



National Council for Building a Better Fiji

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COMMUNIQUE

The third meeting of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji was held at the Nasova Police Academy, Suva on Tuesday April 15, 2008.

The NCBBF noted the increase in its Membership since its last meeting, from 36 to 41. The five new members welcomed were: Ms Asela Naisara (Vice President, National Council of Women-apology); Ratu Josefa Basulu (Chairman, Lau Provincial Council); Mr. Vinod Naidu (President, Dakshina India Andhra Sangam of Fiji); Ratu Meli Vesikula (Chairperson, Initiatives of Change Fiji); and Ratu Samuela Waqanaceva (Chairman, Serua Provincial Council). In addition, the representative of the Chinese Association of Fiji attended the meeting, but as observer for the time being.

The NCBBF also warmly welcomed the newly appointed members of the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) for the People's Charter process: Mr. Geert van der Linden, (Chair), Rev. Carolyn Amy Chambers and Mr. Robin Nair.

The meeting, with the members of the IMG in attendance, then heard presentations from the Electoral Commission and the Constituency Boundaries Commission on the progress of its work to date for the conduct of elections in 2009. The Commissions' presentation highlighted the following:

- Extensive preparatory work is to be undertaken to prepare Fiji for the conduct of the next election;
- The work of the Electoral Commission including also the Constituency Boundaries Commission started in January 2008 and is now being strengthened with the imminent appointment of the new Supervisor of Elections;
- The preparatory work for the election needs to take into account the updated provisional census figures which indicates that Fiji will have about 488,000 voters in the 2009 Elections;
- As well as the growth in population, there have been significant movements of population consequent upon which the Constituency Boundaries Commission is required to review the electoral boundaries and then publish the provisional boundaries for the next election;
- Once the work on boundaries is published, 60 days must be given, under the Electoral Act, for submissions from the public, before the final boundaries are determined and then are published. The estimate is that it would take about 5 ½ months to undertake and complete this phase of the preparation;

- In addition, considerable work is needed to overcome the poor state of the Electoral Rolls by correcting and updating the names of electors on the Electoral Rolls;
- These activities then are to be followed by conducting education and public awareness programs prior to the conduct of the elections; and
- The conduct of the elections needs to coincide with the school holidays as the school facilities around Fiji will need to be used for voting purposes.

In addition to the foregoing, the Electoral Commission and the Constituency Boundaries Commission in their presentations raised the following issues and observations:

- A major impediment to Fiji's return to parliamentary democracy is that the current electoral and voting system itself is undemocratic;
- The current electoral system is undemocratic because it does not enable "government of the people, by the people, for the people" in that:
 - The voting and electoral system that is used is not free and fair;
 - It does not enable the will of the people to be adequately reflected;
 - It violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by not providing for one vote to have one value;
 - It disadvantages and thereby reduces the number of women and minorities who go into politics.
- The voting and electoral system is also undemocratic and unrepresentative because the current voting and electoral system produces outcomes in a number of the parliamentary seats won that do not reflect people's voting intentions:
 - For example, in 1999 the Fiji Labor Party won one and a third times the first preferences of the SVT coalition but won more than 5 times as many seats;
 - The alternative voting system, contrary to what the Reeves Commission intended in terms of encouraging political moderation, has managed by 2006 to reduce moderates to the merest handful;
 - In three elections (1999, 2001 and 2006), the National Federation Party received no representative in Parliament even though it won a third to a seventh of the Fiji Indian vote over these elections; and
 - Contrary to what the Reeves Commission had intended, the alternative voting system has generated a situation where there are only two parties in competition and these are basically ethnically determined.
- The current voting and electoral system is also undemocratic because it is not based on "one vote one value" having regard to the way the electoral boundaries are required to be drawn for indigenous Fijian communal seats;

- In 2006, about 62% of indigenous Fijian voters living in rural areas voted for 17 members of Parliament, while the other 38% living in urban areas were represented by only 6 members of Parliament. The clear unfairness could become worse in future elections considering the continuing urban drift;
- This disproportional effect not only exists between urban and rural seats but also between rural provincial constituencies. For example in the Fijian communal constituencies for the 2006 election, there were 3,340 registered voters in the Namosi constituency, but a massive 19,044 in Nadroga/Navosa, but both constituencies had elected a member each.
- The use of communal rolls under the current electoral and voting system is also contrary to the fundamental principle of “one nation, one people”:
 - It is a hindrance to the concept of a national identity for the people of Fiji.
- The current voting and electoral system is also undemocratic in that the communal electoral roll:
 - Divides the people of Fiji along ethnic lines;
 - Was drawn up based on concerns about protecting the position of indigenous interests at a time when the largest group in the population was Fiji Indian. These concerns are no longer relevant since the indigenous population is well into the majority now;
 - Has created very divisive race-based party politics that has led to the pursuance of extremist and racist policies including fear mongering by some politicians;
- The current electoral and voting system is too complex and this confuses voters:
 - The choice between voting above the line for a party’s list of candidates or voting for particular candidates below the line is not understood;
 - It produces invalid votes as high as 12%, meaning that a high proportion of voters have their votes disallowed.

In considering how to respond to these serious issues, the NCBBF members stressed in their discussions that:

- The overriding concern of the people of Fiji is for the restoration of true democracy within the timetable that had been announced;
- There are indeed grave concerns that must be urgently addressed by experts regarding the fact that holding the next election under the current electoral rules would be undemocratic;
- If Fiji did hold an election under what was regarded as an undemocratic electoral and voting system that would not deliver genuine democracy;
- For the Interim Government to remain committed to its promise to hold elections in 2009 there is a need to hasten the National Council’s work in discussing electoral reform with the people of Fiji; and

