



FIJI HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

GPO Private Mail Bag
SUVA, FIJI ISLANDS

21 May 2007

The Editor,
Fiji Times
SUVA

Dear Sir,

I refer to your Editor's Note, in response to the letter by Samu Koroi on blogs in Fiji Times 21/5/07 at page 10, where you attributed to philosopher Voltaire the maxim, '*I disagree with what you say but I defend to the death your right to say it*'.

I thought it might be interesting for your readers, and of course yourself, to know a few facts about Voltaire:

1. Voltaire was not the person responsible for the maxim you quoted – it was written by a lady by the name of Evelyn Beatrice Hall in 1906, two centuries after Voltaire died. She wrote it under the name of S.G. Tallentyre in *Friends of Voltaire*. This maxim has been mis-attributed to Voltaire over the centuries. Perhaps he would have agreed with Ms Hall in principle but the assumption that he might actually have given up his life in the interest of someone else's free speech was probably only romanticism on Ms Hall's part.
2. Voltaire's own personal and philosophical beliefs are not as enlightening on civil liberties as people have been led to believe. In fact, Voltaire was a bigot. In his work *Essai sur les moeurs* he said that black people, whom he called 'animals', were physically and mentally peculiar and different from other species of humans - in fact in *Traite de Metaphysique*, he narrated that white men 'seem to be superior to Negroes, just as Negroes are superior to monkeys and monkeys to oysters'.

2. Voltaire was a slaveholder. He invested in a slave trading business in Nantes which made him one of the 20 richest men in France, though he did not support cruelty against slaves which, I suppose, must have been a small mercy to the slaves he owned! He did think, however, that black people were born to be slaves.
3. Voltaire was an anti-semite. He once wrote: ‘The Jewish nation...revolts against all masters; always superstitious, always greedy for the well being enjoyed by others, always barbarous- cringing in misfortune and insolent in prosperity’.
4. Voltaire disliked democracy- he said that it ‘propagated the idiocy of the masses’. To him only an enlightened absolutist or an enlightened monarch (advised by philosophers like himself) could bring about social and economic change for the people.

The philosophies of people like Voltaire ultimately resulted in state-imposed racist laws and denial of civil liberties in places like Germany during World War II which led to the extermination of millions of minorities. Before and during the war, propaganda was employed as a weapon by Hitler to express his bigotry and racism - was this propaganda merely ‘free expression’? If so, it was inexcusable because it was used to justify genocide.

After the war, the world decided to put in place a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to try and prevent these types of state-sanctioned violations from ever happening again. There is a limitation on free speech in international human rights law precisely because there was such a close relationship between racist propaganda, including hate speech, and the holocaust. Our Constitution is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We should not ‘quote’ Voltaire quite so lightly. He was someone whose philosophy should not be emulated in this day and age.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Shaista Shameem

Director