Republic of Mauritius

Mauritius: Governance Challenges in Sustained Democracy in a Plural Society

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1. Introduction

When the World Bank published its report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* in November 1989, it highlighted the concern for a more determinate role of the state to manage structural economic changes it was proposing. Good governance has not always been associated with democracy in the mind and discourse of all its proponents. For those, the concept means the way in which state power is used to manage economic and social resources for development. It involves capacity to define and implement well thought-out policies, develop efficient management, ensure efficient market functions, avoid misallocation of funds, and adopt an appropriate framework and environment for private entrepreneurial activities. The concept itself and the content of the policy are imposed, more often than not, from outside, and the latter has become prescriptive and regulative. In the post war period, the countries that have managed to move along a sustained growth path have undoubtedly been under governance good enough to ensure national accumulation, even though most did not enjoy democracy nor did they achieve a desired degree of distribution. After having stated these general considerations, my presentation will focus on the state of governance in Mauritius, examine its progress and highlight the issues and challenges involved in the process.

Mauritius is credited with a particularly good record of stable and dynamic democracy. Its stability is testified by the fact that since the establishment of a parliamentary system based on universal adult suffrage in 1958, and that stability also continued to exist in the post independence period (i.e. 1968), where the people of Mauritius have enjoyed the right to elect their representatives to the national assembly through nine elections in the last forty years. The country’s dynamic democracy is demonstrated by the practice of alternation empower by political parties which was effected through the electoral process which marked a change in majority party and prime minister three times since independence. Mauritius having also managed to achieve one of the best track records in terms of economic development and the highest HDI ranking in Africa, one could conclude that it has achieved a high level of good governance.

The paper shall make a critical assessment of the state of governance in Mauritius, and will look into the issues and challenges to be met in commensurate with the aspirations for higher level of economic development and social welfare of the population.

Considering that the emergence of the forms of social organisation cannot be explained by putting them under the microscope of “voluntarism” but by analyzing the interaction of the social forces, and hence the first part of the paper briefly examines the conditions under which the early parliamentarian system and sustainable democracy developed in Mauritius. It underlines the particularity of the settler colonial set up as being a fundamental factor in the development of a “strong” settler class located in the plantation economy. It argues that the early introduction of the parliamentarian system, albeit based initially on limited suffrage, was a trade off of the colonial administration for a non-disruptive *modus vivendi* with that class. The argument is consolidated with the explanation of how the complex relations between ethnic groups and social classes have forced the expansion and consolidation of the Mauritian democracy.
Mauritius, like many island states in the Caribbean, is the product of settler colonial enterprise which traces its origin to the period of mercantilism. The plantation economy that was developed thereon was on the basis of slave labour, which was later superseded by indentured labour, where labourers were brought from India. The role of Mauritius in the colonial design is fundamental to the definition of its socio-economic and political development. Mauritius was a settler colony similar to that of South Africa and Zimbabwe. In the three cases, the settler bourgeoisie developed economic and political capacity, albeit of varying levels, but to the extent of forcing itself, to interface with the colonial power, both as an agent and as an antagonist. Mauritius did not have any other significance to the French or the British colonial scheme except strategic, i.e. serving as a critical naval base along the route to East Asia. As such, the French from 1710 established a settler community, which while enjoying the advantages of land concessions and other privileges, designed a plan to enrich itself and at the same time to provide food and support services to the French naval expeditions. In that context, the settlers developed, for its own sake, the basic instruments of governance, and its institutions such as a judiciary. When the British took over in 1810, they worked out a modus vivendi with the settler class of landed proprietors and merchants, so long as they had administrative control of the naval functions of the island.

