

FIJI FACING THE FUTURE

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Background

Before I venture into a discussion of the evolving Fijian socio-political systems and its future, let me briefly highlight the past and the historical anomalies that provided the backdrop to the socio-political and economic reform agenda currently implemented in Fiji.

Fiji was a country where a loose form of racial segregation defined the socio-political landscape for four [4] decades. This policy was institutionalised in all of our three constitutions after independence. The 1992 Constitution went as far as reserving certain leadership positions like the PM and President to the indigenous Fijian community. We also accepted as “normal” the election of our parliamentarians along racial lines. And political acquiesce for “affirmative action” programmes justified practices that would be considered corrupt and nepotism in other countries.

Yes, there were some attempts at addressing these anomalies, like the introduction of “national seats” in the 1970 and 1997 Constitutions, but these were in the main, “window dressings” as they were to a large extent small scale adjustments in a political environment that favours the voice of minority but vocal, extremist political elements. Ethnic polarisation was further exacerbated through the tolerance of hate speeches and racially inflammatory remarks, which were common place. In the 2002 Parliament a cabinet minister stood up and likened ethnic Indians to “weeds taking up space” and called for appropriate actions to rid Fiji of this “weed problem”.

This racially divisive environment permeated all facets of Fiji’s society and was further strengthened through government policies dating back to independence. We only have to look at our School curriculums and enrolment practices to understand the severity of the issues I’m highlighting here. It was not uncommon in the last 4 decades for university students to find themselves for the first time sharing a classroom with a person of a different race. By then the seed of distrust and negative racial profiling has taken root and we have been spending the last four decades trying to suppress each other’s advancement to the obvious detriment to national development.

In 1996, the Reeves Constitution Review Commission made this observation in its report,

‘The people of Fiji need to make a conscious choice about whether they wish to take a decisive step away from the communal system that has made ethnic policies inevitable since before independence’

For years we struggled to be a nation under a system that created different classes of citizens and in which the votes of some Fijians counted more than others. The obvious question that begged to be answered was, “How could we be one nation when our fundamental law said that we were not one people?”

The very idea of a just and equal society, of an accountable government, of loyalty to the nation-state, was being eroded from within. There were too many elites that thought the best way to entrench their own privileges was to sow the seeds of division and undermine our independent institutions. The removals of government in 1987 and 2000 were the most radical expressions of this dysfunction.

Most Fijians would agree that the emergence of radical ethno-nationalism during the 1987-2000 period is one of the most shameful episodes of our history and the current government in Fiji is determined that we must never allow a fellow citizen to be second class again, to be less than an equal of his neighbor.

Current Developments

The current Fijian government undertook from 2007 to address these socio-political anomalies on four fronts;

1. Modernise the country by restructuring, reforming and strengthening its governance institutions and framework;
2. Adopt at the core of its political reform the development of a constitution that will guarantee equal citizenry and equal opportunities for all its citizens;
3. Embark on an ambitious but focussed infrastructure development programme throughout Fiji to unleash the economic potential of previously neglected regions and diversify economic activities out of the main island of Viti Levu;
4. Reform of its financial sector to improve on financial prudence and avoid unnecessary wastage of government resources [through corrupt practices].

THE PROCESS

The first stage in this process was the development of a Peoples Charter initiative that was launched in October 2007 and which was developed by a 45 member council consisting of representatives of NGOs, academics, religious leaders and leaders of all major organizations in the country. This council was known as the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF).

One of the first tasks of the NCBBF was the preparation of a comprehensive, fact based, diagnostic report on the State of Nation and Economy (SNE).

The State of the Nation and Economy [SNE] Report found that:

- i. a country wrecked by political instability with an ongoing cycle of coups leading to the repeated overthrow of governments;
- ii. a low level of trust between the major communities;
- iii. increasing corruption and the gross abuse of power;

- iv. low savings and investment, and consequently insufficient new jobs being created each year to employ school leavers, let alone the long term unemployed;
- v. a sharp rise in unemployment and poverty;
- vi. an increase in the number of people forced to live in squatter settlements, a situation exacerbated by the non-renewal of sugar farm leases;
- vii. lack of access to land for both productive and social purposes;
- viii. a weakening export base as markets for garments and sugar contract and because some land has been withdrawn from agricultural use;
- ix. a serious loss of valuable skills, experience and expertise, because of the high rate of emigration;
- x. declining standards of service delivery in the public sector and the community;
- xi. increasing Government debt with higher payments for interest pre-empting funds for vitally needed infrastructure such as water, roads, sewerage, electricity and housing; and
- xii. the dilapidated state of the country's infrastructure.

