

BEING THE CHANGE

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PHOTOS ROSHIKA DEO & LISA KINGSBURY

Eight long years and Fiji has done it. We've held our elections and whether you're an NFP, Fiji First, SODELPA, or PDP supporter or iTaukei, Indo Fijian, Kai Loma, Chinese, Christian, Hindu or Muslim or maybe you decided not to vote at all; I want us all to take a minute and bask in the ambience of what we've done and hopefully where we're going as a country.

As a Pacific Island woman and a Fijian woman, I am proud of the women who stood in the elections. Take Roshika Deo. An independent candidate with her campaign 'Be the Change'. She was up against some big political powers and she struggled financially to support a campaign that she lived and breathed for over a year. She formed the 'Be the Change' campaign as a movement to endorse feminism, human rights, and environmentalism and as a platform to run for parliament in the Fiji 2014 elections. Her team of like-minded people came from all walks of life to help this 33-year-old Indo-Fijian woman achieve something phenomenal. She stood tall and ran a campaign she can be proud of.

Although Roshika did not meet the threshold of 5% to get into parliament, I have a feeling this is just the start for the woman who shook hands with Michelle Obama earlier this year. Talking with her recently was not only interesting but it was inspirational.

Let us rewind to March of 2014 when Roshika first made headlines. Roshika was one of the first candidates to announce her intention to stand in the 2014 Fiji elections but to little fanfare.

There were grumbings on social media sites about her ability to run as an independent candidate and more than one commentator mentioned her ethnicity. Things changed when it was announced that Roshika Deo was the recipient of the International Women of Courage Award.

Established in 2007, the International Women of Courage Award is given out annually by the United States Secretary of State. This award honours "women around the globe who have exemplified exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for human rights, women's equality, and social progress."

Roshika beat hundreds of other women from around the world to be one of the ten winners in 2014. Roshika admits that meeting Michelle Obama in Washington in March 2014 was an amazing experience. She also said that the first two weeks after the award were extremely positive but the following months – not so much.

"For six months I was targeted online and people were hateful and misogynistic on social media," said Roshika.

Roshika understood the cultural context. "It was a reflection of the misogyny, which is still highly prevalent in our society. It was a nightmare: the memes, the messages – I was continually harassed for so so so long."

Another issue that also spiralled out of the debates was Roshika's right and supposed claim to be a representative of the women of Fiji, something she never claimed to be, "I represent the women in my network, because it was their stories that I shared, not every single woman in Fiji".

Roshika and I are sitting down at Mango Café with my 5-year-old daughter in tow, when I ask her about Fiji as a country being ready for women leaders. Without missing a beat, she looks down at my daughter and says, "People like Ro Teimumu and I, we're paving the pathway for other women. It is going to be much easier for her (she indicates my daughter, who is happily enjoying a piece of cake) when she is ready to stand for elections or become the first female prime minister, or the third or fourth, because people will think it is normal. Now for us, people don't think it is normal and so we have to push and push and push."

If you ask Roshika why she ran in the first place, she says there is no defining moment, but that participating in community development was key as to why she decided to run. "Being in the space in the Fiji Women's Forum and learning about the problems that Fijian women were going through and knowing I had the capability, made me think, Why not?"

And it is obvious that this was a team effort for Roshika. This was not a one-lady campaign but she worked as part of a team that runs without single leadership. All members in the "Be the Change" movement are decision makers and leaders. Her favourite moment of the elections stemmed from: "Seeing young men and women participate and claim ownership of the campaign; seeing young people so political and active, that makes me burst with pride."

What is your greatest extravagance? Several years ago, I would have said many things but I am a minimalist now so I don't have many things right now. So I would say food – all kinds of food!

What is your greatest fear? That the world will not change.

Which talent would you most like to have? Dancing! I love dancing but I do not know how to dance. If I dance, people laugh. So I would like to learn how to dance!

What is your current state of mind? Excited! Just raring to go.

What is your best characteristic? I don't know how you describe it, but when I am in Labasa, everyone thinks I am from Labasa. And when I am in the West, everyone thinks I am from the West. And when I in Suva people think I am from Suva. Even when I am overseas, people think I am from there. I am able to be from everywhere without being from everywhere. I don't think there is a word for this but there should be.

What is your motto? Be the Change.

If you had one piece of advice for Pacific women and girls, what would it be? Unlearn and relearn. Everything we are being taught is not as it should be. The other thing would be, to just be alive and be free. You do not need to be in a relationship to be happy and free, find it within yourself.

PHOTO LISA KINGSBURY

And if there is one thing that lights up Roshika's face it is her work with youth. "It's extremely important, especially in our country where we're trying to get real and genuine democracy but where youths are still struggling to have their issues and voices in the forefront and in the mainstream."

Roshika becomes more animated as she explains why young people need to be encouraged and given the space to express and think for themselves. "I heard a lot of people go, Oh, if you don't have rules, youths are going to go wild! But I think that's a lot of b.s. I think young people are responsible, we just don't give them enough credit. I think if they're let free, they come up with all these brilliant ideas, and strategies, and things to do."

Roshika's next step is to create a shadow parliament that will lobby with our new government and she plans to do that by creating a space for our young people to come and discuss key issues. "Democracy is about the people; how they engage with the leaders, how they are still working with the leaders, and participating in their national processes. Because our culture is very submissive, we have a submissive democracy. We don't have an active, engaging or a dynamic democracy. That's what we need, and that's what our plan is."



PHOTO ROSHIKA DEO

She hopes to be able to contribute to the continuing democracy in Fiji. "It is the people who must make democracy. Now we have to get in there and hold the government accountable. The people now have to raise their voice on the promises made and become truly active citizens. That is how we will become a truly democratic country."

The next four years are going to be interesting for Roshika as she tackles the new job of rallying people to lobby actively in a nation that has not had a democracy for eight years. But one thing that is clear is that Roshika has already proved she can be this change. ✨