

Fiji Labour Party

Activities Report 2022/ 2023 Annual Delegates Conference 4 November 2023

The people of Fiji were clamouring for change after 14 years of repression and misrule by the Bainimarama/Khaiyum administration as the nation headed towards general elections in 2022.

The socio-economic situation in the country had worsened since the Covid lockdown and the subsequent economic downturn, leading to widespread unemployment, rising poverty aggravated by increasing cost of living and soaring fuel and food prices. It created a lot of hardship and suffering particularly in the rural community.

The Fiji First government knowing it was unpopular ushered in even more restrictive Electoral laws to make things more difficult for opposition political parties to mount an effective campaign.

Although elections were eagerly awaited in 2022 with parties expecting it to be held anywhere between July and September that year, the actual date was not formally released until 30 October 2022 with one-day polling to take place on 14 December and pre-polling in remote areas and outer islands a week before.

Labour's preparations for the 2022 General Elections

It was interesting that early in 2021 a number of good potential candidates-professionals, ex civil servants and others showed encouraging interest in contesting the 2022 polls on a Labour ticket. This gave us a major boost along with the fact that Labour Leader Mahendra Chaudhry was at last able to lead the party to the polls after being barred from doing so for the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Unfortunately, as the government began to drag its feet on finalising an election date, causing a lot of speculation as to whether an election would actually be held in 2022, we lost some very good candidates.

Organisational/Financial

In the lead up to the elections, Labour's priority was to rebuild and strengthen the Party. Party structures had lapsed and work on re-building had been affected as a result of the Covid crisis and subsequent lockdown. Interest had to be revived and committees appointed and activated.

Secretary-General began campaign work early visiting the North and centres around Viti Levu, talking to people about their problems and identifying potential candidates for the elections.

Finance was a major constraint in the Secretariat's efforts to re-organise Party structures. Repeated pleas with Board members, supporters and activists to engage in fund raising activities failed to elicit much response. We went to the 2022 Polls seriously handicapped financially.

On 2 October 2021, Labour placed its first advertisement in the Fiji Times calling for expressions of interest from aspiring candidates wanting to contest the elections under a Labour ticket.

A second advertisement was placed on 12 March 2022 with applications to close on 10 April 2022.

The early response was good and by 10 March, the Secretariat in its report to the Management Board said that 42 applicants had applied for a Labour ticket.

At its Board meeting on 10 March, the Secretary-General submitted a paper highlighting strategies for the 2022 general elections and emphasising the need for a massive fund raising drive to mount an effective election campaign.

He highlighted the need for us to particularly concentrate on organizing strong/active Women and Youth Wings, pointing out that it was an area in which Labour had failed noticeably in the past.

The Writ of Elections was finally issued on 31st October 2022 with elections to be held on 14 December. The final day for filing nominations was 14 November 2022.

Labour filed nominations for 45/51 candidates. None of our candidates were rejected although one had to pull out just prior to nomination on eligibility issues.

Workshops

The Party organized several workshops in the lead up to the 2022 Polls to inform and educate candidates on their responsibilities and obligations to the Party and to brief them on electoral requirements vis a vis the Political Parties Act.

The first of these was held in Suva on Saturday 21 May 2022. The workshop also discussed campaign issues and strategies to be used in promoting our policies.

The second major national workshop was held in the West at the launch of Labour's 2022 Election Manifesto on 10 September 2022 at the Capricorn Hotel in Nadi. It was also the occasion for the Party to release its slate of candidates for the 2022 general elections and conduct a photo session for all candidates.

Labour's 22 Election Manifesto contained our policies on major issues facing the Nation and our people. We took a holistic approach to our national problems realizing that many of the issues were inter-related and needed an integrated approach to addressing them.

We thank our Melbourne supporter and Party activist Edward Narain for the hard work he put in finalizing the Manifesto, doing the graphics and the design to make it more attractive to the ordinary voter.

Campaign meetings

Labour largely concentrated on small pocket meetings to get its message through to the people although several larger meetings and rallies were held in various locations such as Nadi, Lautoka, Navua, Nasinu, Labasa and Ba.