While the colonial power accommodated the settler bourgeoisie by granting them a large degree of freedom in the management of the internal affairs of the plantation society; but it carefully and skilfully allowed room for itself to manoeuvre the emerging social forces to challenge the settlers social order as a way to maintain them at bay. At the same time, the settlers were allowed to engage in dependent accumulation, they, however, remained relatively weak because they neither could expect support from their country of origin, nor from the colonial masters unless, in the latter case, they were prepared to give in a lot to British capital. Their weakness forced a very early agrarian reform when they found themselves in financial difficulties, creating the conditions for class differentiation which led to the emergence of a small middle class and the petty bourgeoisie. The exigencies of accumulation prompted early structuring of modern institutions such as the judiciary, and financial institutions.

Thus as early as 1886, Mauritius was provided with a partly elective legislature, although franchise qualifications were made very high to ensure that it remained under the control of the settler bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, the introduction of the elective system, however restricted, opened the way for political competition. At the early stage, competition remained between factions of the ruling class, but the broadening of franchise soon became the focus of political struggle through the period leading to 1958, which was marked by the emergence of political parties representing the interests of the contending social forces. At different historical periods, those social forces adopted either ethnic or class identity. During the earlier part of the century, organised political competition came up first from the coloured middle class, and then, beginning in 1936, from the working class and small peasant farmers. In the immediate pre-independence period, political confrontation focused on the achievement of independence, with the political parties assuming more and more confused class and ethnic representations. That confusion somehow cleared up and class representation dominated the political competition of the immediate post independence period up to the early 1980s after which ethnicity dominated the political scene. It must be highlighted here that Mauritius has since the beginning of the century gradually evolved from a ranked to an unranked ethnic situation. This is in itself an indication of the degree of class differentiation that the country has undergone, accelerated by the sustained economic growth of the past two decades. The emergence of a middle class and an elite of a different ethnic group from the settler
bourgeoisie, and the political engineering of the British colonial administration led to the emergence of the state which was not oligarchic but have had the capacity and interest to exercise a certain degree of autonomy in policy formulation both for sustaining accumulation in order not to kill the goose that laid the golden egg, and to extract necessary rent to satisfy the needs and aspirations of its constituency.

2. **Civil Society**

Civil society has played and continues to play a critical role in the sustenance and progress of governance in Mauritius. This section briefly presents the profile and characteristics of that civil society, whose defining elements included the media, political parties and other organized social movements, and their interactions with the state.

Civil society, both organised and unorganised, has traditionally been vibrant and has a certain impact on the determination of the course of events and policies of state as well as non-state institutions.

The written media is a powerful institution in Mauritius, with four dailies, about ten weeklies, and a newspaper circulation ratio of 74 per 1,000 inhabitants. The two main dailies which also run their weekly editions are extremely powerful opinion makers, and this due to their perceived independence, high degree of professionalism, although they are not without their ideological biases of those of the middle class and the petty bourgeois social backgrounds of the coloured community. Scrutiny of public life, decisions and actions of the executive, and other institutions is intense, and readership is much higher than circulation.

Trade unions militancy played the same important role as in other colonies in the struggle for independence. After independence, the most important ones lost credibility having been coopted by the political leadership in power. New more militant ones emerged alongside the emergence of a leftist party, the Mauritius Militant Movement (MMM), and as a number of new challenges such as unemployment, economic crisis, and the export oriented industrialisation. Trade union militancy and its confrontation with employers became so acute in the seventies and early eighties that the state and capital had to come to terms for organised dialogue with trade unions. This dialogue which concerned both specific industrial units, sectoral issues, and national labour relations also included issues such as the annual compensation for inflation. Trade unions in this case were broadly defined and thus embraced not only blue collar workers but also white collar staff. Although in the recent years, as a result of full employment, the level of unionisation in the private sector has dropped sharply although the public service employees have remained heavily unionised.

