

# The Rali affair: A case study for a free press

In early 1996, a PNG news media cover-up was alleged over the so-called Topul Rali affair. An exposé by the student newspaper *Uni Tavor* led to a clash with the University of PNG administration and the journalism programme was closed down three years later.

By DAVID ROBIE

PUBLICITY is one of the most powerful avenues of opposing suppression of intellectual dissent. Suppression usually takes the form of blocking publications of free speech, or of victimising those who hold the dissenting views, such as by harassment, smear campaigns and sackings. Publicity is an immediate challenge to suppression in two ways. First, it exposes or threatens to expose the suppressed views themselves. Second, it threatens to mobilise opposition to the practices, policies or power of the groups instituting the suppression.

— Brian Martin and Clyde Manwell, *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analyses and Responses*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986, p 253.

## Summary of the case:

IN DECEMBER 1995, one of the University of Papua New Guinea's most prominent academics, Dr Topul Rali, at that time acting Dean of Science, was implicated in a protest against the Administration Office of the university over the murder of an anthropology lecturer on campus. Dr Rali is well known in some Australian and international academic circles. The dead woman, Janet Kisau, was the second lecturer to be murdered at the university in less than seven months. In addition, two students were murdered during 1995. The protesters caused an estimated K10,000 worth of damage during the raid and a senior

administration staff member was injured.

The affair was hushed up by the administration, but the incoming Vice-Chancellor, Dr Rodney Hills, instituted an inquiry into the raid in February 1996. In March, the University Council voted in an extraordinary meeting to dismiss Dr Rali from his position. No public statement was ever issued by the administration about the affair and the council meeting was conducted in secrecy.

*Uni Tavor*, the training newspaper published by the journalism programme at UPNG, gathered information about the affair and published reports. These included a full-page background article and a front-page story about the sacking of Dr Rali. (*Uni Tavor*, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) The university administration pressured the paper over the stories but avoided doing so in public. News reports from the newspaper about the affair to Pacnews were secretly removed from the university administration facsimile room and destroyed. The lecturer in charge of the newspaper (along with two senior faculty staff members) were summoned to the Vice-Chancellor's office and the newspaper accused of "breach of confidence" and "defamation" and a campaign of vilifying the newspaper was conducted in some academic quarters. A demand was made to reveal the newspaper's sources who had leaked information from the University Council. However, the public response to the publication of the stories was overwhelmingly favourable.

In the next issue, *Uni Tavor* published an editorial exposing the pressure on the paper and defending its editorial decision to publish the stories in the public interest. Nothing further was said about the affair by the administration.

### **Background:**

*21 December 1995:* An anthropology lecturer, Janet Kisau (quite well known in Australia), was murdered in strange circumstances in the housing compound at the University of Papua New Guinea. She was said to be with "off-duty police officers" at the time she was shot dead outside her home. She was the second academic to be murdered at the university in less than seven months. Two students were also murdered in 1995 (one by soldiers on campus). All murders were related, but none were fully investigated and nobody was charged in any of the cases. (*Uni Tavor*, 1996c)

*22 December 1995:* Dr Topul Rali, head of the Chemistry Department (and at that time acting Dean of the Science Faculty), and two other people were involved in an alleged raid on the Administration Office at the university in



# CAMPUS REVIEW

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## Security crisis at PNG uni

By CHRIS JOHNSTON

THE University of Papua New Guinea is in crisis, with the recent murder of a lecturer the most acute example of continuing violence on the Port Moresby campus. Anthropology lecturer Mr Janet Kuan was shot dead in the early hours of December 21, just hours before the scheduled trip to Australia to begin a sabbatical at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

According to a report in the National newspaper, Kuan and two female students returned to their home on campus about 2.30am after attending a function.

The security believed to be off-duty police, had to disperse university students.

The assailant fought with Kuan before the murder and she died on the spot. The crime was not only her life, but also that of a white female taken to Port Moresby General Hospital.

Kuan was the second UPNG and first female to be killed in the past 12 months.

Last May, a minor campus lecturer was shot to death by masked attackers just metres from his home.

As well, two students were shot dead on campus last year.

Active dean of arts Professor Peter Heston told Campus Review he suspected Kuan's murder was an attempt to shut her school, rather than a personal attack.

