From Minority to Mainstream Politics:
The Case of Mauritian Muslims

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ABSTRACT The slow development of political consciousness among the Mauritian Muslims who immigrated mostly as indentured labourers and rose to small land-owning class in late 19th Century was articulated upon the socio-religious idioms of "*Jamaats*" and "*Umma*". Re-islamisation became the cornerstone for a rise on the socio-economic scale as well as for personal and cultural emancipation. It also marked a separate identity for Muslims, distinct from the Hindu "*Jahaji bhais*" who had shared with them the legacy of indentured labour on the plantations. Since the 1950s the Muslims realised their minority position in the country (17% of the population), and the political options opened to them: team up with the Hindu majority (50% of the population) or build alliances with other minorities to form a counter power and oppose Hindu "hegemony". Either choice made it necessary to build a strong ethnic identity so as to negotiate in strength with those who wielded power. In fact, the political system adopted in Mauritius after the second World War is Westminster style majoritarian system mitigated by elements favouring power-sharing democracy. Over the years it exacerbated ethnic, racial and cultural differences among the various groups in the Mauritian population. My observation is that although the local political system has brought political stability it has not necessarily increased democracy in the island-state. Leaning on theories of consensus democracy for multi-ethnic societies developed by Lijphart and discussed by other authors[1] I demonstrate that the power-sharing among elites, in effect, tends to reinforce majoritarian domination by an alliance of a few ethnic groups in the Mauritian context.

INTRODUCTION

Mauritius, a tiny multi-ethnic state in the Indian Ocean, has repeatedly challenged prophets of doom's predictions of chaos and exhibits a relatively stable and peaceful democracy. It offers an interesting example of the functioning of democracy by a combination of the majoritarian Westminster model and power-sharing practises among the numerous ethnic groups that make up the population.

On acquiring independence from Britain in 1968 Mauritius adopted a constitution that catered for elections by the First-Past-the-Post System (FPTP) but elements promoting consociational (power-sharing) democracy were built into the system, such as multi-member constituencies, electoral districts tailor-made for minority voting, as well as a Best Loser System of nomination for underrepresented minorities[2].

Since Independence the country has been mostly governed by a coalition of parties designed to give representation to almost every ethnic group. This rule was broken during the 1980s where majority control by a minimum winning coalition was attempted. At that time the 17%-strong Muslim ethnic group was excluded from the power structure by a then Hindu dominated government. As a response Islamic funda-mentalism made its way into Mauritian politics (Jahangeer-Chojoo 1997, 2004).

This paper looks into the political behaviour of ethnic groups in the political system of Mauritius. I analyse the local mix of majoritarian rule mitigated with consociational practices and argue that the local system is more majoritarian than concensual. I argue that the political system has greatly influenced the Mauritian society, which has become highly ethnicized and politicised despite attempts at encouraging class-based politics during two political episodes in the 1930s then in the 1970s. I make special reference to the Muslim ethnic group to analyse the changing pattern of ethnic mobilisation and voting since the 1950s. My observation is that although the Mauritian approach to politics has brought political stability it has not necessarily increased democracy in the sense that all citizens are equal before the law and have equal access to power. In fact, there is a growing current of thought in Mauritius advocating for a change in the political system to include a measure of proportionality in the electoral system. This measure might correct certain inequits of the FPTP system of election and the Best Loser System, but it is unlikely to deemphasise ethnicity

in the system. In fact, the power sharing exercise in consociational democracy is actually based on the recognition and reinforcement of ethnicity. I also demonstrate that apparent power-sharing among elites in effect, tends to reinforce majoritarian domination by an alliance of ethnic groups.

Democracy in Multi-ethnic Settings

Burton Benedict[3] (1962: 1240) wrote that "…for Mauritius… corporate groups cannot be differentiated on this basis (ethnic group, religion and language), but they sometimes serve as symbols which differentiate blocs in certain political contexts". Nearly half a century after Benedict's statement the symbolic dimension of ethnic groups based on race, religion, ancestral language has not lessened as he presumed but kept gathering strength in the context of economic development, stratification inside various groups and the reduction of cultural differences among groups due to the adoption of a common, globalised lifestyle[4]. The main reason for this is that ethnicity is highly relevant in the current political system, which favours divisive tendencies, to the detriment of federative ones. The issue of democracy in multi-ethnic settings has preoccupied many scholars. Some authors like Mill (1958)[5] thought that democracy is "next to impossible" in multiethnic societies. In contrast, power-sharing theory developed by Lijphart in1971 and 1975 holds that democracy is possible in deeply divided societies but only if their type of democracy is consociational, that is, characterized by (1) grand coalition governments that include representatives of all major groups, (2) cultural autonomy for these groups, (3) proportionality in political representation and civil service appointments, and (4) a minority veto with regard to vital minority rights and autonomy[6]. In contrast, majoritarian democracy is characterised by the concentration of power in bare-majority (in multiethnic settings the majority ethnic group), one-party governments, centralised power, a disproportional electoral system, and absolute majority rule (Lijphart 1996: 258).