These were not news to the people of Fiji as we were suffering under these conditions. But the NCBBF then recommended solutions to address the wide range of socio-political and economic challenges highlighted in the report, and these formed the provisions of the Peoples' Charter for Change, Peace and Progress.

The Peoples Charter was adopted after a nationwide inclusive and participatory process. It represents Fiji's own way of addressing its deep rooted, complex and fundamental socio-political problems. The NCBBF received very strong, broad based support from the people of Fiji, with 64% expressing support for the draft Peoples charter.

The Peoples Charter was then endorsed by His Excellency, the late President of Fiji in December, 2008.

Vision of Peoples Charter for Change Peace & Progress

The vision of the Peoples Charter is Building a Better Fiji for All.....with the overarching objective to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, united, well governed, truly democratic nation, a nation that seeks progress and prosperity through merit based equality of opportunity and peace.

It is guided by the following principles:

- a just and fair society;
- achieve unity and national identity;
- merit-based appointments and equal opportunity for all Fijians;
- transparent and accountable government;
- uplifting of the disadvantaged in all communities;

- mainstreaming of the indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) in a modern, progressive Fiji; and sharing spiritualities and interfaith dialogue.

Key Pillars of the Peoples Charter for Change Peace & Progress

There are eleven key pillars or objectives set out in the Peoples Charter as the foundation for the rebuilding of Fiji as a nation. These pillars are broad based strategies and the objectives of the pillars are further detailed into a Strategic Framework.

Pillars are cross sectoral throughout Government Ministries and its implementation includes private sector, CSO, NGO and the public at large.

Due to time constraints I will limit myself to highlighting and discussing only a few of the Peoples' Charter pillars to demonstrate the kind of Fiji we hope to realise with the general election planned for September 2014.

PILLAR 1 - ENSURING SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND GOOD AND JUST GOVERNANCE

Constitution

At the centre of this objective is the development of a non-racial and all inclusive Constitution. This was adopted this past September. 43 years and three constitutions later, we finally have a Constitution that meets the test of a genuine democracy that upholds the legal and moral basis of a common and equal citizenry without denying anyone's individuality or culture.

The 2013 Fijian Constitution enshrines principles that are at the heart of all the world's great liberal democracies – an independent judiciary, a secular state and a wide range of civil, political and socio-economic rights. It recognises the indigenous peoples of Fiji, people of Indian descent and other races [Chinese, Pacific Islanders etc.] and their customary practices; protects the rights of the predominantly indigenous landowners and importantly their tenants [most of whom are Indo-Fijians]; demands accountability and transparency from Government officials; builds strong and independent institutions; and replaces our old weighted electoral system with one based on the principle of one person, one vote, one value.

This 2013 Constitution provides the framework for the development of a modern, progressive state in Fiji and will witness the first genuine democratic election in our history, when for the first time in less than year from today [by September 2014], Fiji will go to the polls to elect a government on the basis of a common and equal citizenry and where every vote is of equal value.

The Constitution provides for a single chamber 50-member Parliament – up from 45 in the Draft document- and will be elected on the basis of one person, one vote, one value. Elections are to be held every four years and every Fijian over the age of 18 is entitled to vote.

In adhering to the vision of a “united and prosperous Fiji”, the 2013 Constitution abolishes communal/racial and regional constituencies as a basis of electing parliamentarians. There will be one national constituency covering the whole of Fiji, as in The Netherlands and Israel. And every voter will get one vote, choosing the candidate who they believe best serves their interests under a proportional representation system.

The legislature will only comprise the House of Representatives. We will do away with the upper house or senate as in previous constitutions.