Party Leader was constantly on the move making trips to centres in the West meeting with people individually as well as in groups. He met with farmers, villagers, ordinary workers and the business community. His visits to municipal markets to meet market vendors in Ba, Lautoka, Nadi and Navua were quite popular and well publicized on our Facebook page.

He made three trips campaign trips to Labasa and Savusavu meeting and talking to people there.

The Party appointed Campaign co-ordinators in the three broad constituencies. Satish Chand was appointed to take charge of the Western Division ably assisted by another volunteer Sheeshu Chand in Nadi.

The Norther Division was looked after by former Labour MP, Nareish Kumar and the Party secretariat at the headquarters in Suva handled the Central Division.

Media campaign

The Party staged a pretty vigorous media campaign using both social and mainstream media. As usual we were always quick on the mark responding promptly to government statements, policies and actions. Our media presence was good.

We had a very active Facebook page and a number of our campaign speeches and meetings were digitalized. There was some attempt to go TIKTOK in order to attract the younger voters. Other social media avenues were not utilized much but individual candidates had their own social media platform.

Unfortunately, the Party website met with disaster early last year when our hosting company encountered problems to one of their server clusters in the US. It was pretty catastrophic. The cyber attack wiped out a sizeable chunk of our Web postings since November 2021. We were lucky to have managed to retrieve much of our archival stuff going back to 2002 at least.

But all this meant that a new website had to be constructed and unfortunately, we could not get it back much before the elections.

I must thank Eddie Narain for designing a new much more attractive website for us which we intend to launch at this ADC.

Our media advertising campaign was a departure from previous elections. We opted for shorter and more visual messages mostly in the final weeks before Polling.

Leader and his VPs participated in a number of talk back shows on Party policies on radio and television. There was marked focus on women candidates this election and we fully participated in these.

Legal Action

Labour in collaboration with Fiji Unity Party leader Savenaca Narube mounted legal challenges to a number of key issues relating to the Fijian Elections Office and the conduct of free and fair elections.

Legal Acton 1:

This case related to a no confidence action against the Supervisor of Elections, Mohammed Saneem. In August 2021 the five opposition political parties – Sodelpa, NFP, FLP, Unity Fiji and Freedom Alliance - wrote to Chairman Constitutional Services Commission, Prime Minister Bainimarama, expressing no confidence in the ability of the Supervisor of Elections.

They called for his dismissal citing several cases of misbehaviour as evidence. They called on the CoC to appoint a tribunal to enquire into the complaints.

When the CoC failed to respond to the letter of complaint, Labour and Unity Fiji filed court action on 14 February 2022 seeking a High Court order directing the CoC to act in the matter. The other opposition parties had withdrawn their participation by then.

The case was heard before Chief Justice Kamal Kishore on 14 July but judgment was not delivered until 18 October 2022. Our case was dismissed and struck out. We were ordered to pay Court costs of \$6000.

Legal Action 2:

In July 2021 the Fiji First government sneaked, through amendments to the Financial Management Act, draconian provisions which required political parties and candidates making any financial commitment to voters to immediately submit details of how such expenditure was to be met, finances for it raised and should it lead to a budget deficit, how the deficit would be met. Failure to do so carried severe penalties.

This requirement was subsequently inserted into the Electoral Act.

Labour with Unity Fiji mounted a legal challenge to the amendment on 18 March 2022, seeking a declaration from the High Court that the amendment was “unreasonable, arbitrary and unfair”.

The case was not heard until 27 September. A ruling dismissing the case and striking it off was made by Chief Justice Kamal Kishore on 18 October, just days before the issue of the Writ of Elections.

Legal Case 3

Labour and Unity had also legally challenged amendments to the Political Parties Act that removed the right of political parties to seek legal redress against the rulings of the Registrar of Political Parties. The amendment required the matter to be resolved by the Electoral Commission.

The two parties argued the EC was hardly neutral considering that the Registrar was also Secretary to the Commission. This case was also thrown out just before the 22 general elections.

