

Konrote heeds Rotuma's call

WITH an illustrious career in the military, as a senior civil servant and more recently as a diplomat, Major-General JIOJI KONROTE is seen as the frontrunner in the race for the Rotuman Communal seat in the general elections which begins this weekend. He is one of five candidates vying for that seat and left Australia only weeks ago to answer the call of his elders. Major-General Konrote talks to features writer LICE MOVONO (pictured) about transportation problems to Rotuma, his plans to improve the economy of the island community and the importance of flexible representation for his island home.

Fiji Daily Post: Why are you standing in the election and what kind of representative will you be?

Major-General Jioji Konrote: I consider it my next calling and look forward to serving our people. I'm contesting the elections as an independent candidate who would be responsive and representative, accountable and accessible, efficient and effective in trying to meet our people's hopes and aspirations. I strongly believe that the government must be both accountable and accessible to Parliament and the electorate at all times. If we are to progress and prosper as a nation, then we as a people must ensure that government legislate and strictly adhere to a code of conduct for our leaders and I will demand and expect the highest standards of integrity, transparency, openness and accountability in all decision making.

Post: This is the first time that there has been this many candidates contesting the Rotuman Communal seat. What do you think the Rotuman people are saying?

Konrote: I think the Rotuman people are more politically aware and more eager to have a say about who should represent them in Parliament. I think it also means that democracy is working well on the island and also that there are more people willing to come up and serve their island. More people have political ambitions and this is reflected by the number of candidates. Another important thing is that there are a lot of dissatisfied people on the island in terms of what the Government could have done for the island. People feel let down in the areas of shipping and in terms of the little that has been done to create more income generating activities on the island. Freight, for instance, is out of the question so people can not export their crops and because of all this the rural to urban drift is now a major problem. The majority of the Rotuman people live off the island.

Post: Some members of the Rotuman community in Fiji say that people they have voted into power in the past and haven't fulfilled election promises. What do you have to say about what you will do differently?

Konrote: I am committed to fully realising each individual's potential and I will provide the best opportunity for our people in improving their living standards and quality of life, gaining access to employment, education, housing, health and welfare services. However, I believe that there is a need for a continuous improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of government service delivery. In this regard, I am committed to improving the shipping and air services to our home island of Rotuma.

Post: What will you prioritise if you're voted into power?

Konrote: I'll have to work very closely with the Rotuman Island Council because it is the voice of the people to Government and I will also work very closely with the Rotuman people here in Fiji in order to prioritise the developments which need to be done. There has been a disconnection between the people on the island and the people here and that is largely due to the transportation problems the island faces.

I have a good rapport with the chiefs of the island and I think that is the advantage I have over the other candidates in terms of being a good representative. I was a soldier for 35 years and in my capacity as a senior civil servant and more recently as a diplomat, I have served my country faithfully and in the same way I have served my island.

Post: You have only just resigned from your post as a High Commissioner to Canberra. What has it been like campaigning this late in the game?

Konrote: I don't campaign because I think that my interaction with the community, the vanua and the church is enough of a good track record and people should judge me on that. My team is my family and a three-member team who are coordinating activities for me. My entire campaign is self-funding because I believe that if you really want to serve the community then you will do your own fundraising. I don't want to be a burden to the very people that I am trying to serve.

Post: Political pundits say the balance of power lies with independents. Which government will you align yourself with if you're voted into the House of Representatives?

Konrote: I will have to align myself with the government of the day, I have no choice. If you look back at the short history of the Constitution, our representatives have worked with the government of the day. With a one-member team, there is nothing much we can do, we will have to join the bigger team.

For the first time, we now have 68 candidates standing as independents. I hope the leader of the bigger parties have come to realise what this means. For Rotuma though, we have to be independent because it gives us the flexibility to adjust and reassess the political situation. I have no problems talking to and working with either the FLP or the SDL. Ideally I would like to be a part of the ruling government because I think I have got a lot to offer.

Whichever party forms the government, I will go to them and say "Here I am!" With my international experience, I think I can do a lot.

Post: All five of you agree that the major problem affecting your island is that of irregular transportation. What is your plan to improve that situation?

Konrote: Firstly, right now, the domestic airline servicing the island has two flights a week but they hardly ever keep to that schedule despite the fact that this is a subsidised route. They are always coming up with excuses for why they can't fly. Right now there is a ship that travels to the island once in six weeks once in two months.

I don't agree with the franchise system because I think it gives ships the monopoly. I think that the short-term solution to the islands transport problems lies in subsidies but I think that government must ensure that the companies they give subsidies to are truly servicing the island. That's not happening right now, no one is jumping on the companies to provide the services they are paid to. After all it is taxpayer's money.

When I'm voted into power, I will clamp down on this and will be talking to Vuetaki (Air Fiji chief executive officer Sialeni Vuetaki) everyday. We need to hold them accountable!

The other alternative is to improve the government fleet but that is for the longer-term. The bottom line is that we can not have a separate policy that is isolated to Rotuma. That is unrealistic and can't be done.

Post: What will do you do to protect the interests of your community?

Konrote: I am committed to engaging the government of the day to ensure that the interests of our community and our special and unique status as an Indigenous ethnic group are protected at all times. In this regard I am equally committed to ensure that all amendments to the existing statutes (Rotuma

Act, Rotuma Land Act etc) are done following wide consultations, but more importantly that changes are effected with the full endorsement of the chiefs and the people.

Post: What is your plan to improve the economy of Rotuma?

Konrote: I think the answer to this lies in our maritime resources. Rotuma is abundant in fish and resources from surrounding reefs and we are not tapping into that potential. All the other provinces of the country have a quota of fishing licenses which enables them to have commercial fishing in their provinces. We don't have that and we don't even have commercial fishing businesses on the island. But if we had the same quota system and were given licenses, then it

would be my job to find aid from abroad so we can have several fishing boats on the island. God knows we have enough qualified captains and seafarers who have worked off their boats onto no jobs. These are the people im looking to when I think of how we can revive the economy using maritime means. Yes, our soil is rich and people are planting dalo but freight costs are prohibiting. Our maritime resources are an untapped economic base which is practical and could work and something the people of Rotuma could easily benefit from. This is one of the first things I will work on once I'm in.