The Prime Minister will be appointed from the elected parliamentarians in the political party that commands the most seats in Parliament and, in line with the existing practice, a President will be the Head of State and perform the ceremonial function of Commander in Chief of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

In recognition of the political sensitivity of land tenure issues, the Constitution also contains specific provisions that guarantee and strengthen the protection of communally-owned i’Taukei, Rotuman and Banaban lands (96% of total land area). This was also in response to a large number of submissions received during the constitutional consultation process in March calling for explicit protection clauses. They provide greater protection and security for i’Taukei, Rotuman and Banaban land than ever before.

In addition, for the first time, an extra provision gives any landowner the right to a fair share of royalties derived from the exploitation of resources beneath the surface. Previously anything extracted below 6ft belongs to Government!

Other notable feature of the 2013 Constitution are:

- A Bill of Rights containing specific provisions guaranteeing a range of civil and political rights and, for the first time, social and economic rights. These include the right to education, economic participation, a just minimum wage, transport, housing, food and water, health and social security.
- A free media and freedom of speech, expression, movement and association.
- The safeguarding of the environment.
- The compulsory teaching of the i’Taukei and Fiji Hindi languages at primary school level, along with English as the common language.
- The right to multiple citizenship but a provision that only Fijian citizens be entitled to

stand for Parliament.

- The right to fair employment practices.
- The right to join, form or campaign for a political party.
- The right to privacy.
- A Code of Conduct for public office holders.
- A provision requiring public office holders such as civil servants, members of the disciplined forces and trade unionists to resign before contesting a seat in Parliament.

A civic education programme is currently being undertaken to create awareness amongst the population on the new political environment and their rights under the 2013 Constitution. This is the second such civic education programme, the first was conducted early this year prior to the constitutional consultation process.

Electoral System

The debate over communal vs common roll for Fiji's electoral system is not new. In fact it was one [if not the main] contentious issue at the constitutional conference at Marlborough House prior to independence. It was at this early stage that the indigenous leaders demonstrated a fear of political domination by the immigrant community, particularly the Indo-Fijians. Whether this "fear" was real or the result of "fear mongering" by Fijian nationalist groups is open to debate. But it was clear that it became a major political liability that undermined any attempt at "national unity" by successive governments.

Anyways, as mentioned earlier the 2013 Constitution has abolished the communal representation system as provided for under previous constitutions and replaced it with the use of a common roll system for all future elections.

On 29th July 2012, the Electronic Voter Registration (EVR) was launched and to-date close to 540,000 eligible voters or approximately 87% of the total estimated number of voters have registered for the 2014 elections. Four political parties have registered thus far under new laws that create transparency and accountability.

OTHER AREAS [Law and Order, FICAC...]

Under this pillar Government's focus is also on the removal of systemic corruption in both the public and the private sectors and the establishment of the Fiji Independent Commission against Corruption (FICAC) was deemed to be a necessity.

An Accountability and Transparency Commission will also be established which, for the first time, hold all public officials accountable.

PILLAR 2 - DEVELOPING A COMMON NATIONAL IDENTITY AND BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION

Fiji citizens lacked a common national identity and unity until 2010, and have been classified according to their respective racial profile [Indians, Chinese, Part-Europeans and Fijians for the indigenous community]. The long standing discussions yet unresolved over a name for Fiji's citizens was indicative of both the failure of past Governments and the domination by ethno nationalist group of the public discourse on the subject. This prompted racially divisive leadership and there was more a sense of awareness of ethnic identity rather than national identity.

The current Government has taken the bold step to adopt a common name FIJIAN for all citizens of Fiji with full recognition that the indigenous people are the iTaukei.

This has required the Ministry of Education, to have 55 primary schools and 4 secondary schools to change their schools names to remove any racial connotation that could lead to segregation.

The 2013 Constitution also provides for the establishment of a Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission to uphold this vision in the Peoples Charter.

Promote Multi Cultural Education

The mainstreaming of cultural heritage and arts curricula into the formal education is now welcomed by all parents, who view the compulsory teaching of both the hindi and i-taukei languages in all primary schools as progressive and inclusive.

