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Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources

**RADIO TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW BETWEEN PRIME MINISTER &
RADIO TARANA JOURNALIST SANJESH NARAIN**

Fri 26th July, 2013

- 1. *Recently you have attended a number of International meets, do you get any feedback from leaders attending the meet and what do they say, are they happy with the way Fiji is progressing?***

Yes, Sanjesh, I've just come back from a South-South meeting in Hong Kong, before that I was in the Solomons, in Russia, China, New Caledonia, PNG and I can tell you that on every single one of those visits, the feedback was very encouraging. I always explain where we are going, the election in September 2014, the more than half a million people who have registered, the Constitution that we're finalising, the reforms we are making to create an equal and fairer society. Next year, Fiji is going to get the first genuine democracy in the country's history of one person, one vote, one value and no legal enforcement of ethnic voting.

I find that most people I meet are impressed by that. So we will keep telling our story and it's a good story to tell. We are building a new democracy, a better democracy, a country where everyone has the same chance to get on, and eventually that will sink in.

- 2. *On your official trip to Russia, the Russian Foreign Minister has called on the International community to let Fiji choose it's own path, was the Russian president supportive of the path Fiji has chosen?***

I met both the Russian Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister and yes, they've been very supportive. You have to appreciate that the international community has been having trouble getting countries to send UN peacekeepers to the Golan Heights. Some of these countries have pulled out, Fiji has gone in. And that's appreciated by the Russians and everyone else.

It's no secret that they're a big player in the Middle East and they've offered to help us. That's great. Because we've gone in there to do a job that a lot of other people don't want and that is to keep the peace. As I've said to my troops, this is a noble cause. There's nothing more honourable than keeping ordinary people safe in a troubled place. We've been doing it for the past three decades and we're going to keep doing it because it's our contribution to the world.

Fiji punches above its weight and we're proud of that. The Russians and everyone else can see it and, of course, they're supportive. The Russian Foreign Minister came to Fiji last year and he can see what we're trying to do, that we ARE taking a new path. So, of course we should be allowed to choose that path. It's a better path.

3. While speaking at the Solomon Islands Independence day celebrations you said Fiji also faced many challenges such as corruption, discrimination etc are you satisfied with what you and your Govt. have achieved so far in terms of getting rid of corruption and bringing about Unity in the country?

Look, I'm not going to pretend we've got corruption beaten. You have to keep beating it, keep rooting it out. I'm a bit concerned actually that we're seeing corruption rearing its head again. We're getting stories of payoffs and bribes and nepotism – people giving business or jobs to their relatives. And believe me, we're onto it. I've got zero tolerance for corruption because it eats away at the fabric of the nation. The important thing is that for the first time in the history of Fiji, we set up formal structures to deal with corruption. We've got FICAC – the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption – and anybody can lodge a complaint with FICAC and we encourage them to do so. So this fight never ends, just as it never ends in New Zealand or Australia. It's a fight against human nature.

With unity and discrimination, it's a different story Sanjesh; we have ended formal discrimination in Fiji, the laws that discriminated against certain people because of race or because they are women. That's gone. But that doesn't always mean that attitudes have changed. And I think that wiping out discrimination might take a generation or two because it means changing people's attitudes.

We're doing it in the schools. We've abolished race-based schools. And I tell you, there's nothing more pleasing for me than to go to these schools and see kids of all races playing happily together. That's the new Fiji. And that's what is also building unity. One Nation, one Fiji. Our people working together as one. It's happening more and more and it's wonderful to see.

4. *Are you concerned with the conditions put forward by Australia and NZ before giving assistance for 2014 elections, do you think assistance should be apolitical?*

Look, I'm not interested in conditions, in being told how to run our elections. They will be free, they will be fair, but we will decide how they will be run. In fact, we've set our own conditions. If you want to help us run a successful election, that assistance must be apolitical. In other words, not biased in favour of anyone, me included.

We've actually had a team here that includes someone from the New Zealand Electoral Office, the Commonwealth and the European Union working with the Minister Responsible for Elections to assess our needs. And we're about to place ads in Fiji and overseas for a Supervisor of Elections. The Elections Commission will be completely independent. In fact, I'm happy to see a distinguished expert from overseas come in. It might help convince the doubters that we're serious. Whoever wins this is going to win this fair and square. And this has always been my attitude.

5. *The Needs assessment team has started assessing what the country needs to conduct successful 2014 elections, despite all this some leaders are still saying there is doubt elections will happen, Chaudhry said in an interview that Govt. might not conduct elections until 2020 and NZ first party leader Winston Peters while launching Late Michael Greens book said he doesn't think elections will be free and fair, what is your take on this?*

Sanjesh, my take on this is that it doesn't matter what these critics say. It's the same old bleat from the same tired old faces. I repeat. We are going to deliver a free and fair election in Fiji by September 2014. It will be the first genuinely democratic election in the country's history. We have cut out the cancer of discrimination that has always held us back. We are building a new Fiji, a better Fiji, for everyone. I've promised that and I will deliver.

