

«We Not Changing No Course»: The Power of Technology

*Jamaican General Elections:
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The general elections in Jamaica on the 3rd of September 2007 resulted in a narrow defeat for the National People's Party, which had been in power for the last 18 years. Its leader, Portia Simpson-Miller, did not succeed in unifying the different sections of the party, committed a series of mistakes in the campaign and was a victim of prejudices as a result of her popular origins, her color and the fact of being a woman. The result by no means amounts to a blank check for Bruce Golding who, despite counting on substantial financial resources and a carefully planned campaign, won only a narrow victory and will be obliged to seek agreements with the opposition.

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«We not changing no course.» This statement which was used by former Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller in a recent public meeting was repeated (with some effect) by the Jamaica Labour Party in TV, radio and print advertisements several times a day, almost everyday at the peak of the election campaign.

Mrs. Simpson-Miller had used it to highlight the several achievements of the PNP government, demonstrating how many people had benefited from several govern-

ment programmes, therefore, there was no need to change course, or change direction. It was being proposed that the People's National Party (PNP) of which she is the President, only had to deliver more of the same, with improvements where necessary.

The Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in opposition for 18 years, used her voice and visual image in powerful advertisements, with the help of electronic technology, to demonstrate why the country had to change course: little or no economic growth, high crime rates, high unemployment, corruption, no hope for youth. These advertisements seemed to have had both the effect of energizing the core support for the PNP (we not changing no course became the rallying call on the streets for them), while amongst the JLP and uncommitted, if they were having their doubts about the need to change course, it certainly gave them food for thought, and for some, in the end, action.

The final results suggest that while there may have been a general feel for a need to change, after 18 years of one party in government, it is clear that the PNP was not completely rejected, nor was the JLP overwhelmingly embraced. A popular view is that the JLP did not win the election. The PNP lost it. This election campaign was a hard, extremely competitive exercise, nail-biting to the very end, with both parties going into election day with almost equal popular support, but with the JLP predicted by the most credible pollsters to gain the edge in terms of number of seats in Parliament. The final seat count was JLP 33 and PNP 27, with the JLP getting only 2,940 more votes in popular support out of a voting population of 1.3 million. The JLP won 50.18% of the popular vote to the PNP's 49.82%. This is a difference of just under 0.4 percent, and the turn-out was relatively low: 60.4% - meaning that 40% of the electorate did not vote for either party. Neither party obtained as much as one-third of the electorate. With respect to the gender balance of the contestants, 21 women contested (14.4%): PNP 10, JLP 7, other small/independent parties 4. Eight (8) women were elected: PNP 5, JLP 3. In the last elections in 2002, six (6) women were elected, so there has been a small increase. Among those women elected, 2 are new Members of Parliament for the PNP, and 1 for the JLP.

■ The Campaign: Bruising but Lacking in Substance

Constitutionally, these national elections were due before October 2007. After much delay, some say to the disadvantage of the PNP, election day was announced as August 27. This announcement marked the start of the official election campaign but the

then Opposition JLP had started its own campaign from late in 2006 as it tried to pressure the government to call elections from that time. It should be noted that former Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller had been elected as President of the PNP in February 2006 in an internal election that left the PNP extremely divided, not only at the level of the leadership, but also amongst the general membership. Mrs. Simpson-Miller's first challenge was to run a government, made up of a party (and government) over which she did not have full control, dominated by ministers and senior party officials who did not support her. The divisiveness and open opposition to her, as Party President and Prime Minister continued to influence her own capacity to lead, and the PNP to govern effectively, during her short time (18 months) as Prime Minister. It was observed that the vision which she enunciated in her swearing-in ceremony as Prime Minister over a year ago, a vision in which she committed herself and her government to tackling poverty, community empowerment, transparency, reducing crime, among other things, was rarely publicly endorsed (or reported in the press) by the leaders of the Party or Government. A show of unity during the Party's annual conference in September 2006 was not very convincing, although pictures of the leadership endorsing/embracing Mrs. Simpson-Miller were shown.

This election campaign was dominated, for the most part, by the personalities of the two leaders – their leadership style, their various strengths and weaknesses, their technical competences, the level of trust they did or did not enjoy, their charisma or lack of it – at the expense of informed discussions on guiding principles or the specific challenges facing the country as a whole. It was held in an environment and a time in Jamaica's political history which makes it qualitatively different from any previous one.

- This is the first time both major political parties were facing the voters with a new leader, each one desperately needing her or his own mandate, or possibly facing the end of their political career. Mrs. Simpson-Miller secured the leadership of the government and the PNP from PJ Patterson in an internal party election, and Mr. Bruce Golding «inherited» the leadership of the JLP from Edward Seaga, unchallenged. The JLP had been in opposition for 18 years.

