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My way or highway

By Kamal Iyer
Saturday, March 14, 2009



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Fiji Times Editor in Chief Netani Rika, right, escorted by police to the office.

The Sword of Damocles, which has been intermittently used by the interim regime to attack media freedom in the past two years in the form of expulsions or deportation of three newspaper publishers and intimidation of journalists, was again used by the regime this week to harass and intimidate reputable news editors of the Fiji Times and Fiji Television Limited.

Just like a hot knife being used to cut butter with ease, the Sword of Damocles was in the form of police officers who entered the newsrooms of Fiji Television and the Fiji Times and armed with search warrants, seized documents contents of which were published by the newspaper on Tuesday and aired on Fiji TV's One National News on Monday. Seized from Fiji TV was a copy of a letter by the two political forum interlocutors to interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and from both newsrooms copies of a letter jointly written by the United Nations and Commonwealth, defining the parameters of the proposed President's Political Dialogue Forum.

To the ordinary unsuspecting citizen, it would seem that the two media outlets had committed treason, given the clock-work precision with which police performed their duty not forgetting the rapidity of their action.

If police show the same vigour and move with the speed of a cheetah to swoop down on elements who have committed criminal acts such as burglary, robbery or even petty theft, public confidence in the security force would sky-rocket to unbelievable heights.

But their action in moving at faster than the speed of sound, like the infamous stealth bombers, on the Fiji Times and Fiji TV has plummeted public view (law-abiding citizens anyway) and condemned the image of the force and the regime to Davy Jones' locker.

Fiji TV news editor Anish Chand and Fiji Times editor-in-chief Netani Rika are highly credible media personalities. Their reputation would have been hardly dented nor would they have been or will become (and will ever) subservient to the regime or any elected government. I can speak with authority on their credentials and reputation having known them as colleagues in the same profession and as well as trusted and loyal comrades.

They are above influence and their independence, impartiality and objectivity as well as their adherence to the journalistic code of ethics is extra-ordinary. They will not shirk their principles for expediency and they will not be bought or coerced into compromising their families, friends or regimes. Therefore, any notion that the regime had or has to try and compromise Netani and Anish's journalistic principles even to the extent of using the security forces to harass and intimidate them is only an exercise in futility like trying to break the rock of Gibraltar.

The intimidation and harassment of the news editors is a perfect illustration of the paranoia associated with this regime. This is the logical conclusion given interim Prime Minister and army commander Voreqe Bainimarama's outbursts and utterances through sections of the media, which served as a trailer to the Political Leaders' Meeting yesterday.

The common thread running through the actions of the police in harassing and intimidating the news editors and Commodore Bainimarama's diatribe in the media throughout the week has been marked with indelible ink my way or the highway.

The regime's leadership is naturally aghast that the joint letter by the United Nations and Commonwealth as well as the correspondence by the two interlocutors has been made public.

The letter by the two interlocutors pointed out the direction the political leaders' meeting should take and bemoaned the lack of facilities that the two personalities have had to endure in trying to facilitate such a meeting. The United Nations and Commonwealth letter defines the parameters and suggests that a credible and inclusive approach be adopted to ensure the proposed PPDF is concluded within an adopted timeline.

An adopted timeline means an election date. Mr Bainimarama's statement on Radio Fiji news on Thursday morning stated that the PPDF would be subservient to his regime. He said the regime would have to endorse the outcome of the PPDF and that the UN and Commonwealth would merely oversee it but it will be controlled by the regime and the military.

Therefore, the Political Leaders' Meeting and the President's Political Dialogue Forum are basically rubber-stamps for the military, the regime and Mr Bainimarama. "It has to have the same outcome as the one we would like to have," he told Radio Fiji on Thursday. That outcome is not elections after completion of electoral reforms. That outcome is in Mr Bainimarama's words "we will have elections when we are ready".

Mark my words. General elections, and a return to parliamentary democracy and constitutional governance are like a mirage on the horizon.

* The views expressed here are exclusively those of the author and are published by this newspaper on that sole understanding.



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