



LAWASIA CONCERNED AT INTERFERENCE WITH CHURCH IN FIJI

LAWASIA, the Law Association for Asia and the Pacific, notes with concern that the interim government of Fiji has withdrawn permission to the Methodist Church to hold its annual conference for the first time in three years, apparently because the Church President and General Secretary declined to step down from their positions.

It is understood that the authorities in Fiji had sought the resignation of these leaders because of alleged breaches of Public Emergency Regulations, although these charges are yet to be fully investigated.

LAWASIA considers that any move by the State against a religious organisation should be undertaken with great circumspection, and notes that the Church has, from all reports, been endeavouring to adhere to the requirements of the regime so that it could hold its conference within current regulations.

LAWASIA also notes a subsequent directive of the Fiji Police Force that interferes significantly with the rights of church members to meet and conduct their usual activities, including bazaars, sports days and camps, and restricts gatherings of the Methodist Church to normal church services.

LAWASIA expresses disappointment at what appears to be an excessive and unnecessary interference in religious leadership and activity by the government. The action also appears to raise a fundamental rule of law issue, given that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* enshrines, at Article 18, “the right to “freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Further, these measures infringe significantly aspects of Articles 19 and 20, which provide for the right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly.

Whilst noting that Fiji is currently operating under emergency provisions, hallmarked by a climate of extra control, LAWASIA calls on the interim government of Fiji to demonstrate due respect for its citizens by immediately withdrawing the directive, by ceasing to impose similar such strictures on the religious freedoms of the Fiji community and by fostering cooperative, rather than unnecessarily adversarial relationships with community groups.

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