**B**uilding 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

---

**If the media is supposed to be the watchdog of the nation, it might still be a toothless puppy in some of our nations.**

---

gaping holes in the media umbrella in 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 may 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 earlier this year when the FSM Congress introduced several measures 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



What Pacific Islanders might not recognize, however, is that this is not just another instance of the big powers pushing their own agenda. US, Australia, Japan, and the European Community are not the driving force behind the clamor for change. It is the financial community in league with the international organizations, the force behind what is known as globalization, that is insisting on good governance. There is a set of common expectations on this matter that extends to all nations around the world, whether in the Middle East, Africa, or the Pacific. These expectations apply equally to the more developed countries as well, some of which, like Japan, have had to scramble over the past ten years to meet these demands.

---

**Information on what their chiefs were up to could not easily be denied, for the people in the villages were not far removed from their leaders and the famed "coconut telegraph" was an effective channel of getting information from one person to another.**

---

The form that the government takes is not so terribly important for the world community, providing it gives a fair shake to everyone, including non-citizens with business interests. It must also be answerable to the people in some form or fashion, but the way in which it does so rests with the society itself. This is not too stringent a requirement, since not even traditional Pacific societies were absolutist. Long before the introduction of the ballot box, islanders held some effective checks on the authority of their leaders.

They had expectations of their chiefs and could withdraw their support for their chiefs if these expectations were not met. Information on what their chiefs were up to could not easily be denied, for the people in the villages were not far removed from their leaders and the famed "coconut telegraph" was an effective channel of getting information from one person to another.



But times have changed. So has the way leadership works in the islands. We are all aware that the machinery of government must change in accord with the demands of a modern nation. This is one of the essential conditions for good governance. The other condition—good flow of information from the government to its people—is equally critical, but often ignored. It is on this information flow that the remainder of this article will focus.

### ***Knowledge as a Valued Commodity***

Some years ago a congressman, who was smarting at the accusation that FSM Congress pork barrel funds were being misused, presented me with an interesting challenge. He asked me to check on his own special projects money over the past five years to verify that the money had been spent legitimately on the projects for which they were designated. Since I had publicly questioned the use of these funds on several occasions, my interest in this project was as great as the congressman's. Both of us stood to learn something useful from the project. 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 longer visiting offices and talking to officials. When he returned at the end of the month 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 both the congressman and myself. We had been defeated by the unwillingness of government functionaries to release the information we needed.

Is there anyone who has not had an experience like this? Sometimes we are told that the computer is down. Often we may be told to wait until the office supervisor returns so that he can authorize 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.



The media, then, is the means through which people in modern societies find out what their government is up to. Palau has two newspapers, one of them published weekly and the other twice weekly. Their lead stories often address the alleged collusion and conflict of interest of lawmakers, and question their use of public funds. The public television station often presents telecasts of the national congress in session, thus amplifying the "whispers"—the traditional designation for the decision-making chamber—so that the voice reaches nearly every home in Palau. This small but vibrant island nation tunes in each morning to the call-in show of a radio personality (Alfonso Diaz) who has at one time or other offended just about everyone in Palau. His style may not be marked by what we have come to think of as Pacific politeness, but it gets people listening. (It also has made Diaz, who has had three cars burned already, an insurance risk.)

The scattered atolls of the Marshalls represent a greater challenge for media, with nearly 70 percent of the population living in the town urban areas of Majuro and Ebeye, and the rest sprinkled throughout twenty atolls. Yet, the sessions of the Nitijela, the national legislature, are broadcast live over the government radio station. The privately owned cable TV station, with its local channel, is greatly underutilized as an educational instrument, even though the cable lines were subsidized by the government on condition that the local channel would provide public service.

Like Palau, the Republic of the Marshalls is well served by the print media. *Marshall Islands Journal*, a paper of what by Micronesian standards is of ancient vintage, sells over 3,000 copies. The news in print, including an evenhanded but unsparing account of government activity, filters down by word of mouth even to those in town who can not read. There is also the website *yokwe.net*, which offers the news and a forum in which people can discuss it with one another.

FSM, the largest of the three new island nations, has the thinnest media coverage. Each of the states has television with local programming, but nowhere is there a single local TV news program that telecasts even weekly. The radio stations, which broadcast in the local language everywhere, usually carry



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 may have passed the close scrutiny of the committees as sufficiently sanitized 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 treated like 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 this 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. All we need to do is compare the way the US press handled Clinton on his sexual conduct in office in contrast with the discreet way they treated John Kennedy's exploits forty years ago. Even so, we must come to terms with the question: Are we better off with the media, for all their excesses, than we are without it?

### ***Media in Micronesia***

Perhaps we have no choice in the matter. 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 may 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 today through the Internet.



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 withholding of knowledge. Some of the reluctance

---

**I'm sure that 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?"**

---

to release what Westerners see as public information can be traced to traditional cultural attitudes. The Pacific stance toward passing on knowledge has always been guarded.

This is especially true of certain types of knowledge—local medicine, navigational chants, genealogies and even favorite fishing spots—for they are seen as the valued possession of those in the know. This type of knowledge could be parlayed into personal prestige, as it still can today. This may 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 may also help explain why bureaucrats who have attended a conference abroad so often return to their office afterwards and resume their work without breathing a word of what they learned to anyone else in their department. The specialized 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 as well. In my experience, Islanders are very slow to say anything that might reflect badly on a third party, even in personal conversation. Part of the hesitation may stem from deference to the feelings of the person they are addressing. Who knows whether the other party is a friend or business associate of the person they're discussing? But another large part of the



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 that virtually guarantees personal encounters on a day-to-day basis. 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 in 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 persons 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 criticize 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 forgiveness 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***

**T**he 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

---

## **How do we get a government to work properly if everyone has forgiven everything and not a word of criticism is ever heard in public?**

---

facts to newspapers and other media outlets for fear that the latter will put an unfavorable 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 believes 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