

Emotive public hearing on FBJ, 'coconuts'

By [Tshepiso Seopa](#)

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Emotions ran high at the public forum yesterday, Wednesday, 5 March 2008, on the need to have exclusive organisations in the new South Africa, hosted by the South African Human Rights Commission. The forum was in response to complaints lodged by Primedia Broadcasting against the newly reformed Forum of Black Journalists' refusal to allow white journalists to attend an off-the-record lunch meeting scheduled with ANC president Jacob Zuma.

On the day of the lunch, when white political reporter Stephen Groote was amongst the white journalists who were asked to leave the exclusive meeting, Primedia group head of news Yusuf Abramjee and talk show host Kieno Kammies objected to FBJ's exclusivity policy and walked out, too.

Lodged in personal capacity

Kammies and Abramjee later lodged complaints in their personal capacity with the commission after some of the attendees called them coconuts.

On the panel, the Primedia Broadcasting complaints were represented by 702 station manager Phaladi Gwangwa, , 702 news editor Katy Katopodis and Abramjee.

According to their submissions the refusal by the FBJ to allow white journalists to attend the lunch was based on racism and that such exclusion went against the spirit of the constitution.

Katopodis stated, "While I am not against the existence of such an organisation, the organisation appeared to have chosen this high profile event to make a political statement on racial grounds.

"We submit that it is clear, from the proper consideration of the constitution, the Equality Act that all persons in South Africa, whether natural or legal (including an association of persons) must conduct themselves, including organising themselves, on a basis that they do not discriminate against anyone on the basis of race. They ought to be able to justify such discrimination on the basis that it is fair. There is much legal authority on the topic which the HRC will no doubt have regard to."

Abramjee said, "Being called a coconut was discriminatory, harmful, hurtful and derogatory attack on the dignity of Kammies and myself."

Represented by Abbey Makoe

The FBJ was represented by interim chairman Abbey Makoe. In his submissions, Makoe said: "To say the FBJ has no place in South Africa is to deny that black journalists have the right to association and organisation. Issues in journalism are not limited to job descriptions and newsroom positions. They extend to psychological, spiritual [and] cultural aspects of reconstruction of their own re-humanisation."

Black journalists want to be able to submit a black view without white sanction and their rights are protected by the constitution. He said the FBJ knew that Zuma's presence at the briefing would be a "magnet of sorts", attracting journalists who would not otherwise have attended.

"It [the complaint] smacks of paternalistic arrogance and undermines the right to independence of thought and action. This is about black journalists, their rights, their fears, their concerns."

Makoe added, "I challenge anybody to tell us what we are doing is illegal."

Refused to apologise

Former Talk Radio 702 host Jon Qwelane repeated what he had written in his column this past Sunday when he said that he refused to apologise for calling a former colleague a "coconut", saying that "I have made it clear that I won't apologise for using the word 'coconut'."

Qwelane then said he had written a formal letter to the commission asking it to investigate the "nauseating tendency of 702 to manufacture news through its in-your-face arrogance, because in my view, that tendency violates the public's constitutional right to be informed."

The SAHRC is expected to make a ruling on both complaints shortly.

For more on yesterday's hearing:

- Business Day: [Black journos defend bar on white peers](#)
- The Times Online: [Journalists get heated at racism forum](#)
- IOL: [We don't work for the 'baas' - FBJ](#)
- Sowetan Online: [Debate on FBJ talks still hot](#)
- Mail & Guardian Online: [Don't cry no tears, FBJ tells 702](#)

For the latest debate on issues arising out of the FBJ controversy:

- Mail & Guardian Online: [Questioning division](#)
- Mail & Guardian Online's Ferial Haffajee: [Change starts at home](#)
- FXI's Na'eem Jeenah on Thought Leader: [Coconuts, racism and SABC politics](#)

Updated 13 March 2008:

- SANEF.org.za: [SANEF Chairperson, Jovial Rantao's Presentation to the SAHRC on March 5, 2008](#)

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Tshepiso Seopa was a junior journalist at Bizcommunity.com

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