

HIS EXCELLENCY RATU EPELI NAILATIKAU

CF, LVO, OBE (Mil), KStJ, CSM, MSD

President of the Republic of Fiji

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ADDRESS OPENING THE 2014 PARLIAMENT

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Madam Speaker,

The Honourable Chief Justice and members of the Judiciary,

The Honourable Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers,

The Honourable Leader of Opposition,

Honourable members of Parliament,

Your Excellencies,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bula vinaka and a good morning

We gather together as a nation today to mark a momentous occasion - the launch of our new democracy.

44-years after Independence, Fiji has finally held a General Election based on the genuine democratic principle of equal votes of equal value. And the Fijian people have chosen you – the fifty members of our new Parliament – to represent them and serve their interests over the next four years.

I am delighted and honoured – as your Head of State – to formally launch these proceedings and to join you in commemorating this landmark event in the life of our nation.

Firstly, allow me to congratulate you, Madam Speaker, on your election as Speaker of this Parliament. To become the first woman speaker of a Parliament in Fiji, or in any other Pacific Island country, is a singular achievement and an inspiration to women everywhere.

The historical significance of what we are witnessing today cannot be overstated. We gather in a Chamber that has seen some of the greatest events in Fijian history. These include the meetings of the Legislative Council in colonial times that set the scene for our independence from Britain. And the first gathering of the Parliament of an Independent Fiji 44 years ago, in 1970.

Within these walls have echoed the voices of the great historical figures who led us to nationhood. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, AD Patel, my own father, Ratu Sir Edward Cakobau, Siddiq Koya and Dr Timoci Bavadra.

They speak to us across the decades today urging us to complete the task they started in this place with so many other men and women of goodwill, who are no longer with us but who we also remember with gratitude.

Regrettably, this Chamber was also the setting for one of the most traumatic and painful events in our history, whose impact lingers with us almost three decades on. At 10.00 am on May the fourteenth, 1987, a group of soldiers entered the Parliament, stopped the proceedings and herded the newly-elected Government of Dr Timoci Bavadra away at gunpoint.

It was the first of four disruptions to elected Government and the beginning of a cycle of instability that has plagued our nation and retarded its development. It is a chapter in our history that must never be repeated.

Now, 27 years later, we gather at the site of that first coup to establish genuine democratic rule. And to finally draw a line under the years of division that have held Fiji back and herald in a new era of unity and purpose.

The symbolism of returning our Parliament to this place is extremely potent. History has today come full circle. God has blessed us with another chance to build one nation. Let us dedicate ourselves once and for all to the democratic ideal – of genuine equality for all Fijians. And resolve to work constructively in our new democracy and in this refurbished Parliament for the benefit of all our people.

I appeal to you all as your President to work cooperatively together to advance the national interest and to adhere to the highest standards of collective and personal conduct. As democratically elected members of Parliament, your first duty must always be to keep the trust and confidence of those who have sent you here. They look to you to set an example to the nation, and especially our young people, of dedication and service.

Never before has the parliamentary process been more transparent, nor have our MPs been held more accountable. You must never forget that the Fijian people are listening and watching – either on radio, television or the permanent live streaming of these proceedings over the Internet. They will not easily forgive or forget those who put petty arguments for short-term political gain before the great challenge before you to work together to move our beloved nation forward.

It is a sacred trust that you have all pledged before God to uphold in your oaths of office. Those who have sent you here have already demonstrated their passionate desire to exercise their democratic right with a remarkable election turnout of more than 80 per cent. I implore you all as their President: Please do not let them down.

It is also my duty today – as Head of State - to outline the Government’s legislative program for the coming session. I am gratified to have been informed by the Prime Minister that he intends to run a Government that is inclusive and serves the needs of all Fijians, no matter who they are, where they come from or who they voted for in the recent election. It bodes well for our future and I urge every Member of Parliament – whichever Party you represent - to approach your duties here in the same spirit.

My Government’s goal is to build on the reforms of the past eight years to continue improving the lives of ordinary Fijians and better equip our young people for satisfying roles in a growing, thriving economy. It has a clear vision of Fiji as a modern-nation state, taking a pre-eminent role in our own region and strengthening our voice and presence in the global community at large.

Fulfilling that vision will require dedication, focus and hard work. But the potential to grow our economy and improve the living standards of our people has never been greater. My Government is also determined to carry the nation with it on our journey over the next four years – to govern for all Fijians and leave no-one behind. And it intends to place compassion - especially for the less fortunate - high on the list of national priorities as it strives to generate prosperity and wealth.

Indeed, many of the Government’s initiatives for the coming Parliamentary session are designed to continue to alleviate poverty, to provide a leg-up for ordinary Fijians who may be struggling and who look to the Government to improve their lives in a tangible and sustainable way.

