

Fiji Labour Party

Annual Delegates Conference
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Address by Labour Leader Mahendra Chaudhry
---The Coalition's Performance as a Government---

The nation went to the Polls last year with fervent hopes of voting in a government that was caring and sensitive to the needs of the people, committed to good governance, inclusivity and the rule of law.

After a decade and a half of what was virtually totalitarian rule by the Fiji First, our people were seeking freedom from oppression and a more consultative approach to governance.

Subjected to years of hardship and deprivation, they hoped for a government that would look after their interests, bring down the high cost of living, provide more jobs and build a more resilient economy.

These were the aspirations with which the nation went to the Polls. Their prayers were answered – there was a change of government.

The current Coalition government has been in office just short of a year. The conventional honeymoon period is long over. It is time now to take stock of where the nation is headed under their stewardship and whether they have delivered on their promises and the hopes and aspirations of our people - in particular, the man on the street.

As a political party, it is our bounden duty to hold the government accountable to its electoral promises to the voters and to the edicts of good governance.

Labour has diligently discharged this function in the past 11 months. We are, unfortunately, not in Parliament thanks to electoral skullduggery. Nonetheless, we have done our duty in holding our rulers accountable at all times – often doing the work of the official opposition.

There are those in government who arrogantly brush Labour off as a 'spent force' or 'irrelevant'. I put them on notice today: Make no mistake. Labour is no spent force.

That is something our detractors already know, often to their embarrassment. Labour in the past 11 months has kept this government on its toes as we did with Fiji First.

We are here to serve the people and we do that with utter commitment and sincerity- whether in Parliament or not. For the past 38 years, through coups, repressive governments and intimidating security forces, Labour has been the unfailing voice of the people – the workers, the farmers, the small businessmen and the poor and needy. When necessary we speak for big business interests as well.

We have fearlessly and courageously spoken out against corruption in high public office, repressive and draconian laws, injustices against the people and exploitation of the weak.

No government can afford to ignore the Labour Party. We speak for the people. We will be there demanding accountability and transparency every step of the way.

That is my message to those who make the mistake of arrogantly brushing Labour off as ‘irrelevant’. Or telling us to shut up.

Or resorting to personal attacks when they have no answers to our questions. Let that be clear to those in government.

Now let me move on to the business at hand.

The most important question we need to ask today is: has the Coalition government delivered on its election promises to the people? Has it shown the will to make good on its promises?

OR were those promises made simply to get votes?

Is it able to govern effectively?

To assess the effectiveness and performance of this government we need to look at its structure. To start off its very structure dictates against political stability- most people describe it as a three legged stool. For the stool to be steady and stable – all three legs need to be equal and in this context, satisfied.

There have been too many rumblings, too many conflicting demands and instances of indiscipline which have undermined the effective operation of the government.

The Prime Minister is not able to hold his ministers accountable for fear of losing numbers. Compromises have to be made, interests have to be accommodated and as we have seen lately, rebels have to be tolerated – he cannot afford to upset or ignore anyone.

Remember the Fiji First Opposition holds 26 seats to the 29 held by the Coalition. The situation is fairly precarious.

The debacle over PM Rabuka's recent failure to reshuffle his Cabinet is a clear illustration that he is not in total command. It will be difficult to live down the public humiliation of what happened.

Not only that. Army Commander Major General Jone Kalouniwai constantly hovers over his shoulders, demanding he keep within the bounds of the Constitution and the rule of law.

Particularly pertinent is the Commander's recent concern on the PM's failure to consult re the UN vote on Israel. He believes it may have serious adverse repercussions on the security and safety of our peacekeeping soldiers in the Middle East. The concern is legitimate.

Besides, Rabuka has shown an obtrusive tendency to take unilateral policy decisions that have not gone down well with either his Coalition partners or even his own PAP Ministers, let alone the rest of the country.

Cases in point:

- Fiji's vote against a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israeli/Hamas conflict to allow desperately needed humanitarian aid to victims of the war
- Support for Japan's decision to dump nuclear waste water from the damaged Fukushima Nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean
- Removing Fiji's name from the list of 51 countries calling for China to stop human rights violation against its minority communities
- the drama over the failed Cabinet reshuffle

There has been a tendency to ignore constitutional requirements.

