

Commissioner of Police Esala Teleni has now been in the job for two years and says he needs another three years to reform the Police Force. When he joined, the former Navy and Military man says he found a heavily politicised Police Force suffering from a lack of leadership, and a structure that encouraged jealousy and back-stabbing, and a vakavanua way of doing business. Although he is nicknamed ‘The Executioner’, friends view him as a gentle giant - smart, but an unassuming leader who quietly just gets on with the job. A man of many talents, Teleni is a former national rugby team number eight and captain, who played for Fiji between 1981-1989. Born in Namuka-i-Lau, he has a wealth of experience in the Navy/Army – over 30 years – and has gone through various naval and army staff and management courses, studied international law and has a Masters in Strategic Studies. Religion is an important part of his life – a lay preacher, he preaches regularly at Nasova (Police Barracks) and has brought in a full-time padre for the Police Force. A Methodist, he went to Marist Brothers High School, like many in the Army’s top echelon, but says it was not a plan for him to head the Police Force. It’s a calling from God, says Teleni, and relishes the challenge which includes tackling corruption and racism in the Police Force. He does not think the Police need to be armed, and is not interested in politics. Commissioner Teleni spoke with FijiLive’s Farzana Nisha:

You were the number two man in the military at the time of the takeover. Did you at any time anticipate being Commissioner of Police?

No, I never expected to become Commissioner of Police but after the takeover and as we progressed, the leadership (Military Council) felt there was a need to strengthen the leadership of the Fiji police and that’s when my name came up. When I was asked, I was prepared to move across.

Wasn’t there nobody at that time within the police force who could have done the job?

The job had been offered to the previous deputy Commissioners of Police, but they declined. As you know after the takeover, Jimi Koroi went across. He was a former senior police officer before he joined the RFMF. Romanu Tikotikoca was brought in but things did not work out so they advertised the post and I applied and got the job.

So were you asked to apply or you applied because you wanted to?

I told the interim Prime Minister that I’m interested in the job and he said I could apply so I applied for the post. For me it’s looking at another opportunity ... I have been with the military for - at that time two years ago – it was thirty years and with the post being advertised, I applied and got the job.

So after you came into the job, I guess one of the first things you had to deal with was the complaint against the former PM for allegedly encouraging foreign military intervention at the height of the takeover. What is the progress of that investigation?

Yes, the complaint was lodged by the military when I was still in the military. The investigation has been completed and the case is now with the DPP and my understanding is that DPP and Director CID are consulting with each other on this case.

So it's not at a stage where charges could be laid?

That will be for the DPP and director CID to decide. The Police have not got a positive response from Interpol (in interviewing people supposedly spoken to) so I think they have decided to take whatever they have to DPP for his advice and they will continue to consult. But I can confirm investigations are ongoing.

I think you have done it all ... you were in the navy, then moved to the army and now to the police. How much of a difference is the police force?

Each service has its unique way of life, unique culture, unique way of doing things. In fact I had never thought of the way you put it ... that I have done it all ... the navy was always my career. I loved it and I enjoyed it. I served with the army but I was still a naval officer and was posted to the army headquarters. For me that was not a change because I was just moving to headquarters but there is a lot of difference coming from the military into the police. It is not so much about the way we do business but the environment and culture that exists. The culture of the military is totally different from the culture of the police and now that is one of my biggest challenges – to change the way they do business. In terms of the law and police work, it is not a problem to me because we are already guided by regulations, acts, and criminal code. For me that part was not difficult. The difficult part was getting into the organisation, the culture and the way they do business. But in terms of prosecutions and investigations, in the military we did the same. We conducted a lot of investigations when I was a young naval officer. We went to court many times, including when we arrested vessels on the high seas. So that is not new to me ... and we worked with the police. So I have that experience. When I talk about the environment in the police force, I mean the human and social environment. It's probably different. I'm referring to people who work with you and the atmosphere ... all that makes an organisation unique from another.

