

Dear Editor,

Former President of the Guyana Press Association (GPA), Mr Neil Marks, in a Letter to the Editor published in the Stabroek News on Tuesday, May 16, 2023 under the caption – Credibility of the GPA has been severely harmed – sought to discredit this noble body and undermine the credibility of the just concluded elections by peddling blatant lies intended to misinform the populace about the electoral process and the eligibility of members.

So, please permit me an opportunity to set the record straight, since I served as the Secretary of the Press Association, and was integrally involved in the preparation of the elections held on Sunday, 14th May, 2023.

In his letter, Mr Marks alluded to the 2015 and 2018 Elections, contending that because the presidential nominees for those elections were not challenged, there was no need for a challenger to demand to see the list of members eligible to vote. But the records would show that prior to May, 2023, such a demand was never made, nor was a list produced ahead of the association's elections.

According to Mr Marks, in the past, persons were allowed to sign up for membership and pay their dues on the day of elections – and vote. But, could that have been a realistic option this time around with an ever-expanding media fraternity? The answer is simply no.

In GPA's database, there are a total of 223 persons listed, and though the records show that more than half of them are actively engaged in journalism as set out by the Constitution of the Press Association, a significant percentage has transitioned to other professions within the field of Communication and are, therefore, no longer full members, but rather associate members. It should be noted that only full members are eligible to vote according to the Constitution of the GPA.

With the Executive comprising only four persons in the lead up to the May 14, 2023 Elections, it was impractical for the small group of Executives to verify the status of the 223 members and process

their dues on the same day of the Elections, while at the same time processing applications for new members.

Hence a deadline was set for new and existing members to register and have their dues paid.

On April 27, 2023, Mr Marks made representation for persons practicing journalism for three or more years to be allowed to register, and to have their applications processed.

Taking Mr Marks' concerns into consideration, the Executive agreed to open the process to new members as well. However, as prescribed in the Constitution, those applications would first have to be vetted by the Executive before approval could be granted, as the process is not automatic. In the past, the association received applications from social media commentators and even drivers. In some cases, applicants failed to provide any details to aid in the processing of the applications.

Mr. Marks continued his assault on the association with his untruths by contending that the Secretary of the Press Association at the time, "simply walked into media houses, they presumed they had support and signed up new members."

Mr Editor, it is clear that Mr. Marks is a stranger to the truth. On World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2023, journalists from NCN, News Room and Kaieteur News indicated that they were prepared to have their dues updated. However, because the Secretary did not have the association's receipt book in her possession at the time, she indicated that on the morning of May 4, 2023, she would visit their respective media houses, and uplifted same. No votes were solicited.

In keeping with that commitment, I first visited NCN where I received dues from three members, all of whom were members of the press association, each practicing journalism for more than a decade each.

Given that the deadline for the payment of dues was quickly approaching, as Secretary, I made contact with the Chief Reporter at the Guyana Chronicle, and indicated that I would be visiting the media house to uplift dues. Upon doing so, six persons had their dues updated, one of whom has

been a practising journalist and editor for well over two decades and had served on the press association in years gone by. Another five have been in the profession for well over eight years. Importantly though, GPA's financial records show that all of them prior to May, 2023, had updated their dues in 2017, 2018 and 2019, and therefore could not be deemed new members.

At the News Room, dues were paid for three members, two of whom had served on the Executive of the Press Association. The other person has been a long-time member of the association and has participated in many of our training programmes and awards. In fact, Mr Marks was present when the dues were uplifted, and he would agree dues for no new member was received.

At the Kaieteur News, the company paid for 17 existing members of the Association, all of whom have been in the field of journalism for well over three years, some stretching decades, and the records would show that no new member was registered during that visit.

The Guyana Times was subsequently visited, and there, dues for four editors were uplifted – all of whom are existing members of the association.

It is important to note that of the 110 members who were listed to vote on May 14, 2023, there were no new members included.

