
Forum

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Why was the Solomons gag ignored?

WHILE it is good to read the flowery and colourful words of pride by the Pacific Islands News Association executive in awarding the winner of the 1999 Freedom of Information Award and the specially commended newspaper, one wonders what is PINA's view on the [now lifted] Solomon Islands Government "media ban"?

As a journalist from that part of the Pacific, currently studying in Fiji and enjoying the "freedom of expression" in this country, it is disheartening to see that the recent PINA convention in Suva failed miserably to raise the issue to a new level.

It is rather bizarre that PINA, a regional media body that has consistently over the years claimed to be stand for "freedom of expression", failed to even raise the issue. Isn't this

a "big joke" to talk about and even celebrating "freedom awards" when a member country is fighting a losing battle against a notorious government media ban?

While it is understood that the PINA president four months ago, during the initial stage of the media ban, condemned the Solomon Islands government decree, it should not be a one-off affair. There should be constant pressure, not only from the local media, but the region — especially media organisations like PINA with its world connections. The Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI) has proved that it could not do it all alone. As of today, the "media ban" in the Solomon Islands is still intact.

Surprisingly, at the end of the five-day PINA conference in October 1999, attended by media tycoons, senior regional media executives and so-called professional journalists throughout the region, none of them even cared to talk about the current government's "media ban" in Solomon Islands.

It makes one wonder about whether or not the silence over the issue has been due to the PINA president's business interests in the Solomon Islands (he is a co-owner of the

FM radio station PAOA). Whatever explanation the PINA executive would give, its action has failed the people of Solomon Islands, who have been deprived of the same freedom that is “cherished” and enjoyed by regional countries whose media representatives were attending the PINA convention in Fiji.

It is shocking to note that the other co-owner of the PAOA FM radio station in the Solomon Islands, who is the owner-publisher of one of the independent newspapers in the country, the *Solomon Star* and the general manager of our only nation-wide broadcast radio station, the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Station (SIBC), attended the convention, but left without a trace of their presence. It causes one to wonder — what do these media executives really stand for. Aren't they supposed to be “promoters and protectors” of media freedom?

Their silence should be a cause of concern for any right-thinking journalist from the region, especially the Solomon Islands, who cares about “media freedom”. Yet in the midst of this silence, PINA announced its “media freedom awards”, without any reference to the hardship the media industry in the Solomon Islands is currently facing.

It is rather obvious that with the current “club” of media tycoons in the region, the issue of fighting for “me-

dia freedom” is no longer in their agenda, but clearly is substituted by entrepreneurs’ interests. This is a new development in the media industry in the Pacific which has resulted in the industry’s compromising “freedom of expression” in return for government’s favor.

Such a picture has painted a negative image of the media industry in the Pacific. And if PINA does not care to do anything about its image, this would turn the region’s media freedom awards to be like a “Governments-Media Reciprocity Award.”

It is my sincere hope that PINA and its Solomon Islands’ media industry members stop pretending and redirect their focus for the promotion of media freedom in protecting the lives of our innocent people whose very existence are under threat by the Solomon Islands government current “designed media ban”.

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Research help

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