



**H.E Honourable Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji,
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Brief Presentation to the Conference, 2 November 2021

Responses to the Pandemic

FIJI PARLIAMENT'S RESPONSE: ENSURING BUSINESS CONTINUITY AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

I thank the Parliament of Western Australia hosting this year's CPA regional conference amidst these challenging times. Thank you also to the conference secretariat for the hard work put in over several weeks to ensure a successful conference.

It is unfortunate for all our colleagues that we are unable to be there at the conference in person. But COVID-19 requirements had to be strictly followed.

I wish to share with you the Fijian Parliament's experience and response to the effects of the pandemic particularly in terms of our efforts to ensure that parliamentary business and Parliament's core constitutional functions are not hindered by the multiple fallouts from this national and global public health crisis. It is obvious that the pandemic has tested the adaptability and resilience of parliaments around the world in ensuring that our functions and parliamentary democracy are not impeded.

The border closures, lockdowns, inter-island travel ban, curfews, social distancing, and other restrictive public health measures brought about by the pandemic has doubled the burden on many parliaments. From our experience, Parliament has had to face two challenges.

Firstly, Parliament itself like everyone else had to comply with COVID-19 safe protocols and emergency public health regulations. In Fiji, the establishment of containment zones and

implementation of nationwide curfews had barred many members from outside the capital city, Suva from attending the house sittings. Standing Committees were also unable to meet physically, conduct public hearings and make site visitation in their inquiries. Our own COVID-19 safe protocols meant there were no Parliament tours or community outreaches. There were also restrictions to contractors or service providers.

Secondly, the pandemic has required parliament to take legislative action and facilitate the government's and the national response to the pandemic. This requirement is added on to its existing legislative and oversight agenda, which includes pending legislative business that are in progress.

I will briefly share some grim statistics.

Fiji remained relatively COVID-19 free as the pandemic began. However, the first wave of locally transmitted infections began in March 2020 originating from a returning citizen. A quick Government response through lockdowns and curfews enabled us to reduce community transmissions by April 2020. On November 4, 2020, Fiji marked 200 days without any transmission of the COVID-19 in the community. Two people lost their lives during this first wave.

The second more devastating wave began in April this year. July was a particularly dangerous month with a record 1,405 new cases recorded for the 16th of that month. With the second wave of transmissions, the government had implemented stringent public health responses. This included mandatory masks in public places and a concerted public vaccination campaign.

A total of 674 people have died from COVID-19 in Fiji, with 672 (or 99.7 percent) of these during the second wave.

As of 1st November, Fiji recorded a total of 52,180 cases with 49,860 recoveries (95.6 percent). As of 1st October, there were 1,218 active cases with patients either in hospital or in home containment.

Community transmissions have greatly reduced over the last 3 months. COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns have gradually eased beginning in the first week of October due to reduced transmissions, but mostly because of the increased public vaccination rates.

As of 1st November, 597,083 persons or 96.5 percent of the target adult population have received the first dose of the vaccines, while 542,582 persons or 87.8 percent are now fully vaccinated with the second dose. COVID-19 restrictions will ease further when the fully

vaccinated target adult population reaches 90 percent.

There has also been a concerted effort to have vaccine protection for young Fijians. The rollout of the Moderna vaccine for 15- to 17-year-olds began on 20th September. As of 1st November 31,923, had received their first dose, while 17,650 had received their second dose. The ministry of health & medical services plans to roll out the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years on 15th November.

Vaccination for children is not mandatory. The vaccination programme follows strict protocols such as parental consent and the presence of a parent is required when a child gets his or her shot.

Plans are in place for Fiji to re-open its borders to travel-partner countries from November 11 onward. A full national border opening is also planned for 1st December.

While restrictions have been reduced gradually, we still have active cases and certain aspects of our COVID-19 public health regulations are still in force.

While we are slowly recovering, it is important to be reminded that the pandemic has devastated the Fijian economy, business activity, employment and impacted socio-economic conditions.

As noted by the Government, Fiji's economy is expected to have contracted by 15.7 percent. For the current financial year tax revenues are expected to be 43 percent lower than pre-COVID levels.

Parliament has had to work against the backdrop of the pandemic but has progressed in adapting to the new normal.

