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ADDRESS TO THE NATION ON FIJI'S DRAFT CONSTITUTION

Suva, Fiji

Thursday 21st March, 2013

My fellow Fijians

Bula vinaka and a good evening to you all.

In July 2009, when launching the Strategic Framework for Change, I announced that we must have elections under a truly democratic system by no later than September 2014.

That promise my government has been committed to and will fulfil.

We had also announced, when putting in place the Constitutional process, that the new Constitution must be in place by April of this year. That promise also my government will adhere to and facilitate.

You are also aware that the Constitutional process that we commenced with the Ghai Commission was modified. This was done to ensure that the fundamental principles of parliamentary representation and efficient and transparent government was implemented through a forward looking Constitution.

Today, we further modify the process to ensure that the key objective of holding elections by September 2014 under a truly democratic parliamentary system is met. Unfortunately, this modification has been forced upon us because of the lack of commitment by the political parties to register under the requirements of the law. There are allegations of fraud and impersonation. This does not provide a conducive climate to hold the Constituent Assembly. We cannot be delayed by such circumstances.

This, for me, is very disappointing because it would appear some politicians are still beholden to the politics of old. Racism and corruption cannot form the basis of a new beginning for our beloved country.

My fellow Fijians, adherence to the time lines we have set is critical if we are to have elections by September 2014. A key aspect of holding the elections is to ensure that we have an electoral system that does not allow fraud and that we have public awareness and education about the new electoral system. We need at least 15 months to prepare for such elections.

In line with these undertakings, I announce this evening that the draft Constitution is ready.

Instead of presenting the draft to the Constituent Assembly under the previous arrangement, we will be presenting it directly to you. My fellow Fijians, you will be the new Constituent Assembly.

The draft Constitution is available as I speak through the Government website. It will be printed in full in tomorrow's Fiji Sun and in the days to come, and hard copies will also be available from various Government outlets.

You will have until the 5th of April to give your feedback. You can give your feedback via email to a designated address, which will be announced in the next few days. You can write in your comments to the Solicitor General's office or drop them off there. You can even text your comments on the number 02 from midnight tonight. You can also post your comments via the Ministry of Information's Facebook page.

In the next few days, we will also publish explanatory notes to help you understand each and every single section of the draft Constitution.

Next week, we will also hold a number of community forums at which members of the public and representatives of organisations can attend to ask Government's legal team questions on any aspect of the draft Constitution. Notices of these meetings will be published over this weekend.

I will also be holding talk back sessions on FBC radio stations in all three languages next Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to answer any of your questions and listen to you.

Following these consultations and your feedback, we will finalise the Constitution to have it ready for implementation no later than the 12th of April this year.

Let me now highlight some of the key components of the draft Constitution:

- it gives sovereign control to a single house in Parliament, which is represented by members elected by you;
- the size of parliament shall be 45 with a four year term. The idea is to attract good quality and honest parliamentarians who will be paid accordingly and who won't be corrupt;
- it provides for not only civil and political rights, but also, for the first time in our constitutional history, it provides for a wide range of socio-economic rights. As seen through the constitutional submissions, many Fijians are concerned about their day to day living and access to better facilities and utilities. The draft Constitution has rights to housing and sanitation, reasonable access to transportation, adequate food and water

and social security schemes. It also for the first time gives specific rights to persons with disabilities and to children;

- it creates a secular state which will allow all Fijians to practice their own faiths;
- it has proportional representation through a multi member constituency which will give enhanced opportunities for women and the youth to be in Parliament;
- it gives more independence to the Judiciary, to control their own budget and finances as approved by Parliament. FICAC and the DPP's office shall control their own affairs;
- it creates a Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission to give protection to all citizens irrespective of their backgrounds or socio-economic status;
- it creates a truly independent electoral commission with appropriate powers; and
- for the first time in our history, it gives you the right to change the constitution once implemented via a referendum;

My fellow Fijians I have just highlighted to you some of the key components of the draft Constitution. I urge you to read it in detail and provide your feedback.

In assessing the draft, please understand that it has been put together by incorporating the positive aspects of the Ghai draft, and with the view to withstand the test of time. Constitutional, political and economic stability is critical to create a prosperous Fiji. A Fiji without systemic corruption and a transparent governmental system with true parliamentary representation will ensure that the potential of all Fijians and Fiji is realised.

I look forward to our national discussions and your feedback over the next two weeks.

Vinaka Vakalevu and good evening.