

## **NFP's vision for our people's future**

**By NFP Leader Biman Prasad**

*The following are excerpts from Professor Prasad's speech delivered at the NFP Convention on 29<sup>th</sup> March (continued from last week)*

### ***Creating decent jobs***

Nowhere is the evidence of failure of government seen more clearly than through unemployment. Thousands of graduates, school leavers, and skilled people cannot find jobs. This is because there has been no growth in manufacturing and agriculture sector. The National Employment Centre tells us that out of 26,000 that registered as jobseekers between 2010 and 2012, only 4,000 found jobs. More recently the figure registered at the NEC has risen to 30,000 and of these 1,000 are University graduates.

It breaks the heart of parents, who borrow to support higher education of their children, when they see them out of work on completion of their studies. It breaks the heart of our youth who work relentlessly to complete their higher education and then rather than have a decent job, find themselves jobless. This pain is played out in so many of our families every day.

In government, the NFP will work with employers and investors to create decent employment opportunities through a range of job creating incentives. We will in particular pay attention to supporting both the manufacturing and agricultural sector as both have significant potential for employment creation. We will work with Australia and New Zealand to join the Pacific labor scheme.

### ***Regenerating sugar industry and the islands and rural agricultural sector***

One of the key industries seriously affected after the military coup of 2006 was the sugar industry. The industry lost about 200 million dollars in adjustment funds from the European Union. There is now real threat that lack of progress in the negotiations with the EPA threatens the access of our sugar to the European Union. In fact the government has misled the farmers by suggesting that our market access is granted until 2023. This is far from the truth. The EU has clarified that that we only have until 2014 to negotiate our way in the EPA.

***The NFP as it has always done will help negotiate better deals with the EU and other markets. In Government the NFP will substantially invest in the industry to rebuild confidence of farmers, introduce private sector innovations and rebuild trust in our external markets. We will reinstate a bi-partisan approach to the management of the sugar industry. We will re-establish an elected Sugar Cane Grower Council to create cohesion and cooperation amongst the sugarcane farmers in the country.***

Years of neglect, and concentration of administrative authority in Suva has meant that the reach of Government to our rural villages and islands has worsened. The neglect of some islands and rural agricultural communities is criminal.

Agricultural extension services in near state of collapse, roads in such disrepair that even private buses are pulling back their services in many areas. How did we come to this? We have had nearly 20 years of continuous failure of Government. The attention of an increasingly politicized senior civil service was on serving political masters, rather than ensuring services to rural and island communities. We will begin the task of redressing this comprehensive failure of government. This will not be easy.

In government, we will increase agricultural extension services and work with private sector providers to extend telecommunications connectivity to all island communities as a high priority. At the back of this revolution in networking our country, we will weave onto that IT tapestry, the delivery of front line government services through e-services. Internationally, we will work with our traditional development partners and those in Asia, including China, India and others to learn, adapt and apply low technology solutions to enhancing income opportunities. We will not fail island and rural communities.

***This government's policy on agricultural development in the past 7 years have been confused. The incentive structure has been confused with promoting import substitution and export promotion. We will define a very clear agricultural policy linked to our export markets so that our farmers can increase production and increase income through export-led agricultural development.***

***Land Availability and Land use policy***

Land and the issue of agricultural leases has always been contentious and a source of bitter and acrimonious debates. The NFP's has in the past advocated the need for a lasting solution to the issue of expiring land leases.

***The NFP will promote a Master Lease concept where Government leases all available agricultural land from landowners and then re-leases it to tenant farmers for a minimum tenure of 99 years. We will push for agricultural and residential tenants leasing Crown C Land be provided the option to buy the land at a price following valuation of the Un-improved Capital Value of the Land.***

### ***Fixing health care***

Our healthcare systems are in decay. The health authorities are struggling in their ability to deal with the recent outbreak of Dengue. We might have become the dengue capital of the world! The deteriorating level of services in our hospitals is shocking.

