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आर्य प्रतिनिधि सभा, फीजी
ARYA PRATINIDHI SABHA OF FIJI
(EST. 1918)
(AN APPROVED CHARITY)

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE 2007 ARYA CONVENTION AND THE 90TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE ARYA PRATINIDHI SABHA OF FIJI, ON 24TH JUNE, 2007 AT DAV GIRLS COLLEGE, 1 KULA STREET, SAMABULA – PT. KAMLESH ARYA.

The Guest of Honour, the Interim Prime Minister of Fiji Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama and Mrs. Bainimarama, Ministers of the Interim Government, invited dignitaries, Your Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps, the Pro-Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of the University of Fiji, the Patron and members of the Executive, the President and members of Samabula Arya Samaj, the President and members of the Arya Mahila Mandal, the President and Members of Arya Yuva Dal, delegates from the various affiliated Samajs, Heads of Sabha institutions, Observers, Ladies and Gentlemen, a very warm welcome to you all and thank you for honouring the Sabha on this auspicious annual event held in the precincts of DAV Girls College.

The Sabha is delighted by your support and is humbled by your presence. The occasion is further enriched by the presence of the guest of honour, the Interim Prime Minister of Fiji.

Since the last Arya Convention in June 2006 much has happened in our beloved nation and within the Arya Samaj Movement in Fiji. I would be elaborating on some of the major events to put the Sabha's case forward.

Coup-de-tat of December 5th, 2006:

The Military takeover of December 5th came as no national surprise due to the build up of the constrained relationship and standoff between the military and the pre and post 2006 election SDL Government.

The much anticipated confrontation spilled over on December 5th by the military takeover of SDL/FLP Coalition Government and commandeering of executive authority by the military Commander, Commodore Voreqe Bainimara and later returning the executive powers to the President of Fiji Islands Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda.

The Sabha as an NGO responded responsibly before and after the coup urging the beleaguered political leaders, the executive authority and military to remain in dialogue for an amicable solution to the concerns affecting the parties and the nation. It has stood up to air concerns on the abuse of human rights whilst in the same breath has cautioned those taking extreme positions to heed the responsibilities attached to their deeds.

With the emergence of a new political order the Sabha has continued with its primary functions of propagating faith in the Almighty and education to ensure that its members and the general public were not disarrayed.

The Sabha however, is generally encouraged by the military's theme of 'Clean-up Campaign' for it addresses Sabha's deep perception of corruption in the public and political sectors. Whilst the military takeover is seen as extra constitution and undemocratic its focus on matters of ethics and good governance has been generally appealing and complementary to many social organizations including the Sabha, for the Sabha believes in conduct of love, righteousness, rule of law and justice for all.

The Sabha is hopeful that the Interim Government would be able to produce results that would bring corruption to an end, increase confidence and draw up a road map that would see Fiji in the midst of the global society respected for its values of inclusiveness and good governance. As a religious, social, cultural and educational organization the Sabha has expressed its willingness to assist the Interim Government take the country forward so that together we can reestablish governance based on democratic and non-discriminatory principles.

Peoples Charter for Change & Progress:

In times of difficulties the prudent way to move forward is by harnessing the support of the people. In this regard the Sabha welcomes the Interim Government's proposal of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji and the Peoples Charter for Change and Progress.

As stated earlier, Mr. Prime Minister, the Sabha is willing to support the call of the Interim Government to address national issues and redress public concerns through the 40 member National Council for Building a Better Fiji and I thank the Interim Government for its invitation to the Sabha in this respect.

The Sabha strongly believes that the Peoples Charter for Change and Progress would be the working mechanism to help steer Fiji from its current political impasse. The Sabha also strongly believes that the Interim Government without default will ensure that the 1997 Constitution remains the supreme law of the land. Then only the Interim Government would be able to uphold the mandate given by His Excellency the President that expressly requires upholding and adhering to the Constitution.

Adherence to the Constitution and the rule of law by the Interim Government would make participation of the people in the National Council for Building a Better Fiji and the Peoples Charter for Change and Progress have meaning and purpose and become a credible tool for change and progress, for unity and a shared vision of a corruption free and non discriminatory governance.

The Sabha trusts Mr. Prime Minister that in all its' doings, the Interim Government's repeated assurance to adhere to the Constitution will not be reduced to mere rhetoric particularly when repeated violation of basic human rights is the primary focus of all concerned including NGO's such as the Sabha.

Return to Parliamentary Governance:

Conceding what happened on 5th of December 2006 has happened and further accepting what has transpired since, the Sabha hopes that the Interim Government would be able to follow the road map it has charted to return Fiji to Parliamentary governance. The Interim Government's recent statement that the elections could be held as early as March 2009 is laudable. Sabha earnestly hopes that the Interim Government would remain committed to its stated road map.

