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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, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT OPENING OF PUBLIC RENTAL BOARD’S RAIWAI HOUSING PROJECT**

**Raiwai Road Mon. 1st Sept., 2014**

**RAIWAI 1130 Hours**

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**The Attorney General and Minister for Housing,**

**Your Excellency, the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China,**

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

**The Chairman of the Public Rental Board,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

Before we move on to the official part of today’s proceedings, I want to brief you all on the latest information we have on the 45 Fijian soldiers being detained in Syria.

The latest information we have from multiple sources is that they are safe and are being held in an undisclosed location. We have opened channels of communication with the Al Nusra Front - the armed group responsible for their capture – and negotiations are proceeding. Yesterday, the group released a photograph of our men who appeared to be in good health.

Yesterday, I spoke with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, who reassured me that the UN was bringing all of its available resources to the negotiating table. He also took the opportunity to praise the work our soldiers are doing in the Golan Heights and on other UN peacekeeping missions around the world.

The RFMF has set up a crisis centre in Vatuwaqa that is providing support to the families of soldiers deployed overseas and especially those in Syria. The Government fully supports this outreach and stands ready to assist in any way we can.

I have received messages from Fijians of all faiths expressing their deep concern and saying that these men are in their prayers. Even in the midst of an election campaign, we are united as a nation in praying for their safe return.

Of course, the thoughts of the entire Nation are with these soldiers and their families. And I want to assure their loved ones that we are doing everything possible – working with the United Nations – to secure their release.

When we receive new information, we will share it with you. Until then, please keep these men in your thoughts and prayers.

Excellencies, my Fellow Fijians,

Of all the services my Government has delivered over the past eight years, nothing gives me more satisfaction than to have provided many Fijian families with a home.

So I’m especially delighted to be here in Raiwai this morning to open 210 new Public Rental Board flats that will house more than a thousand people. 1,050 to be precise.

It is a joyous occasion because this is more than just bricks and mortar. A home is the heart of the family. It should be a place of refuge, a place of happiness, a place where children are nurtured and taught the values on which any community depends.

Today, we celebrate the fact that more than 200 families are about to get the keys to these properties and open the door to a new life for themselves and their loved ones.

They join the many thousands of other ordinary Fijians around the country who have benefited from my Government’s housing programs – whether through the Public Rental Board, the Housing Authority, the Squatter Settlement Upgrade Project, the Housing Assistance Relief Trust, or the Housing Assistance Grant for first home buyers.

Our total spending on the housing sector over the past few years has exceeded $93-million. We still have 4,000 people on the Public Rental Board waiting list. But as you can see all around you today, we are working hard to clear this backlog.

I have made housing one of my Government’s top priorities.

The choice you face on Election Day is perhaps the most important in our Nation’s history. It is a choice between the future and the past, a future in which Fiji moves forward – united and strong or moves backwards. Retreats to the divisions of the past that kept our nation weak.

As I keep telling our young people, there has never been a better time to be Fijian, no matter who you are or where you come from. Through the efforts of my Government, we are unified, we are equal, we are secure, we have never stood taller in the world, and our economy is showing the solid growth we need to create jobs and a more prosperous future for everyone.

But this progress is directly threatened by those among us who do not believe in equal opportunity and intend to restore power to an elite.

I see my own role to be the Prime Minister OF all Fijians, FOR all Fijians and to head a government that serves the people and give them the things they need to improve their lives of those of their families. Yet others see their roles to favour one community over the others, to advance their interests rather than the interests of the nation as a whole.

As I keep reminding everyone, talk is cheap. Promises are hollow. Free education, electricity, water, better roads, better health facilities, telecommunications – all those things that we have provided to improve the lives of ordinary Fijians.

But I also want you to judge this Government on our record of unifying the country, putting the Nation first, not sectional interests, and establishing a level playing field on which every Fijian can excel. What I call Team Fiji. Every player valued, no-one left behind, the sights of our entire nation set on being the best that we can be – the pre-eminent nation in our region and one respected the world over.

