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Elected Mattaponi Tribal Leadership Exposes Undemocratic Practices in Upcoming Farce Tribal Election

MATTAPONI RESERVATION, VA, July 18, 2023 — The elected leadership of the Mattaponi Tribe, one of the oldest Indigenous communities in the Commonwealth of Virginia, is raising serious concerns about the legitimacy of the upcoming tribal election organized by a self-appointed group. The election, scheduled for this Saturday, is marred by several irregularities that undermine the democratic process and the rights of tribal members.

The Mattaponi Tribe, known for its rich cultural heritage and strong community bonds, has grappled with internal governance issues. Two bodies claim leadership: the elected tribal council, elected by both reservation residents and non-resident tribal members, and a self-appointed group that has seized control without having ever stood for an election by the tribal members.

The elected leadership has identified several alarming issues with the upcoming election:

1. The "approved voting member list" of the self-appointed body includes only 33 people, while excluding hundreds of tribal members including most lineal descendants of the tribe who are women and others who have mixed-blood.
2. Six people on the voting list are family members of the candidates and do not reside on the reservation, while hundreds of other non-resident members are denied a vote.
3. Two current members of the self-appointed governing body and candidates are state employees, clearly violating the self-appointed group's constitution barring state government employees from holding tribal office. "Article XI Section 2. No Federal, Commonwealth or County Employees. No person shall be eligible to serve as a member of the Mattaponi Tribal Council or serve on any Tribal committee, commission, or board, if employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or by any other Federal, County, or Commonwealth agency."
4. Four individuals listed on the voting list have not been registered as tribal members although they live on the reservation..
5. Steven Custalow, a vocal critic of the self-appointed government, who lives on the reservation has been unjustly excluded from the tribal membership list merely because he had vocally opposed the self-appointed government.
6. The group's decision to appoint Dave Henneman, the Assistant Chief of the Nansemond Tribe, as the election official is a clear breach of tribal customs. It is not customary for officials who are members and officials of other tribes to interfere in other tribes' governance, and his involvement further taints the election's legitimacy.

"The upcoming election is a blatant disregard for the democratic rights of our tribal members," says Chief Lonnie Custalow, elected in an open election held on March 26, 2022. "It's crucial that the broader public understands the undemocratic practices being employed. All lineal descendants of the Mattaponi tribe, regardless of race or gender, should be allowed to register and vote in tribal matters."

"The only path forward for the Mattaponi People is to unite under principles of unity and equality for all tribal members and transparency in government," says Assistant Chief Gloria Custalow, elected in an open election held on March 26, 2022. "Our children are counting on us to make this stand for democracy, where all people have a voice and vote."

The elected leadership calls for transparency, inclusivity, and respect for democratic norms in all tribal governance matters. They urge all stakeholders, including the media, tribal communities, and advocacy groups, to scrutinize the upcoming election and its aftermath.

About the Mattaponi Tribe

The Mattaponi Tribe is one of the oldest Indigenous communities in Virginia, with a rich cultural heritage and a strong commitment to community welfare and environmental stewardship. The tribe faces governance issues, with two competing leadership bodies: the elected tribal council, recognized by hundreds of tribe members, and a self-appointed council recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia by colonial treaty. The elected leadership is committed to upholding democratic norms and ensuring the rights of all tribal members.

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