Lack of doctors, nurses, medicine and neglect of patients is a familiar story for a lot of people. In the last 7 years policy makers and planners of health care delivery in Fiji have not been able to put in place a durable and need based health care system. Today deaths from Non-Communicable diseases, has risen to over 80%. People are dying of heart diseases, blood pressure, and diabetes because of lack of basic medical care at an early stage to prevent these diseases. How can people have a good diet when they can rarely afford a balanced meal on the meagre wages they can ill afford?

***The NFP will review the salaries of doctors, nurses and health workers and implement a new salary structure within six months of being in government. In Government we will implement a health sector modernization program involving private-public sector solutions to improve medical facilities and equipment, to use new technologies including telemedicine to extend services to island communities, and reduce costs of private and public sector drugs through bulk -purchasing.***

### ***Education matters for democracy***

We have no quarrels with government's stated priority for education for all the people in this country. In fact we commend them for some policies and NFP will maintain the increase in school grants. However, we also feel that in the rush to create populist reforms they have messed up the whole education system. Starting from primary and

right through secondary and tertiary education, government policies have been confused, haphazard and ad hoc. Removal of exams, new assessment methods, new curriculum have all been implemented without much thought on its impact on quality.

There is an urgent need to review the current curriculum to find out where we stand in terms of quality of the teaching and learning process. We appreciate and understand government's attempt to provide scholarship and loan for all students who qualify for higher education. We will, however, review the structure of TELS and its secretariat while maintaining the goal of providing scholarship and loans to students.

***The NFP will keep the toppers scheme for the 600 highest achievers in form seven. However, those who do not make the cut in the 600, we will introduce a means tested scholarship. This will ensure that students from very poor families will get full scholarship and will not be forced to take a loan. We will also convert all loans in 2014 to means tested scholarships for those who meet the criteria. The NFP will review the teachers' salaries to ensure that we have a salary level commensurate with the work that teachers, specialists and school heads undertake.***

### ***Delivering services***

When the coup happened in 2006 we were promised fair and equal treatment in many things including the civil service appointments. The regime promised that military officers will not be appointed. The reality today is quite different. The Public Service Commission Chairman and the Permanent Secretary of PSC appear to have shut their eyes and have paddled the appointments of persons based on who they are and not on merit.

We know that there are many hard working civil servants and we commend them for their hard work and understanding. I am talking about those that have moved up the ladder so quickly and so fast under this government fuelling a culture of mediocrity. Board appointments, CEOs of government owned companies are all good examples of appointments made on the basis of considerations other than merit.

The current coup regime unilaterally reduced the public service retirement age. This policy is a no brainer. It should have never been implemented.

***NFP in government will restore the retirement age to 60. In addition, we will extend this further to 65 on annual contracts on the basis of needs. NFP will focus civil service on delivering services to citizens transparently, in a time bound manner and have clear procedures for resolving citizen's grievances in a timely manner.***

### ***Of our international partners***

Thank you for remaining engaged with Fiji in these rough times. We value greatly your support. In going forward, we look to deepening our dialogue with all of Fiji's development partners. Fiji's development needs are many. From, education to health, to environmental degradation, to marine resource preservation, to boosting micro-finance access in semi-urban and rural areas, to rural infrastructure rehabilitation, we will work with development partners to seek their financing and technical support across priority areas. We want to focus their support to creating jobs and boosting incomes within these areas especially in rural and semi urban areas.

### ***Making the right choices***

I will lead a new NFP in this election. I urge you, especially the young and the youth to listen to us. Listen to what we have to offer? Ask us any questions you may have. Check out our vision for this country. We know that these are difficult but not hopeless times. With the right choices, our future is bright.

We need leaders who can move beyond the hallow of egoism and embrace ideas from others, embrace dissent, embrace humility, understand the needs and aspirations of the people.

The new NFP is a party which will stick to its enduring values of freedom for our people, democracy and good governance, humility and understanding of the unique nature of our society. It believes in an open and accountable government.

