

A New Awakening for the Republic

Prime Minister Charlot Salwai charts a new path for the nation in his Independence Day address

By Dan McGarry

AS THE LAST CHORDS OF THE national anthem echoed across the parade ground at Independence Park on Saturday, Charlot Salwai stood and delivered his first Independence Day address.

The annual speech is similar to the American President's State of the Union speech. It provides an all-too-rare opportunity to summarise the challenges and the progress the country has made, and to outline a vision for the year ahead.

Speaking in Bislama, Mr Salwai took the opportunity

to announce a departure from the political culture of past years. "As a democratic country," he said, "we must keep the flame of democracy alight. We must build up our nation to stand up against the disasters, the challenges that test and shake our nation to its foundations."

"We have been through many different kinds of disasters," he continued, "natural and man-made. We recognise our vulnerability and the challenges we face. They have only made us stronger."

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Prime Minister Charlot Salwai delivers his Independence Day address.
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Ranon requests stadium

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In the course of listing the country's many recent tribulations, he characterised the country's slip onto the OECD money laundering greylist as a matter of sovereignty, implying that the nation's international standing could be affected by our continued inaction in countering money laundering and terrorist financing.

He cited the future loss of income and support due to our imminent graduation from Least Developed Country status, our accession to the WTO, and our implementation of the PACER Plus trade agreement as issues that need to be addressed.

An aging civil service, he said, is going to exacerbate our challenges as we lose experience and institutional memory at a time when we are facing increasing challenges in terms of health, housing, youth unemployment, national security and law & order, decentralisation of power and, underlying everything, the land.

Citing the government's Hundred Day Plan, Mr Salwai listed a number of steps his government has taken to address these problems since his government was formed early this year.

He lauded the work of the Government Remuneration Tribunal in its efforts to rationalise and strengthen the work performed not only within the public service, but within our state owned enterprises as well.

To shore up future opportunities, his government "wants free access to education until year 10." He added that they were "thinking seriously about making available a specialised education system for disabled people."

If the government moves ahead with this idea, it will represent effectively the first real policy to support the disabled.

Referencing the other challenges, Mr Salwai provided more general statements of support without outlining specific policies, decisions or actions.

The Prime Minister reiterated that his government remains "very committed to making sure that all [infrastructure] projects go ahead as planned, and all future projects must happen."

He cited the construction and repair of roads, wharves and airports underway right now.

He added that his government "has a strong commitment and support going to the productive sector in the

medium term. This includes trade, tourism, cooperatives, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock."

His government is relying on these areas, he said, to provide employment, grow the economy and to add value to existing products.

"Government," he said, "must find ways to facilitate ways to give purchasing power to all producers."

Mr Salwai cited the National Sustainable Development Plan, begun during the tenure of his predecessor Sato Kilman, as a guiding force in the years to come.

"The journey of the NSDP started in the Torres islands and continued all the way to Aneluyum. This is the first time the government has consulted with communities on our national development plans. We are making sure that the people own this plan, that they are contributing to it, and that it reflects their needs and aspirations."

He cited as well the need to continue working with international partners to combat the effects of climate change, which have already made themselves felt here.

Looking outward, the Prime Minister reiterated this country's enduring support for self-determination for the peoples of the Pacific. "At the appropriate times, our government will continue to maintain political leadership on these issues."

Charting the way forward, Mr Salwai expressed hope. "For all the challenges we've faced, our government believes that because of everyone's hard work and determination, the sun is shining once again on Vanuatu."

"The waters are calmer than before. The government's vision, representing its 38 members of Parliament, is to seek a new political direction, and new initiatives today and in the coming years. This was the will of the people during the 2016 snap election."

We are "recovering the nation together," he said, "for a new awakening for the republic of Vanuatu."

"Independence is a permanent fight that requires strong dedication, hard work and high capacity to adapt to our changing context and new challenges now and in the future."

He concluded by saying, "I have every confidence in this government, in the solidarity, trust and support of our leadership as it stands today. I take comfort in the knowledge that we can work to rebuild this nation and to put Vanuatu back on the road to prosperity."



Payment for the renovation of the State Office.

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