

Fiji's election: Women make their mark

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Ro Teimumu Kepa Responds to Bainimarama



Lawyers, entrepreneurs, academics and civil servants are some of the female candidates standing in Fiji's upcoming elections. Fijians will vote on 17 September, the first elections since the 2006 military coup. Of the 249 approved candidates, 44 are women. This is certainly an improvement compared to the 2006 elections, when just 30 out of the 338 candidates were women.

Several factors have contributed to the increase in women's representation this year. Firstly, women in Fiji are beginning to break social and cultural barriers with respect to education, even though unemployment rates for women are still higher than for men. Increasingly women are coming out as better educated, more career driven and more able to cope with the demands of culturally and socially constructed gender roles. The improvement in female participation can also be credited to Fiji's active women's rights movement. Fem Link Pacific, the Fiji Women Rights Movement, the National Council of Women and Soqosoqo vaka marama I-Taukei together convened the first ever Fiji Women's Forum in April 2012. This created a platform for increasing women's participation in politics and leadership. The final National Women's Forum Outcomes Statement called for a 50% women's quota in any new national legislature and/or a compulsory 50% candidates quota for political parties. Women's NGOs have certainly put in the hard yards in advocating and promoting gender equality in politics and leadership in this year's elections.

While political parties are still a long way from fielding a balanced gender representation in their choice of candidates, it is worth noting that some parties are now ensuring gender balance in management roles by having women as party presidents.

Women party presidents are Peoples Democratic Party's Lynda Tabua, Fiji First's Tiko Luveni, National Federation Party's Tupou Draunidalo and Fiji Labour Party's Lavenia Padarath.

Political leadership of parties is however still very much a male-dominated space, and when a government is formed after 17 September it will be the leader of the party that has a parliamentary majority (should that occur) that will take on the role of prime minister.

The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) is the only political party that has a female leader, who also happens to be a paramount chief. Whether by strategy or coincidence, having Ro Teimumu Kepa as party leader of SODELPA is expected to garner much indigenous support. She not only carries the title of paramount chief but also has the capacity to influence chiefs of other confederacies. Recently, she has been able to field immense support from other chiefs, not only in her own province of Rewa but in other confederacies as well. In turn, it is expected that these chiefs should be able to influence their own people.

Ro Teimumu Kepa isn't new to politics. She contested the 2006 elections, winning her seat and becoming the Minister of Education in the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL)/Fiji Labour Party-led coalition government (SODELPA is the reincarnation of SDL). Given her political and traditional standing, there is some chance that Ro Teimumu Kepa may become Fiji's first female prime minister.

Women candidates contesting Fiji's elections boast a wealth of experience, outstanding academic qualifications and longstanding community service. There is also an increasing number of women lawyers advocating for women's issues and gender equality as well as contesting this year's election. Tupou Draunidalo of the National Federation Party and Lynda Tabuya of the People's Democratic Party have had long legal careers and have contributed immensely to Fiji's legal community. There is also a good number of businesswomen, teachers and civil servants contesting this year's elections.

The People's Democratic Party, Fiji First Party and the National Federation Party remain the parties fielding the most number of women candidates, each with nine women out of the 49, 50 and 46 candidates respectively. In 2006, 8 out of the 27 female candidates contesting elections made it to parliament. This figure is expected to increase given not only the number but also the calibre of women contesting this year's elections.

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**Tudrau Nieta** · a year ago

Awesome piece Jojjana! Really fantastic to see many more women candidates this year! One interesting candidate is Mere Tuisalalo Samisoni who is standing for SODELPA and a proven entrepreneur in Fiji. Apparently she was a nursing sister with Australian qualifications that was not allowed to practice with her Australian qualifications which drove her to start a family bakery which is now a successful Franchise operations in the Pacific. So from nursing to business, she is also holder of a Doctorate in Business Administration and has sat on numerous Boards such as the Reserve Bank of Fiji, Fijian Holdings, Merchant Finance. At 70+ she is an extraordinary example that women can do and be ANYTHING! All the women candidates in all parties all have fantastic stories about their journey and I wish all of them well!

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**Talei Tora** · a year ago

I fail to understand why there is a youtube video of Ro.Teimumu at the top of the article. Other candidates have videos that could have been edited together with this video to provide the reader with a clearer picture of what these women are campaigning for. With this video at the top of the article one would think that the writer is campaigning for SODELPA.

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