It would not be imprudent to state Mr. Prime Minister Sir, that the Interim Government seriously explores the means of founding a government of national unity. The Sabha had made this call in its submissions to the Constitutional Review process as well as to the fact finding missions to the coup of 2000 and knows that there is a possibility if we all subscribe to non-partisan social and political values.

This definitely would require removal of entrenched party politics that has been ethically so divisive this far that it has created serious problem within and in between our diverse communities. It is a challenge that the Interim Government ought to consider if Fiji is to rid itself of racial overtones and divisive political grandstanding. Foundation of such a government in Sabha's view would bring to the fore a common agenda that would be in the total interest of the nation and its people. The government of national unity would encourage people to look at issues at national level rather than at the levels of ethnicity, religious affiliations and narrow political manifestos.

The Sabha trusts that as we move forward as a nation in search of lasting peace and harmony through new initiatives such as the National Council for Building a Better Fiji and the Peoples Charter for Change and Progress that we all could seriously contemplate on the issue of a government of national unity as a means.

Fiji would be able to show the world that we mean business by subscribing to and upholding the principles of Truth, irrevocable and inexorable rule of law, service to humanity, self discipline and faith in God.

Education:

The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, ladies and gentlemen has, as usual continued its effort towards educating the nation. Political instabilities since 1987 have not affected the Sabha's focus on educating the nation and the Sabha continues to complement the Ministry of Education in the field of education from early childhood to university level establishing and financing The University of Fiji in 2005.

Educational Partnership:

The Sabha holds the educational partnership with the Ministry of Education as an important element of reciprocal success. The Sabha strongly believes that partnership demonstrates equality of status. In this case the Ministry of Education is the provider of Education whilst NGO's facilitate the provision through developing and maintaining infrastructure.

Whilst there seems to be partnership equilibrium certain moves of the Ministry of Education has demonstrated a rather heavy handed application of decisions in the absence of any sound discussions with school management. Examples of such actions are the application of the ceiling provision of the 1993 Job Evaluation Exercise in the primary schools and the withdrawal of the grants for the ancillary staff such as school bursars, chaplains and clerks in the secondary schools under the pretext of the Partnership Agreement between the previous SDL Government and the Public Sector Unions. In both these industrial outcomes, the school managements had no input directly or indirectly.

There is also a strong official vibe that the Ministry has begun disregarding the requirement of a promotee to school headship to have the ability to contribute to the cultural and social aspects of the school. The Sabha regards this as a serious departure from the norm and accepted convention that Management schools have their own character and fundamental values that the government of the day needs to recognize and appreciate. Another instruction that has come recently is that the schools are not to operate under the constitution of the founding institution. Each school management in Fiji has setup schools from its own vision and mission statements and values and the Sabha views this instruction of the Ministry as unreasonable and unacceptable.

The Sabha would be engaging in dialogue with the Ministry on those matters after the Convention but states categorically that it will defend its historical position of ownership and school management.

However, Ladies and gentlemen, the Sabha and the Ministry of Education have a very cordial working relationship on a host of other educational issues and the Sabha expresses its appreciation to the past and the present Ministers for Education, the Permanent Secretaries and their staff.

The University of Fiji:

The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and The University of Fiji on 21 December 2006 has paved the way for grant of Multi Ethnic Affairs, the FAB and the PSC Scholarships to the Students of The University of Fiji. The Ministry of Multi Ethnic Affairs has begun granting 10 scholarships since 2006.

Apart from the mainstream academic subjects the University also has six Centres of excellence, namely – Centre for International and Regional Affairs, Gandhi-Tappoo Centre for Writing, Ethics and Peace Studies, Centre for Indigenous Studies, Centre for Diasporic Studies, Centre for Gender Research and the Centre for Environment, Energy and Sustainable Development. The Sabha is confident that The University of Fiji would be able to meet the very needs of Fiji as a nation and contribute to the wider cross sectional development.

The University of Fiji is in its third year of operation and would be graduating its first lot of students in December 2007. Headed by Professor Rajesh Chandra, the staffing at the university is second to none.

The University is now in the process of reconstituting its new Council since the three year term of the Interim Council expires this year. The Sabha appeals to the representative organizations on new Council to commit financially to the future development of the University to bring collective enhancement.

UniFiji Suva Campus:

The Sabha has further strengthened the Council as part of its commitment by refurbishing part of the DAV Girls College to establish The University of Fiji's Suva Campus and it is a proud moment for me to state that the Council has with confidence appointed Justice Devendra Pathik 'Arya Ratna' as the honorary Director of UniFiji's Suva Campus. He is charged with the Affairs of the Suva Campus and the establishment of the School of Law and with his decades of experience in the social and legal arenas there is little doubt about the success of the centre and the school of law. The Sabha congratulates Justice Pathik on his appointment as the honorary Director of Suva Campus. The Suva Campus is set to open in 2008.

