



## **The World Today**

### **ON MANIFESTOS AND FOREIGN POLICY**

**DR. INDIRA RAMPERSAD**

**Alumni, The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations**

The battle drums of elections 2007 are rolling in Trinidad and Tobago and platform politics have become more aggressive than ever. Amidst the bacchanalia and intense mudslinging, the manifestos have only been given peripheral attention by the respective parties as reflected in the fact that they were all launched just over a week before the election date. It seems that the leaders themselves do not believe that manifestos have any significant impact on voting patterns and that character-bashing and personalized politics are more influential. Some political scientists affirm that manifestos in Trinidad and Tobago are routine presentations, even collectors' items, destined to collect dust in some backroom book-shelves before being discarded at Christmas cleaning.

While domestic issues are given ample attention in the manifestos with considerable focus on crime, rising food prices, reduction in vat, pension, gender equality, public transportation, tertiary education, health, energy and tourism, they barely touch on foreign policy. International relations appear almost as an afterthought, in their final pages, emphasizing in a broad sweeping manner, the commitment to regional cooperation; honoring international convention and treaties; maintaining good relations with Latin neighbours; and promises to strengthen our island's position in regional and multilateral fora such as CARICOM, the OAS and the UN.

This marginalization of a foreign policy agenda in the election manifestos should come as a surprise in this era of globalization, when national economic and social barriers are supposed to be blurring and the world is now frequently labeled as a global village. However, even though they do not feature prominently in the manifestos, it seems that the leaders of the respective political parties have recognized the need to underscore certain pressing international issues which constitute integral components of their national agenda.

On the other hand, foreign policy issues are hardly mentioned in the election platforms. One manifesto mentions climate change and energy policy, albeit in vague terms. These issues touch the very lives of Trinbagonians on a daily basis. Last Sunday, the *Trinidad Guardian* carried a story reporting that the effects of global warming may have reached the shores of T&T. It continues that "the Meteorological Office has noticed that over the

last two to three years, maximum temperatures have risen, in some cases from 33 degrees Celsius to 36 degrees Celsius” (*Sunday Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> Oct, 2007). Another article in the same newspaper, affirms that climate changes spurs early dengue warning and ‘is deadlier to Caribbean people than previously thought.’ Today, Trinbagonians feel the impact of an extremely hot climate and increased rainfall with the ripple effect of flash-flooding and higher food prices. Yet, global warming and climate change have not featured as subjects worth mentioning in the election platforms.

The increasing international price of oil and the repercussions for the national economy have not surfaced as a topic of election priority either. With oil price now soaring to US\$92 per barrel, the potential for national growth and development is enormous if the surplus is channeled in the right direction. None of the manifestos outlined a plan for this surplus revenue. Neither have they addressed the theme of sustainable growth and development which seems to be burning on the current international agenda. Also absent are volatile issues like immigration, remittances, deportation of criminals and international security - particularly as the latter relates to regional terrorism and drug-trafficking. Given that drug-trafficking has been identified in the election platform as a major source of domestic crime, it is rather strange that it has not appeared in the manifestos.

Traditionally, foreign policy has never been foremost in the minds of most local electorates. In the United States, it takes wars in the dimensions of Vietnam and Iraq to impact on domestic voting patterns. Some political scientists contend that the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and its continuing controversial presence there led to the Republican defeat in the Congressional elections last November. In the same vein, a number of analysts now forecast that the current war will also heavily impact on the results of the forthcoming 2008 General Elections in the United States.

Yet, even in the United States, foreign policy is hardly affirmed as a significant factor impacting on election results. Some attribute this to a general ignorance on the part of the U.S. electorate on international affairs. Studies before 9/11 found that only about 20% of Americans followed foreign news and that most American knew little about global politics or world geography. Even after 9/11, knowledge seems woefully limited as evident in a study conducted a year after the terrorist attack that tested 18-24 year olds in nine countries with 56 questions about world geography and 8 questions about world affairs. The study found that the percentage of correct responses by Americans was next to last, with the U.S beating only Mexico amongst the nine countries sampled.

This widespread ignorance on foreign policy issues is not only a feature of the United States. The average Trinbago university student does not know the name of the current Secretary General of the United Nations, nor of CARICOM for that matter.

To what can we attribute this lack of knowledge?

Few citizens ordinarily pay much attention to international issues. Apart from a generally small “attentive public”, interest on international issues is negligible. Crisis issues such as 9/11 and the War in Iraq may draw more public attention. Ordinary citizens are usually removed from foreign policy especially “pure foreign policy” which has little or no immediate impact on the population as opposed to “intermestic policy” - a confluence of domestic and international policy which has an immediate and obvious impact on the daily lives of citizens.

Nonetheless, Trinidad and Tobago is a special case. Here, the electorate does not generally vote on substantial issues - neither local nor international. Should a survey be undertaken on the number of Trinbagonians who have actually read the manifestos and by extension, to what extent will that impinge on their choice of a party or candidate, the percentage would be very small.

After all, why focus on serious issues when the mud-slinging, name calling, character-bashing and tribalism are so much more juicy and delicious? As one 76-year-old citizen honestly admitted: “I don’t like Saturdays too much. They don’t have enough political bacchanal on the TV and radio as during the week”.

It is no wonder then, that third parties which purport to be issue-oriented, have had such limited success in the past, not just in Trinidad and Tobago but in other Caribbean countries and North America as well. The bottom line is that “ole talk beats issues anytime” - a lesson which all political parties - old and new - seem to have learnt all to well.

**Dr. Indira Rampersad is an alumni of UWI’s Institute of International Relations. She is currently a Lecturer in Political Science/International Relations at UWI, St. Augustine.**