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“I was appointed by the Almighty to be Prime Minister”: The Rise of Conservative Religion and Jamaican Foreign Policy under Portia Simpson Miller

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Jamaica’s Sunday *Observer* of April 2, 2006 proclaimed “Pastors to run state boards. Portia wants central role for church in state affairs”. The story detailed the new Prime Minister’s announcement at a Seventh Day Adventist Church service, of her intention to instruct Cabinet that every board must be chaired by a pastor. The story also noted the Prime Minister’s new-found spiritual thrust that was first highlighted by a stirring prayer at the beginning of her first speech following her inauguration, and reported her stated intentions to align the church with national development, and her claim that only through prayer could the nation be healed. The following day’s news media reported that Simpson Miller had spent her first Sunday as Prime Minister at church pulpits, proclaiming that the Almighty appointed her Prime Minister, and urging Christians to join her on a crusade to change the country.

Jamaica’s new Prime Minister appears to be astutely aware that there has been a sharp increase in religiosity in Jamaica. In 1998 the national census reported that 76% of Jamaicans identify with the cause of the Church. There has been an exponential increase in the number of churches in Jamaica since the 1970s. The number of denominations registered grew from 92 in the 1970s, to 169 in the 1980s, to 286 in the 1990s. By 1999 there were 606 denominations—coming from an original ten denominations in 1865—and the majority, if not entirety, are new evangelical churches.

But Jamaica’s religious-political dynamic contains significant paradoxes. The large and growing fundamentalist evangelical Christian population holds many similar positions to their U.S. counterparts, who they are also often linked with organizationally and financially, as well as doctrinally. These churches in Jamaica, as in the U.S., are very conservative—they are anti-homosexual, anti-abortion, and pro-Israel. While political scientist Professor Trevor Munroe argued in 1999 that the Church has been either silent or relatively ineffective as a national force on the main issues of the day, they hold tremendous tacit political power because of their numbers, and their perceived role as moral leaders in the society. It would be imprudent to ignore the strong possibility that these religious groups could, simply because of their sheer numbers, exert pressure in a

certain policy direction. This possibility appears not to have been ignored by the Simpson Miller. Moreover, preliminary results from a survey I am conducting among UWI (Mona) undergraduates shows a strong consonance between their self-stated moral and religious values and those of U.S. Republican voters. UWI students are not merely future voters—they are future decision-makers.

The paradox lies in the fact that Caribbean leaders have traditionally aligned themselves with the Democratic Party and the Democrat-dominated Congressional Black Caucus. The usual knee-jerk anti-Republicanism in the region has been magnified lately with the fallout following Aristide's departure from Haiti in February 2004—which the US claimed was their helping him escape, and English-speaking Caribbean leaders appear to believe was a kidnapping as part of a typical US-engineered overthrow—and is in keeping with the growing anti-American trend in the broader Latin American-Caribbean region.

But there is obviously a disconnect between the moral values Caribbean people claim they hold, and the traditional political alignment of the Caribbean with the Democratic Party, which tends to be pro-abortion rights, and pro-gay in the legislation it supports. Indeed this could be seen as merely a corollary of what the March 25, 2006 issue of *The Economist* pointed out as the divide between African-Americans' values—which are overwhelmingly conservative and hence Republican—and the values underlying the votes and decisions of African-American members of Congress. That anomaly was made clear in the re-election of George W. Bush to the U.S. presidency in November 2004, which was a result of the unprecedented turnout of fundamentalist/evangelical Christians to the polls. The support of African-American conservative Christians was significant among the evangelical swing-voters who have been credited with Bush's victory. The Republican Party, having recognized the connection and the possibilities, is right now actively courting African American voters and candidates, apparently with considerable success.

The prospects for Prime Minister Simpson Miller's religious zeal and her domestic policies will not be that interesting. Jamaica already contains a strong de facto Christian basis to the state that is manifested in virtually every action carried out at state level. Church services are held to commemorate state agencies' anniversaries and to launch government programmes and activities. The annual National Prayer Breakfast, where political and church leaders come together to discuss issues of national concern and to pray for the island, is a widely covered event. She is likely to uphold the legislative status quo of anti-homosexual, anti-gambling and anti-abortion laws. This overarching state-endorsed Christianity assists in ensuring social consensus and provides an uncontested web. There isn't that much to change beyond heightening the rhetoric, which the Prime Minister has already begun.

What this will mean for Jamaica's relations with the U.S., however, will be intriguing. While Simpson Miller will easily balance populist rhetoric and conservative values at home, she is likely to find a number of contradictions when it comes to being realistic

about who Jamaica's true ideological allies are in the U.S. halls of power, and the People's National Party's long-standing political alignment with the Democratic Party. Portia's "crusade" might find it bears more than merely rhetorical posturing with Bush and the Republican Party's own current "crusade" at home and abroad.