

National Council for Building a Better Fiji

P O Box 2645
Government Buildings
Suva, Fiji

Telephone: (679) 3305811/3684213

Facsimile: (679) 3310961

Website: www.fijipeople charter.com.fj

Friday, September 26, 2008

Media Release

WHY THE INDIGENOUS FIJIANS SHOULD SUPPORT THE DRAFT PEOPLES CHARTER

- 1.0 As “i taukei” Members of the NCBBF and Vanua Chiefs, we have decided to make this statement on why we believe the “i taukei” [indigenous Fijians] should support the NCBBF and the draft Peoples Charter.
 - 1.1 We would like to stress that all of us had, in hindsight, accepted the removal of the elected government by the RFMF in December 2006. Indeed what transpired is now history. However, when his Excellency the President, Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda, invited us to be members of the NCBBF on behalf of our Provinces and Vanua, we decided to accept his invitation and contribute to the Peoples Charter process as a way forward to a truly democratic election.
 - 1.2 We knew in terms of the precedents of 1987 and 2000 Coups, that the SDL government would not be returned to power, and that the process of returning Fiji to constitutional democracy would be long and hard.
 - 1.3 We believed that the Interim government needed to be assisted to bring our people together in constructive dialogue facilitated through the NCBBF, to discuss our common concerns about the causes of the coup, and how we can address these issues. Our concern was the need for unity and reconciliation and how we can make Fiji a better place for all our people.
 - 1.4 We have been condemned for what we have done by the SDL, the Methodist Church and critics in the mainstream

media basically on the ground that what we have done is in their view (the NCBBF and the Peoples Charter) are illegal, being an initiative of what they say is an illegal regime. Whilst the issue of legality is before the Courts, what we had asked ourselves were the more important and relevant questions: What can we do to help our country get out of the situation we are in now? Given the fact that the deposed government will not be returned, what should we do?

- 1.5 These critics have since December 2006 never initiated or suggested any other practical way forward towards national unity, reconciliation and agreement out of the crisis we have had. They have not offered any better way to sustainable Constitutional democracy, and the development of a better Fiji for all.
- 1.6 It is worth noting that organizations like the Fiji Law Society, the mainstream news media and some NGOs who were all silent and cowering in 1987, 2000 and in the early months after the removal of the SDL government, have become so vocal now about the issues of “legality”. They threaten court actions and condemn people in the NCBBF, including our highly respected Judges who fought for Constitutional democracy in 1987, 2000, and 2006. It seems they are so vocal because they want to politically influence the Judgement of our Courts. Now the critics are already claiming that the people of Fiji have already rejected the draft Peoples Charter when the public consultation process is in the early stages.
- 1.7 We are patient and we are happy to say we have contributed to the NCBBF and our concerns have been addressed in the State of the Nation and Economy Report [SNE] and the draft Peoples Charter. We thank the Co-Chairs of the NCBBF, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama and his Grace the Archbishop Petero Mataka for their enlightened leadership and for accepting our contribution to finding a better path for taking Fiji forward.

The SDL and the Methodist Church Opposition

We know that many people were hurt by the removal of the SDL led government. But we saw no point in just getting angry and then doing nothing constructive. We need to address the problem of getting Fiji back to Constitutional democracy with the support of the Interim Government and the RFMF. This is the only practical way we see possible to return Fiji to Constitutional democracy soonest. We believe that persistent criticism of the Interim government or reliance on outside opposition and pressure from foreign governments would not achieve this objective. Only working with the Interim government could get us there.

- 2.1. We are particularly disappointed that the SDL party which most of us have supported, and the Methodist Church of which most of us are members did not accept the President's Invitation to be part of the NCBBF to take the first steps in dialogue that could ultimately lead towards reconciliation and return to Constitutional democracy.
- 2.2. Before the Methodist Church Conference in August 2008 Interim Minister, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, wrote to the leadership of the Church asking that the NCBBF be given opportunity to explain the draft Peoples Charter to the participants. This request was never acknowledged and a statement was made to the news media by SDL politician, Solomone Naivalu, that the SDL would be using the Methodist Church to mobilize Taukei opposition to the draft Peoples Charter. Even though Laisenia Qarase later denied this, the cat had come out of the bag and no one was fooled.
- 2.3. The Methodist Church leaders were afraid that if the NCBBF were given opportunity to explain the draft Peoples Charter to the Annual Conference delegates, the opposition position foisted on them by Rev. Tuikilakila Waqairatu at the 2007 Conference would evaporated because they would learn the truth that the Peoples Charter is not a threat to the i taukei. They wanted to keep the Conference delegates ignorant. The Church Conference was directed to remain opposed to the draft Peoples Charter and there was no discussion or debate.

