



HE PRESIDENT JIOJI KONROTE'S ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE 2019-2020 SESSION OF PARLIAMENT

**Mister Speaker;
The Honourable Acting Chief Justice and Honourable
Members of the Judiciary;
The Honourable Prime Minister;
Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant
Ministers;
The Honourable Leader of the Opposition;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Your Excellencies, High Commissioners,
Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula Vinaka, Namaste, Asalaam Alaykum, Noaia 'e Mauri,
and a very good morning to you all.

1. We are gathered together this morning, one year through
this term of my government, to open the 2019-2020
Session of Parliament.

2. Wherever and however Fijians are joining us this morning; on television, streaming live on the Parliament website, Facebook or the Walesi app, or listening over radio, I'd like to welcome you and thank you for your civic interest in these proceedings.

3. Only six short years since the launch of our 2013 Constitution, we are undoubtedly still living some of the most consequential chapters of our history. As the journeys of many of the world's great democracies and economically powerful nations have taught us: The quality of our leadership in these formative years will be defining for our political system.

4. I can recall the patriotic euphoria that gripped our nation following the successful conduct of our 2014 General Election. I have watched with growing pride as that excitement has produced higher public expectations for the rights we enjoy, the opportunities at our disposal, the

impact of our voices – at home and overseas – and the conduct of our elected leaders.

5. Nowhere was Fiji's surging civic awareness displayed more passionately – or more creatively – than through the wonderful submissions we received during the “Hashtag Our Constitution Challenge” this past September. To every Fijian who took part: Thank you for making the challenge such an enormous success by sharing what you love about our Fijian Constitution.

6. Thank you to six-year-old Shaveen Kumar who – all while proudly thumping on his chest — told us he loves our Constitution because it has empowered him to unabashedly call himself Fijian.

7. Thank you to the Nokilevu sisters, Siteri and Kelera from Rewa, who spoke to us about how the right of information enhances civic engagement and lends transparency to our democracy.

8. Thank you to Josua from Moala for sharing how our constitutional right to health – and the regular visits of health officers to his island – has dramatically changed life in his community for the better. Rather than selling coconuts to cover the boat fares to visit a hospital, his community can count on healthcare officers to deliver life-saving services directly where they reside.

9. Thank you to Joselyn Mani from Labasa for telling us about the value she sees in equal protection, treatment and benefit under the law, regardless of socioeconomic status, regardless of ethnicity or religion, all in the interest of building an inclusive Fijian society. And of course, a big Vinaka vakalevu to Nix Cagilaba and his scuba team for bringing us their Constitution Day message from the shark-infested waters of Beqa!

10. What was clear from these – and hundreds of other testimonies – is that democratic ideals are taking hold as societal norms in the hearts and minds of our people. Respect and understanding of the role and independence

of our institutions are growing in strength. And high civic values are fast-becoming the new benchmark of dutiful Fijian citizenship. I am proudest to see that wave of change be driven most powerfully by the young people of this country.

11. As I speak to you now, students are learning in Fijian schools who have only ever known a secure, stable and truly democratic country along with a vast array of constitutional rights and protections. In their eyes, their fellow students are nothing less than their fellow Fijians with whom they share a nation and a destiny. And in their minds, their dreams run unchecked by fears of an uncertain future or by politically-motivated prescriptions on their opportunities.

12. In past decades, there were entire generations of Fijian children who were denied the priceless assurance of security, who were constantly told they were different from one another, and who never knew the optimism that equal opportunity engenders.

13. Some were made to feel like strangers in their own country, victims of discriminatory notions of national identity. Others were robbed of education and economic prospects by an unjust system that constrained success to those with wealth, privilege and status.
14. How could anyone – especially young Fijians – think seriously about the future when living through the communally-charged upheavals of our past? What hope could be found in the divisive and despondent political rhetoric that characterised those periods? And what opportunities could be salvaged from the chaos of that mad scramble for power and for what little prosperity existed?
15. We have freed the minds of the newest Fijian generation from the weight of those concerns by bestowing upon them an equal and inclusive society; one increasingly brimming with new opportunities.

16. We have forged a national identity by establishing our common equal citizenship; We have made education free; We are, on a daily basis, creating transparency across the business of government; We are rewarding merit across our society; We are shielding and empowering those who are vulnerable; We are dismantling a culture of violence against women and girls; We have ratified all nine of the core human rights conventions; We are assuming world leadership to confront unprecedented global challenges; and we are investing historic sums to expand the services and infrastructure that lead our people to higher standards of living.

