

# CHAUDHRY'S LAST PUBLIC ADDRESS BEFORE HE WAS MADE HOSTAGE

Mahendra Chaudhry

*Two days before his government was taken over by George Speight and group, Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry spoke to about 500 people at a public meeting in Nasinu. That was probably his last public utterance before he was made hostage — shut behind parliament doors till now. What he said at the public meeting at Nasole Temple on Wednesday 17 May is very much today a concern for everyone — racial unity. He said the government's latest priority was to work out strategies to unite the nation. 'Fiji is the only home and hope of all people living here — we must have a common goal and hope,' he said. He also said that indigenous Fijians and Rotumans should know that their rights and interests take precedence over the rights and interests of other communities, should there be a conflict of interest between Fijians and other communities.*

**We are completing our first year in Parliament**, this coming Friday the 19th of May. Actually, I should have been here earlier than this evening to meet with you and share our views. But it is better late than never.

I have been trying to persuade my Members of Parliament in your constituency to convene meetings regularly, particularly when Parliament is sitting every second month and when we have other Members of Parliament from other parts of the country in Suva, so that we can go

around and meet with the people, in and around Suva, in Nasinu, Nausori, Lami, because there are all of us here for two or three weeks at a time every second month.

But for some reason it has not been possible before now to arrange such a meeting. Having taken the initiative now, I hope that your MPs here will try and hold meetings in different parts of their constituency at more regular intervals.

Tonight you will want to hear, as you have already heard from two of my Ministers and the Honourable Krishna Dutt, as to what the government has done since taking office some 12 months ago. As you know if you have read our manifesto, and this was widely distributed, you would have found that we have highlighted the problems we faced as a nation last year. We laid out this problem and then alongside that we said what we are going to do about these problems if we were elected.

And as a government we had told you that our top priority would be poverty alleviation: that we will work and give priority to those programs and we will allocate resources to those programs which will help the poor because they come first. And we have begun doing this. In fact we began doing this within the first and second month after assuming office.

We have said that we will bring down food prices on basic items by removing VAT and customs duty. We have done that. When we did that, there was a lot of hue and cry from the people. There were claims that the government was going to become bankrupt because they are giving away so much money by removing VAT and duty on these items. But this has not happened. Government revenue is very buoyant.

You would have read this morning's paper, the *Daily Post*, on the front page that the government is bringing 17 more basic consumer items under price control. And these are items that every family uses every day in their homes. And after a survey was done in 1998, it was the recommendation of those who conducted the survey, government officials, that these items should be brought under price control. But the previous government did not want to do it. We have done that and we hope that by putting these 17 items under price control there will be further reductions in living costs.

For the poor, the disabled and the disadvantaged with no income and no means of support, the government in its 2000 budget increased the family assistance allowance by \$1.5 million. So there is now \$6.5 million a year for what used to be called the Destitute Allowance. We call it Family Assistance Allowance. That is the second initiative we took.

We promised the poor that we would help you when we are elected. There are many people who are poor, who live in rural areas and in and around cities and towns. There is urban poverty also. We are very familiar with the living conditions of many people out in your area, in squatter settlements and elsewhere who live in those conditions because they cannot earn enough income and support their families and live a life of dignity. So we moved to do that.

The Minister of Works has already told you that we have already knocked down the charges for electricity and further reductions in these charges will take place soon. For those with incomes of \$6500 a year and less we have promised we will bring down the Housing Authority interest rates from 11.5 per cent to 6 per cent. We have done that. It couldn't be done overnight but we have done that within the year.

And for those of you who are earning more than \$6500 and are borrowers from the Housing Authority we will soon reduce the rate from 11.5 per cent progressively and it will come down. So that is another promise that we have fulfilled. We said to you that we will re-establish students loans scheme for children of poor families or those families with inadequate incomes who wanted to send their children to tertiary institutions like USP, FIT etc. but who could not do so because they do not have enough income to pay the fees or they couldn't get a scholarship. We said the government would provide the money under a scheme known as the Children's Loan Scheme. We have done that. From this year we have established a Children's Loan Scheme to assist children and poor families access a tertiary education and we have provided \$1 million this year. This may go up as resources permit. So that is another promise that we have fulfilled.

We said we would promote development in rural areas by allocating more money and resources for agriculture. My Minister for Agriculture has

already spoken about that. And there is a very good reason for doing that. Every country should produce enough food to feed the population. Food security is very important. We cannot rely on imported food. That is the wrong strategy.

We must produce as much food as we can within the country so that food is cheap and import only food that we cannot grow locally. And for that if we have to protect our farmers we should protect them. That is why we helped to revive Rewa Rice Ltd. Some people did not like that. But there were 1000 rice farmers in Vanua Levu. They have no other livelihood and if we hadn't revived the Rewa Rice company those 1000 families would have become destitute.