- 2.4. We believe that the SDL Party and the Methodist Church have betrayed the interest of their members and denied their members' fundamental rights to decide their view on the draft Peoples Charter, voluntarily, and according to their own individual consciences.
- 2.5. The SDL and the Methodist Church leadership should be championing democracy but by instructing their members to oppose and refuse to read the draft Peoples Charter, without giving any good reasons, is undemocratic and authoritarian. Blind opposition without offering an alternative path forward, is a serious failure of leadership that will inevitably result in desertion of the leadership.
- 2.6. The Methodist Church and the SDL leadership like other critics, accuse the Interim Government of wasteful spending of taxpayers money on the NCBBF and the Peoples Charter. The budget of the NCBBF is only \$2.4 million which is tiny compared to the whole government budget of about \$1.4 billion. At NCBBF, the source of funding is known and the accountability mechanism through the government system is clear. We ask where does the funding of the Methodist Church and the SDL come from? And how transparent and accountable are they to their donors?
- 2.7. The demand that all expenditures be revealed to the public is continuous. The NCBBF has nothing to be embarrassed about and critics should direct their demand to the Prime Ministers Office which is responsible for the accounting of NCBBF finances.
- 2.8. NCBBF budget is little and cannot be regarded as corrupt compared to the \$20 million of public funds that the SDL party illegally spent on its Election campaign in 2001. Civil servants are being sent to Jail, even recently, but the political beneficiaries of that illegal and corrupt expenditure, the SDL politicians, escaped legal accountability. They made the decision but the implementers, the civil servants, copped the punishment.
- 2.9. During its period in Office, between 2001 and 2006, the SDL government more than doubled the Government debt from \$1.3 billion in 2000 to \$2.5 billion in 2006. In other words, in six years, the SDL government borrowed more money then all the 9 previous government since independence. The expenditure was supposed to spur

economic growth but in 7 years, the SDL government achieved only 1.7% average GDP growth. In 2006, their Minister of Finance, Ratu Jone Kubuabola, advised the Qarase government to stop the excessive borrowing. He was overruled.

- 2.10. The Methodist Church leadership does not have a good record of accountability for the monies that they collect from poor members of the Church each year to keep them in offices with nice houses (and some with Pajeros) at the Suva headquarters. Has Rev. Manasa Lasaro ever been held personally accountable for the huge grants from overseas Methodist Church donors during his time as President of the Church in the 1990s? Can the Methodist Church release the Report of the overseas accountants on the mismanagement of Church funds after the 1987 coup and in the 1990s?
- 2.11. The Peoples Charter will not replace the Constitution. It will not take away Indigenous Fijian ownership of land and sell them to foreigners. What the SDL and the Methodist are saying are designed to instill fears and stop people from reading the draft Peoples Charter. The Peoples Charter will not replace the Constitution. It proposes some changes to the Constitution but these can only be implemented through the procedures set out in the Constitution.
- 2.12. If you read the draft Peoples Charter, you will know that the Charter cannot take away your ownership of land. Your land ownership is fully protected under the Constitution and in fact the draft Peoples Charter says that protection must remain.
- 2.13. The SDL is using the Methodist Church to oppose the Peoples Charter and the SNE Report because the documents propose effective legislation to tackle political corruption and introduce better legal and financial accountability. Legislation such as the Code of Conduct and the Freedom of Information Law, that were required by the 1997 Constitution to be introduced to govern the conduct of Ministers and Members of Parliament and to bring about more open and accountable government, were never introduced by the SDL government. Why? Because these laws were against the interest of SDL politicians in keeping many decisions secret from the public. The draft Peoples

Charter has recommended the introduction of such legislation by the next elected government.

- 2.14. The SDL Party wants you to reject the Peoples Charter because it does not want to introduce laws and policies that will require the government to open up to the people and explain its decisions more.