The church and socio-religious organisations are other significant forces. The Roman Catholic church has a constituency of 33% of the population. It has played and continues to play ambiguous roles. On the one hand, it is an instrument of the white bourgeoisie and as such its role is to retard the development of the political class consciousness of the working class and, on the other, it is a strong voice and speaks out against the state particularly when Judaeo-Christian values of democracy, and humanism are threatened. Hindus formed socio-religious associations known as **baitkas** (literally, it means a sitting place) as places of congregation, of ethnic solidarity and as sanctuaries for maintaining the understanding of ancestral customs and language and the associations are institutions of resistance against colonial acculturation pursuits. These grassroots organisations have evolved into more structured nation-wide organisations which are powerful overt or covert lobbies.
Social and youth clubs abound in the rural areas and the urban high density areas. They are the daily meeting and discussion places constituting local pressure groups that cannot be ignored by political leadership. In the recent years, ‘Elderly Citizens Associations’ have emerged as another constituency. In the last few decades, a number of NGOs have emerged and some of which deal with broad as well as specific issues such as the environment, or child abuse, amongst others.

3. State of Governance in Mauritius

As the Mauritian case refers to one of democracy in a plural society, the paper also presents how political competition has given rise to a quasi consociational system. Consociational democracy is defined as one where the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society are counteracted by the co-operative attitudes and behaviour of the leaders of the different segments of the population. Being a pluriethnic society, Mauritian democracy has always functioned on the basis of the consociation model, which in terms of elections has meant alliances of parties more or less representative of ethnic constituencies. After independence electoral competition has in most cases been between two-block of alliances, which thus came out for competition on a two-cornered basis. In 1976, however, this was not the case, and the three major parties went to election separately and hence now it was a three-corned fight. The governments came out with consociational models which were adopted in all elections of 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991 and 1995 and as a result they were composed of coalition/alliance blocks.

Mauritian political scene does not tolerate political void. When, after independence, the two antagonistic parties, the PMSD and the Independence Party, came together to form the government of national unity and the move thus marked the formation an alliance between the economic and political ruling elite. Had it not been the case, Mauritius, like in other cases, could have evolved into a de facto one party state. It did not. The minority ethnic groups which the PMSD had rallied against the Independence Party quickly realised that they had been betrayed, and the working class generally realised that the alliance between the political and economic elite did not foster their interests. This was the ground from which emerged a new party, the Mauritius Militant Movement, which plays a major role in country’s politics. In 1982, the MMM came to power, winning all the seats in the general elections, but after nine months a split was created under the pressure of various social lobbies and that gave rise to the formation of a new movement party, the Mauritius Socialist Movement.

Mauritius has a track record of having a legitimately established government; its legitimacy is realized by holding regular multiparty elections. The country has since long enjoyed the basic freedoms, rights of individuals, rule of law, regular competitive elections, independent (written) media. Elections are organized in a transparent manner, and have been accepted as free and fair by all, winners and losers. Elections are managed through the electoral commission, under the direction of an electoral commissioner which is a constitutionally entrenched post. The position of Electoral Commissioner is recognized by the constitution and he/she is appointed by the Judicial and Legal Service Commission. In the conduct of his functions, the Commissioner is not subject to the authority of any person or institution. Rolls of electors are prepared by the Electoral Commission, and every year they are displayed in a public place in each constituency for public scrutiny. Electors may make representations for correction of the roll. Both the process and the results of elections confer full legitimacy to the emerging government.
Mauritius follows the sacrosanct principle of separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Constitutional provisions relating to the judiciary, the appointment and tenure of office of the Chief Justice, Senior Puisne Judge and other judges are “entrenched”. The Chief Justice cannot be removed from office unless so recommended by the Judicial Committee.

The practice of competitive elections has become so much part of the political culture that at independence, the constitution provided a position for the leader of the Opposition. The constitution further provides that the President has to consult the Leader of the Opposition on a certain number of matters, such as the nomination of the members of the Public Service Commission.

Where it concerns the supremacy of the constitution itself, parliament is empowered to alter the constitution, except that in the case of a number of entrenched clauses, such alterations would require the vote of three quarters or two thirds of all the members of parliament. For instance, a three quarter vote is required for alteration of the clauses relating to the election, tenure of office, and powers of the President, and the chapter stipulating the fundamental rights.

