

Savenaca Narube: A voice of reason - the writings of Savenaca Siwatibau

Address by Mr Savenaca Narube, Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, at the launch of “A Voice of Reason: the writings of Savenaca Siwatibau”, Suva, 23 February 2009.

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Introduction

Mrs. Suliana Siwatibau

The Vice Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific (USP) Professor Rajesh Chandra
Distinguished Guests

It has been over five years since Mr. Siwatibau left us. But looking around this theater today, Siwa as he is commonly called, is still fondly remembered by colleagues and friends in Fiji and the Pacific.

We remember Siwa for many reasons - his professionalism, his technical proficiency, his character and his personality. I think that a common thread running through his legacy was that he fiercely believed in the power of logic and reason. When Siwa was on to something that he knew was logical, it was extremely impossible to persuade him to an alternative view. Such was his passion for reason.

“*A Voice of Reason: the writings of Savenaca Siwatibau*” is therefore a fitting tribute to Siwa. I am personally honored to be here today to launch this excellent piece of work.

Firstly, I must acknowledge the excellent initiative of Professor Wadan Narsey in putting this book together in his own time. I know this was not an easy task. Some of Siwa’s best speeches were off the cuff or from notes scribbled at the back of an envelope. It would take something like Wadan’s persistence, patience and plain hard work to put all these together.

Secondly, as I read the tributes in the book, it struck me that I have the honour of sharing a few things with Siwa. For a start, we have the same first name. We were educated at Queen Victoria School where we came away with the Dux prize of the school. We both went to Auckland University. We held the position of the Permanent Secretary of Finance. We both served in the International Monetary Fund. And finally I have the privilege to share the office that he first occupied in the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

But there I am afraid was where our commonalities ended. In my view, Siwa does not have many equals. As Wadan so eloquently puts it, Siwa was an icon not only in Fiji but also in the region and beyond.

Reserve Bank of Fiji

Today I thought of sharing some of my personal experiences with Siwa.

I first met Siwa at the Central Monetary Authority in Dominion House in late 1980 when he took over from Mr. Tomkins as General Manager after his return from the IMF. He was the first local at the position. So naturally there was a lot of interest on how a local was going to perform in one of the last key national positions to be localized in Fiji. Very quickly, Siwa dispelled any concerns on his ability to lead the Central Monetary Authority. Siwa became the first Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji when the transition occurred in 1984.

We honor Siwa for his humility, caring and down to earth qualities. But in my assessment, underneath all that was a firm and strong leader. For us that worked under him, we came

face to face with his strong leadership qualities in our work. While he mixed easily amongst us, he applied the rules very strictly. I remember the strike that I led when I was a Trade Union representative at the Bank in 1983. At the end of the two week strike, while the Union did not get all that we wanted, everyone acknowledged that the resolution was a fair one and was made possible by Siwa's compassion and goodwill to the workers. During this rather difficult negotiation and tension, Siwa was very calm as he always was in any kind of situation. I could clearly witness the clarity of his thinking and his strong belief in fairness and consistency.

Siwa was our boss and also our father. I recall one day when he called me into his office. I had applied for a loan for my first car, a small Honda Civic. You know, Siwa adopted a slow drawl when he told people off. When you heard that drawl you knew you were in trouble. In that telling off voice he said "Savenaca, why are you buying a car when you don't have a house. You should buy a house first when you are still young." This signified the caring personality that Siwa had for everyone. He was strict but ever concerned about our welfare! By the way I got the loan but with the condition that I buy a house within five years which I did.

Siwa rose in the public limelight as the Governor of the Reserve Bank, a position that he held for 7 years. At that time, the Reserve Bank was a new organisation and many people did not understand what we did. The Bank was in this impressive new 16 storey building - still the tallest in Fiji. Siwa made a lot of efforts to explain the role of the Bank. I listened to many of his speeches. I recall when he explained why the country needed foreign reserves to a meeting of YMCA members. He explained the process of how the commercial banks use Fiji dollars to buy foreign reserves from the Reserve Bank and how the foreign currency eventually ended up with the importer's bank account abroad. I was deeply impressed by how he could simplify a complicated and complex process for the ordinary person to understand. At the end of his talk a young man asked, "Is keeping enough foreign reserves a difficult thing to do?" Siwa replied, "Well, you see my hair, they were all black last year, now they are rapidly turning grey." If you can see me now Siwa, my hair is not only grey they have turned all white in the last six months.

Siwa was a firm believer in getting the views of everyone. He established forums that are still active today. He established the Macroeconomic Policy Committee to help government formulate policies and make forecasts. This Committee is extremely busy right now revising the prediction for the economy in light of the floods and the global economic meltdown. Given what is happening around us, we will do extremely well to achieve the 2.4 percent growth that was released in November last year. I hope that the Reserve Bank will not be blamed for this economic scenario.

We live in challenging times. The world economy is buckling from the fall outs from the financial crisis. Fiji will not be immune from this global recession. Our economy was already under some stress. While Siwa may not have faced the same situation as the Governor of the Reserve Bank, I have often wondered what Siwa would advise us to get us through these unprecedented difficult times. For one thing, Siwa was clear with his thoughts and eloquent in outlining them particularly to non-economists like politicians. Siwa was also a stickler for economic stability. I am sure that he would emphasise to us today that while we have a host of economic problems we must deal with the stability first before we can solve the others. This would be a wise counsel. We will do well to heed it. Without stability you do not have a foundation for growth.

Siwa always liked a lively intellectual debate. He established the Economic Association which is still functioning today. I remember in the first meeting of the Association, he was actually the speaker and speaking - yes, you can guess it--on economic stability and the importance of maintaining our foreign reserves. At the end of his talk, an USP economic student asked him why Fiji could not convert these foreign reserves to Fiji dollars and use the money for development as one of his lecturers had suggested. Obviously a bit perplexed

about the question, Siwa replied, “You should ask that lecturer to go back to school. You see, for Fiji to hold this foreign exchange, the Fiji dollar equivalent would have been credited already to the entity or person who earned that foreign exchange”. Obviously, the student and perhaps his lecturer may not have fully comprehended how foreign reserves end up with the RBF. I do not think that the exchange is a reflection of the quality of the economic teachings at USP today.

Siwa left the Reserve Bank after the 1987 coup. He took his skills, knowledge and experience to the region. Fiji’s loss was the region’s gain. Of course, Siwa went on to be the Vice Chancellor of the USP for a few years.

Tribute to Mr. Savenaca Siwatibau

Siwa to me was the embodiment of a wholesome leader. Professionally, I have always admired his immovable logic, his soft touch and firm hand, his technical sharpness and breath of knowledge. Personally, his humility, inclusiveness and compassion were very touching. He had taught me many things that I have tried to emulate in my professional and personal life.

This book is an excellent reflection of Siwa – simple and modest. I am sure that this is how Siwa wanted to be remembered.

Acknowledgement

Finally, I wish to acknowledge a few people.

Firstly, I acknowledge the presence of Mrs Suliana Siwatibau and Siwa’s relatives that are here today. Thank you for coming.

Secondly, I extend my appreciation to our host Vice Chancellor Chandra for the arrangements.

Thirdly, I big vinaka vakalevu to Wadan for his initiative, perseverance and hard work in putting together this excellent book.

Finally, I thank you all for accepting our invitation to attend this launch.

I trust that we will all enjoy the book and more importantly emulate the qualities of Siwa in our lives and in our leadership.