- This is the first time a female political leader has faced a national election as head of a Party with such deep internal divisions, which in the end would have affected the Party's internal organizational unity and capacity. There is talk that some PNP «comrades» would rather lose the election than give Mrs. Simpson-Miller her own mandate.

- These elections demonstrated the extent to which the issues of race, class and gender influence not only social relations in the Jamaica, but shaped the overall tone of the campaign, revealing on many occasions, the intensity of disrespect and hostility (if not hatred) that the social, political and business elite and sections of the middle classes have towards the poorer classes of people. Mrs. Simpson-Miller has made no attempt to cover-up or distance herself from her poor humble beginnings, and for many, represented the hope for possibilities – that they also, from the black majority, could serve at the highest political level. She became the target for these expressions of hostility and gender bias.

- In support of these expressions of hostility and gender bias, important sections and individuals in the media, women and men, demonstrated such a level of bias and opposition to the persona which Mrs Simpson-Miller represents that in many quarters, including the media itself, the credibility and integrity of these media practitioners and the media houses they represent are now in question. On the other hand, Mr. Golding was generally portrayed as the «new star, the saviour of the country, clean cut, suave, savvy, intellingent».

- Mrs. Simpson-Miller herself, a product of a deeply tribal political culture, demonstrated some errors of judgement which may have cost her and the PNP, the elections. At some critical moments, she did not distance herself effectively, as Leader, from allegations of corruption or at the least serious mismanagement of public funds made against some of her allies in the Party; the handling by the Party and herself as Leader, of charges of corruption in respect of funds which had been donated by an overseas organization; she was not able to unite the party leadership, and some sections of the membership in support of her own leadership; she used popular expressions on a political platform which are considered as improper behaviour, not becoming a Prime Minister; there was some discomfort not with her public embrace of a particular religious belief which in Jamaica would be generally welcomed, but her reported closeness to, and reliance on religious prophets to guide her political decisions, including references to the significance of numbers in biblical matters, and the original date which was announced for elections, August 27. In addition, in the face of indications of incapacity to manage complex technical issues, a focus on Mrs. Simpson-Miller's charisma and charm to «win the hearts of Jamaican people» was also an error. The organized working class, medium and small farmers, teachers, nurses, policemen, and

civil servants would sympathetic to a leader from «the bowels of society», but embarrassed by what was revealed as serious weaknesses in her leadership.

- Mrs. Simpson-Miller and/or the Party leadership fell into the trap of promoting the gender stereotypical image of «Mama knows best, Mama will provide, Mama will solve all your problems» for too many of their campaign advertisements – this worked against them in the end. To quote one male voter: «I already have a mother, I don't need another one. I need a political leader who can run this country effectively».

- Portia Simpson-Miller had been elected as PNP President on a platform of change – away from corruption and tribalism, and for transparency, community empowerment, popular participation through inclusiveness and respect – so a determination of «not changing course» away from the old PNP-way of doing things, would have been seen as betrayal of the very vision and platform on which she had been personally elected as Party President. This alienated important sections of the middle classes who are traditionally PNP supporters.

- The records show that previous Prime Ministers have studiously avoided calling elections during the height of the hurricane season – during August or September. Hurricane Dean hit Jamaica with devastating impact on several important rural and coastal areas a week before the scheduled election date, and had to be postponed for two weeks. Expectations of prompt relief on the part of those most badly affected were not met. Confused decisions on a new election date and a state of emergency (called by her to contain looting during the hurricane) may have persuaded many undecided voters and others, that she was not in control. It is not clear if this development influenced the outcome of the elections, but there is in some quarters, a feeling that there was misjudgement on the part of the former Prime Minister.

- Bruce Golding, now Prime Minister of Jamaica has managed to build and shape the JLP into a more united Party than it has been for at least ten years. He is methodically putting the stamp of his own leadership, gradually replacing the imprimatur and style of its former leader, Edward Seaga. With open support from critical sections of the media and a seemingly endless source of funding, he led the JLP's campaign which was well organized, with clear consistent messages, with technically superior and more attractive television and radio advertisements. His public statements and presentations indicate a reasonable understanding of Jamaica's challenges, and for the campaign, the Party manifesto made proposals in areas such as constitutional and justice reform, for economic growth and business development with a focus on creating

wealth rather than reducing poverty, and more involvement for young people. Many campaign promises, including no tuition fees up to secondary school, and free health care were convincing rallying points for the JLP. Apart from a few older members of the leadership, the new JLP government will include several with little political experience, and no previous experience in government. New faces and new ideas are naturally welcomed by the populace, but questions about the capacity to manage are already surfacing, and also about the ability to keep the many promises.

