

Centre slates Fiji PM over Information Bill

By Jona Bola in the Fiji Times

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The Pacific Centre for Public Integrity yesterday lashed out at Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase for failing to table the Freedom of Information Bill last week despite Cabinet's decision for the Bill to be passed.

"The Prime Minister has expressed shame at the amount of corruption in the Government, yet his government has done very little in terms of concrete policy or legislation to curb this practice," said PCPI chairperson Suliana Siwatibau. She said it was one thing to draft the Bills, but the three anti-corruption Bills have been in draft for the last two years and have not amounted to anything yet.

"Where is the demonstrated political commitment to push this important Bill through? "We can accept excuses once or twice if it is a work load issue, but the constant delay in passing this Bill in Cabinet to enable it to be tabled in Parliament does raise our suspicion on whether this Government fully intends to table this Bill in Parliament and its overall commitment to good governance," said the executive director of PCPI, Angie Heffernan. She said a freedom of Information Law if passed with wide public disclosure provisions would allow ordinary citizens, even at the local community level to have greater access to state information such as government policies and processes, budget, procurement contracts for example that would otherwise be impossible to access from Government.

"Furthermore, an effective Freedom of Information Law would require the state to proactively release information regularly without the public having to ask for it. "A good Freedom of Information law would require the state to proactively release information regularly without the public having to ask for it," Ms Heffernan said.

The NGO stated that a good Freedom of Information Law would provide the public and ordinary citizens with immense power to hold the state and civil servants accountable and transparent in the way it conducts its affairs. "A Freedom of Information Law in essence would ensure and promote an open system of Government which would make corruption very difficult to thrive," she said.

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