Mr Marks alleged that during the AGM, the Secretary admitted that she signed up members on the spot, meaning new members. This claim is nothing but baseless. At the General Members Meeting, I explained that while at NCN, an editor, who is no stranger to the media fraternity having practiced for many, many years, indicated that she was a member and had participated in previous elections. Though the document in my possession did not include her name, the editor's dues were received, solely on the grounds that she was an existing member. The Executive was informed, and subsequent checks confirmed that the editor joined the association on March 1, 2015.

Mr Marks claimed, that while the 'outreach' was done at some media houses, it was not done at others where the Executive believed members would have voted for him. Again, I would like to point

to the fact that only five media houses were visited by the Secretary – NCN, Guyana Chronicle, Guyana Times, Kaieteur News, and the News Room, where Mr Marks works as an editor.

It should also be noted, that a purported petition issued by Mr Marks was signed by four of the five media houses visited by the Secretary. No editor signed or was part of any petition. It just stated "editors" so we could not even verify whether those unnamed "editors" are currently financial, non-financial or aspiring members. There was absolutely no evidence upon which to act. Again, an absence of names. No self-respecting person should provide such vague information, and neither should any self-respecting individual or organisation take such drivel seriously.

In his letter, Mr Marks made claims that persons who were not qualified to vote – a taxi driver, a farmer and a handyman – voted. It is clear that Mr Marks has made a total mockery of himself by making such wild allegations.

Importantly, many media workers not only engage in their core responsibilities of gathering and dissemination of news, but also produce and host other programmes, even while serving as a full-time member of a media house.

The GPA is a voluntary professional organisation. Membership is voluntary and so it is the onus of members of the media to be registered and become financial. No sitting executive is required or compelled to go anywhere to collect dues.

Based on legal advice sought, the membership list or the list of eligible persons could not have been provided beforehand to a third party. However, any member is free to call and ask about his or her membership status. The decision not to disclose the list prior to the elections was further reinforced after receiving additional information and confirmation from Executives at the GPA's last executive meeting about prevailing fears by a number of State Media operatives about their membership of the association being known prior. Indeed, the fear is so deep that a number of State Media workers had in the past requested their participation in workshops and other training exercises be kept

strictly confidential. We are advised that State Media journalism practitioners have been prevented from participating in GPA-organised training sessions and workshops. Similarly, practitioners from a number of privately-owned media houses have not participated.

Mr Marks knows all too well that electoral victory never comes on a platter. He should stop behaving like a champagne socialist and go out and campaign with policies and programmes that will hopefully be a true reflection of what he stands for. In previous competitive elections, Mr Denis Chabrol and his team travelled throughout Guyana and did not request or depended on the existing membership register.

That said, no election is perfect but clearly the numbers were stacked against Mr Marks. The electorate rejected him resoundingly. Based on the results of the elections, 25 members voted for Mr Marks while the majority, some 70 members, voted for Ms Nazima Raghubir to be re-elected President. There was one spoilt ballot.

Mr Marks clearly appears to be part of wider historical campaign to discredit the GPA as the alternative to certain defeat and independence.

Repeated claims were made in various types of communications that media workers were not allowed to register or that the list was padded. However, no evidence has been provided to substantiate these claims pre, peri and post the Electoral process. There was absolutely no evidence upon which to act.

The GPA Executive and, indeed the wider membership, are severely constrained not to conceive that Mr Marks is not part of a grand design not merely to hoodwink Guyanese into believing his naked falsehoods but to engage in a certain type of subliminal messaging that has diseased Guyana for decades.

Despite his deep-seated concerns about Electoral malpractice, he must be commended for contesting the elections and participating in the meeting after the results were declared. Had he won

the elections with the same arrangements that he challenged before balloting, would he have challenged his own victory with such worn out and baseless arguments?

In conclusion, as former Secretary of the Press Association, I reject Mr Marks' baseless claims that the members register/voters list was padded and that the Association's elections were rigged. This is a mischievous lie.

Yours Sincerely,

Svetlana Marshall-Abrams

Former Secretary,

Guyana Press Association.