PILLAR 3 - ENSURING EFFECTIVE, ENLIGHTENED AND ACCOUNTABLE LEADERSHIP

A More Visionary Style of Leadership.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) continues with the Public Sector Leadership Development Programme for the Senior Executive Services (SES) cadre and the completion of the SES Competency Framework that will enhance visionary leadership style. The PSC initiatives in promoting effective, enlightened and accountable leadership is commended.

The participation of women leaders in decision making is advancing in the Public Service with an estimate of 25 % in the SES cadre, 26% in the Provincial Development Board (PDB) and 27 % in the Divisional Development Board (DDB).

The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs continue to progress in the development of the Traditional Leadership Model and the strengthening of the existing model based on the good governance principles. Concomitantly Leadership & Management Training for Traditional Leaders continue to progress into Bua; Rewa; Serua and Namosi province for 2011. The Ministry's Traditional Leadership Committee will be in operation from 2012, the Committee will be chaired by the Deputy CEO of the iTaukei Affairs Board.

PILLAR 4 – ENHANCING PUBLIC SECTOR EFFICIENCY, PERFORMANCE EFFECTIVENESS AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Public Service Reforms:

In terms of reforming the Public Service, Government is conducting a functional review exercise of ministries and departments. The objectives of the Functional Review are to right size the civil service, reduce costs of the civil service, and bring about improvements in efficiency and productivity.

Government's focus is also on introducing a merit based civil service through the performance assessment framework (PAF) and modernising through business process re-engineering (BPR).

Financial Reform has progress on the following:

As of 3rd Quarter, 2011 thirty-eight (38) out of forty-one (41) Ministries/Departments had revised their Finance Manuals. Virement and write-off authority are now provided to Permanent Secretaries of Ministries/Departments with revised Finance Manuals.

PILLAR 5 – ACHIEVING HIGHER ECONOMIC GROWTH WHILE ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY

Fiji's Economic growth forecast for this year has been upgraded by the Reserve Bank to 3.6% from the earlier projection of 3.2%. The growth for 2012 was 2.5 percent. In 2011, the economy grew by 1.9 per cent. The forecast for 2014 has been pegged at 3.0%.

Reforms in the private and in the financial sectors are beginning to bear results.

PILLAR 6 - Making More Land Available for Productive and Social Purposes

Land is not only a scarce resource; it is also a very sensitive political issue. Fiji's recent socio-political history reveals that land, like race, has been used by politicians with their different ideologies and philosophies, as a catalyst to spread unnecessary fear amongst the people. The consequences are now well known. Government's land reform initiative is meant to address all these critical issues and more.

Through this process of Land reform the focus is on access, productive use and equitable sharing of benefits. In July 2010, Government introduced an equitable system of distribution of lease monies where each member of the land-owning unit gets an equal share of lease money regardless of status.

Government has endorsed the Land Use Decree and Regulation on the 17th February 2011, serves as a catalyst for making more land available for potential investors. This decree establishes a new Land Use Unit within the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources which runs the Land Use Bank, a registry in which landowners-whether Government or i-Taukei can voluntarily “bank” their idle land for Government to administer. As of Feb 2012 a total of 3, 797.9962 hectares of land has been deposited into the Land Bank. This comprises 3,050.880 hectares of i-Taukei lands and 747.1162 hectares of state freehold land (mainly the “buy back” land).

Other pillars include the following but will not be discussed in detail due to time constraints.

PILLAR 7 – DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURE AT THE DIVISIONAL LEVEL

PILLAR 8: REDUCING POVERTY TO A NEGLIGIBLE LEVEL BY 2015

PILLAR 9: MAKING FIJI A KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY

PILLAR 10 – IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY

PILLAR 11 - ENHANCING GLOBAL INTEGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Conclusion

It has been a long arduous journey and we have faced numerous challenges along the way. But they no longer seem insurmountable as they were in 2007. As the Prime Minister declared in his statement at the recent UNGA in NY, “Our national compass has finally been reset.” Under this new Constitution, we’re heading towards Fiji’s first genuinely democratic elections by September 2014, and a much brighter future, as one nation.