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Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, i-Taukei Affairs, Provincial Development, Sugar Industry, Lands and Mineral Resources

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**ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCHING OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION**

Government HouseFri. 6th Sept., 2013

SUVA 1530 Hours

**Your Excellency, the President;**

**The Honourable Chief Justice and Members of the**

 **Judiciary;**

**Cabinet Ministers;**

**Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

The term “historic” is sometimes used a little too freely but not today.

Because this is truly a historic occasion in the life of our nation and will be regarded as such, long after we have all passed into history ourselves.

His Excellency, our President has spoken eloquently about why today is so important.

For the first time, Fiji meets the standards of the world’s great democracies and will join their ranks.

We now 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 losing individuality or culture.

It’s taken us 43 years and three Constitutions to get here.

But now, finally, it’s happened. And it’s cause for immense celebrations.

This afternoon, I seek your indulgence to reflect on the true meaning of this occasion.

Today marks the completion of the revolution the RFMF and I embarked on six and a half years ago.

That revolution was to put our nation back on track after years of turmoil. To fulfill our vision, at Independence, of a just, vibrant, and multicultural economic powerhouse in the Pacific.

I was a youth of sixteen on that brilliant sunny day - October the 10th 1970 - and clearly recall the surge of pride and optimism that went through everyone when our flag was raised after 96 years of British rule.

We were Fiji, the Way the World should be. For the first few years, the future looked bright as we led the way to Independence for a string of other countries in our region, who looked to us as a beacon - a source of inspiration and a role model.

But unfortunately, there were unscrupulous elements at work.

Elites used their positions - whether in political parties, religious organisations, trade unions, traditional society or business - to advance their personal interests and entrench their privileges.

So much so that the notion of a just society, of an accountable government, of one nation, was being eroded from within.

Similarly, the justification for the removal of governments in 1987 and 2000 was wrong. It was a concoction by a selfish few, resisting change, who preyed on the misguided and the ignorant. It was the biggest of lies.

Tens of thousands of Fijians suffered and many simply gave up on the country and left. It remains the most shameful episode in our nation’s history and must never be repeated.

The real shame was not just in the countless personal stories of dislocation, discrimination and increased poverty, but the wasted years of development for all Fijians.

It also created a culture of every person for themselves, of loyalty to self rather than the nation-state of Fiji.

History records that I played a significant role in 2000 as Commander of the RFMF, bringing the siege of the Parliament to an end, and charging an Interim Government with the task of rebuilding the nation.

But it too was captive to the same forces of division. And by December 2006, events were spiraling out of control: the integrity of our institutions was at risk, corruption had become endemic, and we were in danger of becoming a failed state.

We had to reset the clock, create *“Year Zero”*. With men and women of goodwill, we had to rebuild Fiji and put it on a different path, a path of equality and inclusiveness.

We had to end the culture of self-entitlement, corruption and hypocrisy that had taken root to the detriment of ordinary people.

Your Excellency, my fellow Fijians,

Many modern, stable democracies have gone through their own turbulent periods. Some have gone through decades of instability and bloodshed, while others have had a single defining moment. These events changed the course of history. They turned their countries from bastions of elitism and oppression into nations of freedom, equality and true democracy.

The United States has its Bunker Hill and Civil War; France has the storming of the Bastille and the French Revolution; Australia, the Eureka Stockade; Britain a bloody history to establish constitutional monarchy.

We Fijians too have had our period of turbulence - our catharsis. Today, however, marks our new beginning. Today, we launch the blueprint for our genuine democracy.

The 2013 Fijian Constitution enshrines principles that are at the heart of all the great liberal democracies - an independent Judiciary, a secular State and a wide range of civil, political and socio-economic rights.

Our three previous Constitutions - in 1970, 1990 and 1997 - failed the basic test of genuine democracy. They enshrined the notion that the votes of some people in Fiji were worth more than others, that some people deserved more rights than others. That in order to possess a right, you had to take it away from others.

These constitutions highlighted differences rather than commonalities. Every time we went to vote, we had to stand in separate lines. How could we expect our nation to be united? How could we expect political parties to appeal to all Fijians when the very structures of these constitutions, the very structures of governance, differentiated us?

As a nation, we had lost our way. And I remain convinced that only the most radical intervention was capable of ever turning us around. With the revolution and the new Fijian Constitution, our national compass has been reset.

As I said the other day, it has stretched some of our international relationships to the limit. Instead of being willing to listen and understand, some of our oldest friends turned their backs on us.

They sought to damage us with travel bans, erode our attempts to attract the best people to government jobs and boards, jeopardise our ability to borrow money for our development and even tried to torpedo our contributions to UN Peacekeeping.

I have to say that this campaign to sabotage our national interests filled me at times with disappointment and dismay. Because these countries chose to support a form of democracy, governance and justice in Fiji that they would never have accepted themselves.

Had they helped us, rather than hindered us, this day might have come sooner. The Elections might have come sooner.

Surely they realise that this Constitution is as democratic and inclusive, or even more so, than anything they have themselves.

To the few voices of skepticism and criticism, I say: read the Constitution. You will find that it meets the standards of the most liberal of democracies and international norms and conventions.

Every month that passes we are building the foundations of our new parliamentary democracy.

Close to 540,000 Fijians have registered to vote for the 2014 Elections and four political parties have registered thus far.

As I’ve already pledged, I will subject myself to the will of the Fijian people at the polls before the end of September 2014. It is they who will pass judgment on me and my political party, under this new Constitution.

We are now a more just and a more caring nation. Our reforms have strengthened our independent institutions and created new ones to increase accountability and transparency, and to remove systemic corruption.

Our voice in the world has never been stronger. We serve the international community not only through our UN Peacekeeping but with our volunteer retirees who are raising standards of education and health in our smaller neighbours.

Your Excellency, my fellow Fijians,

The same optimism that I felt as a 16 year old at Independence, I feel again at almost 60.

We have a blueprint for a new future, one in which every young person in Fiji today can also share. We need to tap their optimism and idealism to take our country forward. We need to provide a better future for their children and grand-children.

On this wonderful day - a day to remember and celebrate - we Fijians can once again be truly proud of ourselves and our beloved country.

God bless Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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