3.0 Support the President's Dialogue Forum

- 3.1 The most recent decision of the SDL leadership to not participate in the President's Dialogue Forum, if the draft Peoples Charter is presented for discussion, is irresponsible because they will then close the door to dialogue to reach agreement on the way forward for our country. The reason given by SDL and the Methodist Church leadership that their opposition is based on their belief in the illegality of the interim government is also hypocritical and inappropriate.
- 3.2 Since the NCBBF announcement that the President's Dialogue will not take place until after the public Consultation on the Peoples Charter is completed, the critics have switched again to calling for the President's Dialogue Forum to be held as soon as possible! From a position of boycott of the President's Dialogue Forum, they now call for convening of the Forum as early as possible! Well, they will just have to wait until the peoples responses to the draft Peoples Charter is compiled and made known.
- 3.3 The SDL and the Methodist Church leadership are now defending the Constitution they once rejected. Their past record shows they had never supported, and in fact had wanted the 1997 Constitution to remain abrogated in 2000. Both had wanted a new Constitution in 2001 to replace the one they are now defending. They have yet to explain to their members and the people of Fiji, their change of position on the 1997 Constitution.
- 3.4 The Methodist Church leadership should realize that in supporting the SDL Party, they have taken a political and not an independent church-based and inclusive position. Politicians change their positions to suit their desire to obtain political power. The Church should, instead, be steadfast on justice, and morality and not the desire of

the SDL to be returned to power. A Christian position is one that should support constructive dialogue that will lead to justice. It should not be one based on one sided and shallow moralism that appears to be hypocritical.

- 3.5 If the SDL and the Methodist Church do not change their position, they will only have themselves to blame for marginalizing themselves and their members and supporters from the national consensus that will be achieved under the draft Peoples Charter. They will find eventually that they are supported by a small and diminishing minority.

4.0 Plea to all people to support NCBBF Charter process.

- 4.1 As Christians and patriotic citizens concerned about the future of our country, we believe we need to help move Fiji forward as soon as possible under an Electoral system that is broadly supported because it is simple and fair and resolves the major problems of the Alternative Vote system.
- 4.2 We also support the programme of changes outlined in the State of the Nation and Economy Report [SNE] and the draft Peoples Charter. These can bring about a better, more effective system of government, an economy that can grow faster and generate jobs for our youths and more development to all our people.
- 4.3 It seems to us that the SDL and the Methodist Church leadership are blinded by the short term interest of a few SDL politicians who cannot provide a practical path back to constitutional democracy because of their hatred of the interim government. The draft Peoples Charter as the way forward has the support of the Republic of the Fiji Military forces [RFMF]. We ask what plan for the way forward SDL and the Methodist Church have that can get the support of the RFMF? On this they can't continue to bury their heads in the sand. We hope that the "i taukei" will wake up now and be aware of the truth, and distance themselves from those leaders who are not offering a national vision and a practical path to a better Fiji for all.
- 4.4 We say that we, as the "i taukei", are not going to get anywhere and achieve our desire to return to Parliamentary democracy by blindly opposing the draft

Peoples Charter because those who are asking the “i taukei” to oppose it are not offering a better practical alternative. The draft Peoples Charter is in the interest of all the people of Fiji and therefore, the “i taukei” should not blindly oppose development programmes that are in their own interest.

- 4.5 There is no other practical alternative. The draft Peoples Charter needs “i taukei” support so we all can have an Election as soon as possible, and move our country forward to a path of peace, security, unity and progress. The “i taukei” in the Methodist Church should ask the SDL to participate in the President’s Dialogue Forum and contribute to the discussions on the way forward under the draft Peoples Charter.
- 4.6 We are calling on each individual “i taukei”, and indeed our brothers and sisters from all the other races, to take this opportunity to read the draft Peoples Charter and give your feedback through the Response Forms provided. The opponents are telling you not to read the Peoples Charter. Why? Because they are afraid that if you were to read it, and decide for yourself, then you will only approve and support the Peoples Charter as the way forward for our nation. The Peoples Charter is giving power back to you, the ordinary people of Fiji. This is what the elites and SDL and the National Federation Party do not like.
- 4.7 We are concerned that increasing numbers of our people are having to face a bleak future – one that guarantees nothing but poverty and hopelessness. This is evident in growing squatter settlements in the urban areas and in our rural communities. Almost 4 out of every 10 persons in our communities live under conditions of poverty.
- 4.8 Not enough money is being spent on our health services to improve health care services and to reduce the increasing number of babies and children who die at birth and at very young ages. Victims of HIV/Aids also need to be cared for and prevention measures made more effective.