He said he doesn't remember a death and those who knew her in both PNG and Australia were very distressed and upset.

La Trobe senior anthropology lecturer Dr Marko Mijovic, who was in Port Moresby in 1995, expressed his grief for death in Australia.

The said Kuan, who attended her home during a two-month stay, would have been one of the few Papua New Guinean women who were successful in finding study.

A well-attended memorial service was held in La Trobe on the night between the deaths.

Mijovic said Kuan was a very intelligent and motivated person who was enthusiastic about her subjects, which included a wide range of subjects. She appeared as a very bright person.

The lecturer had a broad range of friends, including colleagues and other PNG students in Melbourne, and his

Continued page 2

## Welcome back – grab a placard

MEMBERS of the University of Sydney will consider a placard work day at a second stage work starting next week. Several hundred members of the

Community and Public Sector Union, the Health Services Union of Australia and the Health and Research Employees Association of Australia held a two-day work meeting last Thursday

over the administration's response to a 12 per cent pay rise claim. The union had been offered a 2

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## Monash calls in auditors

By GEDIH MARIEN

RESEARCH financial irregularities the hospital has been accused of at Monash University's State Department of Accounting.

The university has commissioned an external audit of the hospital department following a communication to vice-chancellor Professor Mel Logan by the dean of business and economics,

Professor John R. Smith. Logan had argued an audit should be commissioned by the department last year and proposed to Logan that an external

audit of financial practices be commissioned.

A spokesman for Logan said the external audit was being undertaken by

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protest over Ms Kisau's murder. During the incident, a computer was trashed and the Acting Bursar received a gash on the leg.

Dr Rali was regarded as one of the brightest national PNG academics and was sometimes touted as a potential future vice-chancellor. He also had a reputation in some quarters for drinking and harassment of some individuals at the university. He had been chairperson of the university's disciplinary committee which adjudicates on alleged offences by students. The university had suffered from a law and order problem for some years, including the murder of four students in three years.

*February 1996:* The incoming Vice-Chancellor, Dr Rodney Hills (from Australia), who replaced Joseph Sukwianomb (a PNG national who had been ousted by the University Council the previous year for alleged mismanagement), set up an inquiry into the Rali affair. For weeks it had been a hot topic of debate around the campus, but no reports were carried in the local daily papers, or weekly press.

*14 February 1996:* An anonymous letter (apparently written by an UPNG academic) was published by *The National*, one of the PNG's two daily newspapers, alleging a news media cover-up of the Rali affair (*The National*, 1996). It said in part:

The UPNG community was so terrified that it shut down for the day, and many women did not return to work the next day.

Later that afternoon, the drunken 'academic' threatened the lives of the head of the Extension Studies department and his wife, causing them to leave Papua New Guinea and the US Embassy put out a warning about the danger of visiting PNG.

The name of the man who perpetrated these crimes and blighted the name of PNG is known to all at UPNG, but it has been kept secret by the media (campus reporters are said to be his drinking mates).

The man has a record of violence and intimidation on campus.

*23 February 1996:* *Uni Tavor* published a front page report about the inquiry under the headline ACADEMIC SUSPENDED OVER OFFICE RAID. The Vice-Chancellor was unhappy with publication of the story, although he never conveyed this directly to the paper. Also, he was cited in the story about being non-committal over the inquiry while the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lance Hill was quoted by the newspaper as confirming Dr Rali had been suspended pending the investigation. (*Uni Tavor*, 1996a).

*Uni Tavor* has a 2000 circulation with about half distributed on campus and



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the balance available through Port Moresby news agencies and mailed out to subscribers throughout the Pacific. The role of lecturer in journalism (in charge of all print projects) is to supervise the newspaper as managing editor, and also to educate/train the journalism students. A student editor is appointed each semester. In 1995, the paper was revamped as a professional tabloid, printing with the *Post-Courier* daily. Previously it had been an A4 format since it began publishing in 1974. It also has a Web edition: <http://www.journ.upng.ac.pg/>

*Uni Tavor* has traditionally been independent from the university administration with vigorous and outspoken editorials and barbed cartoons. Its role is quite different from the modest official weekly university newsletter, *The University This Week*. The university Students Representative Council does not have its own publication and at times has unsuccessfully tried to influence the editorial policy of *Uni Tavor*. But the paper has resisted any attempt to undermine its independence by either the administration, or the SRC. It covers both national issues and campus news. It also has an editorial charter.