The Rabuka government has come under strong criticism from the Fiji Law Society and opposition political parties over several high powered appointments made recently in violation of constitutional provisions ie. that of Alipate Qetaki as a judge, John Rabuku as acting Director of Public Prosecutions and Filimoni Vosaroga as Attorney General.

To make it worse, after the Law Society raised the issue of Vosaroga's ineligibility, PM Rabuka challenged it to take the matter to court. These appointments were another source of embarrassment to the government, raising questions about its ability to govern within the rule of law.

Accountability and Transparency

Other critical flaws in terms of governance have surfaced in the past 11 months – the most important being a noticeable lack of accountability and transparency. Several questionable cases that raise issues of corrupt practices, nepotism and cronyism are of concern.

These have been brought to the attention of the Prime Minister and the Attorney General without any action being taken to deal with them.

1. Grant to the Global Girit Institute

The \$200,000 grant to the Global Girit Institute in May for which accounts have still not been made public 5-6 months later, despite assurances by the PM as well as his Finance Minister that they will be published soon.

Its trustees are the Finance Minister's wife and a close political ally, Ganesh Chand. GGI was de-registered in February 2022 for failure to submit annual accounts since its registration. The manner in which it was unlawfully granted re-registration in February this year, also raises serious questions.

Attorney General Siromi Turaga had assured the media in May that the matter would be investigated but nothing has happened to date. Labour has written twice to the AG calling for an inquiry. There has been no response.

2. Pacific Polytechnic Institute (PPI)

Another worrying case is the huge financial grant, over \$1m, given to the Pacific Polytechnic Institute (PPI) which is another failed venture with close connections to Ganesh Chand and other allies of the Finance Minister bypassing other more successfully established technical/vocational institutions needing urgent funding.

The two raise serious questions about the Finance Minister bailing out his own cronies and close associates. Under the norms of good governance

this would be branded as nepotism and cronyism. The Prime Minister may turn a blind eye to this. The people will not.

3. Fiji Water tax holiday

The 7-year tax holiday granted to Fiji Water in the 2023/24 Budget remains a matter of concern. How does government justify giving a 7-year tax holiday to a highly profitable foreign-owned company at a time when it is calling on everyone else to practice austerity?

More so, when it had worsened the suffering and financial hardship of ordinary folks by raising VAT to 15% across the board.

To date government has given no acceptable justification or explanation for this. You should know that Fiji Water is a highly profitable foreign company which posted a profit of \$69m in 2022.

I must also question government's decision to grant an unlimited ground water extraction licence to Fiji Water. This was done despite the advice of regulatory authorities which wanted a limit imposed to ensure sustainability.

The tax holiday and its unlimited extraction licence raise eyebrows, coming just a few months after Prime Minister Rabuka was dined and entertained by the principals of Fiji Water at its headquarters in Los Angeles in March this year.

4. The Ferris Wheel accident Report

Another case involves a denial of justice to ordinary folks. I refer to the ferris wheel accident in Suva in June this year when a young woman named Komal died and two others were seriously injured when they fell off a moving machine. The accident took two lives as the girl's father went into a depression following her death and died of hypertension six weeks later. She was his favourite child!

The other two women have serious injuries. The girl Supriya had broken both her arms and had to undergo surgery. She is still in a lot of pain and has limited use of one of the hands. Her mother has developed neurological problems and needs specialized medical attention.

None of the victims was offered any kind of medical assistance or provided consultancies for trauma.

I am appalled that some five months later, the Ministry of Employment and Industrial Relations has still not come up with a report on the accident. The Ministry says the machines were inspected before use.

The question is how thorough was the inspection if it malfunctioned the very first day of use.

Why is the report taking so long? Is the Ministry hiding something? What is Minister Agni Deo Singh doing about it? I believe he has taken at least 7 overseas trips and seems more concerned about workers overseas than our local people!

The Minister needs to realise that the lives of ordinary folks matter! They have been waiting patiently for justice all these months. They need expensive medical attention.

He had better knuckle down and get that report released so these hapless victims can get on with their lives.

Such lack of response and insensitivity to the plight of ordinary people, gives the government a bad name.

As it is the Ministers are facing strong criticism from the public for their frequent overseas trips. At any one time, you will find that 7/8 ministers or their assistants are out of the country.