17. But in acknowledging these successes, we must turn our focus to the mountain of progress left to ascend. We are still a developing nation. We still face great challenges of geography, the worsening fury of a changing climate and the uncertainty of changing markets. And there are still elements within our society which seek to sow politics of fear rather than preach the

proven power of unity. And who choose to undermine our prosperity rather than support Fiji's long-term economic growth and sustainability.

18. In this chamber, you will deliver the solutions to those great challenges. You are not here to guard your political fortunes, or make theatre out of political discourse. You are each here to serve as guardians of every Fijian's wellbeing.

19. No matter which side the chamber you sit, you must keep the following questions on your minds: are you speaking in the national interest, or are you speaking in the interest of self or party? Are you advocating to advance our people's collective good or for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many? And are you speaking the truth or are you bending the truth to serve a political end?

20. There is no doubt that scrutinising government is an important function of this parliament. But let me remind you: The business of this chamber is not only relegated

to question time. As parliamentarians, you must also serve as conduits to community engagement. And it is through the work of the various committees that engagement takes form.

21. By stepping up the work of the committees, we can lend far greater efficiency and inclusivity to the law-making process. As it is through our committees that we bring the ideas and opinions of the public to bear in crafting and delivering legislation that achieves the greatest national good.

22. But, in my opinion, our committees run as if we're still living in the 20th Century. In our present era of rapidly evolving technology, it is your duty as committee members to not only bring energy and commitment to your committee roles, but to consider new ways to conduct your affairs that drives greater parliamentary efficiency as well as new tools to enhance public engagement. For example, have any committee members considered making digital platforms available

to take online submissions from members of the public?
I certainly hope someone spearheads such an effort soon.

23. Mister Speaker, the Honourable Chief Justice, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

24. So much of Fiji's progress over the past decade is owed to our ten-year unbroken streak of economic growth. That steady increase in the value of our Gross Domestic Product is represented by more than numbers on spreadsheets in the offices of financial institutions; it is represented by the improvements we've delivered in Fijian lives.

25. Our growing economy has given Fijian businesses the chance to expand and diversify, earn and invest profits, create and sustain higher-paying jobs and reward greater

specialisation across various professions. And it has enabled my government to fund life-changing development across the country.

26. We are drilling boreholes that provide clean water, street lights to illuminate our roadways, underground power lines that electrify communities, and we are building back stronger school facilities that house our students and teachers. And we have taken on the hard lessons of cyclones Winston, Keni, Josie and Gita by building resilience across that network of national infrastructure.

27. We are building roads and expanding telecommunications into rural and remote communities granting them access to markets, goods, and services, eliminating location as a barrier to participation in our growing economy.

28. We are serving our landowners with real opportunities to put their land to productive use and take up larger roles in our national development.
29. We are backing innovative, game-changing ideas from our entrepreneurs – particularly young Fijians – with seed capital to turn their ideas into engines of economic growth.
30. We're leveraging digital technology as an equalizer in society, wielding new technological tools to make services more affordable and efficient. We're blazing a path towards digital identification to make cashless transactions easier and open new opportunities for Fijian businesses. And the new bizFIJI portal has already brought unprecedented transparency to the processes of starting a business and obtaining a construction permit.
31. My government is showing the agility to step into new sectors, the vision to make long-term investments in our

competitiveness, and the discipline to remain true to prudent and proven economic fundamentals.

32. I urge the members of this chamber to respect what economic growth means for the families of this country by bringing a patriotic level of responsibility to conversations surrounding our economy. We need to deal only in reliable facts and in thoughtful, intellectual honesty, especially given the fog of uncertainty hanging over the global economy.

33. Last week, the international rating agency, Moody's, downgraded the outlook of the Indian economy – recently one of the world's fastest-growing – to “negative” due to expectations for slowing economic growth. The US trade war with China shows no signs of relenting. Brexit is no closer to a conclusion. And manufacturing is sputtering across Europe and the United States.

34. Our growth this year is muted, but still positive, and global financial institutions and our development partners

all hold promising projections for our economic expansion in the years ahead — and for good reason. Our economy, while relatively small, is also relatively isolated from the supply value chains of the global market. We can generate activity by looking inwards, by tapping new industries and opportunities in our own economy. The most recent reforms and incentives announced in our latest national budget are already spurring greater domestic investment. If we play our cards intelligently, there are opportunities to accelerate the pace of foreign direct investment as well.