6. *You're still refusing to accept an Australian High Commissioner. What's your relationship with Australia right now.*

Sanjesh, let's just get this straight. We have no problem with the Australian people. We love them. Always have, always will. They come here in their hundreds of thousands and we've got tens of thousands of Fijians in Australia. But we've got a big problem with the Australian Government because they don't treat us with consideration and respect. And I can assure you it's the same with all the Melanesian countries. On the surface, things might seem fine but we think – quite honestly – that Australia always puts its interests first and tries to tell us ALL what to do.

With Fiji, they're still trying to damage our interests because we didn't do what they ordered – to have an immediate election after 2006 that would have solved nothing. We wanted a real democracy, not the racially-weighted sham we had before. And we wanted to reform a system that was basically sending the country backwards and tackle the corruption that was destroying us. Far from being understanding and supportive, Australia chose to punish us.

They've tried to damage us at the United Nations, to get our peacekeepers sacked, they stopped us getting loans from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. Sorry, these are not the acts of a friend. So we went out into the world and got new friends and if the Aussies politicians don't like it, too bad.

I'm not going to accept an Australian High Commissioner in Fiji until the Australian Government stops trying to damage us. Now obviously, there will come a time when the relationship is properly restored and I guess that will be when we have the election next year. Great. But I can tell you that if I win the election, we can rebuild the relationship but it won't be the same relationship. It won't be Fiji kowtowing to Canberra. We want a genuine partnership with genuine friends – governments that treat us as equals and with respect. We might be small but our vote at the UN has the same weight as Australia's and anyone else who isn't one of the five permanent members of the Security Council.

So I'm always hoping for a good relationship with Australia but I really think that will only come when there's a change in the mindset of Australia's politicians. When they realise that the days of treating us like inferiors are over. And I think the asylum seeker crisis is a good example of Canberra's overbearing attitude.

7. *What do you think about Australia's deal with PNG to take the asylum seekers arriving by boat and resettle them in PNG?*

Not much, I can tell you. Think about it. This is an Aussie problem that shouldn't have a Melanesian solution. The Labor Government in Australia abolished John Howard's tough line against arrivals that kept the people smugglers out of business. Blind Freddy could see what was going to happen.

45,000 asylum seekers have made it to Australia because Labor opened the floodgates. For me, the worst part about it has been watching hundreds of people die at sea because the people smugglers put them on boats that were unseaworthy. They are evil but the Australian Labor Government created the market in the first place. Now, it's a political problem for Labor because they're about to go to an election. What do they do? They say, "oh let's dump these people in Melanesia. Doesn't matter that these people don't know anything about Melanesia. Let's just send them there to save our political skins".

I'm not going to criticise my Melanesian brothers in Papua New Guinea for doing this deal. That's up to them. But as someone who has chaired the Melanesian Spearhead Group, I think a lot of Melanesians are pretty uncomfortable about what's happened. And they're more uncomfortable when they realise that Canberra seems to be also trying to do a deal with Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to take more of these people.

Now my understanding is that when these people arrive in PNG, those that are found to be genuine refugees are going to be allowed to stay. Excuse me, how many of them are there going to be? Why isn't Australia resettling these people. Why are you dumping them in other countries?

Look, we're desperately sorry for them. It's a terrible human tragedy. But it's Australia's problem, not ours. Labor and Kevin Rudd in particular created the problem in the first place and now they go around dumping their problem on everyone else to get themselves voted back in. I'm not impressed and neither are a lot of other people in the region.

8. *Is there any date set for the announcement of the new Constitution?*

Sanjesh, the document is ready and we're getting it translated into iTaukei and Fiji Hindi. That's happening as we speak. Then we'll get it printed and we're aiming to have the Constitution come into affect by the end of August.

9. *The Pacific Islands Development Forum meet will take place in Fiji, is this organisation getting good support from the Pacific nations?*

Yes, very much so. We've got 23 Pacific countries coming to Nadi between the 5th and 7th of August, as well as 10 other countries with observer status. So fantastic support and we're very much looking forward to it. As you know, this is a new initiative by Fiji to bolster relationships between the island countries and allow us to try to work out our problems without external interference.

Fiji's problem with the Pacific Forum is that it's dominated by Australia and New Zealand and they largely set the agenda. They've got a couple of Polynesian countries in their back pockets and managed to get Fiji suspended. Fine. We're not interested in coming back. We want a new regional structure without the Aussies and Kiwis that more reflects the concerns of Pacific Island nations. So this new body allows us to try to find solutions to our own problems, not solutions prescribed by our larger neighbours. And we're convinced it will be a success.

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