Chairman Electoral Commission

Labour and Unity also challenged the eligibility of Suresh Chandra to hold office as chairman of the Electoral Commission.

In November 2021, Labour and Unity Fiji wrote to the CoC pointing out that Suresh Chandra did not hold a valid practicing licence in 2021 as a Legal Practitioner and could not continue as chair of the Electoral Commission. He should be suspended subject to an inquiry.

Labour also later claimed that Chandra had made fraudulent claims for sitting allowances as chairman of the Electoral Commission even when the Commission was not sitting. These allowances were paid in cash by the Secretary to the Electoral Commission, Mohammed Saneem, in violation of financial regulations of the EC.

A formal complaint was lodged with FICAC which did go through the motions of investigating the issue but concluded that there was no case to answer. Strangely, however, they removed the case files from the EC office.

Labour and Unity were not satisfied and handed the case over to their lawyers.

In the meanwhile, on 24 November within days of the Labour/Unity letter to the Constitutional Offices Commission, Suresh Chandra tendered in his resignation as chairman EC. He gave no explanation for doing so.

Political landscape

As usual, moves were afoot in the lead up to the 2022 polls to get the opposition parties to form a united coalition to oust the unpopular Fiji First government.

Several meetings were held to foster a united front but it soon became clear that Sodelpa and NFP as current parliamentary parties were not really interested in presenting a united front with opposition parties outside parliament.

In August 2021, the Peoples Alliance Party led by Sitiveni Rabuka was launched, further splintering the opposition front. In May 2022, Rabuka announced a formal agreement with NFP on a post election coalition.

By early 2022 Labour had realized that a coalition of the smaller parties without the inclusion of NFP and Sodelpa would not really work. It was decided that Labour would avoid the trap it fell into prior to the 2014 and 2018 elections chasing a united front, and this time would go it alone.

2022 General Elections

Labour fielded 45 candidates in the 2022 general elections led by Labour Leader Mahendra Chaudhry who had been barred from contesting the 2014 and 2018 general elections.

We went to the Polls confident of winning a few seats although by early December it was clear that the Rabuka-led PAP had a pretty wide following from the indigenous Fijian community and Fiji citizens in Australia and New Zealand. Many were looking at Rabuka as the messiah who would deliver Fiji from the excesses of Fiji First.

At the same time, we were bracing for another bout of vote rigging similar to what had happened in the two previous elections, perhaps worse as the Fiji First by now had become very unpopular.

The manner in which the Electoral laws had been manipulated, and the fact that the government ignored all complaints against Saneem to retain him as Supervisor of Elections was sufficient to indicate that they were relying on him to ensure they get back into office.

Counting took place immediately after the end of voting on 14 December.

It was a disappointment for the Party. After starting off in third place in the early stages of the count, our vote count trailed off after the famous 6-hour 'glitch' on the counting night – the night and early morning of December 14/15. The results dramatically changed after this in favour of the Fiji First.

It was a close call with Sodelpa holding the balance of power with its three seats. Fiji First despite its unpopularity emerged the largest single Party with 26 seats; Rabuka's Alliance Party had 21 seats and NFP secured 5 seats giving us a hung Parliament. Neither Labour nor Unity Fiji secured sufficient votes to make the threshold.

If you remember, there was frantic lobbying for support with SODELPA by both FFP and the Rabuka/NFP coalition while the nation with baited breath to see who formed the government. The Rabuka group finally negotiated a deal with Sodelpa to form a government with a majority of 3.

Labour was disappointed that after forming a government, leaders of the Coalition promptly forgot their agreement with other Opposition parties to enquire into the credibility of the 2022 general elections.

We wrote to the Prime Minister on 3 January 2023 reminding him of the immediate post-Count agreement and urging him to appoint a commission to carry out an independent forensic audit of entire electoral process.

Apart from the glitch, there were too many reports of anomalies at the various polling stations such as votes not being reflected on the Protocol of results, extra votes showing up in ballot boxes etc that reflected adversely on the integrity and credibility of the 2022 Polls.

We never heard from the Prime Minister on the issue. It seems having managed to get into power, they lost interest in inquiring whether the elections had been free and fair.