This state of 1.3 Million inhabitants living mostly on Mauritius Island though two other islands are settled[7], offers an interesting field of study in democratic politics. Uninhabited previously Mauritius Island was settled by the French in the 18th Century and they imported slaves and some indentured workers worked for them. The island and its dependencies were conquered by the British in 1810, who organised mass immigration of Indian labourers when slaves were set free. In the 19th Century this island society still exhibited the typical colonial stratification where the white owners of capital and land occupied the highest rungs of the ladder and the Indians and Creoles (descendants of slaves of African and other origins) the lowest, and a small middle class made up of Coloured or people of mixed descent and some Indian trading castes occupied the middle rungs. This order was challenged in the 20th Century. The occupational structure greatly diversified and as noted by Benedict (1962: 1239) economic classes developed within ethnic categories which could be differentiated not only by income but because they adopted distinctive forms of behaviour.

Up to 1948 the British shared political power with the traditional elite consisting of White (of French and English origins - but mostly French), and to some extent, Coloured or fair-skinned Creole sections of the population. The Indian (or Indo-Mauritian) and Creole masses were largely disenfranchised through property and literacy qualifications (see Smith-Simmons 1982; Mathur 1991; Bowman 1991; Dubey 1997). The introduction of enlarged suffrage in 1948 and universal suffrage in 1956 initiated major changes among the latter. Ethnicity was instrumentalized for political gains leading to a scramble for power, especially during the 1960s.

I have retained the structural-functionalist view of ethnicity that is construed as the degree of adherence by members of a collectivity to the shared norms of the ethnic group in the course of social interaction (Cohen 1974: x). The ethnic group is understood as "a collectivity of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and form part of a larger population, interacting with people from other collectivities within the framework of a social system" (Cohen 74: ix). According to that author some interest groups exploit parts of their traditional culture in order to articulate informal organisational functions that are used in the struggle of these groups for power (1974: 91 in Eriksen 1993). In fact, ethnic groups develop and organise themselves with respect to competition of resources which finds expression in the political field (Desprès 1984). I argue that the crystallisation of ethnic groups is a dynamic

process motivated by competition for resources and power within a political system.

During the pre- Second World War years there had been some pressure at the grassroots with the creation of the Labour Party by Dr Maurice Curé, in 1936, who was trying to mobilise the working classes along class lines. This movement gained ground during the economic depression of the 1930s and clamoured for wage rise and constitutional change (Simmons 1982: 60). It however suffered reverses during the war years and by 1940 Curé had lost his popular following and a new Indian elite would take over the party and transform it " into a party for Indians rather than a party for labourers" (Curé cited in Simmons 1982: 77).

Political reforms were introduced in Mauritius as in many parts of the British Empire during the post-war years. Unsurprisingly the mode of election introduced was the FPTP system based on the Westminster model. This system of majoritarian rule affords a strong ruling majority where the winner takes a majority of seats, but has the disadvantage of leaving a large section of the population on the losing side. In a multi-ethnic society where ethnic belonging was highly emphasised as was the case in British Mauritius, this system would favour a majority ethnic group and minorities would risk to be unrepresented in the Government for prolonged periods, leading to marginalisation and instability. Aware of this risk the British tried various corrective formulae to afford representation and inclusion of minorities in the local political system. Thus power-sharing principles or a consociational type of democracy were built into the system. As early as 1945 the colonial government had instituted consultative committees with various elites to discuss electoral reforms. Boudet[8] (2003: 327) believes this to be the beginning of consociational practices in view of power-sharing among elites, which would characterise subsequent Mauritian politics. Since 1965 Mauritius adopted an electoral system with FPTP, mitigated with multi-member electoral districts and the shaping of constituencies to ensure repre-sentation of all the major groups. The consti-tuencies were drawn of varying sizes: they vary between 22 488 and 58 341 voters, (Electoral Commission 2009) to ensure representation of constitutionally recognised minorities. In addition, a Best Loser System (BLS) of nomination for underrepresented minorities was incorporated into the system[9].

Under the BLS 8 seats out of 68 are allocated to best losers from underrepresented groups in order to increase the latter's representation in the House. The ethnic groups that were officially recognised during the 1950s were: Indo-Mauritians (66%), General Population[10] (29%) and Chinese (3%)[11]. However, the Muslims agitated to be recognised as a separate ethnic group leading to the Indo-Mauritian group being subdivided into Muslim (15%) and Hindu (49%)[12] communities in 1962.

Mauritius constitutes an interesting case in point in the experiment of democracy in the context of a particular political system.

Contrasting Elements of Power-Sharing and Majoritarian Democracy in Mauritius

An electoral system was introduced in Mauritius since 1889 in the shape of the FPTP system. Restricted voting rights ensured that only the propertied classes were returned. When enlarged suffrage, giving right of vote to every adult who could read and write a minimum in any language, was introduced in 1948 the election results sent shock waves to minorities: Of the 19 elected members 11 were Hindus, returned in rural consti-tuencies, 1 was Franco-Mauritian and 7 were Coloured/Creole members, returned in urban constituencies. No Muslim candidate was return-ed despite the presence of a certain concentration of Muslim population in Port-Louis and no Chinese stood for election (Simmons 1982: 107). Class-based politics that was initiated during the 1930s was swept aside, replaced by ethnic politics. The new consti-tution forced a complete realignment in Mauritian politics (Simmons 1982: 101).