So when you joined the Police Force, were there any surprises or were things as you expected?

Probably my expectation was too high based on where I was coming from. I think the police at that time had no leadership ... with rapid changes in leadership from Hughes to Jimi Koroi to Romanu. This probably left the police very vulnerable in terms of leadership and providing surety to the men and women of the force. And when I came in, I had to reassure them of their positions and the organisation.

This was some of the immediate action I had to take to bring confidence back into the police force. I mean three commissioners within six months ...

This is the second time this has happened where a military officer has come in and taken over as Police Commissioner. Do you think this also has an effect on the Police Force? Well, when I came in, I was expecting resistance. I was expecting some negativity from within the force because of my military background and because of the events of December 5, 2006. When I came in, I was also stepping on some other people's shoes so I was expecting all those things.

Has that been the case?

Well that was the case when I came. I worked very hard to build up the confidence within the police. I worked very hard to try and refocus the organisation to make sure they maintain law and order effectively and professionally. It was not that easy especially within the first few months. It was obvious to me when I came over, resistance was visible. I talked to the officers and one of my challenges was to try and bring confidence to them ... that I'm here as their commissioner. I think I have managed that throughout and I think I have turned things around. I wouldn't say completely but it has turned around. My job here is - I always remind the officers, I'm not here to do police work but I'm here to ensure that we have a strong organisation and that we have a strong police force into the future. That is my main purpose.

So you feel you have turned around and gained the confidence of the force?

We are getting there. I'm gathering more momentum. I have done some changes, some radical changes. I had to do it. I had to move people around. I have made a major restructuring within the police ... totally changed the existing structure. And after the restructuring, I have moved a lot of senior people around and got a new team into place. And even now I'm still reviewing and I have continued to remind them we will continue to review our manpower landscape. My priority is to make sure that police remain effective, operational, and efficient and at the same time uplift the professionalism and standard of discipline within the force.

So because you had to do the restructuring, it was obviously a culture shock and would not have been very popular.

Yes, but it had to be done. What I was trying to tell them is the police need to change. We need to reform ... to change the culture, the mindset, and the vakavanua way we do business. Unless you change the structure and people, the change won't be effective. So that's what drives me to make the major changes and I think it's working. We have come a long way and we still continue to make changes and at the same time I'm trying to improve training and instil discipline to support the changes but we definitely need a very strong police force into the future because for me, I have realised that it is very critical for any country to have a very strong police force to be able to maintain stability in any country.

People would argue what's the point having a strong police force when the military has the arms and the power to take over when it feels things are not going the way they expect?

I think people are misreading me ... when I say a strong police force it does not mean you have to arm the police force. I mean having a strong police force by improving and

strengthening professionalism and discipline, a police force that cannot be corrupted, a police force with a high morale, for me that is a strong police force. You don't have to be armed but be a police force that responds effectively to the people. A force that is committed to its people and that is my definition of a strong police force. You don't need to be armed. You need to have strong values and strong ethics.

With the number of violent crimes today, you still feel the Police should not be armed?

No. I'm confident this is not needed and I will not support police to be armed. For the Police, arms are not their weapon. If you have a strong police force ... a police force that cannot be corrupted, has strong discipline, strong values, professionalism. For me that is enough to fight crime.

But would you decide to give a certain unit to carry arms?

I will never encourage police to be armed but I have established a Ready Action Unit to carry out specific roles that is normal police work. For example response to natural disasters, any anti-terrorist, anti-riot work ... they are trained in search and rescue, assisting the National Fire Authority, assisting probably the security at the airports. We need this special unit but I don't see them as armed. Give proper equipment to them ... right vehicle, right gear. I still believe that with the military and police working together we don't need to arm the police and I will not encourage that as long as I'm Commissioner because the RFMF is always around the corner to help us. We have developed a very good working relationship now. We have officers posted at our operations centre at Totogo. We share information; we share training so we are building our relationship ... not only with the military, but also with immigration, customs. I'm working very hard now with other border agencies. For me once that working relationship is well established, and people trust each other, you really don't need to arm the police. The military is just a phone call away. Most of the time we share information and if anything happens, then police and military will work hand in hand.

