

The Australian media and the Julian Moti case

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The Australian media has imposed an effective blackout on proceedings brought before the Queensland Supreme Court by former Solomon Islands' Attorney General Julian Moti.

The constitutional and international lawyer is appealing to the court to permanently dismiss criminal charges relating to statutory rape allegations discharged by a Vanuatu magistrate more than ten years ago. His grounds are that the Australian authorities' investigation and prosecution is a politically driven abuse of judicial process, marked by a series of allegedly illegal actions by several Australian police and diplomatic officials. Despite the highly sensitive character and the potentially far-reaching implications of Moti's court action, the first two days of proceedings, held September 16-17, were largely boycotted by the media.

On any objective criteria, the hearings represent a significant and newsworthy event. Moti's arrest in September 2006 in Papua New Guinea while en route to be appointed attorney general in Honiara was followed by a protracted diplomatic standoff, with the PNG and Solomons' governments resisting Canberra's extradition demands. As senior government ministers issued public denunciations of Moti as an alleged "child sex" offender and stepped up their campaign against Solomons' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, virtually every Australian newspaper published front-page reports written by senior journalists, while television and radio news networks also prominently featured the story.

A series of subsequent reports in late 2006 and 2007 followed. These covered events including the Sogavare government's expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole in September 2006 and Police Commissioner Shane Castles in December of that year, Moti's appointment as attorney general in July 2007, and Sogavare's ousting in a parliamentary no-confidence vote, followed by Moti's extraction to Australia in December

2007. As well as being reported by Australian, New Zealand, and regional outlets, a number of prominent international publications covered aspects of the Moti affair, including the *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *International Herald Tribune*, BBC, and the *Economist*.

Moti's appearance at the Queensland Supreme Court last week nevertheless received only the most cursory coverage, with about half a dozen journalists present at the beginning of the first day of hearings. Proceedings began with a Supreme Court judge rejecting subpoena applications by Moti's legal counsel for internal documents held by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP). None of the reports subsequently issued by the Associated Press, the ABC, Radio New Zealand International and other publications included any mention of the contentious legal grounds cited in the subpoena decision. (See "Australian court hears Julian Moti's challenge to "politically motivated" prosecution")

Coverage of the subsequent stay application hearing was even more limited.

The ABC's September 16 report, headlined "Moti in bid to dismiss sex charges", was typical. Like virtually every media account of the Moti case, the ABC echoed the Australian government's rhetoric of "child sex charges". The broadcaster excluded any mention of the fact that the allegations were thrown out after the Vanuatu magistrate found there were no grounds for the case to proceed to trial. The ABC report limited its explanation of Moti's current application to a single sentence: "The court heard the grounds for the stay application include that Moti's deportation from the Solomon Islands was unlawful and that there is an element of double jeopardy in the case." No mention was made of Moti's central charge—that the alleged abuse of judicial process flowed from the "politically motivated" basis of the Australian investigation.

Not a single Australian media outlet has reported on the contents of internal memos, emails, and other documents voluntarily disclosed to Moti's legal team by the Australian Government Solicitor and the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions. This material definitively establishes that the sole reason that an AFP investigation was launched into the Vanuatu allegations was the desire of Australia's High Commissioner to the Solomons, Patrick Cole, to sabotage Moti's proposed appointment as the country's attorney general.

Aside from the *World Socialist Web Site* ("Evidence backs Julian Moti's allegation of 'politically-motivated' charges"), the only other coverage of this material has been written by Sydney-based journalist Susan Merrell, whose articles were published in the Papua New Guinean newspaper the *National* (August 21) and the Solomon Islands' *Solomon Star* (August 22). The latter piece included reference to one of the grounds of Moti's stay applications—the large sums of money paid to the alleged victim's family by the AFP, and a mobile phone message from the alleged victim to an AFP officer: "In the text message the witness threatens to say she 'was used as a tool by the Australian Government for political and neo colonial reasons' if her conditions are not met."

Again, none of this material has been referred to by any Australian-based media outlet. This extraordinary omission is only explicable as a conscious decision to suppress the truth about the Moti case.

On the second day of the Supreme Court hearing, aside from the WWSW there was just one journalist present, Brisbane-based reporter for the *Australian* Sarah Elks. Elks's report, headlined "Moti witness 'threats'", provided a fairly objective, albeit concise, account of the permanent stay proceedings, focussing on the testimony of Solomon Islands' police officer Sam Kalita, who told the court that his superiors had threatened to sack both him and another key witness of Moti's extraction from the Solomons in December 2007 if they appeared before the court and gave evidence. (See "Australian court told witnesses were threatened in Julian Moti case")

Elks's article was not published on the *Australian's* website, nor in the Queensland, New South Wales, Victorian, or Western Australian print editions of the newspaper. It appears that the Tasmanian and Australian Capital Territory editions were the only versions of the newspaper to run the story. Similarly, Elks's report on the first day of the Supreme Court hearings, "Moti deportation

'abuse of process'", was not published on the *Australian's* website nor in the newspaper's Queensland, Victorian, New South Wales, and Western Australian print editions.

Both stories, it seems, were consciously restricted by the Murdoch press editors.

The latest coverage of the Moti affair is entirely consistent with the media's record throughout the case. Every Australian report on Moti's pending appointment as attorney general in mid-2006—before his arrest in PNG—mentioned the Vanuatu statutory rape allegations, despite the fact they had been dismissed in 1998 and despite the fact that the unfolding AFP investigation was not yet publicly known. Australian authorities were clearly feeding journalists the line they wanted peddled. Throughout the subsequent standoff over Canberra's extradition demand, the press repeated as good coin the Australian government's hypocritical accusations that the Solomons' and PNG governments had violated the "rule of law" and "good governance". Significant evidence of the involvement of Australian police and other officials in dubious, if not unlawful, activity throughout their pursuit of Moti was simply ignored.

The entire episode serves as a case study in the media's role as a critical adjunct of Australian imperialism's filthy operations in the South Pacific.

When critical strategic and economic interests are at stake, the press effectively places itself at the government's disposal. Whenever called upon, the media is perfectly happy to throw elementary principles of professional journalism out the window and amplify "corruption" or "bad governance" accusations against those regional governments targeted for removal; bolster bogus humanitarian pretexts for Australia's various military-police interventions; or, as in the Moti case, simply bury unpleasant truths that point to the real agenda underlying Canberra's activities in the region.



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