The new game of democracy made groups consider formation of parties along ethnic lines and striking pre-election alliances. The Coloured elite allied itself with the Franco-Mauritians; the Muslim commercial elite joined with them briefly to reinforce minority strength. In 1958 a group of Muslims led by Abdool Razack Mohamed, a Meimon trader, formed an exclusive party, the *Comité d'Action Musulman* (CAM). For the 1959 elections (the first after universal suffrage) they struck an alliance with the Labour Party. The LP had by now become a party strongly held by the Hindu elite, headed by Dr Seewoosagur Ram-goolam. Thus a form of power-sharing experiment was tried. The coalition game would be further extended during the 1960s to briefly incorporate

even the staunch opponents of the Labour Party in power, namely the *Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate* (PMSD) (1964), and the Independent Forward Bloc (IFB) of S. Bissoondoyal, who was opposed to the elitism of the LP. That was a case of Grand Coalition, where every party/segment as well as conflicting ideologies were taken on board. It did not last long since highly diverging opinions could not co-exist: the Independence issue divided the Labour Party and its allies who were in favour and the PMSD which was against it. Decision-making had become extremely difficult in the coalition. In fact, the majoritarian system requires an opposition to function well and the Mauritian system was a peculiar combination of both majoritarianism and consociationalism.

Post-Independence politics has also often been characterised by enlarged coalitions. Power–sharing through coalition of parties would become the most common form of government, thus in all appearance reinforcing consensus democracy. It is far from clear however, whether representation by the elites of the various groups in a power-sharing arrangement did in fact give representation to the whole population. In fact, discontent among some ethnic groups was so high during the early 1970s under an enlarged coalition that a new leftist party was formed, the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM), which captured the votes of many people from various groups.

For a brief period during the 1970s it seemed that ideological motives would influence political behaviour instead of ethnic politics. Young people became enthusiastic about socialist doctrines propagated by the MMM as well as Mauritianism and anti-communalism. That period of relative unrest was also marked by the introduction of Emergency Law and the postponement of elections from 1972 to 1976. Several political activists were jailed. The MMM was returned as a major opposition party in the elections of 1976 and for the 1982 elections it made an alliance with an offshoot of the LP, the *Parti Socialiste Mauricien* (PSM). This coalition captured all the contested seats. The socialist movement however came to an abrupt halt in 1982. Inner contradictions among members of the newly elected government erupted leading to a breakup. The MMM became a party supported mainly by minorities while most of the Hindus rallied behind the newly created party of Sir Anerood Jugnauth, the *Movement Socialiste Mauricien* (MSM).

During the 1980s Mauritius experienced a period of clear break from power-sharing methods. Majority rule was installed by the govern-ments of Sir Anerood Jugnauth. Under his governments of 1983 and 1987 a Hindu majori-tarian rule with some Creole representation was installed, ostracising the Muslims. They were being punished for giving support to the MMM. These were cases of minimal winning coalitions typical of the majori-tarian rule, where power is shared among a small number of groups. However, none of these governments completed their terms while more stable coalitions take on board all segments of the population.

In fact, the local polity has evolved in such a way that two major coalitions vie for power and each one tries to be as representative of all ethnic groups as possible to increase its chances of winning the election. Ideological differences among them are hardly perceptible. This feature tends to show that the Mauritian political system is in agreement with consociational practices. However, this would be a wrong conclusion because the electoral system is basically majori-tarian and the system that matches power-sharing democracy is the proportional representation (and not FPTP).

In fact, a major defect of the Westminster model is its winner-takes-all characteristic and this has given rise to strange political scenarios in Mauritius. In two instances the FPTP system had caused the winning coalitions to carry all the directly contested seats in the elections of 1982 and 1995, and nearly all the seats in 1992. In those instances only the Best Loser System afforded a minimal representation to some 35-40% of voters who had voted for the losing parties.

The only form of proportional representation in the Mauritian system is the Best Loser System (BLS), which allocates 11% of the seats in Parliament. The constitutions of 1958 and 1965 were fitted with this inbuilt mechanism to improve the representation of minorities. The BLS was subsequently incorporated into the post-Independence constitution. It is widely criticised because it purportedly "entrenches" commu-nalism into the Constitution (*Mouvement Anti Communalisme* (1995), Bunwaree (2002), *Resistans ek Alternativ* (2005) and others). However nobody denies the fact that at least 2 large minorities, the General Population and Muslims, are regularly underrepresented in all elections after direct polls despite the above

mentioned measures to ensure minority representation.

A more pertinent criticism of the BLS would be that the number of "recognised" ethnic groups is too limited. In fact, the number of groups has kept increasing since the 1950s with the development of consociationalism. New ethnic/ pressure groups have emerged on the basis of regional /ancestral languages (Tamils (8% of the population[13]), Telugus (3%), Marathis (2%), caste groupings: High Castes including Brahmins and Kshatriyas[14] (4%), middle castes regrouped under the Varna Vaishs (22%), lower castes consisting of Raviveds (former Chamars) (8%), and Rajputs[15] (former Dusads) (5%). Besides, the Creoles have recently been claiming for a separate appellation to distinguish themselves from other segments (Franco-Mauritian and Coloured) lumped together under the term General Population (L'express dimanche 27.4.08).

In fact, the Labour Party followed by the PMSD and the MMM have all tried to allocate representation to all segments through filing of candidates in the multimember constituencies. Since the 1950s the LP included candidates of lower caste Hindus especially as it was perceived as being dominated by upper caste Hindus (Mannick 1979:149). The Vaish movement was highly successful in the 1976 elections and began to challenge the upper castes' privileged position in the power structure (Mannick 1979:156). The latter had become upwardly mobile through positions of authority among the labourers and through education. Anerood Jugnauth's governments of 1983 and 1985 were dominated by Vaish elements supported by lower caste Hindus. By unifying these hitherto divided Northern Hindu segments he sought to exercise majority rule with the help of some Creole representation. The exclusion of the Muslims and part of the Creole minorities created such tension that a more consensual approach had to be adopted (Jahangeer-Chojoo 2004: 196).

