

HON ASERI M RADRODRO

RESPONSE TO PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH FOR OPENING OF 2016
PARLIAMENTARY SESSION

(Thursday 24th September, 2015).

SALUTATION

Madam Speaker,
The Honorable Prime Minister
The Honorable Leader of the Opposition,
Honorable Cabinet Ministers
Fellow Honorable Members of Parliament.

I rise to make my contribution to his Excellency the President's opening address delivered last week in this August House.

From the outset, I must state that I experienced a mixture of feelings as I listened to his Excellency's address!

EXPIRY OF PRESIDENT'S TERM IN OFFICE

Nevertheless, I now wish to speak briefly on the last part of it.

Madam Speaker, all good things come to an end.

His Excellency has acknowledged his term as President of the Republic of Fiji Islands will end in November of this year, 6 years after he took office.

I take this time to thank His Excellency, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau for his leadership to Fiji.

The work could not have been easy.

He would be aware Madam Speaker, of the great expectations the people of this Nation had of his services and leadership.

He no doubt would also be aware, that at times, he was questioned on some of the decisions he took, or the silence he adopted, during certain times when many expected him to take a position, on matters that had a significant impact on people's lives.

I am a great believer in the human spirit and in acknowledging that as humans, we will not always have the right answers for everything.

I wish you well Sir, and pray you enjoy your twilight years, in whatever capacity you will play God willing.

Vinaka Saka vakalevu.

DEMOCRACY/ SEPARATE STATE/

Madam Speaker, His Excellency took great pains to inform this house of our new found Democracy, and why it needs to be protected.

On that, I will quote from Subha Wijesiriwardena.

She is from Colombo, Sri Lanka, is a recognized blogger and a regular contributor to online discourse about Sri Lankan politics.

She made the following comments about democracy following the recent change of leadership in Shri Lanka in January of this year after a decade of authoritarian leadership by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

And I quote, “*Democracy is not just a system, a structure; it is also a feeling. It is a feeling within each one of us; a desire to be led by the things we believe in; and the people we see those things in.*

It is a desire to stand up, to feel powerful in our own way, to wield that power in the face of despair and frustration. It is a feeling that inspires other feelings; it gives us courage, it gives us hope.

It allows for Army officials- men who have made their entire careers out of respecting rank and taking orders- to say ‘No,’ when they are asked to deploy their troops to help a desperate and frightened man stay in power; best of all: that they say ‘NO’ with pride, that we all say ‘NO’ with pride”.

Madam Speaker I will now turn my attention to the issue of sedition or the setting up of alternative States.

I noted his Excellency’s address spent a considerable time on this subject.

I am of the view that any right minded, Honorable Member of this House, will take for granted the firm denouncing of any seditious acts against the ruling of any elected government.

Personally, I have and will always denounce the illegal attempts by anyone whether military or civilian, for the overthrow of an elected government, for whatever purpose or argument.

I, hold the firm view, that should we the people find discontent with any ruling government, we must exercise fairness in respect of the People's majority will, and await Elections, to express our implicit desire for the government we wish to have.

Recently, at an event for Naitasiri High School where, I spoke to my fellow kinsmen to respect and abide by the rule of Law and cautioned against negative political agitation as the mechanism of democracy has been undertaken; and that due recognition and respect is accorded to the government elected by the people.

It is the fair thing to do! Besides, when we the Opposition will become the government of the day; I would expect nothing less than the same respect and call, to be made by our fellow

Honorable Members on the other side of this August House.

I reiterate that call today.

We the people of Naitasiri remember like yesterday, the experiences our people were made to go through at Kalabu and at the Tikina of Nabobuco in 2000, as a result of the political manipulation of some people, who remain ambiguous to us to this day.

Some of our people served time for their part in those events, temporarily losing their freedom.

Some nurture scars emanating from the beatings received at the hands of soldiers and the Police, sent in to disperse the groupings and bring to judgment those that it needed to.

I remain outraged with the treatment they received at the time; however, I also believe the actions of our people could have been better.

"Sa rauta na vakayagataki!"

THE 2013 CONSTITUTION

Madam Speaker, on the 2013 Constitution.

I beg to differ with His Excellency that the document was the product of a national exercise.

Whatever ideals any such document holds, one of the prerequisites for a Constitution to be deemed legally adoptable by the Judiciary, demands that the process for its establishment must be owned by the people, and constructed with the participation of the people!

That document Madam Speaker was the Yash Ghai Constitution.

However, this parliament went to election under the 2013 Constitution. We are all here as legislatures, by virtue of that process. The voices of our people are represented, and heard through the Honorable Members now elected to represent them after eight long years.

This, does not however, give credence that the Constitution was created with the will of the people.

I mince no words when I say there remains a lot to be desired of this document.

I call on us all as Honorable Members of this August House, to collectively acknowledge the shortcomings in the consultation process of this Constitution, and allow this Parliament to engage in meaningful discussions that will ensure it becomes a document that espouses true justice,

peace and prosperity, and freedom for our nation, and all our people.

