



PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY – SUNDAY 15TH OCTOBER 2017

11:00 – 13:00 pm – Start of the General Debate on Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue

Honourable Chairperson, Excellencies, Honourable Speakers of Parliament, Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The topic under discussion aligns well with a December, 2016 resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, of which Fiji is a member and I quote *“Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace”*.

The Fijian Parliament recognizes that cultural pluralism and peace are important conduits for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

We are adamant that as a Parliament we will continue to encourage legal, regulatory and policy frameworks that are inclusive and ensure the citizens of our nation regardless of ethnicity, culture and religion are fully covered

under the Bill of Rights of our Constitution and have equal access to the basic needs of life.

Our multi-cultural and multi-religious nation is made up of the indigenous Fijians 56.8% and Fijians of Indian origins 37.5% and the rest 5.2% is made up of other ethnic groups (Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Part Europeans, etc). Since 2013, we have had to adjust ourselves through a new Constitution that recognizes our ethnic diversity.

Fiji's Constitution removes obstacles to the inclusive society that we strive to achieve. One particular provision that stands out as an example, is that of the teaching of the major vernacular languages, the Indeginous and Hindi as compulsory subjects in all primary schools. Ethnic-dialogue therefore begins very early for Fijians, as language creates bridges between the two major cultural groups. This is the beginning to have far reaching impacts now and in the future direction of our multi-cultural and multi-religious nation.

Given our past political instabilities, we are determined with very strong commitment in the parliamentary process to remove the root causes of the instabilities. Moreover, the one man, one vote principle under the current Constitution brought to an end, voting under ethnic lines and that all Fiji citizens are known as Fijians. With respect to our cultures, our contemporary traditional dances see the fusion of our cultures with respect to costume and actions. The fusion is also evident in the designs of our informal dress and it is always impressive to see all races wearing the same colors and designs during national celebration events.

However Fiji recognizes that we must retain inherent traditions and cultural diversity that identify our ethnicity and these are strongly protected and sustained.

Our nation acknowledges the significance of religion and the important role it plays in sustainable development and indeed sustainable peace.

An important body that contributed to freedom, faith and conscience thinking in our 2013 Constitution is a group called *“Interfaith Search Fiji”*. The 16 member organization of various religious groups through its dialogue continues to build bridges of respect and understanding of their belief and meet to discuss and use their own scriptures to explain their understanding of given themes.

A religious inter-faith summit was held in 2016 to explore ways, various religious actors and communities can work together to enhance positive engagements in order that Fiji achieves the Sustainable Development Goals. There is a general sense of tolerance and awareness that all are working towards the greater good of our nation.

The role of civil societies and donor agencies is also acknowledged in our strive towards cultural pluralism and peace efforts in Fiji. Inter-ethnic dialogue has featured significantly in the *Dialogue Fiji Initiative*. Through this organization, people from across Fiji’s ethnic, social and political

divides, mostly leaders, come together to discuss national development issues and challenges in organized national dialogue events.

While there are processes and mechanisms being used to close gaps in our cultural differences, one that I would like to focus on and is common in our nation and indeed in the Pacific is the process of "*Talanoa*". This is the same process that our Hon. Prime Minister as Chairperson of the COP23 in Bonn, Germany, has indicated recently will be used by Fiji as a tool for dialogue at this world event.

The **Talanoa** process is an inclusive environment of transparent dialogue and is about having informal discussions to share experiences that lead to decision-making. It is indeed a process which our forefathers have used in settling disputes through understanding other alternative points of view. So the *Talanoa* is an effective tool used by our traditional leaders, the Executive, Members of Parliament and community leaders when engaging with the members of the public on cultural sensitivities and issues of peace.

Because Fiji stands on the constitutional foundation of an inclusive society, our Parliament will continue to complement the work of existing institutions of democracy, in efforts to encourage dialogue, respect, and build capacities for co-operation towards harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Ladies and Gentlemen I thank you for listening.