Another essential characteristic for power-sharing democracy is the principle of proportionality in allocation of civil authority and representation of segments proportionally during the decision-making process[16]. As far as representation at ministerial and highly strategic posts levels is concerned some form of proportionality is in general respected in Mauritius. Apart from the period mentioned above, most ethnic groups are represented at ministerial level. In fact, even small minorities of 2-4% are represented by a minister from that group, which amounts to a greater proportion than their percentage in the population. However, large minorities such as Creoles and Muslims are often underrepresented at strategic posts level. In fact, it is important to analyse how ministerial posts are allocated to representatives of various ethnic groups: very often the most powerful ministries are allocated to the group that holds the dominant political position in the alliance. In general it is the Vaish group, which has also been holding the post of Prime Minister since the 1960s, except for a period of two years from 2003-2005 where Mr Paul Bérenger, a Franco-Mauritian, was PM. This shows that elites from other groups implicitly accept positions of lesser power as minor partners in the alliance where the Vaish group is the dominant partner.

As far as allocation of jobs in the governmental services is concerned the principle of proportionality is further flouted. This constitutes a strong ground of contention among ethnic groups. Prior to Independence every branch of the Civil service was dominated by the Creole/ Coloured/Franco-Mauritian segments while top positions were most often held by British civil servants. Post-independence clientelism opened the door of white collar jobs to Hindu and secondarily to Muslim elements, especially as there was an important emigration of the General Population segment[17]. In fact, education and socio-economic mobility have allowed members of most groups to enter new sectors of the economy while the expanding government sector has allowed ruling coalitions to patronise a large number of supporters. Individuals have access to much sought after government jobs if qualification requirements are met. The Government directly employs 17% of the labour force[18]. Besides, parastatal corporations and state-controlled organisms have been conveniently multiplied by each government. Their number reached 179 in 2006, which included 105 Extra Budgetary Units, 52 Non-Financial Public Corporations and 22 Financial Public Corporations[19]. Most of these organisations are headed by political nominees of the respective regimes. Besides, recruitment in these organisations follow less codified rules than in the Civil Service. They constitute fertile ground for political patronage.

To date government and parastatal sectors are widely dominated by Hindu personnel. A finer

analysis shows that the former predominance of high caste Hindus has been challenged firstly by the Vaish followed by lower castes, which have emerged strongly through political lobbying during recent elections. The Creoles are the least represented in the State services both in skilled and unskilled jobs. They have recently been mobilised and are demanding proportional representation in job allocation (Grégoire in L'Express Dimanche 27 April 2008).

The above shows that the chequered history of pre and post-Independence is far from being basically consociational or power-sharing as Sookhoo (1994)[20] proposed. Majoritarian rule underpins the Mauritian polity and comes to the fore strongly from time to time. Under the Majoritarian rule a minimum winning coalition is favoured so that the resources need not be shared among a wide array of groups (Horowitz 1998). Although the country is mostly governed by a coalition of parties that tries to give nominal representation to all ethnic groups a finer analysis of the allocation of real power among ministers and highly strategic posts shows a dominance of the Vaish group. This has been further reinforced after the elections of 2010. Allocation of jobs in the governmental sector further confirms this lack of proportionality.

It is also pertinent to ask how far incorporation of elites from various segments of the population in fact constitutes representation. In many instances self-seeking elites were largely cut off from the masses they were supposed to represent. This happened locally in the 1970s and late 1980s. In both instances new parties were formed which represented popular discontent and lack of representation by the system.

The above analysis tends to show that many characteristics of consociational democracy are not present in the Mauritian political system. The system gives salience to ethnic and cultural differences among the population. In fact, cultural differences among various groups are decreasing with the rise in social mobility and the adoption of common patterns of consumption, of material culture and attitudes. Besides, social class and education are important factors of differentiation and of status within ethnic groups. However, groups invest great effort to cultivate symbolic differences such as "ancestral" languages, rituals and customs to demarcate each group from others.

THE FORMATION OF AN ETHNIC GROUP, THE MUSLIMS[21]

By the end of the 19th Century several distinct groups of Muslims, mostly from the Indian subcontinent had settled in Mauritius. A small group of sailors (known as Lascars) had settled during the French Period, followed by indentured immigrants from the Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies (called Calcuttyas locally) as well as Gujarati traders. The latter consisted of several competing castes and sects, namely the Sunni Meimons, Sunni Surtee Vohras, and the Shi'ite Bohras and Khojas. All of these groups formed distinct social classes with linguistic/sectarian divisions. The common religion progressively became a binding force especially after the 1860s, when upwardly mobile former indentured labourers began settling in villages and building mosques. Islamization subtended the behaviour of the upwardly mobile and opened their consciousness to a larger community that went beyond the shores of the country. The Gujarati Sunni groups supported this process by helping with the construction of mosques and madrasahs and by inviting priests and preachers from the Indian subcontinent to inspire the population.