Some people who are importing rice into this country and who are making a lot of money out of that did not like that because they said they will not be able to make a lot of money if Rewa Rice company comes back into operation. They don't want to care about what those 1000 families will do, how their children and wives will live, what they will eat. But this government cares about them. We care for the people, that is why we did that. It cost the people \$4.5 million to start Rewa Rice again. But this is the government that puts people before money. That is why we did that.

Another reason for agriculture development is that land in this country is largely owned by our Fijian brothers and sisters. Now much of that land is lying idle and undeveloped, except in the sugarcane belt. A lot of other land is not put to productive use. The government's strategies are to see that by investing money in agriculture we will encourage our Fijian brothers and sisters to develop their land so that they can earn income from that development. They can become commercial farmers, land which they did not need, once they develop it they can lease it and earn an income from lease money.

And for that we have created additional resources and all those land owners who are willing to have their land developed can use this money to develop that. And this is one way of addressing Fijian poverty in the rural areas because they have a resource there which they can develop and earn incomes out of. This is another reason for pouring money into agriculture.

I can go on for the rest of the night telling you what government has done to help the poor, help revive economic development. Mr Krishna Dutt has told you that he has confirmed most of our promises inside the last 12 months. But much work needs to be done.

Our latest priority at this time is to unite our nation. That is very important. Because a nation that is divided, which is split, will not progress. No matter where you are. We have seen this even in the developed world where the inter-ethnic conflict and other unfortunate events have crippled much greater nations, much more advanced and richer than Fiji.

Fiji's only hope (and hope) for all her people is that we all come together as brothers and sisters, as citizens with common interest, with a common goal. Everybody's rights and interests, traditions, customs and cultures are protected under the Constitution. Let nobody fool you that your custom is under threat, your religion is under threat, that your land may be taken away from you, that you might lose your property. No.

Let me remind those people who are protesting today, that they were the very ones who put through the 1997 Constitution when they were in power. And under that very Constitution the rights and interests of all communities are firmly secure. Moreover, the rights and interests of our indigenous community — the Fijian and Rotumans take precedence over the rights and interests of other communities should there be a conflict of interest between the rights and interests of the Fijian community and those of other communities.

Now that having been done, we saw what happened to this country after the 1987 coups. We all suffered in the process, everybody, not a single one did not suffer. Maybe some didn't, those who created this mischief. But by and large, all of us suffered — Indians, Fijians, Chinese. We all suffered to some degree and the consequence of that: the country suffered because the economy plunged. Jobs were lost, our currency devalued, everything became very dear. Government did not have enough money to provide for good health services, education, to build and repair roads, to help the poor.

And it took us 12 long years to build back. We put through a new Constitution in 1997. It came into force in 1998. It is a Constitution which seeks to unite the people of the country, irrespective of race. It is a Constitution that provides for power sharing. Our government is made up of four political parties. It is not a Labour government. It is a People's Coalition government. We have the Labour Party, the Fijian Association Party, the Christian Democrat Alliance, and the Party of National Unity. And of course, we have the General Voters Party who joined us after the elections. We have one or two independents as well. Out of 71 members in Parliament, 58 sit on our side.

So it is a very representative government. No one can accuse it of being a government of one race. And we took special pains to reassure our Fijian brothers and sisters. As Prime Minister, I appointed 12 Fijians to my Cabinet and only six Indians. Because for the first time, the nation was to have a non-Fijian Prime Minister.

In such a situation, it was very important that I retain the trust and confidence of the Fijian people. I also invited that time the SVT party to join the government because they had a constitutional right. Under the Constitution, any party which wins 10 per cent or more of the seats is entitled to be represented in Cabinet. I did invite them to join the government. But they stipulated conditions which were very difficult for any reasonable government to accept. And by choice they decided to stay out of the government. Otherwise they would have been part of the government also.

Now we also have a major party, the National Federation Party. That party is not represented in Parliament any more. They had a coalition with the SVT party. And when they went into the election, they went on a platform also of multi-racialism. But after they lost the elections, SVT has changed. It is no longer espousing multi-racial principles. In fact, they have become very racial. One can see that in Parliament too, in debate and directions and all that. On account of that I am wondering whether the NFP remains part of that coalition. Because we have to be honest with ourselves.

We cannot play politics with the lives of innocent people. And we don't do that. We went to these elections, and ever since the formation of the Labour

Party, we had a dream, a vision about Fiji. We want to see a prosperous and united country. It has great people and great potential. It will all come together. Nobody will want to go to Australia and New Zealand. We can create those conditions right here in Fiji. But only if we can come together.