They include a major provision to benefit the iTaukei, whose ownership of more than 90 per cent of the land in Fiji makes them asset rich but in many instances, cash poor. My Government wants to unlock the further potential for iTaukei landowners to generate wealth from their land, not only to benefit themselves but the entire economy.

To this end, $10-million will be set aside to help the iTaukei use their land for subdivision and development. For too long, landowners have leased out land for others to develop and make huge profits. My Government will encourage landowners to become landlords while reaping direct commercial benefits from their land. The funding will be made available as grants to assist landowners to meet development costs, such as the provision of electricity, water and roads.

My Government is committed to ensuring that the iTaukei Land Trust Board performs at the highest possible level for the benefit of ordinary Fijians. It will continue to reform the TLTB to make it more efficient and address issues of corruption within the organisation, in particular where landowners have been deprived of their say in the renewal of leases. It will also ensure that members of landowning units don’t have to pay an application fee when they lease their own land.

So my Government is committed to strengthening the economic status of the iTaukei. And, naturally they will also benefit from a range of other provisions that apply to all Fijians.

We intend to reduce the cost of living pressures on ordinary families with targeted, affordable and sustainable initiatives rather than quick-fix measures that deprive our nation of the revenue we need to meet our expenditure requirements.

To this end, my Government will revise the national minimum wage upwards in line with the recommendation of the Reddy Report to a new rate of $2.32 an hour from 1 July, 2015.

My Government will increase the electricity subsidy for low-income families from the current 75 kilowatts per hour to 85 kilowatts per hour. This will provide immediate relief to thousands of households.

My Government will provide 91,250 litres of water free of charge per year to Fijian households earning less than a total income of $30,000. Our calculation is based on an average of 5 members per household and takes into account a World Health Organisation Report that estimates that an individual requires 50 litres of water each day.

My Government will extend the current free education for primary and secondary students to pre-school students from the beginning of the second term in 2015. Free education will now be available one year before admission to primary school at recognised and accredited pre-schools.

My Government will provide 250 ml of milk a day to children enrolled in Class 1 at all primary schools starting from Term 1 of 2015.

My Government will strengthen and streamline the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS) to make it more efficient. By 2016, TELS will be extended to those who already have a diploma or who are in the workforce and want to gain formal qualifications.

My Government will continue with the existing social security system for those pensioners who have never been a member of the FNPF and will lower the age of eligibility to 68 from 1 July 2015 and then further lower it to the age of 66 from 1 July 2016.

My Government will conduct a further review of the social security system to ensure that those Fijians who are most in need do not fall outside the net. This is on top of the recent reforms that restructured the system to make it fairer, reduce abuse and ensure that resources are targeted properly. There continue to be anomalies that exclude deserving Fijians from receiving benefits and these will be addressed.

My Government will provide all medicine prescribed by a doctor and currently under price control for all Fijians who earn less than $20,000 a year. This includes medicines for Non Communicable Diseases.

My Government will ensure all essential drugs will remain under price control and that there is a regular supply of all essential medicines through the public health system.

My Government will provide land and funding to Fiji National University to establish a world class Tertiary Hospital in Lautoka to be run in collaboration with the university’s Medical College. Once this hospital is operational, Fijian citizens earning a household income of less than $20,000 will receive medical procedures free of charge. For retirees, irrespective of whether they are on pension or not, the cost of all procedures will be borne by Government.

With a view to reducing fuel prices and increasing our buying power, My Government will follow the lead of Mauritius in taking control of the import of all fossil fuel, such as petroleum and gas, in place of the existing private companies. We will call for international tenders for the supply of fuel and the existing companies will then buy that fuel from the Government. As well as being able to negotiate lower prices in the international marketplace, the Government will generate revenue from the sale of fuel, establish price stability and be able to pass on the benefits of competitive prices to consumers.

My Government will set up a separate and standing emergency fund to enable the nation’s farmers to better cope with drought and natural disasters.

My Government will continue to give Commercial Agriculture Scholarships to encourage young people to take up farming as a vocation.

My Government will continue to provide fertiliser subsidy to the sugar cane industry, dalo, rice, and dairy farmers. From next year, we will extend this fertiliser subsidy to ginger farmers. It is expected that within two years this program will be extended to other crops.

My Government recognises the high cost of land preparation and to encourage land use and agriculture we will allocate additional funding of $5-million in 2015 to assist farmers to prepare land for cultivation of all types of farming.

My Government recognises that water-logged farms are a major problem for the nation’s farmers, some of whom urgently need assistance with drainage, such is in the Lakena Irrigation Scheme.

My Government will ensure that all State land on which squatters have been living will be subdivided and squatters will be given 99 year leases. Negotiations will also be held with iTaukei landowners and, with their consent, to give 99–year residential leases to squatters. This initiative will extend to the whole country. Successful arrangements have already been concluded in the Lami-Nausori Corridor in Nadonumai, Qauia, Wakanisila and Waidamudamu.

