

NFP: Comments tarnish credibility

BY NFP PRESIDENT RAMAN SINGH

Suppression of information

The Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum's comments that a stolen laptop contained an electronic copy of the National Voters Register including analysis of statistical data like "including division by age, gender, distribution etc." proves that Government has been deliberately suppressing this extremely vital information from political parties despite official requests for the release of an electronic copy of the Register.

Mr Sayed-Khaiyum's comments in the *Fiji Sun* (Tuesday 25th February) also demonstrate that Government has been deliberately withholding this critical information to place its proposed political party in an advantageous position while feeding scraps to political parties in the form of bulky hard copies of the National Voters Register. This in itself is not a level-playing field and undermines the conduct of free and fair elections.

His comments reveal that Government, using taxpayer funds, has been analyzing the National Voters Register to use the statistical data for its proposed political party while denying access and availability of the electronic copy of the roll itself to political parties.

This is exactly why the NFP has been insisting for the last two years that electoral preparation must be conducted by a caretaker government, not by the Regime that makes all laws without consultation and uses them to its own advantage.

The NFP had written to the Permanent Secretary Responsible for Elections on 30th January 2014 requesting an electronic copy of the National Voters Register as per the provisions of the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Decree 2014. But the Permanent Secretary has not responded to our letter until this day.

The revelation by Mr Sayed-Khaiyum also destroys the credibility of his comments to the Electoral Commission soon after the appointment of the 7-member Commission about the need for the polls not to be dodgy but free and fair.

The NFP does not condone the theft of the laptop. This must be investigated and due process followed. The information contained with respect to the voter registration is not a sensitive issue. In fact the Electoral Commission should have released all the information on the voter registration to all the political parties by now and we call on the Commission to do so immediately.

More seriously the warning by A-G to the Commission is tantamount to saying that the Commission still reports to him. This is uncalled for, disrespectful, unacceptable and a direct attack on the Commission and its independence. Surely the Chairman of the Commission and its members understand the seriousness of any theft of items from Elections office and procedures to follow to deal with such situations.

The Commission must not sack any staff without proper investigation and due process as suggested by the A-G because to do so will be unjustified and unlawful. We hasten to point out that the staff and set-up that the Commission inherited was under the direction of Mr Sayed-Khaiyum in his capacity as Electoral Commission until the appointment of the Commission just last month.

Finally, Mr Sayed-Khaiyum's assertion that political parties may be involved in the theft is a figment of his imagination. He must furnish evidence, if any, of such involvement to police and not taint political parties by his ludicrous theories.

Lack of good governance

On Thursday 20th February, Prime Minister Commodore Bainimarama, while launching the HFC Bank, attacked former politicians involved in the National Bank of Fiji scandal. However, he conveniently forgot that the scandal was brought to the attention of the public by the NFP and its leader at that time, Mr. Jai Ram Reddy. It was Mr Reddy's actions that led to investigation, reforms and recovery where possible of funds.

Commodore Bainimarama is clearly on a campaign trail using taxpayers' funds while he remains Commander of the RFMF, a position defined as public office under the Political Parties Decree. Commodore Bainimarama talks about good governance in running the new bank but conveniently ignores bad governance by his own government. Both the PM and the AG should evaluate their own governance records. They should tell the people of this country why the Auditor General's reports since 2007 have not been released. Indeed the people of Fiji are entitled to know if the Accounts have been audited.

There is no credibility in the lectures that both the PM and the AG have been giving to the people over the last seven years on good governance, transparency and accountability in the absence of audited Accounts.

They should tell the people why they need a new Bank supported by the workers of this country who fund the HFC. They should reveal the details of the feasibility study if any as to the viability and sustainability of this Bank in the future.

The NFP is concerned that the government has gone ahead without any public debate and without releasing all the details of the feasibility and management issues relating to the Bank.

Surely, this is not too much to ask from a Government whose leaders profess to walk the moral high ground of transparency, accountability and good governance.