So that is the vision with which we have been working ever since 1985 when I entered politics for the first time. And that is the vision that has driven us and my colleagues. We have a vision for Fiji. We want to see a united and prosperous Fiji where there is love, there is sharing and caring for each other, and where the nation has enough resources to provide for every one.

After all what does the human being want. What do you want? Whether you be a Fijian, an Indian or Chinese, what do you want? What do you really want from life? What you want is to be happy. Everybody wants to be happy, and to be happy you must be able to satisfy your daily needs. If you have children you must be able to provide for them. You must have a place called home, a roof over your heads, you must have clothes to wear. You must have three meals a day. You must have a job which brings you the income from which you can provide for your children. You want the government to provide for education for your children and good health services and water and electricity.

If you have all of these you are a contented person. That is what one expects from life. If you are able to meet your daily needs, your family is happy, your children get a good education, they are able to get a good job. That is what everybody wants. And that is the responsibility of government. Then we provide these things for our people. (Clapping)

But we cannot do that unless we come together. Government can only do so much. What government can do depends on its ability, on the financial resources that it has at its disposal, but the economy does not just run on that. The economy runs on how productively we use the resources at our disposal. And if our economy is doing well then people will be doing well, too, so long as you help the government there which believes in fair distribution of wealth. This is the vision we have of Fiji. And we can do it if we can come together. There are issues that they are addressing in those marches. They are not the real issues affecting the Fijians. No. Their real issues are what I am saying.

We were ready to debate in Parliament, we are currently debating the Social Justice Bill, affirmative action. What the government can do to help the disadvantaged people in education, housing, land and all that the Constitution requires the Parliament to do. An act of legislation for affirmative action for the disadvantaged people in our community and actually the contribution from a number of members of the opposition was quite sickening.

They are pointing at the problems faced by Fijian people — Fijian poverty, education, in commerce etc. These are the problems of the Fijian people. I know that. We have known that for a long time and we have got programs and ideas on how to address those problems. But they make it sound as if these problems were created when we came to power. That is only 12 months ago.

And I said they are thinking as if for the last 30 years since independence, for 29 years we have had a Fijian Prime Minister. If I have to take the blame, I will take one-thirtieth of the blame. Not more than that. The rest of the blame must be taken by those people.

But you see the way they whip up the emotions. It is not fair. So this is what they are trying to do at the moment. Quite wrongly, they are distorting things. They are telling outright lies even in Parliament. And with this kind of leadership, this kind of behaviour, we will never be able to build a nation. It is a very basic thing that one cannot attain happiness by making others unhappy. You can't do that. We will never be happy if you want to make others unhappy. You yourself will not get justice if you are not just to others. And this is the message that is there in every scripture, every prophet's message, in every religion. We are all God's children. Whether we are born Fijian, Indian, Chinese or a European. We don't decide. He decides. So why can't we, as all His children, live in peace and harmony?

In every democratic nation, people have the right to choose their government. You have chosen a government. Many people pray that the government will do good. God has given you a government, support that government. Because they are there to do good for you, for all of us.



But if every time we lose an election, we want to change the Constitution of the country, we will not get anywhere. The world is moving ahead very fast, we have entered the 21st century. This is a world of technology. We have got to move forward with that world. If we have to take our Fijian brothers and sisters with us, we have to work overtime for them. Because they must become a part of this fast-moving world. And we cannot do that by keeping the nation divided by wanting to feed on non-existent racial prejudice, things that don't exist, which are just invented by people for their own best reasons.

I will talk to you about these things because they too concern me, that they must be concerning you. I know for the last few weeks you have seen all this. You must be thinking about this. Many of you may be thinking what is our future, how secure are we. Don't despair because inherently there is a lot of goodness in our people. We all owe our allegiance to Fiji. We are Fiji's children and whatever we must do for the good of this land, for the good of this country, that is like a mother to us. So in all our action, thoughts and needs, we must think like that.

We have been trying very hard in the government to move the economy because, at the end of the day, it is a growing, vibrant and healthy economy that will deliver.

We don't have an economy that is growing, that is vibrant. We cannot help the poor, we cannot give the jobs that our young men and women are dying for, we cannot give you good roads, we cannot give you a good water supply, we can't give you good education, we can't give you good health services. Everything depends on how an economy does. That is where the prosperity comes from.

And that will only come, as I said, if we work together and utilise both our human resource and others. And this is what this government is trying to do, trying to move the country forward, address the problems that we have faced, help the poor, develop agriculture, tourism and other sectors of the economy so that we can provide a better life for ourselves. That is the aim of your government and that is what we will carry on doing. So I ask you tonight to have faith, confidence and trust in your own selves, and in this country.

Life has never been easy but we can make it easy if we all do the right thing. So that is my appeal to you tonight and from time to time we will be coming and visiting you and we will be keeping you informed of what the government does.