



A project of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate Group with IDN as the Flagship Agency in partnership with Soka Gakkai International in consultative status with ECOSOC

- HOME GOAL 1 GOAL 2 GOAL 3 GOAL 4 GOAL 5 GOAL 6 GOAL 7
- ABOUT US ▼ CONTACT ARCHIVE SEARCH ▼ LANGUAGES ▼ GOAL 8 GOAL 9
- GOAL 10 GOAL 11 GOAL 12 GOAL 13+14+15 GOAL 16 GOAL 17 Sitemap



Watch out for our new project website <https://sdgs-for-all.net>

Goal 10



Rev Ili Vunisuwai praying for a united Fiji with the church choir in the background. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

After Historic Apology, Fiji Moves to Build a New Nation

share

tweet

pin it

share

share

By Kalinga Seneviratne

SUVA, Fiji, 15 May 2023 (IDN) — In an emotionally charged “Reconciliation and Thanksgiving” service organized by Fiji’s Methodist Church—the country’s largest Christian denomination—the President of the church Reverend Ili Vunisuwai and Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka apologized to the Indo-Fijian community for the suffering and insults they have endured in Fiji’s post-independence era, paving the way to what the political leaders here call “building a new era” of peace and prosperity.

The South Pacific nation of Fiji Islands that has a population of close to 925,000 and about one-third of them of Indian descent brought here during an era of human trafficking by the British between 1879 and 1916 to work in the sugar cane plantations they were establishing.

According to official records, 60,553 were shipped to Fiji from India and they are today known as Girmityas, which is a reference to the unfair agreement they had to sign with the British plantations owners after arriving in Fiji as indentured (bonded) labour for five years.

“The indentured system or Gimit as it came to be called, was an extremely degrading and dehumanizing experience for our forefathers. Their suffering, the unspeakable hardships, humiliation and the indignities they suffered under an evil and cruel system are now well recorded,” noted Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry writing in a special issue of [The Fiji Times](#) marking the ‘Gimit Day’.

After five years of work in the cane fields, the British freed the girmits from bonded labour but did not offer them a passage back. So, most of them stayed back and by the mid-1980s their descendants through hard work and education have made a mark in Fiji dominating business and professional fields.

By this time Indo-Fijians made up 49% of the population but indigenous Fijians controlled land ownership. In April 1987, for the first time since independence in 1970, Fiji elected a multi-ethnic Fiji Labour Party to power supported mainly by Indo-Fijian voters but led by indigenous Fijian academic Dr Timoci Bavadra. Most of the Cabinet however were Indo-Fijians.

On 14 May 1987, 39-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, then third in command of the Royal Fiji Military Forces stormed the parliament, ordered the MPs to vacate the building and forced the Governor General (GG) to elect him as the country's leader. In September, the same year he staged another coup when he felt the GG (as Queen's representative) was undermining his rule by trying to impose a coalition government, and a month later he declared Fiji a Republic.

Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka signing the 'Forward Fiji Declaration' with Deputy PM Prof > Biman Prasad (left) and Mahendra Chaudhry (behind him) and two members of the Cabinet he ousted in 1987 (on right).
Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne



In December last year, Rabuka was elected as Prime Minister after having been in the political wilderness for almost two decades. He formed a coalition government with the Indo-Fijian led National Federation Party and elected its leader, former Economics Professor at the University of the South Pacific, as his Deputy PM and Finance Minister.

The same Rubuka, who staged the coups in 1987 to protect indigenous Fijian interests that forced thousands of Indo-Fijians—especially professions—to emigrate overseas thus bringing down the Indo-Fijian component of the population to about 35% now, announced in February this year that 15 May will be a national holiday each year to mark “Girmit Day” to pay homage to the girmitiyas who helped to build modern Fiji.

On 14 May, in an 8-minute speech, the Rabuka—now 74—in an emotional speech told a stunned audience that what he did in 1987 was wrong. Making clear that he is not speaking on behalf of the government or the I-Taukei (indigenous) people, because they were not involved in the coup, he said he was speaking on behalf of himself, and the people involved in the coup.

