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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**

**SPEECH AT NADI TOWN COUNCIL’S SENIOR CITIZENS DAY AND EID CELEBRATIONS**

**Nadi Civic Centre Wed. 30 July, 2014
NADI 1100 Hours**

The Special Administrator, Mr Robin Ali;

[Other Salutations]

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

It’s a great pleasure to be in Nadi today to celebrate Senior Citizens Day with you, as well as the festival of Eid.

In many ways, I think it’s appropriate to celebrate these two occasions together considering the special emphasis the festival of Eid places on making sure no one is forgotten or excluded from the celebrations.

This is certainly an important lesson that we can adopt in our national life, especially when it comes to the elderly and the disabled – those who many consider to be on the periphery of society.

It is the collective responsibility of the younger generation and indeed of all of us to make sure that senior citizens are not forgotten.

We must strive to provide the attention, understanding and support that older Fijians need to continue to lead lives of independence and dignity.

Indeed, as a society we usually talk about our responsibility to look after the elderly – whether as a family, a community, or a government. In this respect, I am definitely proud of the initiatives that my Government has introduced to make life easier for our senior citizens.

This year, we set up a pension scheme for Fijians 70 years and older who don’t have access to any other form of superannuation funds. And I’m pleased to say that Cabinet has recently endorsed an increase up to $50 a month for this scheme.

Also this year, we have given grants for the maintenance and improvement of seven institutions for senior citizens located across the country.

In 2011, we introduced reduced bus fares for those over the age of 60, who now only have to pay half rate. Close to 40,000 Fijians are currently benefiting from this program.

What’s more, Fiji is the first country in the Pacific to have  a National Policy on Ageing. The Policy was launched in 2011, establishing the National Council for Older Persons - an independent body that promotes the welfare and wellbeing of senior citizens in Fiji.

However, while there is no doubt that these are important programs and initiatives, today, rather than talking about what we are doing for our senior citizens, I want to talk instead about what they can do for Fiji.

As I keep saying wherever I go, we are in the midst of one of the most important periods in our nation’s history. In less than 50 days, Fiji heads to the polls to vote in the first truly democratic election we have ever had. And the stakes couldn’t be higher.

Fijians will have to choose between competing visions for the future – whether to retreat to the fears and divisions of the past or to embrace a united and prosperous future for all.

For many, this will be the first time they ever cast a vote. The latest numbers show that more than 170,000 Fijians under the age of 30 are currently registered for the election.

This group – mostly first-time voters – has grown up over the past eight years free from many of the divisions and fears that plagued Fiji after Independence. Indeed, this is something I am very proud about as your Prime Minister.

But as we draw closer to 17 September, we must also be aware that many of these young voters have little recollection of what it was like in Fiji during its darkest days.

When I travel to schools around the country, I tell the young people I come across that there has never been a better time to be a Fijian. That they are in a better position than any young person in Fiji’s history. With nothing to compare to, they have to take me at my word. But as older Fijians, through your own experience you know this is true.

You know just how far Fiji has come over the last eight years. You come from a generation that never experienced true equality in Fiji. You remember when some Fijians were treated as if they were more important than others. When somewere given more privileges while the rest were treated like second-class citizens in their own country, and never had a sense of truly belonging.

You remember the uncertainty, heartbreak and anger that dominated that period in our history. You remember the honest, hardworking people who had contributed so much to our nation who simply lost faith and left Fiji in search of lands where they could be recognised as equals for their contribution to national life.

After the coups of 1987 and 2000, there was a mass exodus from Fiji of tens of thousands of our best and brightest people.

This exodus was a national tragedy that robbed Fiji of the opportunity to develop itself years ago into the nation that is only now starting to become unified, proud, with a keen sense of purpose and punching above its weight in our region and the world.

I for one remember. This is why I talk so passionately about resisting the lies of the old politicians who are trying to throw the country into reverse. This is why every fiber of my being is determined to prevent Fiji from being dragged back into a similar state of discord and disharmony. And I know that many of you share this passion.

So, as older Fijians, I call on you to join me in making sure we never let anyone forget how far we have come as a nation over the last eight years.

Tell your children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, what Fiji was like then compared to what it’s like now. Tell them your own stories; help them understand the darker periods of the past so that they may never be repeated in the future.

Please don’t allow the old politicians to re-write history; to tell a false story to our young people about what’s happened in Fiji.

Don’t allow them to pretend that things were better before my Government intervened to reset the national compass. To pretend that the same people who brought Fiji to its knees through their squabbling can now work together for the benefit of all Fijians.

Even those who stayed behind there was no real equality. There was discrimination between those who lived in the city and those in the rural areas, between chief and commoner, between the rich and the poor, between those who were connected to the elite system and those who weren’t. As a nation we cannot afford this. We as nation cannot go back to this.

As a nation, we cannot afford your silence. We cannot do without your input and advice. Fiji needs you now.

With those few words, ladies and gentlemen, it is now my pleasure to thank to organisers for making today possible, including the Nadi Town Council and Nadi Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It’s a wonderful event that your hard work has made possible.

I would also like to acknowledge the team from “Projects Abroad” that is providing free medical check-ups for all the senior citizens here today.

Finally, to all the older Fijians here, happy Senior Citizens Day.

And to all, Eid Mubarak.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.