

A lesson about freedom

BY KAMAL IYER

“Let us put Fiji First – the rest will fall in place” and “Reforms first elections later” were repeatedly emphasised in 2008 by Mahendra Pal Chaudhry, a former Prime Minister, Leader of the Fiji Labour Party, general secretary of National Farmers Union, and the Interim Minister for Finance and Sugar in the military regime from January 2007 to August 2008.

Nine years later, Mr Chaudhry talks about freedom as being more important than highlighting issues like cost of living, medical services and the \$100 per tonne price of sugarcane. This is hypocrisy of the highest order.

“These are most important but what is more important is your freedom”, he was reported as telling FLP supporters in a meeting in Labasa – page 4 The Fiji Times 25/9/17

The Labour leader also stated that it seemed the plight of cane farmers seemed no longer important to be discussed during Parliament meetings.

While not naming any one, Mr Chaudhry was obviously directing his comments at the National Federation Party and its leadership. Because the NFP has been actively and consistently highlighting issues of cost of living, deteriorating health and medical services and a minimum guaranteed price of \$100 per tonne of sugarcane.

Misleading

Nothing can be further from the truth.

Firstly, the FLP leader is wrong to state that the plight of cane farmers is not discussed in Parliament. Even a cursory glance at parliamentary Hansard will show anyone the importance being given by the NFP parliamentary caucus to the cane growers and sugar industry.

As recently as Wednesday 13th September, NFP Leader Professor Biman Prasad outlined what the party do if elected into Government. On sugar, he spoke about the implementation of the minimum guaranteed cane price. Construction of a new sugar mill in Ra and highlighted the constant refusal of the current government to resolve problems facing the entire industry in a bipartisan manner.

A motion moved in February sitting of Parliament by NFP Whip Prem Singh on the establishment of a bipartisan committee to look at sugar was defeated in Parliament because government rejected it.

A petition by Ra growers in March for Government to look at building a new mill in Rakiraki was not allowed to proceed to the parliamentary select committee on economic affairs because the Prime Minister flatly said "NO". This was well highlighted by the Fiji Times' headline "Kicked Out" on the front page of its March 24 edition.

A petition by growers throughout the cane belts in April for the implementation of the \$100 minimum guaranteed price was not allowed to be tabled in Parliament. "Thrown Out" screamed Fiji Times' headline of April 29.

Therefore, the NFP has meticulously highlighted grievances facing growers and impacting their livelihood. The FLP leader for all intents and purposes, is deliberately misleading growers.

Suppression of freedom

Mahendra Chaudbry should be the last person to talk about freedom of cane growers and the ordinary citizens when he himself is guilty of suppressing freedom by being a central player in the military regime's interim Cabinet from January 2007 to August 2008.

He is guilty of either directly or having helped sow the seeds of suppression in the form of a restricted media and the dissolution of the Sugar Cane Growers Council (SCGC).

The democratisation of the SCGC and the need to have an absolutely free and fair media have, are and will be repeatedly highlighted by the NFP.

But what did Mr Chaudhry, who now laments lack of freedom, do as the regime's senior Cabinet Minister? He: -

- (a) Took control of the SCGC in January 2007 after the sacking of the then CEO Jaganath Sami through Decree Number 1 of 2007
- (b) As regime's sugar minister directed the Fiji Sugar Corporation to deduct \$6.56 million to be lent by Sugar Cane Growers Fund (SCGF) to South Pacific Fertilizers Ltd (SPFL) and for it to be deducted from industry proceeds. This meant that growers without their knowledge were forced into paying \$4.96 million (as 70 % share of proceeds)
- (c) Said reforms first elections later and that democracy was flawed (FLP Annual Report – 2008)

- (d) Accused the media of bias and partiality (FLP Annual Report – 2008)
- (e)
- (f) Supported a Fiji Human Rights Commission Report into the local media industry, urging for the Regime's intervention to hold the media to account (FLP Annual Report – 2008) (This resulted in the Media Industry Development Decree in 2010)
- (g) Condoned the deportation of expatriate publishers of the Fiji Sun and Fiji Times – Russell Hunter and Evan Hannah in 2008, basically endorsing the regime's claim they were a threat to national security(FLP Annual Report – 2008) (Ironically the deportations came soon after both newspapers highlighted the FLP Leader's AUD\$2 million he kept in Australia)
- (h) Recommended to Cabinet in June 2008 to defer the elections of the Sugar Cane Growers Council to 2010 because elections would be an impediment to reforms being undertaken by the Regime (FLP Annual Report – 2008 & media reports) (This resulted in the dissolution of the SCGC in 2009 as well the reforms started under him has led to Bills 19 and 20 – Reform of the Sugar Cane Industry and Growers Fund Bills that subjugate growers under FSC and Government)

No Principles

There are countless other examples of Mr Chaudhry condoning or being part of a regime suppressing fundamental freedoms during his 18-month stint in the regime's Cabinet.

For him to now talk about freedom, and point at others cannot go unchallenged.

Mr Chaudhry's shirking of his principles and participating in a government born out of a military coup is best stated by an

Editorial in the New Zealand Herald newspaper of 13th January 2007 and there is no need to say anything more. The Editorial titled "Chaudhry's act muddies road back to democracy said: -

"There is little more melancholy than the sight of a person's last shreds of credibility being burned. Such was the case when this week Fiji's former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry threw in his lot with Commodore Frank Bainimarama, taking the post of Finance Minister in the military leader's sham government. Here was a man who twice before had been deposed from government in coups lending his hand to the orchestrator of a reprise".

"If politics sometimes creates strange bedfellows, this was totally beyond the pale. Mr Chaudhry has tendered just one justification for his decision. 'The constitutionality or otherwise of the Government that I pledged to serve is yet to be determined', he said. It was a crass excuse given the international condemnation of the coup. The defection from the cause of democracy of the leader of Fiji's second-ranking political party and its first ethnic Indian leader muddies the road back to normality. Mr Chaudhry seemed to know better in the immediate aftermath of the coup".

Then, he said he would not join the military regime because it was illegal, but was willing to work with it to restore democracy. He should not have deviated from that. His many qualms about the ousted Qarase Government's divisive policies and governance shortcomings, and the election framework, could all have been addressed within Fiji's democratic processes. Perhaps there should have been no surprise, however".

"This was the same man who after the 2001 elections, craved power so much that he contemplated a coalition government with the party of George Speight, the man who overthrew his democratically elected Administration and held him hostage for eight weeks. Then, as now, saw no credibility problem".

"Now, as then, his political judgment is horrendous. The moral authority with a figure brutally and illegally ousted from power has evaporated".

- Kamal Iyer is a former journalist and an employee of the National Federation Party. The views here are his own and not of this newspaper.