So how does an unarmed police officer deal with violent criminals?

If we have armed violence, as I have said, we will ask the military to support police.

So if there is an increase in armed robberies, you will seek the assistance of the RFMF?

Yes, definitely and that is the reason why I mentioned that I don't really need the Police to be armed to fight armed criminals because we have the RFMF whom we are working very closely with.

After the takeover when the military was in the streets, the level of crime like home invasions and armed robberies was really down. Obviously you cannot continue to have the military in the streets, but the public perception is this.

This is how I see it ... the crime increases because the people do not have confidence in the police. That's how I see it. People are committing crimes because they know the police will not get them. They can get away. That is the reason I said we need a strong police force. When the criminals know this, they will think twice or three times before

doing it, knowing I have a very good police force in place and if I do a crime they will catch me ... and that is how I pursue how to combat crime. People outside will not commit crime because they know they have a very strong police force and for me if they commit crime because they don't trust the police force and they know the police will not respond. So my priority now is building up the police force.

What's the time scale for this to happen?

I'm looking at 2-3 years to put my plan in place. We have developed a five year plan on how to get the police into the future. And I have always reminded the police officers that if you need the crime to be reduced, the police have to be professional. My highest priority is revamping, re-energising, transforming and modernise the police force. Once that is done then people will respect the police force, they will have confidence in the police force and then people will not commit the crime. We want people to have confidence in the police. To come and report whatever they see. And this for me is the best way to fight crime.

This plan will take 3 years to be put in place but in the meantime home invasions, violent robberies will continue ...

We are doing other aspects of policing - community policing, liaising with other stakeholders. I'm not ruling that out but what I'm trying to emphasise here is an effective force will take care of the crime.

When you came in, did you find the police force very politicised?

It was heavily politicised. And again that is one of my challenges ... to try and change that mindset and even now, it is an ongoing battle. When I came in I was expecting some resistance because even before I came in, I knew the police was already politicised. They were so much involved with the SDL. My challenge is for the police to focus on their work.

Is racism a problem in the Police Force?

It is an issue – there have even been unsigned letters calling me a racist - but I have called together all my senior officers and told them I will not tolerate racism. There will be no race or cultural issues in the force – we must be professional and judge everyone purely on performance. I want the best person for the job. We are all police officers.

What is the level of corruption?

I cannot give any exact figure but I can say when I came in it was quite high. This year we have received reports of some corrupted officers. I have sacked over 10, mostly in middle management. And that I will never tolerate ... corrupted police officers. I continue to receive reports but reports that we will substantiate, I will take action.

It's not endemic?

No, I won't say it's endemic and I think the mindset is changing. People are coming around. People are more committed to work. I think they understand where I'm coming from ... that I'm here to rebuild the effort to need to take the organisation forward. I think they have come around to realising that.

What is the light at the end of the tunnel for them?

I think they have seen that light we trying to get to. We trying together to build this organisation into the future to become a highly respected disciplined and professional organisation.

But the ordinary guy wants money and better working conditions. For him that is the light at the end of the tunnel.

That is part and parcel of rebuilding and reforming the organisation. We are not ruling that out. We have discussed the service conditions. We have discussed allowances. We are also looking at improving infrastructure, improving mobility, communication.

You have talked about restructuring. What changes have taken place?