Gradually, an ethnic consciousness developed within this heterogeneous grouping where socio-economic differences were wide. The mass of Muslim Calcuttyas diverged from the "*Dahaji Bhai*" consciousness they shared with the Hindus, especially North Indian Hindus with whom they shared a language, Bhojpuri, and folk culture. With islamization they acquired and adopted the Islamic notions of "*umma*" and "*jamaat*". This diffuse type of consciousness became politically motivated during the 1940s and 1950s, with the introduction of a democratic electoral system.

The political awakening of the Calcuttya Muslims was mediated through the activism of the Meimon trading caste through the agency of an Indian religious preacher, Maulana Abdool Aleem Siddiqui. The latter spent several sojourns in the 1930s and 1940s as guest of the Cutchi Meimon Society and proselytized the Muslim masses through fiery preaching. Benedict calls this process sunnification (1961: 39). He made numerous disciples in the Quadriya Order of Sufism. A mass mobilisation was organised in 1939, on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad's birth anniversary and the Governor and

other dignitaries were invited. The charismatic preacher made several political demands that day, including a law about religious endowments and the inclusion of Muslim Personal Law into the local legal system.

While urban and rural masses in Mauritius were being mobilised along class lines Muslim masses were being incorporated by the urban elite along ethnic lines to give political force to the elite's demands. The priorities identified during the 1930s were the introduction of a Muslim Personal Law to regulate marriage and inheritance, the institution of public holidays for Muslim festivals as well as demands concerning education and commercial activities.

The religious activism of the Meimons prepared the ground for the projection of Abdool Razack Mohamed as the Muslim leader. The disciples and admirers of the maulana formed the brotherhood known as *Sunnat Jamaat* which constituted the power base of Mohamed. An exclusive Muslim party, the *Comité d'Action Musulman* (CAM), was formed in 1958. This identification of popular Sufism-based traditional Islam with the CAM would prove detrimental to it eventually as reformist ideologies were also present and growing in strength in the island, such as the Deobandi School.

As seen earlier, at the first election held after the introduction of enlarged suffrage in 1948 no candidate of Muslim religion was elected. Muslims realised their minority position and Mohamed tried to form a loose alliance with Jules Koenig, a conservative Franco-Mauritian lawyer, the founder of a political grouping that would later become the *Parti Mauricien*, in a bid to oppose Hindu majority control. Mohamed was barely elected in 1953 and he was the sole Muslim to be returned. This grim performance could only bring dismay to a Muslim population that was growingly urbanised and upwardly mobile. Fearing that forthcoming universal suffrage might further marginalise them they began to demand separate electoral rolls and recognition as a distinct ethnic group. The leaders also recognised the need to form alliances and bargain for political patronage in the new consociational arrangements. Hence a coalition was formed with the Labour Party for the 1959 elections. The LP, for its part, had to enlarge its power base and show that it was not a party for Hindus only. It had Independence as its objective and had to enlist support from every ethnic group. The 1957

constitution had divided the country into 40 single-member constituencies and the CAM returned five candidates for the first time and shared in the (albeit limited) exercise of power with the LP. Ramgoolam became Chief Minister in 1961 and the Muslims were officially recognised as a separate "community" for the census exercise of 1962.

As the masses became more politically conscious through elections more pressure/ethnic groups developed among Hindus to demand representation and patronage from the High Caste and Vaish dominated LP. Similarly, CAM was rocked by factionalism. Reformist ideologies gathered strength during the 1960s, and Mr. Ajam Dahal became their political mouthpiece. He broke away from the CAM and formed another party, the *Muslim Democratic League*. Meanwhile, Koenig's *Parti Mauricien,* strongly opposed to Independence, was instilling the fear of Hindu domination and was making headways into the Creole and other minorities. It also began to exploit cleavages among Hindus, along regional (Tamils, Telugus) and caste lines (lower castes), and among Muslims. Ajum Dahal's faction joined the PMSD. Ramgoolam tried to form a large coalition to include all groups for the crucial election that would bring independence in 1967. That coalition did not last long, as seen earlier.

The Independence Party (consisting of LP, CAM, IFB, Hindu Congress, a short-lived grouping led among others by Anerood Jugnauth, future PM) won the elections of 1967 with 56% of votes and 62% of seats, while the PMSD had obtained 44% of the votes and only 37% of seats. Muslim opinion was largely divided on the issue of Independence and the fear of Hindu domination had swung a section in favour of the PMSD. Only one CAM candidate was returned and Abdool Razack Mohamed was beaten but had won enough votes to be returned as Best Loser. The role of the CAM as a Muslims' party/pressure group led by an acknowledged Muslim leader was coming to an end. It would be swept away during the 1976 elections.

During the 1970s the Muslims inaugurated a new phase in their political evolution: that of integrating a national party. They began to give support to the leftist party that was newly formed by a group of young people of various ethnic origins, the MMM. This party advocated for socialism and all-inclusive Mauritianism. It appealed to the working classes and minorities

who felt wary of Ramgoolam's long (from 1961 to 1982) rule. The Muslims overwhelmingly supported the new party and paid a price for their political choice when the competing coalition led by Aneerood Jugnauth was returned in 1983 and 1987. The latter broke away from Ramgoolam's practice of consensual politics to install majority control. The majority was formed by the Vaish and lower caste Hindus associated with the PMSD's section of the General Population. During that period the Muslims were largely denied jobs in the Civil and parastatal Services and those already employed felt discriminated against for promotions. The Muslims greatly resented this marginalisation.