It is vitally important that we continue the reform program that we embarked on almost eight years ago to transform Fiji from a dysfunctional and divided country into a modern, unified nation state.

Rather than turn back the clock, I am asking you to help me rewind it by moving Fiji forward. Because we not only have a proud record, we have a plan.

That plan is to build on the progress that every Fijian can see with their own eyes that has transformed our nation and set it on a better course. For the first time, we have a genuine democracy based on a common and equal citizenry. And we intend to show every Fijian and to show the world that this democracy is worthy of their confidence and support. That Fiji deserves the kind of large scale investment that creates prosperity and jobs. That Fiji finally fulfils its destiny. That Fiji can truly be the way the world should be.

As we approach September 17, we hear virtually nothing from politicians about the economy apart from them disagreeing with any figures or assessments that are accurate and positive - Even those given out or carried out by independent entities. The difference between them and us is that we are working to, for example, eradicate poverty and are gradually doing so, not just talking about it. And we are doing it not by promising a bigger slice of the national cake to special interest groups but by growing the cake so that every Fijian can get a bigger slice.

I am going to the nation with a message of hope. That by working together as one nation, Fiji has already achieved great things and there are even better days to come. And I am calling on all Fijians to reject the underlying message of suspicion and fear that some politicians have brought to this election campaign. It is a cancer that threatens the unity of our nation and all the progress we have made. It is a cancer that must be destroyed.

Some are fighting this election claiming to protect the interests of the i’Taukei. Yet the truth is that it protects the interests of a self serving elite rather than the interests of ordinary i’Taukei and some of its leading figures have a record that is shameful.

The people who converted native land to freehold using a legal loophole and lost it forever, now have the audacity to portray themselves as the defenders of i’Taukei land. The truth is my Government closed the loophole the previous Governments allowed to betray the iTaukei people.

The future has never looked brighter. Your land is safe. Your ownership of it is guaranteed in the Constitution. In fact, my Government has strengthened that ownership since I was appointed Prime Minister eight years ago. So reject the lies and look at the facts. Look at our record. And then decide who can be trusted – the person who has defended your interests or the people who claimed to defend your interests but betrayed you.

They keep saying that the i’Taukei need special protections because quote *“there are only half a million of them in the world”*. The clear implication is that their very existence is threatened, yet this simply isn’t true either. That number of half a million is more than any other community in Fiji. The i’Taukei are in the majority. Our birth rate is greater than any other community. We own the overwhelming majority of the land. 91 percent. It is guaranteed ours forever. We are the dominant culture. So how on earth can we be threatened?

I am a proud i’Taukei. To tell me and everyone else that I need protecting because I am somehow under threat is not only a lie. It is demeaning. It is offensive. It is portraying me and my community as weak when the truth is that as a people, we have never been stronger. We have never had cause to be more proud. And we have never had a better future ahead of us.

i’Taukei children today live longer than ever before, thanks to our better health facilities. More i’Taukei than ever before can get a proper schooling, thanks to the free education my Government has provided. More i’Taukei than ever before can go on to technical colleges and universities, thanks to our scholarships and government loans. Our language is now taught as a compulsory subject in all primary schools. We are thriving as a people. Our land, traditions and culture are intact. We are respected. We punch above our weight in Fiji and the world.

In fact, wherever the i’Taukei go, they are the protectors, not the protected. Our UN Peacekeepers protect other communities in far off lands and they do it better than anyone else. They are brave - as we have been newly reminded in recent days. They are fearless. And they have made the i’Taukei renowned throughout the world for their courage.

The average i’Taukei doesn’t need protecting, nor do they want it. The average i’Taukei wants respect and a fair share of the Nation’s resources. And we have it. They also want to be empowered. To have a Government that serves them, that gives them what they need to improve their lives and those of their families. Free education, better health facilities, electricity, clean water, better roads, telecommunications and - as with this project – better housing.