As in 2018, so in 2022 - we were not in a position to push the issue.

We did, however, re-iterate our concerns about the lack of independence and impartiality of the Supervisor of Elections and asked that he be suspended from office pending an inquiry into complaints against him.

Saneem was suspended on 19 January and resigned from office on 31st January 2023. But it is disappointing to see the inexplicable delays in holding him accountable. A commission of inquiry is still being awaited.

It was subsequently revealed that Saneem had received substantial salary increase and other benefits, including a lucrative relocation allowance for his family in a new employment contract negotiated and approved by former Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum in April 2022, some 9 months before the elections, when Khaiyum was acting PM.

This agreement was unlawfully entered into without the knowledge or consent of the Constitutional Offices Commission.

Acting Supervisor of Elections, Ms Ana Mataciwa, reported the matter in February 2023 following which Khaiyum was charged on 1st May 2023 facing one count of abuse of office. The case is pending in the High Court.

Labour may not have secured Parliamentary seats but we have been very active throughout the year in holding government accountable, often more vocal than the parliamentary Opposition.

At first it did seem that the Coalition was willing to work with Labour to address critical issues facing the nation, but party politics intervened and early overtures never saw fruition.

Undeterred, we carried on as usual looking after the interests of the people, speaking out when the need arose through media statements and an active Facebook page.

Reconciliation

One encouraging sign early on that the government was on the right track was the move towards Reconciliation and Forgiveness initiated by the Methodist Church in Fiji at the time of the Giriti celebrations. It occurred under the stewardship of its former President, the Reverend Ili Vunisuwai who personally visited Labour Leader to invite him to the Reconciliation service.

As one of the main speakers, Mr Chaudhry mooted the notion of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address issues pertaining to race relations in the country. This was readily accepted at the time by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka but nothing happened after that.

So on 8 June Labour wrote to the Prime Minister reminding him of his undertaking. Not surprisingly there was no reply. But at much later sitting of Parliament, 14 September 2023, a government motion to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was approved. We still have to see it being established.

Labour was also strongly denounced what appeared to be blatant nepotism and cronyism by Finance Minister Biman Prasad when he gave a \$200,000 grant to a discredited organisation the Global Girit Institute of which his wife and a close political ally were trustees. The Institute had been deregistered a year before for failing to submit its annual reports since its inception in 2017. It was 're-registered' in February this year under questionable circumstances. Fiji's laws do not allow re-registration of charitable trusts.

Despite calls on the Prime Minister and Attorney General, no inquiry was ever carried out in the matter. Nor was a subsequent \$1m allocation to the Pacific Polytechnic Institute, again a failed organisation connected to people close to the Minister, ever investigated.

Labour has also been very vocal in denouncing government's failure to fulfill its election promise to bring down the cost of living and review the national minimum wage. Particularly so when VAT was increased to 15% across the Board in Budget 2023/24, inflicting more hardship on our already struggling low and middle income families.

The government has shown a noticeable lack of accountability and transparency in its handling of public funds and national issues, including appointments to high office. Labour has played a critical role in denouncing these and bringing them to the people's attention.

We have been critical of the frequent overseas junkets taken by Coalition Ministers something that the general public has also been very critical of.

We were quick to denounce a secret decision to grant a \$10,000 a year tax free increase in pays to all MPs, as a sign that the Coalition was all for itself at a time when it had done nothing to meet its promise to review the minimum wage.

A month ago we wrote to the Secretary-General to Parliament pointing out the move was unlawful as the payment did not have parliamentary approval.

Labour recently made a submission to the FCCCI strongly opposing Energy Fiji Ltd's proposal for a 32% increase in electricity tariff as totally unwarranted. It would create extra hardship for our struggling families.

So was have been there – defending people's interests, speaking out on issues of concern to them despite not being in Parliament.

Conclusion

Finally, as the year draws to a close I wish to thank all our well wishers, financial donors, supporters, activists and National and Branch officials for all their help and support during the difficult and challenging times we have been through in the past two years. We look forward to your continued support.

Best wishes for the Festive Season. Thank you.