- 4.9 In Education, 10% of our children aged 5-14yrs do not attend school. More than half the total numbers in final year of primary school do not progress to secondary school. 16,000 students are coming out of the school system each year and only about 8000 can get jobs.
- 4.10 We need to grow the economy to create more jobs and improve our health and education services. That is why it is vital that our people should come together as soon as possible so we can dialogue and agree to the ways recommended under the Peoples Charter to address worsening poverty, health and lack of jobs. There is no point in blaming each other. We need to agree on the way forward so that we can have an elected government soon, a government that will be fair in its representation all our communities, to begin addressing our national problems.

5.0 Provincial Council Opposition

Representatives of some Provincial Councils that have opposed the draft Peoples Charter were also influenced by some politicians and political party activists who are only pushing their own individual political interests. They had politicized Provincial Councils. They had continued to use the Provincial Councils as political forums and tools for their political agendas.

- 5.1 Provincial Councils are government bodies that should be concerned only with promoting and helping implement government policies and development programmes in the Provinces. They should be independent and not be involved in supporting the narrow self-serving agendas of political parties and politicians.
- 5.2 That is another reason why we have supported the independent work of the NCBBF, to connect and consult straight with the ordinary people at the grassroots and bypass the Provincial Councils; especially those that support certain politicians desire to prevent ordinary people from reading the draft Peoples Charter and expressing their views.

6.0 Chiefs and the Peoples Charter

The ordinary “i taukei” also have their own fundamental individual rights to read, listen to whoever they want to hear and make their own decisions based on what they know and believe to be in their interest, and in the interest of their families, and for their future. Our traditional Chiefs will serve the people and the community best if they respect the rights of people who want to know more about the draft Peoples Charter and to let them decide for themselves.

6.1 Provincial Councils and the “Bose Vanua” have no authority to decide for individuals how they should exercise their rights. We urge all Vanua, village chiefs and talatala in the Divisional circuits of the Methodist Church to co-operate with civil servants who are only doing their duties. We must allow the teams that are explaining the draft Peoples Charter to visit all the villages and communities. We need time and patience over the next two and a half months for the consultation process on the draft Peoples Charter to be completed and the result presented to the President’s Dialogue Forum for consideration.

6.2 Reports of positive reception of the draft Peoples Charter from the “i taukei” in almost all Provinces show that ordinary people understand the value of the draft Peoples Charter as a Christian approach to the development of Fiji. When the draft Peoples Charter is clearly explained to the people, they see that it is a very sensible document that reflects the principles and programmes they want to see implemented to build a better Fiji. The people see for themselves that there is nothing dangerous in the draft Peoples Charter. It is a Charter in the interest of the people. It is a guideline to remove fear and to build trust and good relations between our people of different religions and culture.

6.3 We say that if the indigenous Fijians want national progress and development at the local level to meet their needs, then they should support the draft Peoples Charter that is summarized in the comprehensive recommendations for national development that are in the SNE Report.

6.4 We urge the SDL Party and other political parties to attend the President's Dialogue Forum and engage in constructive dialogue. We do not think that is in the interest of the "i taukei" and people who are posing as their political leaders in these difficult times to marginalize themselves. Nothing will be achieved by boycotting the President's Dialogue Forum and the NCBBF Charter process.

7.0 **Conclusion**

We have explained above the real reasons why the SDL Party and the Methodist Church leadership do not want you, the ordinary "i taukei", to read the draft Peoples Charter. They are afraid that if you read the document, you will find out the truth that there is nothing in the draft Peoples Charter that you should fear or that will deny you your right as a landowner and "i taukei" citizens of Fiji, to development and to government services that are of a high standard.

7.1 They want to keep you in fear and ignorance of the good things in the Peoples Charter that you should read, and make your own decision freely to support. If you believe they are in your personal interest, the interest of your family, your mataqali, your yavusa, your vanua and your country then make a positive decision and support the Peoples Charter. In asking you to oppose the draft Peoples Charter without reading it or listening to those who will explain it to you, the SDL and the Methodist Church are actually trying to control you and keep you to following the old ways of just letting the politicians and the Church Ministers decide what you should think or do. Both are fearful that you will discover when you read the draft Peoples Charter that all their claims about it are not true. They fear that when you find out the truth, you might turn your back on the SDL and the Methodist Church as far as the Charter is concerned.