Still on the Constitution, I have a question for the Honorable Attorney General, the Chief initiator of this Constitution.

I would like to refer to Chapter 2 on the Bill of Rights, section 5, sub section c and it reads;

"The rights and freedoms set out in this Chapter, apply according to their tenor or may be limited by;..... limitations which are not expressly set out or authorized (whether by or under a written law) in relation to a particular right or freedom in this Chapter, but which are necessary and are prescribed by a law or provided under a law, or authorized or permitted by a law, or by actions taken under a authority of a law".

The question that I would like to pose for explicit intent is;

- what limitations in our Bill of Rights this section of the Constitution is alluding to; and
- Which authorizing body or authority of law is able to provide this limitation especially when there is a whole list of rights under the Bill of Rights section?

Madam Speaker, His Excellency highlighted the Fiji First Government was voted in with a margin of 60 percent.

According to the Fiji Elections Office official website, they registered 59.2% of the valid votes that were cast or 293,714 votes. Should we take the population figures of the last Census of 2007 which stood at 837,271 people, these would only represent 35% of that population, voting for them.

In comparison, Madam Speaker, the total votes cast to the other 6 political parties that contested elections, along with the two independent candidates, amounted to 202,650 votes or 24% of the 2007 population.

Collectively, these represent 59% of the total 2007 population.

The total number of voters who registered to vote Madam Speaker in 2014 was 591,101.

Madam Speaker, reports have suggested that Fiji's population has increased to 903,207 in 2014.

Taking the total votes polled by Fiji First, that would mean 608,493 or 67% of our people to-date did not give government the full mandate to rule, or enforce a Constitution or legislation on them without prior consultation.

They won the elections Madam Speaker Yes, and I congratulate them again. But I request them to be practical and accept that we all need to exercise maturity in thought and spirit to ensure true healing in our nation.

I say this with full conviction that they have the ability to make this work, should they become bigger people, allowing this exercise to be a partnership between this legislature and our people.

DEBT BORROWING FOR INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS

Madam Speaker, the provision of infrastructure development is to ensure general improvement in investment opportunities, standard of living and accessibility to services.

In this year's budget, the infrastructure Ministry received a whopping \$1.13 billion in its 2015 budget allocation. Of this amount, \$105.8 million was estimated to be secured in 2015 as overseas borrowing.

This kind of massive budget and borrowings surely should have eased some of our more prominent and persistent infrastructure challenges.

We heard in the last few days in this House Madam Speaker, the examples of infrastructure

development being implemented in Ba. It sounded like an impressive list of developments.

However, if only these could be the same for the whole of Fiji.

In rural electrification for example, significant communities remain without electricity despite having paid deposits as levied from the Department of Rural Electrification.

Concerns now brought to our attention, highlight that many of these customers are still waiting today for their electricity connections Madam Speaker.

They paid their deposits for some years now.

Some of these villages and communities include; Vorovoro and Mali Island in Macuata; Matalevu in Tavua; Vatubalavu village in Nadroga; Tokaimalo in Rakiraki and Matamaivere Settlement in Tailevu to Nuku, Naitauvoli and Waisa in Naitasiri to name a few.

Madam Speaker, this is not the only villages or communities around the country in need of electricity.

In Macuata at the Vunimoli Education Centre, they have been waiting for the survey required by the

Rural Electrification programme for some time now.

The deposit they were directed to prepare, is available and ready Madam Speaker.

For roads Madam Speaker, the Fiji Roads Authority this year received a budget allocation of \$635.6 million.

The question Madam Speaker is; where are the roads and bridges that are supposed to have been constructed or rehabilitated?

We note the major projects like the Sawani Serea Road, the Buca Bay road recently opened by the Honorable PM, and others. But, we also note there were promises in the 2015 Budget, for the construction of small rural roads.

For the greater part, the only evident road works are the maintenance and rehabilitation of roads confined to orange cones causing road blocks everywhere, filling in of potholes, or resealing, with little regard for road users.

Madam Speaker, the importance of infrastructure development has been reflected by the budget provision, but sadly this is not materializing still, for many.

In the Tikina of Noimalu in Naitasiri, villagers are still travelling by foot and by horseback as they have done for the past year to this day to reach the nearest access!

Likewise the villages of Roma in the Tikina of Nabobuco Madam Speaker are still awaiting to this day, their request for road access.

Madam Speaker, urbanization is putting greater pressure on infrastructure especially on the Water Authority piped water system.

Whilst 80% of Fiji's population has access to piped water with some form of treatment, and around 40% has access to sewerage facilities, the age old pressing problem of intermittent water supply is still existent despite the level of investment going into this sector.

According to government official reports, this is related to high leakage in the systems and the inability of existing Infrastructure to cope with demand.

This is made worse, when there is favoritism practiced by the Authority as in many instances, commercial demands from major tourist hotels for example have been known to be prioritized over demand from the local surrounding population.

If these problems continue to persist Madam Speaker, maybe the Honorable Minister concerned needs to get better people to handle the problems, and overhaul the Board of WAF just as he has done for LTA.