This period was marked by the rise of various Islamist ideologies, advocating for a return to the fundamentals of Islam, including its political principles. Practice of religion stepped up among all the various ideological shades and a new mosque-building phase was initiated. Competing ideologies mutually excluded one another and quite a few factions developed. "Political discontent, articulated through the collective feeling of victimization, was directed into religious reforms and Islamic revivalism", wrote Hollup, 1996 (p. 289). In fact, this could be an explanation for the rise of funda-mentalism although influence of external events and religious activism of foreign Islamic states/organisations may have helped the process[22].

One of the factions was the *Hizbullah* (meaning Party of God) which developed into a political party and stood for elections in 1991, in a Muslim-dominated constituency. No Hizbullah candidate was voted in then but in the 1995 elections a religious functionary was returned as Best Loser. That group has changed its name and is now known as *Front de Solidarité Mauricienne,* and its leader, Mr Celh Meeah, has been elected in the 2010 polls. He has reduced his former rhetoric of "infidel" political institution and wants to function in the electoral system reputedly to work for the poor and downtrodden. A fraction of about 36% of the electorate in the Muslim majority constituency of Port Louis gave support to that party which was active in social work at grassroots level in that area, while the rest of the votes were split between the two contending coalitions.

In fact, during the late 1990s the pattern of voting of the Muslim electorate has shifted markedly. From overwhelming support to the MMM it has now split votes between the two major coalitions, one headed by the Labour Party of Dr Navin Ramgoolam and the other by the MMM led by Paul Bérenger. The 1990s were characterised by a return to a more inclusive democracy in Mauritius and the majority of Muslims felt less discriminated against. In fact, by splitting votes among the contending coalitions they ensure a measure of representation whoever wins the elections. This policy is more astute than that of strong support for one party. In fact, it is followed by almost every ethnic group, large or small, as a way to participate in (albeit a little) power-sharing. This pattern of voting has been repeated in the 2010 elections, which saw Dr N. Ramgoolam returned to power for the third time.

We may therefore distinguish different periods / phases in the evolution of ethnic group consciousness and political behaviour among Muslims in Mauritius. This can be periodized as follows: diffuse communal phase before the 1940s; primitive communalism phase with the creation of and support to an exclusive party from the 1950s to late 1960s; followed by a national party phase between the 1970s and early 1990s. A fundamentalist phase can be recognised for a section of the Muslims. At present, their pattern of voting favours the splitting of votes, between the two contending coalitions. Does this mean that ethnic consciousness has reduced among Muslims? I would not assert that although the political discourse of politicians and opinion leaders has changed from the former obsession of building Muslim unity, (or at least a semblance of it) towards an acceptance of political diversity. The sense of ethnic belonging to the group has not, for that matter, diminished. In fact, the political system encourages factionalism inside ethnic groups with elites bitterly fighting to ensure a maximum support from members of the group so as to be a in a better position to bargain for power with the coalition heads.

This case study shows that ethnic group formation and evolution is highly dynamic and responds to economic, social and political situations in the country as well as the way other groups are evolving. This pattern is far from singular: many ethnic / pressure groups tend evolve in the same manner, especially among the Indo-Mauritians. There are indications that the General Population group might follow a similar pattern of ethnicity in the coming years.

Perhaps one advantage of the political system in Mauritius, as pointed out by Owolabi (2006: 30)[23] is that shifting party alliances as practised

since Independence reduces the tendency of the electorate to organize itself into permanent ethnic voting blocks. Hence, both contending coalitions can hope to capture the votes of almost every ethnic group in presence. However, this type of *realpolitik* arrangement hardly brings more democracy in the thinking or practice of the average citizen.

LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY AS OBSERVED IN MAURITIUS

A major criticism of consociational democracy is that incorporation of ethnic groups does not really spell democracy in the sense of giving equal rights and opportunities to people[24]. In fact, this political system favours groups instead of individuals. It is also criticized for supporting elite predominance and ignoring the role of non-elite groups. In Mauritius this feature is all important and elites within the same group compete fiercely to acquire coveted positions and favours. As a consequence the Civil Service and other state-controlled departments have become struggle grounds for pressure groups and factions for the allocation of posts. The individual merit, qualifications and competence of candidates rate low. This results in gross inefficiency, strife and power struggle in the government departments. Besides, at each change in government most politically appointed officials are sacked to make way for the new government's protégés, which often paralyses institutions. The magnitude of the public sector in the economy and society further reinforces ethnicism in the job market.

It must be pointed out that the success of the Mauritian political system in achieving relative stability and peace can be imputed to a (largely) booming post-independence economy and an expanding government sector. Education and socio-economic mobility have allowed members of most groups to enter new sectors of the economy while the expanding government sector has allowed it to patronise a large number of supporters. To those at the lowest rungs of the ladder enlarged social security benefits are granted by each government.

It can be argued that after decades of power-sharing practices groups have become astute in negotiating their votes against resources. This feature empowers groups and not individuals. Personal initiatives and expression are not given due recognition and encouragement. Lijphart's assumption that in plural societies the stakes of politics are much higher than in homogenous societies is especially true for Mauritius. Besides, consociationalism tends to overemphasise ethnic/sectarian identity to the detriment of national identity. One feature of ethnicity is that each group cultivates the aspects that distinguishes it from the next one and under-emphasises the similarities or common patterns. We have seen the paramount importance given to religion among the Muslim ethnic group and also cleavages that developed along sectarian / religious ideological differences. Increased religiosity is also a feature of all other religious groups and state patronisation through subsidies to religions further enhances political incorporation of religions. Common features are de-emphasised and differences erected and cultivated.