■ The Electoral System and Process

The electoral system and process, including the actual election day activities are greatly improved, and was reported by international observers, including teams from the Organization of American States and CARICOM, overall to have produced fair and clean elections. There were a few organizational glitches in particular constituencies only. Supported by the work of the Electoral Commission of Jamaica, an independent body answerable to Parliament, the Electoral Office of Jamaica has cleaned up the system reducing possibilities of electoral fraud, intimidation and fear. Where the latter did take place was out on the streets, in certain communities where physical and often violent confrontations were used to intimidate persons into not voting. Two features have contributed substantially to this greatly improved system. First, in 19 of the 60 constituencies an Electronic Voter Identification and Balloting System in 670 polling stations was used to identify voters by fingerprints. This would have prevented impersonation of electors, multiple voting and the use of unauthenticated ballots. Second, in one of its last acts, the outgoing Parliament passed a law making it a crime for a voter to publicly display his/her choice of candidate by openly showing other people where the «X» was placed. This was meant to allow voters the possibility of voting as they chose, free from fear, especially in «garrison» constituencies where there is a premium on showing blind loyalty to a candidate, often in return for money.

It reported that these elections were the most expensive in the country's history, with reports that the Electoral Office of Jamaica spending J\$180 million for election training and organization, and the two major political parties together spending perhaps that sum again on their advertising campaigns (not organizational, on-the-ground work). (J\$69=U\$1)

■ Final comments

In all elections, there are winners and losers. In this case, the overall winner is Jamaica – its people, its electoral system, and most importantly, the democratic process. Despite a few moments of uncertainty about the possibility of a tie (30/30) in the results, the closeness of the results in many constituencies which is leading to magisterial recounts to determine the final winner, the democratic process as practiced within the Westminster parliamentary model is secure. Regrettably, due to violent confrontations between misguided elements in both parties, there were five reported deaths associated with the election. The elections generally were free from fear, with a mature acceptance of the loss by most people allowing for an incident free, civil transition of power. Mr. Golding was sworn as Jamaica's 8th Prime Minister of Jamaica on September 11, he will name a Cabinet shortly thereafter, and the first sitting of the new Parliament will follow.

The JLP did not get the sweeping victory it anticipated and so badly wanted. After a campaign that was stronger in every area – advertising, visible teamwork at the leadership level, its manifesto, political debates and financing - the electorate gave the JLP only a razor slim victory. On the other hand, the PNP's campaign was not altogether ineffective. The strength of Portia Simpson Miller's personal popularity engendered feelings of hope among the poorest and gave her strong electoral support, but it was not enough to overcome the weaknesses and errors mentioned above. In a sense, she was alone. The class and gender bias reduced her political strength, while her weak performance in a national debate and other confused decisions suggested that she was not in control. The «action» of non-voters was supplemented by strong class bias of traditional middle class PNP supporters, who felt that her image was inconsistent with profiles of past PNP leaders, sending the message that her social background was deficient. However, it is this social background from which Mrs. Simpson-Miller has consistently drawn considerable support, which prevented the PNP from suffering a greater loss in the elections. In other words, the «Portia factor» worked for and against the PNP. Even her most ardent critics conclude that the «Portia factor» was critical in the PNP's victory.

On election night, the new Prime Minister Bruce Golding in a sober and conciliatory victory speech, acknowledged with great humility that «in their profound wisdom» the people had sent a clear message, evidenced by the narrow margin of victory for

the JLP. He noted that this narrow victory will compel the two parties to cooperate in «constructive engagement», and build consensus on critical issues, so badly needed for the country to move forward. Both leaders in their new positions, respectively, face particular challenges. Both will have to control those party hacks and blind party loyalists who would not endorse consensus-building across party lines, and have to begin the process of engaging the uncommitted. Mr Golding will be challenged to «deliver on the many promises made» not only to his party loyalists, but to the country in general. Mrs. Simpson-Miller and the PNP will be challenged to rebuild their traditional support with a growing and upward mobile middle class, while deliberately reinforcing and expanding their natural support within the poor and marginalized communities.

There is a clear need for introspection for the JLP leadership. The PNP was in office for 18 years, disaffection, especially among the very young was high, and the perception of corruption pervaded the PNP government, but even with massive resources at their disposal, a superior organizational machinery on the ground, supported by an impressive, visual and audio advertising campaign, and a clear media bias, the JLP was only able to win by a very, small margin. That in these circumstances they could only win by this small margin should be a cause for concern for the new JLP government. ☐