Chancellorship – UniFiji

It is also a proud moment for the Sabha to note with deep gratitude the acceptance by His Excellency, the President of Fiji, Honourable Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda, of the Sabha's invitation to be the first Chancellor of the University of Fiji.

From the outset the Sabha strongly believed that the Turaga Na Tui Vuda in his traditional capacity as Head of Vanua Veseisei and President of Fiji is the most appropriate person for the position of the Chancellor of the University and a uniting factor for the diverse Fiji society. The Sabha and the Council look forward to wise counsel of the President towards the affairs of the University.

The University established for the people of Fiji is a testimony to the unifying efforts of the Sabha that has brought greater inclusiveness in the governance of the University and the Sabha is confident that the nation would rally behind Fiji's very own institution of higher education as we collectively search for new social and political directions in the days ahead.

Public Response to The University of Fiji

Since inception The University of Fiji has received very encouraging support from the general public, individual donors and the corporate sector. It would be negligent of me not to mention these donors ladies and gentlemen and they are – Rajendra- Sahay Trust, Padam Raj Lala, Gayatri Lala and Lotus Garments, Tappoos Group of Companies and Asha Bhai Limited. Promises from other business concerns are on board. The Single most prominent donor to the University is Labasa born Dr. Umanand Prasad who has committed \$1,000,000 towards the Medical School. The Sabha is deeply grateful to their generosity.

The Sabha is further encouraged by your government's assurance of financial assistance from 2008 Mr. Prime Minister and the Sabha expresses its gratitude to you and your Ministers for this positive assurance.

School Management Board:

The Sabha welcomes the move of the Ministry of Education to set up Divisional level School Management Board as a dialogue forum to complement the work of the National Education Forum. The proposition brings the school managements and the Ministry of Education closer as dialogue partners. On invitation the Sabha has nominated the Manageress of DAV Girls College Mrs. Sushila Pathik to the School Management Board Central and Manager of Pt. Vishnu Deo Memorial College Mr. Shanti Saroj to the School Management Board Western.

They both carry with them huge educational experiences and the Sabha is confident that they both would be useful units for this new setup.

Arya Baal Ashram:

The Arya Baal Ashram was established in 2006 at a cost of \$130,000 and at the close of the year had 12 boys under its care. The number in 2007 has increased to 16 of which 9 are at Arya Samaj Primary School and 7 at DAV Girls College.

At the dedication ceremony last year the Minister for Women, Social Welfare and Housing had announced the payment of the care and protection allowance at the rate of \$60 per month per child. The Interim Minister for Women, Social Welfare and Housing had on her visit given positive indication the allowance was payable. The Management Committee of the Ashram has made all necessary presentations and yet the payment has not been effected. The Sabha hopes that the Ministry would be able to finalize the payments in due cause.

The Sabha however, thanks the Ministry for the payment of the NGO grant and also thanks the general public for its continued support to this social venture. The boys are at the convention and could be met during refreshment break.

APS Scholarships:

As part of its contribution towards assisting the poor financially the Sabha started a scholarship scheme in 1996 and began distributing scholarships (one each at Form 6 and 7 levels) from 1998. Since 2005 the Sabha has extended this provision to 10 students of The University of Fiji. The 2007 scholarships would cost the Sabha \$30,500.00.

Development Projects:

In 2006 there were fifteen projects undertaken by the Sabha simultaneously costing \$1.9 million dollars. Major projects were:

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| 1. University of Fiji second phase development | - | \$405,000 |
| 2. Excavation Works/Tiri reclamation | - | \$300,000 |
| 3. UniFiji Suva Campus | - | \$100,000 |
| 4. DAV College, Nabua (Ablution/Admin Block) | - | \$080,000 |
| 5. Dr. Ram Lakhan Primary School Kindergarten | - | \$030,000 |

Appreciation of the Sabha is expressed to the Bankers – Westpac and Bank of Baroda for financing the projects.

Projects in the pipeline are:

1. Additional classroom at J. N. Jokhan Memorial School, Navua
2. New staff quarters at Nadroga Arya College with \$19,000 building grant from Ministry of Education.
3. Multipurpose hall at Bhawani Dayal Arya College
4. Relocation of Commercial School in Nadi.

Convention Theme:

To maintain the positive and balanced focus the Sabha chose the theme – Striving for a Better Fiji. It demonstrates Sabha's and its members' faith and confidence in Fiji and reflects the hope that collectively Fiji can move Fiji. It also induces national pride and commitment to finding a solution to the ills affecting our beloved nation. The Sabha is confident of its commitment to nation building and is certain that other civil societies and religious bodies would do the same.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Sabha expresses its deep appreciation to the Interim Prime for accepting our invitation and being the guest of honour. Thanks are also expressed to Mrs. Bainimarama for accompanying the Prime Minister to the function. The Sabha also expresses its appreciation to you all guests and members of the public and private sector for your presence and continued support to its social work. **Thank you ladies and gentlemen.**