After 40 years of independence no strong sense of national identity has developed in this state. Despite the adoption of a globalised way of life by practically every Mauritian which tends to attenuate cultural differences, ethnic barriers have not weakened. In fact, Mauritians share a *lingua franca*, common food, dress style and share broadly common social norms, values and attitudes. Eriksen (1988: 50) thought that cultural differences were decreasing in Mauritius, although social ones might not be. He argued that growing areas of shared meanings have resulted from ethnically neutral recruitment in industrial and tourism sectors, universal practice of Kreol language and a common lifestyle (1988: 209-213). Hence the construction of a national identity would be in the making. However, we may observe that successive governments formed on a power-sharing basis have further emphasised ethnic differences, for instance by building Cultural Centres for each ethnic/ethno-linguistic group rather than national institutions or symbols. The continued exclusion of Kreol, the language spoken by the majority of the population from official recognition is another case in point while the promotion of so called ancestral languages is favoured.

Several authors as well as Civil Society groups have, in recent years, criticised the political system. Callikan (2001: 116) questions democracy as practiced in Mauritius and notes the non-existence of a national identity, of the prevalence of communal arrangement in parties and communities, all of which being legitimised by

the constitution. She argues rightly that a sense of citizenship cannot develop in these circumstances. In a similar vein, Bunwaree (2003: 2) deplores the absence of a sense of Mauritianness which renders the island State fragile and vulnerable. For her part Simmons (1982: 200) emphasised the need for peaceful resolution of conflict and implicitly concurred that a multiethnic polity can hardly ask for more, while Carroll and Carroll (1999) believe that democracy in Mauritius can be consolidated by incorporation of marginalised groups.

There seems to be a general feeling that a combination of some proportional mechanism with FPTP system of election would take care of minority representation (Sach report, 2001; Electoral Reform. Moving towards an inclusive Democracy, 2006). This would remove the BLS and all reference to ethnic groups in the constitution. Some political thinkers advocate in favour of the maintenance of the BLS because it has done good service in reassuring minorities by ensuring them adequate representation. In the 2010 elections, both contending coalitions promised reforms of the electoral system in their programmes while a group, the *Resistans ek Alternativ,* successfully campaigned against mention of candidates' ethnic group while registering as a candidate. A pertinent question would be: will removal of the BLS stop ethnic voting in elections and promote Mauritianism? According to Horowitz (2003: 2) no electoral system simply reflects voter preferences or the existing pattern of cleavages in a society or the prevailing political party configuration. Every electoral system shapes and reshapes these features of the environment and each does so in different ways.

I believe that the crux of the electoral matter lies in the distribution of the population and the configuration of the electoral constituencies. I pointed out earlier that the large minorities of General Population and Muslims are regularly underrepresented after direct elections. These segments are highly urbanised, with a concentration of their population in a few constituencies. On the other hand the Hindu electorate is spread in villages and urban areas and can influence the votes in a large number of constituencies. As a result coalitions tend to file Hindu candidates of the various denominations and subgroups in all rural and semi-urban constituencies, and this often favours an overrepresentation of Hindu representatives in the parliament. This feature allows the politically dynamic Vaish (22% of the population and the largest Indo-Mauritian group), to patronise smaller Hindu minorities in a non-egalitarian relationship, and strike alliances with non-Hindu minorities to achieve power. Therefore electoral reforms should be accompanied with a reshuffle of electoral boundaries in order to change entrenched patterns of political thinking and behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The Mauritian political system is basically majoritarian but contains some inbuilt mechanisms that promote power-sharing practices among the various ethnic groups. Since Independence the polity has fluctuated between large coalition governments, which incorporated members from almost every ethnic group, and minimal winning coalitions where large sections of the population remained unincorporated in the power structure. The latter scenarios generated instability, the rise of fundamentalism and disruption while the enlarged coalition governments generally promote stability.

The evolution of ethnic groups is a highly dynamic process. It responds to the political system adopted in the country as well as economic opportunities and political moves of other groups. The Muslims' political behaviour has evolved over time together with the perception of their political potential. At the onset of democracy they practised defensive minority politics, trying to form a united front and demanding separate electoral rolls and reserved seats. As they matured in the power-sharing experience they favoured a national party that incorporated many minorities. This opened the way for their participation in mainstream politics. The political system favours the constitution of two competing coalitions which try to be as representative of the various ethnic groups as possible, as a showcase for power-sharing. In the absence of a strong difference in political ideology votes are negotiated by competing elites within each ethnic group, each trying to rally popular support. As a large ethnic group the Muslims can tip the balance in favour of one or the other of the coalitions, which was again demonstrated in the 2010 elections.

Undoubtedly the Mauritian approach to democracy has brought stability to this multiethnic state and this has favoured its economic emancipation. However, it has showed its limits

and needs to be improved. The local political system has favoured the development of ethnic / sectarian identity to the detriment of a national identity. More public and private resources are devolved into cultivating differences than in building commonness. It can be argued that in fact, limited democracy is practised as rights and privileges of groups are favoured to the detriment of rights and privileges of individuals. Unequal relations develop among groups and some groups are less integrated in the state and the economy than others.

