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Fiji: Former PM's rights to free speech and assembly violated

Amnesty International is today calling on the government of Fiji to drop Public Emergency Regulations (PER)-related charges against the country's former prime minister after he was accused of failing to seek permission to hold a public meeting.

Mahendra Chaudhry, also the current general secretary of the National Farmers Union, was detained on 1 October 2010 with five of his associates in the town of Rakiraki, in the western part of Fiji's main island. When Mahendra Chaudhry was arrested, he was talking to a group of farmers gathered outside one of their homes.

"Mahendra Chaudhry's arrest is just the most recent and high profile example of the way in which the PER is used to violate Fijians' human rights," said Donna Guest, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Asia Programme. "The government's continued use of the PER acts as a clear deterrent to Fijians seeking to speak and meet freely".

Under the PER, people are required to get prior permission from the government for public meetings of three or more people. The PER also gives extensive powers to the authorities to detain, fine and imprison those who speak out against the government. Further, the PER exempts government officials from criminal or civil liability.

Mahendra Chaudhry appeared in court on 4 October and was granted bail. He is due to appear in court again on 6 October.

Since its promulgation in April 2009, the PER has been used to hold dozens of people in short term detention merely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Journalists, opposition politicians and government critics have been subjected to threats, intimidation and violence by security forces since the abrogation of the country's constitution and the imposition of emergency rule in April 2009.

The PER is being used to deny the Fijian people their right to express their views freely in public about matters that impact on their lives, Amnesty International says.

Those who express any views that are interpreted as anti-government are dealt with harshly by the authorities.

"Mahendra Chaudhry's arrest and charges under the PER are a violation of his rights to free speech and peaceful assembly, and are symptomatic of the human rights violations that Fiji's citizens continue to be subjected to," says Donna Guest. "The PER should be immediately repealed."