

Commodore J.V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

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 THE FIJI MUSLIM LEAGUE CELEBRATIONS FOR THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD’S BIRTHDAY**

Prince Charles Park Mon. 13th Jan., 2014

NADI 1200 Hours

**The Attorney-General,**

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

**The National President of the Fiji Muslim League, Mr. Hafizud Dean Khan,**

**League Executives and Branch Officials,**

**Representatives of Various NGOs,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Assalam Wa Alaikum, Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

I am happy to be with you today as you join one-point-six billion people around the world in celebrating the birth of one of the world’s great spiritual leaders – the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. For Muslims everywhere, this is a hugely important day. The Prophet Muhammad’s teachings are at the very core of Islam. It guides their faith and defines the way they live their lives – lives of obedience to the word of God laid out in the sacred book of Islam – the Holy Quran.

There areFive Pillars of Islam - five obligations that every Muslim must satisfy in order to live a good and responsible life according to Islam.

* They must firstsincerely recite the Muslim profession of faith.
* They mustperform prayers five times each day.
* They mustset aside from their income and asset base annually an amount for the welfare of the poor and the needy. This is called Zakat.
* They mustfast during the holy month of Ramadan.
* And they must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, if they can afford to do so.

These obligations require more than usual discipline, but fulfilling them provides a framework for every Muslim's life, their everyday activities and their beliefs woven into a single expression of religious devotion. Islam requires its believers to put their faith into action and practice. And carrying out the Five Pillars demonstrates that a Muslim is putting their faith first, and not just trying to fit it in around their secular lives.

Here in Fiji, we join our Muslim brothers and sisters in their joyous celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birth anniversary or birthday. It’s all part of the wonderful tradition we’ve developed of acknowledging each other’s religious festivals.

We have a public holiday for the Prophet’s birthday, just as we do for the great commemorations of our other major religions – Christianity and Hinduism.

Fiji is one of only a handful of countries in the world that does this, and we do so proudly. It underlines the unique nature of Fiji in our own region - a multi-faith nation with a new Constitution that guarantees religious freedom and establishes a secular state, in which all religions are equal. We also do it as a personal gesture of respect for our fellow citizens of other faiths, knowing that whatever beliefs we hold, we are one people, one nation, and have a common destiny.

Many Fijians have come to realise that religion can actually be a unifying force, a bridge between us all no matter what we believe. That is because a sense of spirituality – a belief in something greater than ourselves – is common to the overwhelming majority of Fijians, no matter what their religious background.

We can find common ground with each other precisely by understanding and respecting that principle, because the wonderful thing is that the teachings of our many religions are interconnected. They embody many of the same values - of consideration for others, especially the less fortunate; of honesty and integrity in the way we live our lives; and of duty and service to each other, our nation and the higher being we worship.

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last of God’s prophets and also acknowledge the importance of prophets Abraham, Noah, Moses and Solomon, and, of course, Jesus.

If you examine the teachings of Muhammad and Jesus, there are many striking similarities between their messages about the way we should all live our lives and relate to our fellow human beings.

These include not killing someone unlawfully, not bearing false witness against others and being dutiful and kind to our parents and families.

The Prophet Muhammad urges us to look after our neighbours, to be generous, to look after our guests and to give our children a good education.

All these are values to which every Fijian subscribes, whatever their particular religious belief. And there is one fundamental principle in Islam that has relevance to us all as we work to build a new and better Fiji, with a common and equal citizenry and with justice and opportunity for all.

In Islam, everyone is equal, whatever their ethnicity, language or nationality. No-one has more privileges, no-one a higher status based on birth or wealth.

It is a teaching that upended the world into which Prophet Muhammad was born in the year 570, a world in which many people were downtrodden. And it has resonated throughout the centuries ever since.

While the Prophet was born into a well-known family in Mecca, he had an extremely difficult childhood. Both his parents had died by the time he was six. So he was an orphan dependent on the care of his grandfather, who also died when he was eight years old and then an uncle. The Prophet Muhammad shares this experience with other great religious leaders who weren’t born to wealth or privilege. He knew what it was like to be poor, to struggle. And while he reputedly became more affluent later in life, he taught that we all share a responsibility to care for the needy and the helpless.

Indeed, it is the duty of all Muslims – under the Third Pillar of Islam, Zakat, - to give 2.5 per cent of their income to charity. So it is a caring religion, a giving religion, as well as standing for equality and the unity of mankind.

Today, I ask each of us to join with our Muslim brothers and sisters in celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings of love, understanding, social justice and equality among all people.

As with our other public holidays that commemorate Christmas, Easter or Diwali, it’s also a time to consider the special role that faith plays in each of our lives and in the lives of our neighbours.  Today, we reaffirm the responsibility we have to each other as Fijians. We reflect on the values and principles that we all share and we re-dedicate ourselves to our common goal of creating a prosperous and caring nation for all.

People of faith have an important role to play in the ordering and conduct of our society and government, as individuals and congregations. They give voice to principle and ensure that ethics and morality are a part of our political dialogue. This is essential for any society, but especially for a democratic one.

Government must be pragmatic, but it must also uphold principle, stand for fairness, and stay true to the values of its people.

Fijians are a religious people, and our government must depend on people of all faiths to be our moral compass—not to impose their religious practices through law but to ensure that government’s actions respect the guiding principles of all faiths.

On behalf of every Fijian, I want to pay tribute to the Muslim community in Fiji for its contribution to our national life. I especially thank the Fiji Muslim League for the wonderful educational opportunities the League is providing in the five colleges and 17 primary schools that it operates, not only for Muslims but young people of other cultural backgrounds and faiths.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on this day, when we celebrate the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, let us also celebrate the wonderful values he stood for and the values we share. Together we are building a new future for ourselves and future generations of Fijians.

An important milestone will be reached later in the year when we hold our general election. As I’ve said before, the possibilities for our nation are limitless if that election is a success and we can stay focused and unified. So today, we again ask for God’s blessings on the noble quest of all Fijians – working together - to finally fulfill our promise as a nation, to fulfill our destiny.

Shukria, Vinaka Vakalevu, Thank you.

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