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Fiji: Suspension of parliamentarian underlines government stranglehold on freedom of expression

The Fijian parliament must overturn the suspension of an opposition MP for merely exercising her right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today.

“Parliaments can only be worthy of their name when all members can speak freely on all issues,” said Rafendi Djamin, Amnesty International’s Director for South East Asia and the Pacific.

“Unless this suspension is immediately reversed, the Fijian authorities are proving they are intent on silencing critical voices.”

Tupou Draunidalo, an indigenous Fijian parliamentarian and member of the National Federation Party was suspended following a parliamentary motion on 3 June 2016 for calling a government minister “a fool” while responding to comments deriding opposition members of parliament.

Draunidalo asked the government minister if he was suggesting herself and other indigenous members of the opposition were “dumb natives”.

Under the terms of the suspension, Draunidalo will not be able to sit in parliament for the remainder of its term. She was elected to parliament in September 2015, in Fiji’s first election in eight years.

The suspension underlines the Fijian authorities’ ongoing hostility to criticism, including persistent and wide-ranging restrictions on what journalists can report.

Since 2012, Fiji’s media has been subject to undue restrictions laid out in ‘The Media Industry Development Decree,’ which includes potential imprisonment for news editors who do not uphold “the national interest.”

“If Fiji is serious about its bid for the UN Human Rights Council, they must demonstrate they are serious about upholding human rights at home,” said Rafendi Djamin.

“Letting Draunidalo take up her rightful place in parliament, with all due protections for her right to freedom of expression, will be an important first step.”