We understand and embrace changes in the expectations of our young people; we understand their aspirations of living in a free, peaceful and progressive country.

***Our vision for Fiji is one where people have the freedom to earn a decent living, freedom to question the government, freedom from fear and oppression. It is a Fiji where we will promote the delivery of services to all without fear and favor.***

***A Fiji where businesses are allowed to flourish, where economic growth is sustainable, Fiji where employment is plentiful, Fiji where people will want to live and make their homes and not think about migrating at any cost.***

Let me say this. The days when young, smart, educated and skilled persons chose to stay out of politics are over. I believe more and more young people and especially women have become conscious of the fact they have lost freedom, they have lost prosperity and they need to do something. More and more young people and women are convinced that they cannot remain 'apolitical. There is too much at stake. I know that our young and women want freedom, they want respect, they don't want to be told all the time what is good for them, they don't want to be told what they should study and why, and they want to be part of the future for this country. The new NFP provides that opportunity. It is a party where young and women activists can develop their leadership skills.

***NFP will encourage women candidates in this election and our manifesto will contain policies towards gender equality and empowerment of women.***

In the next few months, both the President and I, together with key leaders of the NFP will travel throughout the country. We will present and discuss our policies. We will listen to you as we travel and review our programs and proposals based on your contributions. We will take programs and policies that flow from these into government.

We are not in an environment which promotes free and fair election. This cannot be the case so long as restrictions on media remain and the bias of public sector media organizations is not reduced.

Mr. Bainimarama, if you want our citizens to have the freedom to choose, please free our media. Remove the punishing decrees, and ask the media to give equal coverage to all parties.

To the journalists in this country, let me say this. We understand your predicament. But, you have a large and historic role to play in restoring our democracy. I urge you to do your bit in ensuring that Fiji citizens can watch, read and listen to messages of all political parties and not only that of the Government. In the absence of democracy

the media's role as an effective watchdog becomes even more important and a free and unbiased media is the last bastion of hope for all our citizens.

***In government, NFP will remove all restrictions to media freedom.***

In taking this responsibility, I have consulted widely across the country. Based on hundreds of interactions, I have a clear message on their behalf for Mr. Bainimarama. Our people are not stupid. They will think carefully before they vote. They are asking serious questions. They do not buy your propaganda. I have that infinite trust in the goodness of our people. Come September, they will do the right thing.

Mr. Bainimarama, if you indeed are ready to stand on your record, join me in a public debate on your record.

This country is at a 'critical juncture' ladies and gentlemen. I will lead a very talented and committed team in this difficult election. **We need your support.**

Ms Tupou Draunidalo and I offer you an opportunity to make a lasting impact on the future of this country.

We are a party of high principles. We hold the use of force in politics as fundamentally abhorrent. Our Party and its leaders have never supported or benefitted from a coup. Our leaders have not enriched themselves in the name of the poor.

The new NFP will re-claim its rightful place in Fiji's politics. We will return to parliament with a substantial number of seats. We will be in government. We will transform the way we are governed.

We will not be dictatorial, we will not be vindictive, we will not harass and we will not go out on a witch-hunt. We will promote a politics of consensus not partisanship. We will bring in a politics of inclusiveness and not divisiveness.

What we desperately need is a clean and efficient government, that creates opportunities for the greatest number instead of favoring a select few; that is fair and consistent, not vengeful and whimsical; that instils hope instead of fear; that encourages initiative and entrepreneurship instead of killing it. We will engage with young, women, persons with disability. We will not condemn old politicians and leaders and Chiefs. We seek out their wisdom and advice.

In rebuilding our country, we ask you to join NFP, support it with your vote, and support it with resources and your time.

Let me make this very clear. The NFP will contest the election on its own. We are NOT in coalition with any party.

We are here to secure your future. NFP is our people's future. It provides a new national beginning. I urge you all to join us in this journey to rebuild our democracy, our economy and our society.