For goodness sake, knuckle down and get some work done for which you are being paid handsomely by the taxpayer!

The impression one gets is that ministers in the Coalition are out there to grab whatever they can for their own personal benefit.

The widespread people perception is that there is little difference between the Fiji First and the current government.

There is no real departure in terms of policies and governance issues from that of the Fiji First. The Coalition has hardly initiated any new policy measures – it just carries on with projects and policies of the Fiji First.

This is a real disappointment considering that people voted for a change. They are not getting the change they wanted.

A lot of important work is held up. No steps appear to have been taken to move on inquiries related to malpractices under the Fiji First. Work on changing electoral laws, investigating electoral fraud all of them are pending. Let me cite a few:

1. Investigations into the payment of fraudulent claims for sitting allowances made to former Electoral Commission Chair Suresh Chandra and other Commissioners by the Supervisor of Elections, remain suspended. These were referred to FICAC early this year by the Acting Supervisor of Elections. Some 9 months later nothing has happened. FICAC's latest response is that it does not have a commissioner. Former Supervisor of Elections Mohammed Saneem is implicated in these claims.
2. Investigations into the now infamous 'glitch' that occurred at the height of vote counting remain in a limbo.

The findings of FEO that the glitch occurred because of human error were to be subjected to further scrutiny to determine whether the human error was deliberate or accidental. This exercise was to be carried out by the Ministry of Home Affairs in conjunction with the office of the Attorney General.

Failure to keep election promises *vis a vis* the people

This brings me to the Coalition's failure to meet its election promise to improve the quality of life of our people - bring down the high cost of living, reduce poverty, increase job opportunities and the minimum wage.

Instead, it increased VAT to 15% across the board inflicting more hardship on the poor claiming that government needed to raise revenue to pay the \$10b public debt.

They made such a huge song and dance about the need to raise VAT to 15% because of our huge debt burden and all that rhetoric about the need for the people to make sacrifices.

It then came as a real shocker when they secretly gave themselves huge pay increases of \$10,000 a year tax free per MP – when Ministers and MPs are already enjoying excessively high pays and allowances.

Not only that. Each political Party in Parliament will now also get \$325,000 a year. None of this was specifically approved or even mentioned in the 23/24 Budget address or even at the Committee stages of the debate on Budget allocations.

As far as we are concerned the \$325,000 payment to parliamentary political parties is unlawful unless it is properly sanctioned by Parliament.

When I raised this publicly, the cunning but not so smart Finance Minister responded that the decision to grant the \$10,000 increase to each MP and \$325,000 annual grant to each party in Parliament was taken by the Secretary-General, to be paid from funds allocated to Parliament.

But what the people were not told is that the allocation to Parliament was doubled from \$8.61m in the 2022/23 Budget to \$16.27m in the 2023/24 Budget – ostensibly to meet these payments and of course, for more overseas trips.

My correspondence on this issue with the Secretary-General remains unanswered.

This devious move to fill their own pockets became public only after the Fiji First general secretary disclosed it on his Facebook Page.

How can a government that indulges in this kind of self-gratification to fill its own pockets at the expense of the people, face them with any degree of moral integrity?

Particularly so when it continues to renege on its promise to raise the national minimum wage to keep abreast with increases in the cost of living.

What I find appalling is the Coalition's failure to respond to criticisms of its actions and policies. It has blithely closed its eyes to its mistakes and wrongs. Anyone that questions faces a barrage of personal abuse. But no response to issues raised.

In Hindi we call such people "*thethar*". Similar to incorrigible in English ie. a person who stubbornly persists with his actions, not able to be changed or reformed.

You hear the constant rhetoric that the Coalition listens to the people. But then those who question them are told in very crude terms to shut up.

They talk of consultation and inclusivity but there is no reply to letters sent to the Ministers on national issues. Not even the Prime Minister replies. We wrote to him twice regarding investigations into the 2022 elections as well as the setting up of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. No reply to either. But he was peddling the commission in his recent visit to Ba – obviously for political mileage.

Let's go back to post election 2014. Do you remember how incensed the now Finance Minister Biman Prasad was in October 2014 when the Fiji First unilaterally increased the pays of MPs even before parliament had its first sitting!

