

JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND CIVICUS: WORLD ALLIANCE FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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FIJI: STOP HARASSING PEACEFUL PROTESTERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

The Fiji authorities must respect the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly for university staff and students and immediately cease intimidation tactics.

Around 200 university staff and students at University of the South Pacific (USP) campus in Fiji held peaceful protests from 8 June 2020, to show support for the Vice Chancellor Pal Ahluwalia who was suspended later that day. The Vice Chancellor appears to have been suspended because of his role in exposing mismanagement of funds and cronyism at the university.

On 9 June, police entered the USP campus to shut down the protest, stating that any continuation of the protest would require a permit. Following the peaceful protests, the police obtained photos of protesters from journalists. The police also confiscated some of the photos from the office of *Fiji Times* newspaper on 12 June, using a search warrant.

On 16 June 2020, the police questioned staff from the university, focusing on possible breaches of COVID-19 rules by participating in the peaceful protests.

Since March 2020, the Fiji government has prohibited all gatherings of over 20 people as part of its COVID-19 response. On 5 June 2020, the Prime Minister announced that all 18 persons who had confirmed cases of COVID-19 nationally had recovered, and that there had not been a new positive test result in over 45 days.

Under international human rights law, the right to peaceful assembly may be limited in a public health emergency, but such restrictions must be reasonable, necessary and proportionate to a legitimate aim. Given Fiji's effective response in containing cases of COVID-19 in the country, continuing restrictions on gatherings need to be specifically justified and may amount to a violation of human rights.

Preventing people from protesting collectively in public as a result of COVID-19 measures must be a last resort based on compelling needs, and due weight must be given to the importance of the right to peaceful assembly and the need of people to jointly raise their voices.

There have been a number of instances over the last few years where peaceful protests have been arbitrarily restricted in Fiji, under the Public Order (Amendment) Act 2014, particularly protests organized by trade unions. Authorization under national laws to hold protests have been denied without any valid reasons and often at the last minute.

The governments of Australia, New Zealand, Samoa and Nauru have issued statements expressing varying degrees of concern about the leadership issues at the University.

UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC BACKGROUND

Established in 1968, USP is jointly owned by governments of the 12 member countries – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Nuie, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Other international partners including Australia, New Zealand, the European Union and Japan are key donors to the university.