We have had to implement COVID-19 safe protocols in parliament through the restriction of movement in and out and within parliamentary offices. These include social distancing in the plenary and internal office meetings are held virtually. We also had to comply with the *Health and Safety at Work (Amendment) Regulations 2021* which require all employers and employees entering a workplace to be fully vaccinated and to be the norm by 1st November 2021. All our staff and MPs are now fully vaccinated.

The Fijian Parliament's ability to continue parliamentary business amidst the COVID-19 pandemic is attributed to the timely investments in its e-parliament initiative which started in 2018 and included the development and strengthening of IT facilities to ensure effective

online or virtual communications.

The target was enhancing Parliament's accessibility to citizens for information resources, and access to committee inquiries. But it became crucial in ensuring the continuity of business during the lockdowns that were instituted to counter the transmission of the coronavirus.

This initiative was due to the successful partnership between the Fijian Parliament, the Government and our development partners of Australia, Japan and New Zealand that was facilitated under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Fiji parliament Support Project (FPSP).

A second wave of COVID-19 infections began in April 2021 compelling lockdowns as directed by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

However, we have been able to have hybrid sittings from 25 May to 7 June to pass important legislation and which also allowed parliamentary oversight on the Government's COVID-19 response.

The hybrid sitting was a milestone in the history of the Fijian parliament and parliamentary democracy in Fiji.

The hybrid sittings continued for the passing of the National Budget and Appropriation Bill in July and for the sitting weeks of August and September.

A full in-person sitting of parliament was convened on 22nd October to appoint Fiji's new President. This was possible due to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and the strictly supervised re-opening of local containment borders.

For the hybrid sitting more than 50 percent of the Members attended the sitting virtually, with the remainder attending in-person and observing parliament's COVID-19 safe protocols. In total we have had 94 percent daily attendance in the period during which we had containment lockdowns, curfews, and a ban on inter-island travel.

During these hybrid sittings, Standing Committee reports, and Bills were tabled, debated, and passed by acclamation and were televised live on free-to-air TV and live-streamed on the Parliament's website and Facebook page.

It should be acknowledged that the Standing Committees had already been meeting virtually since April 2020, undertaking inquiries and hearings throughout Fiji where interested citizens

and stakeholders made virtual submissions. The hearings had also been livestreamed on Facebook allowing public access.

Despite the lockdowns Parliament has been able to continue its business in Plenary and Committees by working virtually.

Remaining relevant and engaged

The hybrid sittings have ensured that Parliament's legislative and oversight agenda continues. Fijians have been able to access Standing Committee inquiries and public hearings virtually.

The livestreaming of Parliament sittings and Committee hearings, have ensured a wider reach, keeping Fijians informed and engaged with the business of Parliament, and thereby generating much public debate.

Adapting parliamentary procedures and practices

We note that some parliaments in the Pacific have difficulty in having virtual sittings or virtual committee engagements.

Also, in addition to the IT infrastructure and connectivity challenges, some have been hindered by Standing Orders, Constitutions or Statutes that do not allow virtual sittings or remote parliamentary work.

The Fijian Parliament has been able to undertake the hybrid sittings while allowing Committees to work virtually, because of the provisions provided for in the Standing Orders that give the Business Committee and the Speaker the power to convene sittings of Parliament.

The Speaker has additional powers to do everything necessary or convenient in connection with the performance of his or her functions under the Standing Orders.

In this new normal, parliaments should evolve and adapt their rules of procedures to allow parliamentary processes to continue which is essential for the continuance of parliamentary democracy.

Parliaments must make the necessary changes to their practices, procedures, and work culture to adapt to the effects of pandemics and other disasters.

Bridging the gap between the people and the state

The virtual Committee hearings and Parliament sittings have ensured transparency and access to information for many Fijians whose movements have been hampered by the lockdowns.

Fortunately, for Members of Parliament, the secretariat had been quietly conducting its training well before the pandemic surfaced and was therefore well prepared and have continued to display great resourcefulness in providing the ongoing essential back-up services.

This continuity of Parliament enables oversight as members of parliament raise questions and engage in debate on the Government's COVID-19 response strategy – this is essential for the continuance of parliamentary democracy.

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