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### **POST-MORTEM ON JAMAICAN ELECTIONS**

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The recent elections in Jamaica raised interesting questions on a number of issues ranging from observer missions, low voter turn-out, Doctor politics, female leadership, ideology and religion.

#### **OAS Observer Mission**

Dr. Mark Kirton, Lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, had a first hand perspective on the elections in his capacity as a member of the OAS Electoral Observer Mission which monitored the elections between August 30<sup>th</sup> and September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Electoral observer missions can only monitor elections at the invitation of the government of the country where the elections are held. Civilian groups do not have the legitimacy to take it upon themselves to do so. They can be expelled as noted in the 1980s under Burnham when a civil society organization went to Guyana without invitation but was politely asked to leave.

According to Dr. Kirton, a major objective of the OAS mission was to observe the behaviour of the participants in the electoral process to ensure that it was consistent with electoral rules enforced in the island which insists on honesty, impartiality and reliability in the electoral machinery. The OAS was well-received by all sectors of Jamaican society which believed that the mission would lend confidence and legitimacy to the electoral procedures if an international interest monitored the event. Moreover, they mirrored Dr. Kirton's vision of a more sustained role for the OAS in implementing post-election development policies in the countries where they operate.

The Jamaican elections were hotly contested between the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) led by Bruce Golding and the People's National Party (PNP) headed by the incumbent, Portia Simpson-Miller, amongst sixty constituencies with an electorate of 1.3 million. There were 6,380 polling stations throughout the country with 803,000 voting which constitute 60.8% of the electorate. Ultimately, the JLP captured 33 seats and the PNP 27.

Contrary to allegations of irregularities from defeated Prime Minister, Portia Simpson-Miller, Dr. Kirton affirms that the electoral machinery was well-structured without evidence of disenfranchisement or violence. The officials of the Elections Office of Jamaica (EOJ) ensured that the rules of the process were followed. For example, when voters failed to produce identification cards, they were allowed to vote by producing bio-data such as finger-printing and personal background information under oath. Interestingly, party agents were allowed to sit in the polling stations to witness these

proceedings, some even wearing the T-shirts with the official colours of the party they represent.

Dr. Kirton notes that Jamaica displayed not only a high level of organization in its election machinery, but was also quite advanced in technology in employing the Electoral Voter Identification and Ballot Issuing System (EVIBIS) which is a computerized method of verifying fingerprints, similar to those used by immigration officials in the United States. Though these were only dispatched to 100 voting stations in Jamaica, because they are new and expensive, he suggests that this can be replicated by other CARICOM member states to add confidence to the electoral process in areas where the electoral machinery has been challenged in the past.

### **Low Voter Turn-Out**

The pattern of low voter turn-out should be one of concern since it seems to be a trend of both the developing and developed world. Studies reflect an average of 48.3% voter turn-out for the United States and 57.3% for France. Similarly, statistics for Jamaica average 58.5 %, St. Lucia 59.9% and Trinidad and Tobago 66.2%. These statistics discount the argument that “heightened sensitivity [to economic conditions] affects fluctuations in voter turnout and voter choice across developing democracies. Economic downturns result in increased voter participation as lower status voters express their grievances at the polls. This seemingly benefits political parties and coalitions with expressly working-and lower-class appeals. The consequent logic of this argument is that frustrations and resentment against government policies tend to run high in the less developed countries, hence voter turn-out may be higher in the attempt to oust unpopular incumbents.

What then, accounts for this trend of low voter turn-out in both the developed and developing countries? It may be attributable to a general apathy sweeping through the global electorate as a result of a lack of confidence in the state and structures of government. It may also be due to the failure of the young and/or grassroots electorate to identify with government, country and leaders, perceiving themselves as far removed from these in their perception that electoral participation is a bourgeois phenomenon. This is substantiated by Dr. Kirton’s Jamaican experience when he questioned a group of young non-voters on why they are not voting. The response implied that they saw voting as elitist, “not for Jah”.

Even so, the economic argument may hold to some extent in the Jamaican context. Although Golding claimed that his party was dead center, his proposed policies had a distinct socialist bias, clearly appealing to the masses of poor in rural Jamaica. Yet, economics alone can hardly explain the ability of the JLP to wrest power from the PNP after 18 years.

### **Doctor Politics and “The Portia Factor”**

Undoubtedly, what Professor Selwyn Ryan calls “The Portia Factor” had a significant role to play in the PNP’s defeat. While one would be inclined to sympathize with the first female Prime Minister of Jamaica and the obstacles she faced as the leader of a male- dominated Caribbean island, one cannot subscribe to the view that she was

rejected because she is female. Indeed, she would hardly have gotten so far as a man, given her lack of competence and grace. Moreover, though ostensibly she came across as a brilliant orator as was evident at the recent DC summit, it was often difficult to understand her argument in her many flamboyant speeches. This combined with her poor performance at public debates suggest that Jamaicans still hold “Doctor Politics” in high regard and that intelligence and intellect are timeless virtues.

Even after the recount, Portia spurns the olive branch offered by the statesman-like Golding who has been reaching out to all Jamaicans, irrespective of political affiliation to join him in a new project of good governance. Such arrogance reflects the attitude of many in the PNP who believe that Jamaica belongs to them. The PNP is strong, an enviable strength with the comrades extremely devoted to the party. However, it would appear that for them, it is party first, self second and Jamaica last. Firm in the belief that they “own” Jamaica and that Jamaica is there for them, it has become difficult for them to accept defeat and assume their role as the Opposition. They believe that what is rightfully theirs has now been stolen from them. In the face of such perceived arrogance and widespread corruption and complacency, it is surprising that the PNP lost by a mere 3000 votes.

### **Bling Bling Gospel**

Another possible and somewhat unexplored explanation for the PNP’s defeat may be found in the “Bling, Bling Gospel” syndrome in which Portia is steeped. An extension of George Bush and the Christian Right in the United States, this new trend in Jamaican (and Portia’s) religiosity could be part of a global pattern of the desecularization of the state which has reached the Caribbean, also touching Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. Upon her inauguration in 2006, Portia announced that she was “appointed by the Almighty” and continued to tout an evangelical Christian ideology throughout her short reign.

In her recent presentation at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Montreal, Canada, Dr. Diana Thorburn, Lecturer in International Relations at UWI, Mona, noted that “Mrs. Simpson Miller, announcing a variety of plans to “align the [Christian] church with national development,” instructed the Cabinet that every state board must be chaired by a pastor, claiming that only through prayer could the nation be healed. These types of pronouncements have continued throughout her tenure, so far and in fact have extended to her association with one Pastor Phinn, a “prophet” who claimed to be able to foresee her election victory in the upcoming national elections”.

Clearly, Pastor Phinn misled Portia into becoming over-confident about her impending victory. The new church seeks to usurp the older mainline churches which in the Jamaican and Caribbean contexts are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Moravian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist and Congregational, many of which have not taken favorably to the onslaught of “Bling Bling Gospel” which threatens to steal their respective congregations and ideology.

But Portia is not alone in this 21<sup>st</sup> century “megatrend” of a global resurgence of religion at the leadership level. Bruce Golding also repeatedly invoked God at his

inauguration, and two of the entertainment acts were rousing gospel performances. He had also attended church on the Sunday before.

Whether such evangelical religiosity will inform his domestic and foreign policies in the next five years, is left to be seen.

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