When I came in, they were more or less operating as standalone units. They competed for the same resources and that brought in jealousy, hate and a poor working relationship among officers and that was one thing I observed. There was a lot of backstabbing, a lot of un-professionalism and I saw the need to reorganise and to make sure we work as a team. And I came out with an integrated approach. We are now integrated as one team. That's why I'm strengthening the national command centre and the command centre at each division. They share resources now, mobility ... we are looking at improving our mobility soon. They share ideas. They work together and come out with strategies on how to take the organisation forward. So it has become team work now. They are working as a team to fight crime and take the organisation forward. I have also established a logistics unit to look after our stores. That's one of the new development. They look after inventories and purchasing of uniforms. We didn't have this before.

And we looking at anything that will help the police even spiritually. That's why I brought in a padre to help me. We now have a full time padre Reverend Senimoli. He was the talatala for Muanikau and when I approached the Methodist Church, they posted him to the police.

What is your plan for improving mobility?

Cabinet has just approved the leasing of vehicles. We are looking at probably more than 10 which will be very helpful to us especially for this upcoming holiday season. What is consuming our mobility is patrolling farming areas like Muaniweni, Waibau because of a lot of crop theft in those areas.

Are you looking at changing police uniforms?

No I'm not. But for the Ready Action Force Unit, yes. I'm changing their whole uniform to camouflage. I'm going for camouflage because it's more custom friendly then the current one.

Are you working on more police posts in rural areas?

Well, only when the need arise. There are some areas where you don't need police posts. Having a lot of police posts is also a burden on the police force in terms of resources and

manpower and the cost. Normally 13 officers need to be allocated to each police post to be able to manage it 24/7.

How many officers are there in the force now?

2798 regulars and 1248 special constables.

Do you feel that is adequate?

We have done a review of our manning. We show the need to increase manning, not now but into the future. We have made recommendations to the PSC and the minister that within the next 3-5 years this is the number we need to have

Do you think there is a need to review the qualifications for recruitment?

We will maintain the Fiji Junior level for some time. But if we want people with higher education levels, then we will go for it.

Are Police and Army officers training together?

That's part and parcel of us working together. We have army officers in our national command. We have army officers in our ready action unit and we have joint training. I have five police officers who have graduated from the Army Training School at Vatuwaqa. So we have a lot of exchange in that area. We also share information.

How many senior army officers have you brought in since you have come into the Police Force?

None. What I have done is when I need assistance in certain areas then I go to the military. But we have some senior officers who are around with us and helping us.

How difficult is it being on the other side for the Sukuna Bowl?

Well, you have to understand I was a military man all my life so it's not easy. But the good thing is I see myself as the winner whichever side wins now. But I do warn the Police side not to under-estimate the Army side and their strength when they put on the Army jumper – that is the loyalty of the men to the institution.

The Police Force has acquired prime real estate at Selbourne Street to build its new HQ. How did you secure this land when it was earlier given to the provinces for the multi-storey Bulacakau project?

I don't know. The only thing I know is the land now belongs to the police and it will house our new police headquarters. It will be good for us. Very convenient, it's close to Totogo. Totogo, we are turning it into our national command centre. And the HQ will be where the Special Branch and corporate services will be and Totogo will be the operational headquarters.

Do you think Fiji needs to beef up its intelligence services? We used to have the Fiji Intelligence Service?

We have the special branch, we have the military intelligence and I think the ministry is working to strengthen intelligence at ministerial level ... not maybe having a full fledged

service like FIS. I suspect it will be within the ministry. I think there is a team working on that.

What do you hope to achieve as Police Commissioner and how long do you expect to stay in this role?

The duration of my stay here will depend on the almighty. To be honest I really don't know how long I will be here. I have been telling a lot of my friends that the Almighty has brought me here and if the Almighty thinks I have finished my business, he will move me on. But for how long I stay here, I don't know.

What about politics, has the thought crossed your mind?

No, probably because I love my work. I loved my work in the Military, I loved being in the Navy and now in the Police force. I don't think I will make a good politician.

What drives you in life?

I enjoy life. I take whatever comes my way as a challenge and a calling from God. And I always give it my best shot. On a personal level, all I want is for me and my family to have a good life.