7.2 Times have changed, especially for the young people whose future the draft Peoples Charter is concerned with. They are not going to accept the opinion of those older people who they know have less knowledge than them about current concerns. They will not accept the fear mongering statement of those with a short term interest in getting back to Parliament to carry on in the old ways. They know that these people who pose as their

leaders are not concerned about a better future because in a few years they will be gone.

- 7.3 The Peoples Charter is a document that seeks to empower you by recognizing that you as an individual is the most important unit of citizens of Fiji. You must decide yourself, not the SDL or the Methodist Church, what is good for you and members of your family. The SDL and the Methodist Church, because they are interested only in keeping the old ways of a small group at the top deciding for the people at the bottom, they feel threatened by the new democratic way of the NCBBF, evident in the consultative process for the draft Peoples Charter. They do not want individuals to have their say directly about future direction of our country and what need to be done to build a better Fiji for all. So they want you to remain fearful of the draft Peoples Charter, distrustful of the Interim government and the NCBBF and, opposed to the Peoples Charter. They want that you not inform yourself about the proposals that are made in the document.
- 7.4 We urge you to get a copy of the draft Peoples Charter and the summary of the SNE Report and read them carefully. Attend the meetings about the draft Peoples Charter that are being organized near you and ask the questions that you want to ask. Do not accept second hand opinions about the draft Peoples Charter because most of these negative views came from the mainstream news media who oppose the Peoples Charter. Negative views also come from people who have either not read the document or are only parroting the views of those who want you to blindly oppose it.
- 7.5 Let yourself be informed directly by obtaining a copy of the documents from government office near you or from a neighbor or friends who has one. Read it, make up your mind and fill in the Response Form. Have it witnessed by a Civil Servant or an authorized witness and then hand it in to a Government Office near you.
- 7.6 The critics continue to falsely claim that the Peoples Charter is being imposed on you. But you know that is totally untrue. This is your chance to show the critics how wrong they are. Your opinion about the way forward for our country is important and your must take this opportunity to have your say. Have no fear!! What you

say will be treated as confidential and will be seriously considered.

- 7.7 The Peoples Charter remains the only viable and practical way forward to a better Fiji for all our people. The public consultation process on the draft Peoples Charter and the President's Dialogue Forum are the two doors that are open now to the people, the politicians and critics generally, to move the nation towards consensus on our own home grown solutions to our fundamental problems. This must inevitably lead towards reconciliation, healing of the wounds and a return to Constitutional democracy as soon as practically possible. You, as a concerned citizen can best send the message about the need for national agreement and national reconciliation, by expressing your support of the draft Peoples Charter. There is no point in signing opposition petitions that is circulated by the Methodist Church, that is not going to help the people of Fiji achieve what you all want. Support the Peoples Charter because it is the best practical way get what you want for this country.

I TAUKEI NON-GOVERNMENT MEMBERS OF THE NCBBF:

1. Ratu Josefa Basulu (*former* Chairman, Lau Provincial Council)
2. Ratu Meli Bolobolo (Chair, Ra Provincial Council)
3. Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere (Macuata Provincial Council)
4. Mrs Jokapeci Koroi (President, Fiji Labour Party)
5. Mr. Atunaisa Lacabuka (*former* Chair, Serua Provincial Council)
6. Ratu Jolame Lewanavanua (*former* Chair, Lomaiviti Provincial Council)
7. Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara, Lau Provincial Council)
8. Ratu Josateki Nawalowalo (*former* Chair of Kadavu Provincial Council)
9. Ratu Filimone Ralogaivau (*former* Chair of Bua Provincial Council)
10. Mr. Josefa Serulagilagi (Chairman, Tailevu Provincial Council)
11. Mr. Rupeni Silimaibau (Provincial Youth Network)
12. Adi Finau Tabakaucoro (General Secretary, Soqosoqo Vakamarama)
13. Ms. Lorine Tevi (President, Fiji Council of Social Services)
14. Ratu Meli Vesikula (Chair, Initiatives of Change Fiji)
15. Ratu Samuela Waqanaceva (Chair, Serua Provincial Council)
16. Rev. Akuila Yabaki (Executive Director, CCF)