So the record shows that this Government has served the i’Taukei – and all Fijians – and empowered the i’Taukei, along with all Fijians. And yet on one of the most important issues of all – the power of the i’Taukei to decide how they spend the money they get from the land they lease – some want to turn back the clock and disempower ordinary people. As you all know, I gave the lease money direct to ordinary people, individually and equally, to decide for themselves how it is spent. But now some politicians want to take it back and restore the power of the chiefs to decide how it is spent.

I honestly can’t think of a single election anywhere in the world where a political party has gone to the people promising to take money off them. And yet that is what this Party is doing in Fiji. It is the height of arrogance, a mentality of self-entitlement. Of not putting the interests of ordinary people first.

They are saying *“We know better than you, how you can spend your money. So give it to us, we will take what we want, and decide how much you get”.* Money that rightfully belongs to the people. Their inheritance. Their birthright. Money that they should be allowed to keep and decide how to spend themselves, not to be treated like children.

Some of their other policies are just as illogical. They say the word *“Fijian”* belongs to the i’Taukei and can’t be shared with everyone. Fijian is an English word. It’s from the English language. How can it belong to the i’Taukei? It belongs to everyone and describes a person who comes from the place that the English called Fiji. That makes us all Fijians, just like a person who comes from Australia is an Australian or a person who comes from America is an American.

The i’Taukei word for Fiji is Viti. Strictly speaking, we should be Viti-ans. But they say no, we are the Fijians and the rest of you, at best, are Fiji Islanders. On this logic, any Australian who isn’t an Aborigine should be an Australia islander. Any American who isn’t a Red or American Indian should be a United States Continental.

We are all Fijians because we come from a place that Captain Cook – not the i’Taukei - called Fiji. This English word belongs to all of us. It describes all of us. And it unites us by giving us a word we can all use to describe ourselves. A common identity. Proud citizens of Fiji. Fijians. It is what we are and where our future lies. One nation. One people. Not a collection of separate tribes in the South Seas fighting over the use of an English word.

And let’s examine their stand on the secular state – a cornerstone of our Constitution that guarantees religious freedom for all Fijians. Again, they treat the people like fools by saying *“this is a threat to Jesus”, “This is a threat to Christianity”.* These claims are completely false. The secular state protects Jesus, protects Christianity. It guarantees your freedom to follow him, to worship him in public and in private, just as you have always done.

The only difference is that the State – the Government – remains neutral when it comes to religious issues. The State doesn’t say *“because you’re a Christian you should get the best jobs in the civil service or because you’re a Pentacostal civil servant you should only serve members of your church first”*. Every single citizen is treated the same whatever they believe in. That is the way it is in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France and most of the other great democracies. And that is the way it should be in Fiji, where our people have different beliefs but there is now a guarantee that whatever they believe in, the State treats them the same.

And that is the logic some parties are using when they now argue for Fiji to be declared a Christian State. That because there are more Christians in Fiji than anyone else, their religious beliefs should take precedence, their religious beliefs should come first.

This is not the way of Christ, who said *“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”.* In other words, the State and religion are separate and our obligations to both are different.

And so with just over two weeks to go before Election Day, I make this appeal to every Fijian voter: turn your back on the past and embrace a brighter future. Reject the politics of division, the lies and the crude attempts to pit Fijian against Fijian.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, my Government’s underlying philosophy is embodied in what you see around you today. Not empty promises, but concrete achievement. We are building homes for ordinary Fijians and their families. We are building dreams.

And I want the children who grow up here to dream big dreams for themselves and our nation. To join hands to help build a better Fiji. To make Fiji Great.

Thank you to the Chinese Government and people for their assistance with this project, the China Railway First Group Fiji for its construction work and everyone from the Housing Ministry and the Public Rental Board involved in bringing this project to fruition.

And I now have great pleasure in declaring this development of 210 flats – the new homes of more than a thousand people – open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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