35. But there is one threat to our economic prospects that could prove far more damaging than any global headwinds on the horizon: The politicisation of our economy. If we treat our economy like a political football and choose to play fast and loose with the truth, we can very well talk ourselves into panic and crumble economic confidence from within.

36. I assure you, the Fijian people – particularly our young people – will not look kindly on any who seek to undermine their economy, their jobs, their investments or their financial security. Whether you are an elected leader – on either side of this political divide -- a business owner, a member of civil society or our various professions, or a breadwinner in your household, it is on all of us to be focused, positive and prudent about our future. Never has our nation been better equipped to seize new opportunities, harness our ingenuity and propel our economy forward to new records of growth and new achievement. It can be done. It will be done, so long as we stay true to the proven management that has carried our economy to historic strength.

37. Mister Speaker, the Honourable Chief Justice, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

38. When we open next year's parliamentary session, Fiji will have welcomed a defining day in our history: The 50th Anniversary of our Independence.

39. Our plans for the tenth of October 2020 are already underway – and we'll have some very special announcements to make about how we plan to instil that occasion with its deserved significance. But given the great expectations every Fijian holds for that moment, it would be a shame to only limit our celebrations to a single day, week, or even a month. We must see every day of the year ahead as an opportunity to appreciate the first fifty years of our nation's journey; the crowning moments of achievement as well as the mistakes which do not bear repeating.

40. Our independent nation's 50th birthday will signal a new era of nationhood. If we look beyond our shores and throughout the course of history, we can see well-trodden pathways other nations have taken to greatness. The countries that have grown strongest are those whose

people have joined together in common cause and purpose. That is how strong economies are built, that is how deep prosperity is achieved and that is how great democracies have endured. And only by choosing to walk hand-in-hand down that same path, can Fiji and the Fijian people make our next fifty years the greatest years our nation has ever known.

41. The promise and potential of that next half-century should lend new weight to your contributions throughout this session. As we look to the Fiji of 2070, it is incumbent on each of you to give serious thought to the long-term challenges that will define Fijian wellbeing one, two or even three generations from now.

42. One year ago, I outlined my government's future-focussed legislative agenda. It aspires to deliver continuing prosperity for our people today and establish a robust, long-term foundation on which the coming generations can build.

43. We will continue forward with the reforms we promised.

We will pursue the passage of new bills, such as the Climate Change Act. This historic piece of legislation builds on Fiji's global climate leadership by building our resilience to climate impacts at home, preserving the health of our oceans and marine resources and reducing our own emissions and in line with what we're asking of the rest of the world. Yes, our own emissions may be negligible. But this legislation is bigger than Fiji alone, it is about setting the bar for other nations to meet in addressing the indisputable warming of our world. I'd like to personally congratulate our friends from the New Zealand government for the solidarity they've shown their Pacific Island neighbours through the recent passage of a climate change law as well as thank the many Fijians who have taken part in our national consultations on the Climate Change Act.

44. We will pursue the passage of a Cybercrime Bill to align our national legislation with the Budapest Convention – the first international treaty seeking to address internet

and computer crime. We will review the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998, Excise Act 1986, Customs Act, VAT Act, and Republic of Fiji Military Forces Act 1949 and our agricultural laws to ensure their effectiveness in a rapidly modernising world and avoid hiccups in service-delivery.

45. Mister Speaker, the Honourable Chief Justice, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

46. Before I formally open this new session of Parliament, I wanted to share one last contribution made during our Constitution Day celebrations that I feel speaks to the greatest purpose of our work in the coming year. A simple yet profound message from 5-year old Pamela, 6-year-old Jemima, and 7-year-old Seruwaia from the Turagaiviu family, which reads:

47. “Our favorite part of our Constitution is on the Rights of Children because we are protected, cared for and empowered to become good Fijian citizens”

48. Our children, our grandchildren, and their children who will come after them – those are the Fijians we are all ultimately meant to serve. Let us serve them well by building a future worthy of their greatest dreams and aspirations.

It is now my honour to declare the 2019-2020 Parliament session officially open.

May Almighty God Bless you all. May God Bless Fiji.

Vinaka Vakalevu, Sukria, Bahoot Dhanyavaad, Fai’aksea and Thank you.