Thus, multiethnic Mauritius needs to innovate to remain a showcase for democracy. Some interesting grounds have been covered but the political system needs to be reviewed so that greater integration takes place and a real sense of Mauritian-ness is fostered. There seems to be a general consensus in the country that a change of the electoral system to include a measure of proportionality will improve representation and incorporation of various ideologies, parties and opinions. However, more profound changes will be necessary in order to promote equality in opportunities and rights of individuals instead of groups.

NOTES

1   Arendt Lijphart brought forward the theory of consensus democracy. See Van Schendelen. *Consociational Democracy: the Views of Arendt Lijphart and Collected Criticism,* at www.mmisi.org, 2001 and *Consociational Democracy*, Stanford Univ., 1997 at www.stanford.edu.

2   Mauritius Island is divided into 20 electoral constituencies with the number of voters ranging from 22,488 to 58 341 and one constituency is formed by the island of Rodrigues. Each constituency votes for three candidates while Rodrigues with 26 930 electors, votes for 2. Elections are held every 5 years. 62 representatives are elected by the FPTP system and 8 are selected from the best losing candidates deriving from numerically underrepresented groups.

3   Benedict B 1962. Stratification in Plural Societies. *American Anthropologist*, 64 (6): 1234-1233.

4   Hollup O 1993. *Changing Conceptualization of Indian Ethnic Identity in Mauritius*. DPol.thesis, Bergen: University of Bergen.

5   Cited in Lijphart A 1996. The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation. *American Political Science Review,* 90, (2):258-268, p. 258.

6   Lijphart A 1996. The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation. *American Political Science Review,* 90, (2) : 258-268.

7   Rodrigues with 37,774 inhabitants (2009) and Agalega Islands with 289 inhabitants (2009).

8   Boudet C 2001-2002. L'émergence de la démocratie consociative à Maurice (1948-1968). *Annuaire des Pays de l'Océan Indien,* XVII : 325-336.

9   Sithanen R 2006. The Mauritian Context: Realities, Limitations and Opportunities. In Electoral Reform. Moving Towards an Inclusive Democracy. *Conference Proceedings,* Réduit: Univ of Mauritius.

10 General Population is a residual category defined as follows: whoever does not fall into the categories of Hindu, Muslim and Sino-Mauritian by his/her way of life. Consists of Creoles, Whites, Coloured, Christians, atheists and others. The term was first coined by the British Census of 1861 to group together Creoles, Coloured and Whites, as opposed to Indians.

11 Colony of Mauritius, *Census* 1952.

12 Colony of Mauritius, *Census* 1962.

13 These figures are from unofficial sources, published in various newspapers and taken up by Callikan S 2001. *Communalisme et vie politique: La question de la citoyenneté à l'île Maurice.* Master's Dissertation, unpublished.   Paris: University of Paris 1.The official census does not include data on ethnic belonging but on religion, ancestral languages etc.

14 Brahmins and Kshatrya are technically Varnas regrouping several castes and sub-castes. In Mauritius these varnas constituted a minority among the indentured labourers. Caste subdivisions among them have largely disappeared and as there is much intermarriage among Brahmins and Kshatrya they are often grouped together under the term "High Caste". They constitute about 4 % of the population.

15 Ravived is a new word coined by the Arya Samaj movement to uplift former Chamar caste which adhered to it. The Dusad claim to be of Rajput ancestry and reject the caste appellation of Dusad. See Gangoo ON 2004, *The Arya Samaj in Mauritius & South Africa*. Triolet: AVS.

16 Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University, 1997. *Consociational Democracy.*http://www.stanford.edu/~sitnikov/Lijphart2.html. p.8.

17 Some 3000 members of the General Population emigrated to Australia and Europe during the period preceding and following Independence. The fear of "Hindu Domination" was the primary motive. Besides, people from all ethnic groups emigrated for economic reasons.

18 Central Statistical Office, *Annual Digest of Statistics*, *2006*.

19 Source: Central Statistical Office. *National Accounts 2006.* http://www..gov.mu. These are official categories regrouping the parastatal bodies according to their functions as well as their nature, for instance the Extra-budgetary units include Trust Funds. They are financed by government grants.

20 Sookhoo N 1994. The Political and Constitutional Development: Problems and Prospects of Research. Unpublished. *Paper presented at seminar on the Concept of Mauritian Studies*. Moka: Mahatma Gandhi Institute.

21 Material for this section originates from my PhD thesis entitled*: La Communauté Musulmane de Port Louis. Une étude de Géographie Sociale.* Uunpublished. Bordeaux : Univ. Of Bordeaux III, 1997, which was published under the title: *La Rose*

et le Henné, une étude des Musulmans de Maurice, Moka : MGI, 2004.

22 Boosted by petrodollars charitable organisations like the Rabita-al-Alam-al –Islami, from Saudi Arabia, donated buildings, schools and mosques to local socio-religious organisations. The Lybian Arab Jamahiriya sponsored the teaching of Arabic and gave scholarships to students studying that language.

23 Owolabi K (2006). State Formation, Ethnicity and Democracy in Post-colonial Callaloo Societies: Comparative Study of Guyana, Trinidad and Mauritius. *Political Research Online.* http://www/allacademic.com/meta/p138751_index.html. 4.20.2008.

24 Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University 1997. *Consociational Democracy*, p. 9-10.

25 Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University 1997. *Consociational Democracy*, p. 3.

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