

# Democracy and Good Governance in the Caribbean A Retrospective Analysis

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In the light of recent manifestations and practices, divergent expressions of democracy and governance in the Caribbean, I am propelled to revisit my consultant's report to the Organization of American States, Unit for the Promotion of Democracy which was submitted in March 1999 as a working document on a Program of Support for Democracy and Good Governance in the Caribbean.

In that report, an extensive review of reports, recommendations, and pronouncements emanating from Caribbean Heads of Government and their respective Ministries, the Organization of American States (OAS), the OAS Summit of the Americans, the Inter American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations agencies, the CARICOM/OAS Secretariats, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), various regional and international agencies, as well as contributions from national, regional and international scholars was undertaken.

Emanating from the above, a program of support for democracy and good governance was elucidated which included the following areas each with relevant background information, justification, concrete proposals, objectives and cost estimates covering a four year implementation period under the following headings:

- Education for Democracy (Civic Education)
- Improvement of the Justice System
- Legislative Drafting
- Decentralization, Local Government and Citizen Participation
- Youth Leadership Programs and Democracy
- Strengthening Electoral Processes
- Caribbean Studies on Democracy and Governance
- Caribbean/Latin American Dialogue
- Caribbean/Latin American Parliaments

This program was to be implemented through OAS inter-departmental programs with support from external agencies some of which had manifested support for specific areas outlined in the report. For example, the British government funded a program on legislative drafting which was conducted for some time at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus.

The report states that it is recognized that the English speaking Caribbean countries have for many years been well known for their deep-rooted practice of democratic governance and a parliamentary system of government. Nevertheless, it is noted that as a result of various influences and the inherent vulnerability of small states, the threats to the very fabric of Caribbean democracies were beginning to manifest themselves. It further states that the adverse effects of the increasing arms and drug trafficking and money laundering; the increase burden being placed on the judicial system which is in need of considerable improvement and modernization; the challenges posed by the realities of trade liberalization and globalization, with the resultant loss of special trading arrangements and the limited job market, especially for the young; the weakening of Caribbean economies reflected in a decline in economic growth, living standards and real wages; are all, in different ways, creating a strain on democratic institutions and the maintenance of good governance, and could seriously affect the very security of small island states.

To the above may be added the increasing external forces leveraged by countries from outside the region seeking their geopolitical interests, and the absorption of various forms of social and economic assistance there from particularly at election time. Further, the lack of transparency and accountability as regards financial contributions to political parties from external and local sources are areas which require attention.

The above is a summation of various reports and pronouncements by eminent scholars prominent among which is Sir Shridiath Ramphal in The West Indian Commission report of 1992, which was mandated by the Caribbean Heads of Government where he states good governance was under threat that. "In the West Indies today there is considerable disquiet that the threats to good governance are increasing fast" and he made reference to this situation as ...."a warning signal that can not be ignored"

It is nevertheless refreshing that the imperatives of democracy and good governance have been enshrined in The Charter of Civil Society for the Caribbean, which was approved by Caribbean governments in 1998 where various articles of the Charter emphasize democracy and governance as being fundamental to Caribbean societies in both the private and public sectors. Unfortunately, this Charter is little known in those sectors in the region and indeed in our schools and institutions.

In this paper, I focus on a selection of a few areas which to my mind require urgent attention for they are fundamental to the free expression of the people of the Caribbean in exercising their democratic right in the selection of their government. My report of 1999 placed great emphasis on strengthening the electoral procedure through the modernization and computerization of the process in order to ensure that all citizens who are eligible to vote can exercise that right in free and fair elections. It called for an improvement in the management and administrative system requiring a registration of eligible voters, the use of identification cards and a continuous registration process linked with a civil registry.

In this regard the report recommended the establishment of an Association of Caribbean Electoral Organizations (ACEO) which would give ferment to an harmonization of the electoral process in the Caribbean and our hemisphere and the formulation of basic principles and procedures which would apply to our region as a whole with due regard to legal systems.

Having been Head of OAS Observation Missions in two countries and member of a team in one, it is evident that the fundamentals of the electoral process are not being observed in some countries in the Caribbean to the extent that in spite of repeated recommendations from observation missions, there continues to be obvious flaws in the practice and conduct of elections at the national as well as sub-regional levels. In the absence of a monitoring and follow up by the people, governments and observer institutions (regional and international) to recommendations made, it is likely that this situation will continue to recur at every election. Innovative and what may be described as conspicuous manifestations to achieve survival of party in power have become manifest in some countries.

I posit that there is need for a Caribbean institution which would be the barometer of democracy and governance practices, delegated inter alia to the study of Caribbean democracy and governance and the watch dog/rudder of

best practices in this regard. Comparable institutions and Think Tanks of international repute are mentioned in my report. Perhaps the University of the West Indies through its relevant departments may wish to engage in this discipline where faculty and students would be engaged in scholarly exercises directed at comparative studies, defining strengths and weaknesses in our systems of governance as they relate to our disparate constitutions while contributing to a commonality of purpose in the peace, security and development of our Caribbean states.

It has become evident that there is a need for a further examination of the other eight subject areas dealt with in my working document, their role in strengthening our democracies and governance. It would be useful to revisit and evaluate progress made in the context of implementation of recommendations and their relevance today in the furtherance of the strengthening of the culture of democracy and good governance in the Caribbean.

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