



GOVERNMENT
ACCOUNTABILITY
PROJECT

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January 13, 2021

Re: Illegal Removal of Patsy Widakuswara from Covering the White House

Dear Messrs. Pack and Reilly and Ms. Robbins:

We represent employees of your agencies who are whistleblowers who wish to remain anonymous.

At about 10:30 p.m. on Monday, January 11, 2021, you summarily removed Voice of America (VOA) White House Correspondent Patsy Widakuswara from her post. Hours earlier, we informed you that Ms. Widakuswara is a whistleblower who has made disclosures of wrongdoing protected under the applicable federal whistleblower statute (5 U.S.C. § 2302(b)(8)).

You acted after Ms. Widakuswara attempted to question Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the end of his speech to VOA staff at VOA headquarters on Monday afternoon. Ms. Widakuswara's questions touched on current events – the January 6, 2021, takeover of the U.S. Capitol – to which the Secretary has yet to take a public position. He did not address this vital topic in his address or in the answers to the questions posed by Mr. Reilly after the speech (Mr. Reilly's six questions also omitted that topic). Secretary Pompeo ignored Ms. Widakuswara's subsequent questions.

Seconds after Secretary Pompeo departed from VOA headquarters, Mr. Reilly publicly berated Ms. Widakuswara. First, Ms. Widakuswara asked Mr. Reilly, "Mr. Director, why didn't you ask

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any of the questions we wanted to know about?” Mr. Reilly and Ms. Robbins, the organizer of the event, asked Ms. Widakuswara to identify herself – she said she was the White House Correspondent for VOA. Then, Mr. Reilly told Ms. Widakuswara, “You don’t know how to behave ... you are not authorized. ...” In response, Ms. Widakuswara said, “I know, but I am a journalist and I am paid to ask questions and none of those questions you asked.” Ms. Robbins, then cut off further discussion. Approximately seven hours later, Ms. Widakuswara was informed of her “reassignment.”

Ms. Widakuswara had been scheduled to be one of the White House pool reporters covering President Trump’s trip on Air Force One to Alamo, Texas, on the morning of Tuesday, January 12. She did not cover the event. The White House Correspondents’ Association called your action “an assault on the First Amendment. ... VOA’s reassignment of Patsy Widakuswara for doing her job, asking questions, is an affront to the very ideals Secretary of State Pompeo discussed in his speech on Monday.”¹

The bipartisan leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has been equally critical. The joint statement issued by the Chair and Ranking Member states in full:

We were incredibly frustrated to hear the Voice of America White House senior correspondent Patsy Widakuswara was demoted from her position after questioning Secretary Pompeo about last week’s attack on the Capitol. Absent a legitimate reason for this move, which has not been provided, we believe she should be reinstated. This is the United States of America – we do not punish our journalists for seeking answers to their questions. A free and fair press is at the core of our Constitution and our democracy.²

In the two days since you acted, Ms. Widakuswara has been reassigned twice. On the evening of January 11, she was told that she has been removed from the White House beat and had been reassigned to a "general assignment" position within the VOA News Center. On January 13 she learned, by way of being copied on an email addressed to the VOA Indonesia Service chief, that she has been assigned to the Indonesian Service. Neither Ms. Widakuswara nor her Union

¹ White House Correspondents’ Association Press Release, *An Assault on the First Amendment* (Jan. 12, 2021), available at <https://whca.press/2021/01/12/an-assault-on-the-first-amendment/>; CNN, *Voice of America Reassigns White House Reporter Who Tried to Ask Mike Pompeo a Question* (Jan. 12, 2021), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/12/media/voa-reassigns-reporter/index.html>.

² House Foreign Affairs Committee Press Release, *McCaul, Meeks Ask for Answers on Demotion of VOA Reporter Patsy Widakuswara* (Jan. 12, 2021), available at <https://gop-foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-meeks-ask-for-answers-on-demotion-of-voa-reporter-patsy-widakuswara/>.

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representative were consulted and no reason has been given for these reassignments. The shuffling of Ms. Widakuswara is further evidence of your animus. It is also gross mismanagement.

In our January 8, 2021, letter to you, we advised that your mandate to broadcast the Secretary's speech live to VOA's worldwide audience – a speech we expected would be a regurgitation of the Secretary's many widely covered public statements – constituted illegal, political meddling prohibited by the VOA statutory firewall. Secretary Pompeo did not disappoint: his speech was filled with the predicted propaganda.³ In other words, our concerns were realized.

Sadly, Ms. Widakuswara's removal from the White House beat is another example of illegal political meddling. It is a clear violation of the firewall and sends a chilling message, journalists in authoritarian regimes are very familiar with: if you dare ask questions, you suffer the consequences.

It must stop.

Very truly yours,

/s/

DAVID Z. SEIDE
Government Accountability Project

cc: House Foreign Affairs Committee
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General
U.S. Office of Special Counsel

³ The only new item was the Secretary's comments on our January 8 letter to you. He called our clients' objections "morally wrong." He went on to say that their concerns constitute "[c]ensorship, wokeness, political correctness it all points in one direction -- authoritarianism cloaked as moral righteousness." *Reclaiming America's Voice for Freedom* (Jan. 11, 2021), available at <https://www.state.gov/reclaiming-americas-voice-for-freedom/>. We disagree.