My Government will formalise leases on Crown land that were sold without proper consent in order to give tenants security of tenure and the ability to apply for consent to connect to electricity and water.

My Government will set aside a fund of $1-million to provide emergency assistance to Fijians with an income below $20,000, who have proper leases, but no insurance and who lose their homes in a fire.

My Government will at least double the amount payable under workmen’s compensation for death and injury claims.

My Government will fast track all pending rural and peri-urban electrification projects, in particular where deposits have been paid by the community. It will also work with various international agencies to speed up the expansion of the national grid.

My Government will set up a parliamentary and government committee to oversee the quick implementation of socio-economic rights. This committee will oversee a transparent program with public involvement to integrate the provision of socio-economic rights through every government decision-making process. This includes the right to work for a just minimum wage; the right to education; the right to economic participation; the right to reasonable access to transportation; the rights of persons with disabilities; the right to housing and sanitation; the right to adequate food and water; the rights of children; the right to social security services; the right to health; and environmental rights.

My Government will make it easier to establish small businesses by streamlining the current regulatory requirements.

My Government will implement the current recommendation for a new fee structure for small to medium enterprises. Under this structure, micro-finance entities and small businesses will be exempt from paying fees to meet health, fire and occupational health and safety regulations.

My Government will provide micro-finance start-up or assistance grants to encourage small-scale economic activity. These grants will be targeted at individuals who have particular skill sets, such as handicrafts, or those selling crops and vegetables.

My Government will continue its program of upgrading the country’s municipal market to improve conditions for market vendors and provide accommodation to women travelling into those markets from outlying areas.

Madam Speaker, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

All these measures are designed to assist Fijians either directly or indirectly to give them a leg up and to create economic growth. To reduce the gap between the more fortunate and the less fortunate among us. To continue building a fairer and more equal society.

There are many more initiatives that my Government plans across a broad front in all sectors of the economy. The focus will be on realising our true economic potential. The Government will work with all stakeholders to create a conducive commercial environment that is investor and business friendly. At the same time, it will ensure that our vulnerable - those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale - are also beneficiaries of our economic policies and growth.

We will make Government more accountable, protect our environment, take a tough line on law and order; develop our communications and Information Technology capability; and improve our transport and infrastructure.

In the coming months, a large part of my Government’s focus will be to reform the public sector, which needs to be restructured to keep pace with the demands of a modern economy. The reforms are designed to make the Civil Service more efficient, modern and responsive to the needs of the people.

 My Government intends to encourage a culture of excellence at every level, improve work conditions, develop specialised career paths to enable us to attract the best and brightest to government service.

Madam Speaker, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this Parliament begins the task of capitalising on the progress of the past eight years and building on the goodwill - at home and abroad - that has accompanied the arrival of our new democracy. We have much to be grateful for as a nation. We are unified and at peace. Our recent election has been hailed as credible, free and fair. As we embark on this new journey, let us join hands – whatever our political allegiances - to work together to move our beloved nation forward.

My Government is urging a change in our mindsets, to think beyond our own narrow interests as individuals, within and beyond the walls of our newly-elected Parliament. I urge you all, and especially the Honourable Members of this House, to think beyond the parochial interests - perceived or real - of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status or wherever you come from in Fiji. If we don’t, it will be to our ultimate peril as a nation-state.

But if we do, not only will it make us stronger and a modern, inclusive and mature nation-state but it will give us our rightful place as Fijians in the region and the world at large. It will enrich our own lives individually, enrich the life of our nation and enrich the lives of those in the global community with whom we come into contact.

We are no longer just a small nation in some far off corner of the Pacific. We no longer can isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. The recent capture of 45 of our UN Peacekeepers has reminded us yet again that the world’s problems are our problems. We are an integral part of the global community and must carve out a successful place in it. And we are doing so, whether it is to put our case for a fairer trading system for developing countries such as our own or adopting international best practices or confronting head-on the crisis of global warming and rising sea levels.

Fiji has never stood taller in the world than it does today. But my Government wants to fire the imagination of every Fijian to think of how much taller we will stand when our education revolution produces the smarter nation that we intend to become.

Henceforth, we must ensure that every Fijian child is given the best possible opportunity to be educated, have access to all basic amenities and services, be brought up in a liberal and inclusive society and become a true citizen of Fiji and the world.

Today, you fifty men and women take your place in this Chamber charged with the responsibility of leading us. You carry on your shoulders the hopes and aspirations of **all** Fijians.

Madam Speaker, the Honourable Chief Justice, the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, the Leader of the Opposition members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is now my honour to declare the 2014 Parliament officially open. May God Bless you all. May God Bless Fiji.

Vinaka Vakalevu, thank you.