

PRESS RELEASE

Apia, Samoa 1 October 2025

Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CFNHRI) Webinar “Disinformation as a Threat to Human Rights in the [context of Elections]”

On Wednesday 1st October 2025 the Office of the Ombudsman/NHRI (Office) as the current Chair for the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CFNHRI), successfully initiated a CFNHRI webinar, focussing on the timely and pressing issue of: ✨ ***“Disinformation as a Threat to Human Rights [in the context of elections]”*** ✨

The webinar opened with remarks from Acting Ombudsman, Ms. Lagafuaina Tavita, who highlighted the growing challenge of disinformation more than ever before in undermining democratic institutions and human rights globally.

“Voters must have accurate information about parties, candidates and government activities to ensure rights to free and fair elections are upheld.” says Ms Tavita. “At the same time, measures to combat disinformation must not infringe upon the fundamental right to freedom of expression. These are difficult issues for NHRIs, but they are essential to the resilience of our democracies.” (Opening Remarks, attached).

The event brought together a distinguished panel of experts, including:

- Ms. Alithia Barampataz, Human Rights Officer, Commonwealth Secretariat
- Mr. David Moore, Vice-President, Legal Affairs, International Centre for Non-Profit Law (ICNL)
- Dr. Lorraine Finlay, Human Rights Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission
- Dr. Eileen Carter, National Coordinator, South African Human Rights Commission
- Ms. Mauga Mulitalo Fetogi R. Vaai, Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Samoa Office of the Electoral Commission

Speakers shared insights from across the Commonwealth on balancing the fight against mis/disinformation with the protection of freedom of expression, lessons learned from elections, and the role of NHRIs in safeguarding democratic institutions.

The webinar was moderated by Ms. Rachael Chadwick, Human Rights Legal, Policy & Data Analyst at the Ombudsman’s Office, with closing reflections from Ms. Ulugia Rosa Toese, Director of the Human Rights Unit.

This dialogue underscores CFNHRI’s commitment under the Apia Declaration to foster resilient democratic institutions that uphold democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The event also reinforced the importance of regional collaboration in addressing the growing global threat of disinformation while ensuring human rights are protected.

For more information about the webinar and the work of the Office of the Ombudsman/NHRI Samoa, please contact:

Office of the Ombudsman/NHRI Samoa

Level 2, SNPF Plaza, Savalalo

PO Box 3036 | Phone: (+685) 25394

General Enquiries: info@ombudsman.gov.ws

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(Opening Remarks: Acting Ombudsman, Ms. Lagafuaina Tavita)

Thank you Ulugia for your introduction, and welcome to all our CFNHRI members and our special guests joining us today.

As you know, the Apia Declaration commits CFNHRI members to collaboration under 4 key pillars. The first of these pillars is: “resilient democratic institutions that uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law”.

At this point in time, all over the world, it seems that the resilience of democratic institutions is being challenged more than ever before. The V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg, recently released its latest annual report which analysed the state of democracy in 179 countries over the past year. It showed that for the first time in 20 years, autocracies outnumber democracies. In several countries, authoritarian leaders are increasingly resorting to political violence and repression during election periods, to maintain a grip on power.

In Samoa, we have just seen the most highly contested general election since independence. While the transfer of power has been peaceful, the strength of democratic institutions has certainly been tested. In particular, the ability of Samoan citizens to discern what is truth, fiction and rumour in political discourse has never been more challenged.

These difficulties were highlighted in a recent survey of almost 900 members of the general public conducted by our Human Rights Unit here at the Ombudsman.

Almost 60% of survey respondents identified social media as a source of information about electoral candidates and political parties. However, many expressed concerns about political figures using social media to cyberbully other candidates and their families, or to damage their reputations by spreading misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.

When asked whether people should be given the freedom to say whatever they want to say about others on social media, respondents were almost evenly split, with 43% agreeing and 49.9% disagreeing. When asked how hate speech, mis/disinformation online and/or cyberbullying should be addressed, almost 30% of respondents thought that social media should be banned in Samoa altogether.

Voters must have accurate information about parties, candidates and government activities to ensure rights to free and fair elections are upheld. On the other hand, any measures introduced to combat the spread of dis- and misinformation must not infringe on rights to freedom of expression.

Here at the Ombudsman, we are considering what role we should play as the NHRI in addressing these difficult issues, while also dealing with challenges to accessing the necessary information to monitor the situation ourselves.

On today’s webinar agenda, we are very fortunate to have a distinguished line-up of speakers from the Commonwealth Secretariat, the International Centre for Non-Profit Law, the Australian Human Rights Commission and the South African Human Rights Commission and the Samoa Office of the Electoral Commissioner to share their knowledge and experiences with us today

I thank you all in advance for your time, and we hope this event serves as an opportunity to strengthen ties between Commonwealth NHRIs, and to help us all to think more strategically about how NHRIs can contribute to combatting the threat of mis- and disinformation to human rights, while upholding freedom of expression.

I will now hand over to Ulugia, who will introduce our first speaker.