The 23 February 1996 issue contained a full-page background article about the murder of Janet Kisau and the crime problems on the campus. The *Uni Tavor* reporters had great difficulty trying to speak to Dr Rali to get his side. After the paper appeared, the reporters were threatened. Efforts to get a follow-up story with Dr Rali's comments were in vain.

*21 March 1996:* The newspaper received information in its editorial office that the University Council was meeting that morning in an extraordinary session to decide the fate of Dr Rali after the inquiry. A senior reporter (in his 40s, who had returned to university to gain a bachelor's degree to upgrade his earlier Diploma in Media Studies) was assigned to cover the story. He had excellent sources within the council. Within half an hour after the meeting, two councillors had leaked the information to the reporter that the council had voted to dismiss Dr Rali.

The newspaper was due to go to press that evening and the following issue was due out a month later (because it did not publish during the mid-semester breaks). The reporter had already written the story and it was independently verified by the lecturer that what was written was true.

The dilemma for the editorial staff was whether the paper should run with the story when clearly Dr Rali would probably not have been formally told of the decision by the time the paper came out next morning. It was decided that the issue was so overwhelmingly in the public interest that it must be published.

The student reporter who was chief-of-staff was asked to phone the Vice-



Chancellor to ask for comment in view of the story being run. He made no comment for publication but harangued the reporter about the identity of the sources of information. He also said it was a "private disciplinary matter".

22 March 1996: The report appeared on the front page of *Uni Tavor* under the headline COUNCIL VOTES TO SACK RALI. (*Uni Tavor*, 1996c)

The mood at the university was strongly in favour of the publication and relief that action had finally been taken by the administration to help restore security on campus. However, the administration issued no public statement — even to the daily news media. Instead, it was apparent that the Vice-Chancellor was angry at the publication (although once again it was never conveyed to the journalism programme directly, always through other academics). It was clear the university was doing its best to keep the affair out of the public arena.

29 March 29 1996: Several days later it was discovered that a fax message from *Uni Tavor* to Pacnews cooperative in Vanuatu with a photocopy of the front page (and to two other destinations, in the Solomon Islands and Radio NZ International) had been censored by a senior member of the Registrar's Office. She removed the messages from the university fax room without any reference to the lecturer in charge or editors and interfered with a long-standing arrangement the newspaper had to fax its front page to those outlets.

A formal letter of complaint over the censorship was written to the Vice-Chancellor. In response, the dean of the Arts Faculty, the head of the South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information in Development (which included the journalism programme) and the lecturer were summoned to the VC's office. The lecturer was given an angry dressing down over alleged unprofessionalism, breach of confidence, unethical behaviour of reporters and defamation. No opportunity was given to defend the newspaper's professional conduct. The Vice-Chancellor wanted to know the identity of the paper's sources on the University Council. This information was refused and the Vice-Chancellor was reminded it was a breach of journalistic ethics to reveal confidential sources. (In fact, one of the sources was a senior administrator but his future could well have been on the line.)

The Vice-Chancellor then threatened to summon the lecturer (and/or the reporter) before the University Council in an attempt to force revelation of the sources. The VC was given copies of the PNG Journalist's Association Code of Ethics, the International Federation of Journalists Code of Ethics and a copy of the newspaper's own charter of editorial independence. The lecturer also declared that he was satisfied with the performance of the reporters and he would





# Uni Taur

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## Maori expert slams Hagahai 'outrage'

Staff reporter

A Maori expert on indigenous intellectual, social and cultural property rights has challenged Papua New Guinea to press a case with the World Court over the "immoral and unethical" Hagahai cell line patent issue. Aniba Mendi, deputy convener of a Maori Commission in New Zealand, told Uni Taur this week indigenous people in the Pacific were "outraged" by the Hagahai patent.

"We challenge the morality of countries extracting DNA samples from indigenous peoples without full and informed consent," she said.



Dr Alpers

PNG's High Commissioner to NZ, Garter Gamianda, has been criticised for saying PNG plans a protest against a USNI bioethics conference. However, this has not been confirmed by the PNG Government.