Overall Madam Speaker, for this alluded debt for infrastructure development, we wonder if we will be able to make this repayment without going into further debt.

How much will we, and our future generations have to pay eventually towards these loans?

PROSPERITY FOR ALL

Madam Speaker, His Excellency stated; 'prosperity and a brighter future for all Fijians'.

I would like to bring to the attention of this House, the recent sale of a publicly listed entity; Sky Pacific operation, which is a part of Fiji TV, to Digicel.

This subsidiary company is owned by Fijian Holdings Limited as majority shareholding.

The Fijian Holdings CEO last week declared the sale of Sky TV to Digicel for \$5.75 million.

How did this come about and why did it not follow the principles of a sale of a publicly listed company?

There are a lot of questions Madam Speaker especially when the initial set up cost of Sky Pacific in 2004 was \$6.5 million, and 3 years ago, Fiji TV spent a further \$6m in upgrade including change of satellite.

This would resonate to bad investment business decision when the sale price is \$5.75 when the cost of establishment and upgrade is around \$12.5 million.

Madam Speaker, this is a breach of duty of care of the Fiji TV Directors and FHL and I call upon the Honorable Prime Minister, also Minister for I-Taukei Affairs, to initiate, a Parliamentary Special Committee according to the Standing Order under section 129.

This Special Committee should be tasked to investigate and review this sale transaction.

The Honorable PM must ensure the Fiji TV and FHL Directors be suspended whilst Reserve Bank of Fiji investigate why South Pacific Stock Exchange did not look into this matter!

This must be done in light of ethics and transparent leadership and to avoid misinterpretation as one of the directors of Fiji TV, Nouzab Fareed, also CEO of FHL is also on the board of South Pacific Stock Exchange!

We recommend that whilst the parliamentary enquiry is ongoing, SPSE suspend trading in FHL and Fiji TV shares until the findings of the independent enquiry have been publicly released.

Madam Speaker, there are more pressing questions than answers in that sale process.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ALL FIJIANS

On the subject of a brighter future for all Fijians Madam Speaker, I will conclude by saying that these sentiments by His Excellency seem like a distant dream at this stage.

Times are hard. Cost of living has risen many times over.

Addressing the minimum wage levels is a drop in the ocean. It means very little to our people who are struggling to put food on the table.

According to Global statistics, Cost of food in Fiji Madam Speaker, increased by 4.70% in August this year, over the same month last year. Food Inflation in Fiji averaged 5.22% from 2004 until 2015,

reaching an all-time high of 16.50% in June of 2007.

Madam Speaker, we know that Cabinet has given itself salary increases.

Compared to the PM's salary of \$115,000 with benefits in 2006, and an average of \$96,000 for Ministers, the declarations of salary that was made by the Honorable PM, the Attorney General and one of their Minister's in 2014 according to FBC article published on Friday July 04th, 2014, reads and I quote;

"The declaration published in today's Fiji Sun newspaper shows that Bainimarama had a total income of \$278,750. From that money, \$230,000 is what he receives as annual salary for being Prime Minister, \$20,000 for entertainment allowance and other allowances \$28,750. Meanwhile, Party General Secretary Aiyaz Sayed- Khaiyum receives an annual salary of \$185,000 as Attorney General. Party President receives \$135,000 as annual salary for being Minister for Women" (unquote).

These salaries Madam Speaker were increased when there was no Parliament, so the people had at the time, not given them the right to award themselves these salary levels. They awarded it to themselves!

Further, since the declaration of these assets to the Elections Office, I know that the salaries of Cabinet have further increased through Decree No 29 of 2014, gazette on 3rd October, 2014.

This is unjustifiable Madam Speaker.

What about our civil servants who do all the hard work? What about our everyday citizens? How do we survive? How does Government propose we survive?

"So Ga e Qava, So e Maqa?"

Madam Speaker, I ask that Government in line of this inflation rates, consider the plight of our ordinary people.

They need to give attention equally to the salary levels of civil servants and not just the defense forces for example.

They need to give priority consideration, to the high cost of food people have to now pay!

More is demanded of them.

REVIEW OF LEGISLATIONS

Madam Speaker, lastly, on the review of existing legislation and subsidiary legislations in 2016.

This side of the House is optimistic the reviews will be positive for our people.

That maybe, Government could also review some of its Decrees created since 2009 like the FNPF Decree of 2011 which disallows the right of any Member to seek legal redress on an issue they are aggrieved with.

I make no apologies Madam Speaker for the issues I have raised today in this August House.

On that note Madam Speaker I conclude by relaying the famous words of '*Martin Niemoller*', a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps.

He uttered these words as a result of the lack of resistance to the Nazi ordeal, which the world ignored for some considerable time, before it finally acted.

And I quote, "*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Socialist.*

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me” (**Unquote**)

The question, for Us will then be;

“In our democracy, what are we willing to sacrifice in order to achieve development?”

I look forward to this question being answered, as we approach 2016 Budget announcement.

Thank you and Vinaka Vakalevu.

ENDS