WORLD RUGBY Executive Committee Nomination: Mr Francis Kean (Fiji)

20/4/2020

Dear Sir/Madame

I am writing to you as one of the members of the World Rugby Council who will vote next month in elections to the seven-person Executive Committee and to decide the chairmanship and/or vice chairmanship of World Rugby.

Pacific Rugby Players Welfare is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that supports professional and semi-professional players of Pacific Island heritage in the UK and Europe. We have around 700 members, about a third of whom come from Fiji.

Silence towards figures of authority is a big part of culture in the developing world, including the Pacific. That's said, it is not easy to write this letter.

Officials in Dublin make out that they are in an apparent state of shock at information about Francis Bulewa Kean [aka Ratu Bulewa Francis Frederick Kean] that has been in plain sight all along. Following revelations in the Sunday Times an urgent investigation has been promised into his candidacy. As PRPW is independent, takes no funding from World Rugby and has no partnership agreements with any member union, it falls to us to speak truth to those in power about Francis Kean.

If the values of World Rugby really are integrity, respect, solidarity, passion and discipline, all of this – and the claim to have been building character since 1823 - will be utterly debased if Kean is elected to the Exco. It is as simple as that.

You may have thought as Pacific Islanders, we would fall in line in support of Kean. But it is extraordinary to anyone involved in the game in the Pacific that Kean is even on the ballot. His time in office has become a byword for intimidation, vindictiveness, corruption and self-dealing, nepotism, and the threat and realisation of violence. This is all conducted in plain sight.

A New Zealand citizen living in Fiji took her own life in November 2015 after a run-in with Kean when she tried to open a rugby academy. At the time Fiji had at least three rugby academies operated by top French clubs, approved by Kean, that were also in clear breach of World Rugby regulation 4. One FRU board member operated openly as a player agent specialising in taking players to France. [Rugby World September 2015: ‘Fighting spirit: the problems Fiji must overcome’.

Julie Alexander received a letter from Kean on November 24 quoting World Rugby regulation 4 and demanding ‘Immediately stop your misleading representations and the operation of your rugby academy in Fiji.’ Complaining that Fiji’s regime was
trying to cut off her internet, her last social media post on November 27 said, ‘Off to bed now, see you tomorrow if I am not murdered in my sleep’. She was admitted to hospital the next day and passed away on November 29. A source close to the family has since informed me that her state of mind was affected deeply by Kean’s stand-over tactics and reputation for violence.

I make no comment about why the Fédération Française de Rugby would support Kean’s nomination to Exco. Or why the current chairman would allow his nomination to be seconded by the Fiji Rugby Union, which the man known in his own country as ‘Killer Kean’ runs in the manner of an executive chairman.

So I find myself asking this obvious question: why does World Rugby have some of the most elaborate and exhaustive eligibility checks for those who play the game but apparently no checks for someone wanting to run the game. Even when that person couldn’t get a visa to watch Fiji in the opening match of the 2015 RWC or the 2018 RWC 7s because of his criminal record for violent killing.

By the way, to get around the immigration checks of World Rugby member unions including Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the Schengen territories, Canada and the USA – where Fiji citizens who have served jail sentences for a violent killing would expect visa applications to be automatically rejected – Kean now travels on a 10-year diplomatic passport [number 002348].

That Kean even holds a diplomatic passport is a breach of the Fiji government’s own protocols and the Vienna Convention, and should be of concern to you if your country requires a pre-approved visa for Fiji citizens. The diplomatic passport also contains different names to those on Kean’s passport at the time he was jailed in 2007.

Reporting in the Sunday Times [‘Bill Beaumont under pressure over backing from convicted killer’] doesn’t even come close to capturing the full brutality of what Kean and his brother-in-law, Fiji’s prime minister Frank Bainimarama [and FRU president], have inflicted both on the game of rugby in Fiji and those rugby officials who dared to oppose them.

And Kean’s spilling of blood is both personal, and professional in his role of Commissioner of Prisons and stretches from 2006 to just this past week.

Old blood: The New Zealand judge who tried Kean in October 2007 ruled that Kean had ‘murderous intent’ when he killed John Whippy. So why was Kean not convicted of murder in October 2007 when that was what Kean was originally charged with in January 2007? Kean took the opportunity to plead guilty to the lesser charge of manslaughter, an offer made by state prosecutors who, by October 2007, were now firmly in the control of the military regime headed by Kean’s brother-in-law. The judge, Gerald Winter, left Fiji soon after the trial, his car having been sabotaged in such a way as to cause a serious accident. Another judge, Briton Sir Gordon Ward, head of Fiji’s court of appeal, had his home burned down just before Kean’s trial.

New blood: just this weekend, four of Kean’s prison officers were charged in relation to the death earlier this week by ‘blunt force trauma’ of a prisoner in a remand centre. Two officers face counts of murder and the others of assault. Kean has
served as commissioner of prisons since 2016 and the forces under his command have become a byword for state-sanctioned violence.

Kean [and Bainimarama] have been strongly and repeatedly criticised by any number of NGOs including Amnesty for comments made in support of police, military and prison officers accused of assault or murder and creating a culture of impunity by giving early releases to anyone in the security forces so convicted. The Sunday Times referenced a well-known recording of Kean shouting ‘violent and homophobic’ instructions to his prison officers, whipping them into committing beatings.

And despite the culture of silence within rugby in Fiji, if you know where to look it’s possible to see clearly Kean’s clenched fist, and the limitless violence that Fiji’s security forces can unleash, in how he rules Fiji rugby:

From Ben Ryan’s book Sevens Heaven:

One morning Kean came to the gym in Suva where I was training the boys … A soldier on either side of him, both in uniform. “Ben, these two men are in your next training squad”. I knew I could not face him down but that I could not step back either. OK, they can train with us today.”

In conclusion, I have always believed that rugby is the best sport in the world bar none. From the rugby professionals at the game’s apex that I work with, right down to club 3rd XVs everywhere, from corporate suite-holders to the armies of Sunday morning volunteers, all of us recognise the values that bind us to the game.

But I believe that part of the responsibility that we all share to the sport that we are passing on to our children is also to speak out when the guardians of the game look like they may drop the ball on those values.

If Kean was up for elected office at any tier of the FIFA membership the violent nature of his criminal record would disqualify him automatically [FIFA.com 2017 eligibility checks 3 a. (1)].

But it appears for the game of rugby there is no barrier to Kean. The World Rugby chairman told the Sunday Times: ‘World Rugby does not make the decision as to who stands. It is a matter for the union.’

The unions in the Pacific are always being lectured about our governance. But who judges the judges? The tests World and Oceania Rugby applied to Kean and the FRU to allow them to fly so close to the seat of power over these past years show a tick-box culture. If nothing else can, this proves that things in the Pacific are not as they seem or as they are measured and represented to you on the Council.

The only thing standing in the way of Kean is the good sense of you and your Council members. I ask you to honour the memory of those in the game who came before us and to uphold those timeless values of integrity, respect, solidarity, passion and discipline that we all wish to mean something so that we can pass them on to the next generation.

Attached to this email are some specific bullet points you may find instructive and which give more information.
Kind regards,

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(Director PRPW)

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