He said the institute would host a

seminar on the issue at the University of PNG in August to raise public awareness and establish guidelines. "The discovery came from the blood of the Hagahai individuals," he said. "The scientists involved did not exploit the people."

The Hagahai people had agreed to the research project before it began. Dr Alpers said the Hagahai patent had been turned into a global issue by Canadian non-government organisations which were concerned over life patenting.

He said there was just a slight chance of commercial benefit from the patent. This would be shared between

the Hagahai and the discoverer. Last month, Dr Alpers said that in Taiwan countries it was better to have the Hagahai as part of the patent than to "have taken the ethical stance not to be involved and to have allowed all the rights to go to the US."

The patent is for the PNG "human (1) lymphoblastoid virus", or HTLV-1, in many countries, the international strain causes forms of cancer and paralysis and is spread through blood transfusions, but the Melanesians have an immune-free

Me Mendi said that "Although many traditional cultures may be lost to Page 2

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Son Taita died after a march in Lloyd Robinson Oval.

## Council votes to sack Rali

Staff reporter

The University Council of the University of Papua New Guinea yesterday decided to dismiss a senior national academic.

The head of the chemistry department, Dr Tapai Rali, is being dismissed by the council for his involvement in the destruction of university property last year.

Dr Rali was suspended in January for being allegedly involved in a violent incident in which the office of the Vice-Chancellor and accounts office were ransacked on December 22, 1995 — the day after anthropology lecturer Janet Kinca was murdered.

Dr Rali was possessing over the tragic death. About K10,000 worth of damage was caused by the rampage.

An investigator was ordered last week. It was completed about a week ago and the report handed to the council.

Sources said the report was considered yesterday and a unanimous decision was reached to dismiss Dr Rali.

There was widespread criticism that Dr Rali was a party to the ransacking of his office and destruction of property, a source said.

The sources said the council was taking a tough stand on matters because both staff and students.

Earlier this month, Vice-Chancellor Dr Rodney Hill announced a strict new code of conduct for



Dr Rali, office head

## Rugby player's body going home

By LYNN AMERSON

The body of rugby league player Son Taita, who collapsed during a match last weekend, will be flown here in Midway on the way to his home village of Pangia.

son expressed of the 20-year-old Southern Highlander. The science student died on Monday after collapsing while playing for Port Moresby in a third grade match against Tararua at the Lloyd Robinson Oval on Sunday.

association president Wake Munga thanked students for their support. "I never expected such a generous contribution and I'd like to thank you all," he said. But he said he was disappointed with the administration's lack of re-

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Uni Taur's report of the sacking of Dr Rali, 22 March 1996.



defend their efforts and their ethics.

News of this encounter spread quickly around the campus and several senior academics indicated that the newspaper should strive to maintain its editorial independence because apart from the issues of freedom of the press, the future of academic freedom at the University of PNG could also be under threat.

26 April 1996: *Uni Tavour* published an editorial under the headline A FREE STUDENT PRESS AND ITS RESPONSIBILITY defending the decision to publish the Rali story and revealing that the paper was under pressure from the administration over publication. (*Uni Tavour*, 1996d)

In the same issue, a front page article was published announcing that *Uni Tavour* had won the Journalism Education Association's Ossie Award for Student Publication of the Year Award (best regular paper in Australia, NZ and the Pacific journalism schools).

19 July 1996: Unemployed and facing charges of illegal possession of firearms and pornographic materials — charges which he denied, Dr Rali commented on the implications of his case for higher education in PNG, saying: "I have always been frontal (sic) in nationalist issues and I happen to be a victim of bad publicity and reversal of the University of PNG staff development programme." He said he wanted to speak out because of reports in Australia's *Campus Review* "implying that I am a criminal, so my academic and intellectual friends throughout Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States will know the full details". (Rali, 1996)

### Analysis:

After the edition of *Uni Tavour* with an editorial declaring "such a major incident should not be masked by secrecy ... the public has the right to know" was published, the university administration was reluctant to speak to reporters. (*Uni Tavour*, 1996d)

The issues involved in this affair are important, particularly as they coincided with a major debate on freedom of information and the news media in PNG. The Government of then Prime Minister Julius Chan sought to bring in legislation to curb the national media. *Uni Tavour* was the only independent newspaper outside the two national dailies, two national weeklies and the provincial fortnightly *Eastern Star*. Its continuing freedom is essential for diversity and plurality of the news media in the country.