Let me ask: How is what Biman did a few months ago different from what Khaiyum did in 2014? Thanks to Khaiyum raising it, the tax free payout to MPs is now on hold, pending the work of the Parliamentary Emoluments Committee.

But this again comprises none other than MPs themselves! You can't have it better, can you! Fix your own pays and allowances – OMG!

Fiji National Provident Fund

Government appears to have a lot of money to give itself huge pay increases, but it clearly baulks at delivering justice to the workers or the victims of the 2012 restructuring of the Fiji National Provident Fund.

OR to reimburse the \$180m FNPF members were forced to withdraw from their retirement savings to survive the Covid crisis.

Another election promise not met. This was a Labour policy initiative that was taken up by major political parties at election time – those now in government. No move was taken in the 2023/24 Budget to meet this promise. Or the promise made by all parties to re-visit the 2012 re-structure of the Fund.

Instead, what the Finance Minister did was to relegate FNPF pensioners who were victimized at the time, to the ranks of social welfare recipients by giving them a handout of \$115-\$120 a month. To get this meagre sum, they are being forced to run from pillar to post.

Let me tell the Minister: FNPF pensioners are not begging the government for charity. They are demanding justice to get back what was rightfully theirs. Only 1500 of these pensioners are still surviving.

It would not have made much of a dent in the coffers of the FNPF to make it good to these people who suffered a 50% cut to their pension annuities in 2012. Many of them were put to severe financial hardship as a result.

The increase in social welfare payment of \$15 and \$20 per month is mere tokenism. The removal of the 10% subsidy on bus fares, has caused more hardship to the travelling public.

Looking back to its early days, one must admit that the Coalition did start off well. They kept some promises – restoring Media freedom, restoring the retirement age to 55, reinstating the GCC, removing short term contracts from the civil service etc.

These were things easy to do because it meant simply restoring what the Fiji First government had unilaterally removed. But when it came to meeting the real challenges of governance, they seemed to have no sense of direction on how to forge ahead. They resorted to the same old policies of Fiji First that people sought an escape from.

They got all too easily embroiled in the trappings of power – holding conferences and meetings at grand hotels, being wined and dined by those seeking favours – and of course, the numerous overseas junkets.

They have forgotten the very people who put them there in the first place.

At one critical juncture, at the time of the failed Cabinet re-shuffle, the Prime Minister admitted that all his three deputy PMs were out of the country while he himself was on a State visit to Australia.

This is gross mismanagement and lack of control over his Cabinet. When I pointed this out, the PM arrogantly said I was a “spent force”.

Is this how he plans to run the nation?

Is it any wonder that our people, particularly our youth, are continuing to leave the country in droves seeking a better life overseas? It signals a worrying lack of confidence in the future of our nation and its leadership.

The Coalition needs to wake up before it is too late. They need to shed their arrogance and get on with the job of running the country responsibly. We need more than just ministers driving around cutting ribbons and making fancy speeches.

We need a blueprint for the nation that shows vision and proper direction. Not just following in the footsteps of the Fiji First.

For instance, do they have any ideas on:

- Giving relief to people from the ever rising cost of living. What can the Coalition offer in this regard? Have they got a plan or is it just business as usual?

- What have they in store for thousands of our unemployed youth aside from hoping to send them to Australia or New Zealand under the Pacific Labour Mobility schemes?
- Do they think that their current cavalier approach to fixing the problems of our ailing sugar industry is the right answer to its revival?
- Do they realise that that they are seriously mistaken in adopting holus bolus the Fiji First's Public Private Partnership Scheme for Affordable Housing with its huge potential to be turned into a scam of similar proportions as the rebuilding of schools after Cyclone Winston in 2016?
Or the Tacirua Heights residential subdivision for families on low incomes which turned out a grand failure with speculators benefitting from it.
- Can they be honest about their campaign promises to increase the National Minimum Wage. Can they explain why it has now been put on the back burner?

The list goes on but does it matter to them?

Unfortunately, we cannot expect much in the way of growth in investments either local or foreign because there still remains doubt

- about the stability of this government
- about its commitment, competence and capacity to deliver
- about the consistency and fairness of its economic and social policies
- about its treatment of the various communities – particularly the minorities

Ladies and Gentlemen I must regretfully conclude on that disappointing note.