Section 1 of the constitution which defines the constitution as the supreme law, and section 57(2) which stipulates that “parliament unless sooner dissolved, shall continue for 5 years from the date of the first sitting of the Assembly after any general election and shall then stand dissolved” can not be altered except by parliamentary and popular consensus. In effect, section 47(3) of the constitution provides that the provisions under section 1 and 57(2) can only be altered by: (a) the proposed bill for such alteration has been submitted by a referendum to the electorate of Mauritius, and has been approved by not less than three quarters of the electorate, and (b) if, finally, that it has been supported voting by the votes of all members of the assembly.

4. Accountability and Transparency

The mechanism of accountability and a certain degree of transparency have been laid in the constitution and in the functioning of parliament.

The creation of the office of Director of Audit is provided by the constitution and is independent of the executive. It is answerable only to parliament. The department of the Director of Audit scrutinises the accounts of government and the Director gives his report, more often critical than not, to the parliament. His report is laid in parliament. It is given wide publicity by the press, and is generally an instrument of action for the opposition.

Parliament has two main avenues to force accountability and transparency. The first is the question time, as practiced in the British parliament, and the second is the Public Accounts Committee (P.A.C.). The P.A.C. is a committee of parliamentarians set up by parliament, where the opposition has the majority of the members. It is empowered to call civil servants to answer on all matters of public accounts, and it is generally the Director of Audit's report which is used as the base document. The capacity of parliament to ensure accountability and transparency on the part of the executive by way of parliamentary questions remains limited by the will of the incumbent government to provide the information. Nothing and no one can force a minister to give a reply to a question, except however by the pressure of civil society opinion which in Mauritius is of a critical consideration.
The other area where accountability and transparency remain seriously limited is that of the “quangos”, parastatals, which were fully or partly state-owned economic enterprises now transformed into private companies.

5. Issues of Governance

The parameters for economic performance have long been established and is constantly being perfected. In the past few decades, indices have been developed for measuring Human Development. But no system has yet been devised for measuring progress in governance. The difficulty being the determination of common meanings and consensus on what is to be measured.

6. The Electoral System

Mauritian elections are run on the “first three past the post” system, which is similar to the U.K system. There are twenty constituencies where each elects three members to the National Assembly. Two members are elected in the constituency constituted by Rodrigues, which is the second island of the Republic of Mauritius.

The Table showing the outcome of four of the seven post independence general elections demonstrates vividly that voting patterns are not reflected in representation in parliament. The three other elections not featuring in the Table show a similar pattern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of Votes</th>
<th>Percentage of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967 ELECTIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENCE PARTY</td>
<td>54.13</td>
<td>62.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMSD</td>
<td>43.99</td>
<td>37.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 ELECTIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMM</td>
<td>38.64</td>
<td>48.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENCE PARTY</td>
<td>37.90</td>
<td>40.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMSD</td>
<td>16.20</td>
<td>11.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982 ELECTIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMM/PSM Alliance</td>
<td>64.16</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN (IP + others Alliance)</td>
<td>25.78</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMSD</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 ELECTIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMM/LP</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSM/RMM</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Table indicates clearly that the distortions of the electoral system can result in a sizable portion of the electorate (about 20% in 1995 and 33% in 1982) being without representation in the legislature.

The most disturbing element of the system is the fact that the political swing of the electorate can result in absolute one party control of the legislature as in 1982 and 1995.

Demand for reform of the electoral system had previously come from parties more representative of minority ethnic groups, namely the PMSD and the MMM, and resisted by
those more representative of majority groups, the Labor Party and the MSM. Following the 1995 elections, debates have become more pressing for change of the system. The Labor Party, now in power, still resist, but the MSM has now publicly changed its view and has come out in support for such change.

7. **Relationship Between Central and Local Government**

Local government institutions have been well established for almost one century, and local elections in urban areas have been conducted on the basis of full adult suffrage since 1956, and that of the 1962 one was for village elections for electing village councils. All municipal and village councilors are directly elected by the electorate. Village councils are regrouped under district councils, and the district councilors are selected by village councilors. A tug of war between local and central government for control has been a constant feature of the political scene of the country in the last three decades. Control by the central government has varied in extent and intensity, going, at times, to the extreme of matters such as allocation of market stalls requiring ministerial approval.