Some might find it tempting to make comparisons with issues confronting



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the student press in Victoria, Australia, in 1996, such as the abolition of the student fees for political purposes to muzzle the student press and attempts to suppress *Rabelais*, the La Trobe University student magazine. (Messina, 1996) *Rabelais* appealed against a chief censor's decision that it be banned for publishing a guide in 1995 on how to shoplift and police were considering prosecuting it for publishing a photograph of Premier Jeff Kenneth's face framed in the cross hairs of a gun sight. However, such comparisons would be wrong. There are crucial differences. While the Victorian student papers were published by student bodies and staffed by few people with journalism education or training, *Uni Tavour* is published by a journalism programme and staffed by students who are educated in media ethics and techniques and aspire to be professional journalists.

### **The issues involved:**

Freedom of the press and the right for the university and the wider public to be informed on an issue involving a senior academic with a high national and international profile.

Academic freedom in the sense that the staff of the university should be free to conduct the journalism education and training in a manner that is in keeping with professional standards, and independent from editorial interference by the university administration.

*Uni Tavour* and journalism education upholds the Papua New Guinea Journalists Association and International Federation of Journalists codes of ethics. It also has its own principled Editorial Charter:

1. To provide a vehicle for members of the University of Papua New Guinea community to communicate news and opinions to one another.
2. To inform the people of the nation about issues affecting Papua New Guinea (PNG).
3. To promote a fairer more tolerant society and to seek an improved quality of life for citizens of PNG.
4. To ensure that the activities and the concerns of the poor and powerless are represented.
5. To inform the nation of important media and information developments, and to contribute to the debate of ethical and media issues.
6. To offer practical advice to students about community and academic life.

Universities have a potential for ideological unmasking of the present order



Suppression is essentially a back-up mechanism, to keep those in line who are not induced or seduced by privilege and status to support the powers that be by keeping to their narrow activities and staying out of political struggles.

which makes them periodically hotbeds of dissent. And this leads to attempts by elite groups to muzzle dissenting groups — particularly any university publication that is independent of the establishment. (Martin, 1986)

The University of PNG is modelled on Australian academic institutions. Australia's academe has many documented cases that support the argument for dissent — for example, Raymond Hoser, a whistleblower who exposed corruption in government bodies and the police in Victoria and is the author of the Hoser Files. David Rindos was an academic at the University of Western Australia who was denied tenure after exposing problems in the Archaeology Department.

According to Dr Brian Martin, of Whistleblowers Australia, academic institutions are protected in two ways: first by their own service in the maintenance of society, and second by the intellectual tradition of liberal education and freedom of opinion.

Although this tradition, says Martin, often masks the reality of intellectual service to vested interests, it is also useful for defending dissent.

Suppression is essentially a back-up mechanism, to keep those in line who are not induced or seduced by privilege and status to support the powers that be by keeping to their narrow activities and staying out of political struggles on behalf of oppressed groups. Suppression is important precisely because dissidence is so infrequent. When the consensus of expert intellectual opinion is virtually unanimous, a single dissenting voice can make a big difference in helping to legitimise contrary views. (Martin, 1984)

Robert Pullan, founding president of the Free Speech Committee, says all fights about censorship are fights about power: "At some level we know instinctively that censorship is disreputable. Often, as we will see it, the censor disguises itself simply by denying that what it is doing is censorship. At the same time, the censor says it strongly favours free speech and adds a daunting



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reminder of the power of words.” (Pullan, 1994)

By publishing information about the Dr Rali affair, the newspaper *Uni Tavor* defied suppression and brought a hushed up affair into the public arena, exposing a double standard on ethical behaviour in Papua New Guinea's leading national university. And by making public the pressure on it from the administration, the paper thwarted attempts to muzzle its freedom to report and interpret on behalf of the public.

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□ *David Robie formerly coordinated the journalism programme at the University of Papua New Guinea from 1993-97. He was editorial manager of Uni Tavor and revamped it as a professional tabloid in 1995, leading to it winning the Ossie Award for Best Student Publication. The publication of stories on the Rali affair led to conflict with the Australian Vice-Chancellor which culminated in the closure of the journalism programme in January 1999 as a “cost-cutting” exercise as part of the university's controversial restructuring plan.*