“We confess our wrongdoings, we confess that we have hurt so many of our people in Fiji, particularly those of Indo-Fijian community of the time and among them sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters of those that were indentured as labourers from India between 1879 and 1916. We confess that we have wronged you,” he said, while his wife seated in the front row was wiping away tears. He also acknowledged that many in the Indo-Fijian community have left the shores since then.

Addressing those who have stayed on, he said that they have every right to feel angry about what was done to them. He thanked the Indo-Fijian community leaders for helping to bringing “some restoration in our relationships over the past few years”.

“As you forgive, you release us and you are released. You are released from hatred and from your anger, and we begin to feel the peace of God coming to our beings and our lives,” added Rabuka.

He was immediately followed by Mahendra Chaudhry who, in an equally emotional speech, recalled the hurt and bitterness they experienced during the coup. He actually became Fiji’s first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister in 1999, only to be ousted barely a year into office, by another army coup (not staged by Rabuka) and held hostage inside the parliament building for 58 days. He spoke about the tremendous trauma and bitterness that created not only within him but in the Indo-Fijian community as a whole because their businesses, especially in Suva, were burnt down.

However, Chaudhry said that he was “deeply honoured by the Prime Minister’s gesture”, and added “I also accept your apology (that) in your personal capacity you have apologized. Thank you very much for your magnanimity”.



< The Hindu choir performing at the Methodist Church Reconciliation service with the Christian choir (in white) in the background. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

The Methodist church in Fiji strongly supported the coups of 1987 and 2000, but now under a more moderate leadership, they have taken the lead to bring the Christian indigenous community and the predominantly Hindu Indo-Fijians together. The Sunday’s service was held at a large indoor stadium and included both the

church choir and a choir that sang Hindu Bhajans.

“The only way forward for us for a better and prosperous Fiji is to confess our shortcomings of wrongdoings, repent from committing sin and live together in peace and in harmony,” said Reverend Ili Vunisuwai. “On that Foundation I hereby stand in the Holy presence of God our heavenly father and also in the honourable presence of our brothers your families and friends in Fiji and abroad to seek your humble forgiveness for all that had taken place in the past in our beloved country.”

The Indo-Fijian community has also contributed their share to Sunday’s development in not resorting to violent uprisings following the coups. Those who went abroad have rebuild their lives and even helped relatives back home. Those who stayed behind have educated their children and even opened their many schools managed by Hindu and Sikh organisations for the education of indigenous Fijian children as well. Thus, the younger Indo-Fijian generation is today graduating in large numbers from Fiji’s three universities, and the poverty rate among them has dropped to around 20%.

In his speech, Chaudhry referred to the fact that 75% of those living in poverty in Fiji are indigenous people, and addressing this issue is crucial to building community harmony and stability in the country.

Describing the event on 14 May as a “pivotal moment for our country” Prof Prasad said he accepts Rubuka’s apology and added that through combined efforts of its people, Fiji has arrived at this moment of hope.

“This may well be the start of resetting the moral compass of our nation,” he said, adding, “repairing the social fabric, moral and political fabric, so badly needed for forging a united and harmonious future.”

At the end of the service, Fiji’s leaders including the PM, Methodist church, past and present political leaders and community representative signed the *‘Forward Fiji Declaration’* vowing that “there will be no more coups and divisions”, and instead promote mutual understanding and respect to build the new Fiji.

In a casual conversation after the service, Rev Vunisuwai told IDN “the journey has just begun” referring to the task to heal wounds and build an economically stable Fiji. An Indo-Fijian academic who heard the comment told IDN that for such peace building “the army need to keep out of politics”.

Interestingly, there were no armed police or army personnel present in or outside the building during the ceremony, and Rabuka left the venue without any armed escort. [IDN-InDepthNews]

Photo: Rev Ili Vunisuwai praying for a united Fiji with the church choir in the background. Credit: Kalinga

NEWSLETTER

📧 Goal 10

NEXT >

Subscribe

STRIVING



2023 JOINT MEDIA PROJECT REPORT



MAPTING



PARTNERS



Copyright © 2016-2023 International Press Syndicate