The most important instrument of central government control is financial control. Urban councils are dependent on average to the tune of 50% on government grants, while rural councils fully depend on such grants. The determination of the grant is completely in the hands of the central government, acting through the minister of local government. There is a mechanism for the evaluation of grants required, which is done by the Local Government Finance Board. It is the minister however who determines the membership of the board. The most pernicious element of financial control is administrative. By law, the minister must approve the yearly estimates of local authorities, as well as subsequent reallocation. This also applies to capital projects by local authorities. As urban municipal councils have generally been the domain of opposition parties, the central government has often used its power to frustrate the concerned local authorities.

The second instrument is the question of control of the chief executive of local authorities. Although these officials are employees by the local authorities concerned, the council does not have the right to discipline or impose sanctions over them, as this power rests in the hands of the permanent secretary of the ministry of local government. Consequently, the chief executives of local authorities are in a situation of divided allegiance, if not actors to frustrate the implementation of local council decisions.

8. **The Role of the Audiovisual Media**

The written media mirrors the democratic and pluralistic tradition of Mauritius. There are political party papers and independent ones. Radio and television remain however a monopoly of the state, and generally a propaganda instrument of the ruling party of the day. Calls and pressure for liberalization of the audiovisual media sector, albeit controlled liberalization has in principle been accepted, its materialization has not been on the agenda to date. The national television has always been under attack by the public for being a propaganda instrument to the government of the day, for its failure to give air time to other parties, except during the elections time when they are under obligation to do so.

State bureaucracy enjoys a mixed perception in the eyes of the Mauritian masses. The recruitment of civil servants is done by the Public Service Commission (PSC), which is constitutionally independent. It is prescribed that it is legally a criminal offence to try to
influence the decisions of the PSC. The state bureaucracy was built as a strong civil service along the British model, where civil service employment meant clear career paths, insulated from lateral entry. Towards the end of the colonial period and in the early post independence period, recruitment was based more strictly on the principles of competence, and promotion on dedication. In the post independence period, the new political elite slowly but consistently maneuvered the recruitment process in favor of their ethnic constituency. By and large, the public sector has retained a relatively good level of competence, although the level of competence is generally considered to have deteriorated rather than enhanced. The state bureaucracy has largely retained a certain degree of autonomy vis-a-vis the political executive, specially given the tradition of changes in political leadership. Nevertheless, the body is not free of political patronage, clientelism and ethnic and clanish outlooks whose presence becomes none visible and pervasive in certain departments than others.

The parastatals and quangos have however been more intensely subjected to the practice of political patronage and clientelist recruitment and promotion. It is therefore not surprising that rent seeking practices have been more rife in these institutions than in the core public service itself.

The level of rent seeking practices although considered as a scourge by public opinion, have never reached a level where it has become predatory on the economic growth and the overall development of the country. Attempts at curbing corruption have not been successful because they laced commitment of the party in power which turned a deaf ear to the problem.

The last five years have seen growing expression of frustration of one section of the population whose consciousness has awakened to the fact that the political engineering of access to public sector employment, and the dispensation of economic assets such as credit, state land or taxi and other licenses through clientelism and political patronage has been contrary to an inclusive governance policy.

9. Conclusion

The examples of East Asian NICs and presently that of the People's Republic of China irrefutably demonstrate that democracy is not a precondition for economic development. However, those examples should not be brought up to advocate the need for an authoritarian state as a necessary condition for rapid economic development and the states such as that of India which provided a different model for the creation favorable conditions for fast track development. Good governance certainly is a prerequisite inasmuch as it means a non-predatory state capable of prompting and favoring national accumulation. The question is how to engineer and sustain such a state in Africa. Mauritius has managed to develop such a state system while having a vibrant democracy that evolved from its specific socio-historical circumstances.
References


