

HAS THE CYCLE BEEN BROKEN

In late 2015 I published a book called "Breaking the Cycle" in which I drew attention to the political tribalism from which our country has suffered since 1967. I also focused on the need for constitutional, governance and electoral reform. I documented the excesses of the Douglas Government up to and including the 2015 general election. I suggested that the result of that election won by Team Unity, a coalition of three political parties, raised hope that the never ending cycle of political tribalism would be broken. I warned however that change was not guaranteed. I wrote the following at the end of the first chapter " Previous governments quickly fell into the entrenched partisan ways with the leaders consolidating power around themselves and their close associates. Will the new Prime Minister, Timothy Harris and his Team Unity government do the same? The jury is out and the clock is ticking"

The purpose of this commentary is to reflect on where the country is four and a half years later. I begin by reminding of some of the excesses of the Douglas regime of which I wrote. They:

1. hijacked our Parliamentary democracy by a 26-month delay in bringing to Parliament the Motion of No Confidence tabled by the Opposition in December 2012;
2. changed the electoral boundaries without due process and in an act of utmost gerrymandering;
3. abused Parliamentary process to pass the resolution changing the boundaries;
4. sought to steal a march on the Opposition by dissolving Parliament immediately after changing the boundaries and calling an election in the minimum time allowed.
5. The Supervisor of Elections acted in a biased and improper manner in delaying the election count when it became obvious that Labour were losing. That required intervention by Caribbean leaders to bring back some sanity to those involved.
6. Douglas himself had sought generally in the preceding years to develop a political culture akin to the rule of man.

Douglas came close to succeeding in his scheming and abuse. He might have succeeded had he not made a simple error in not properly gazetting the resolution making the boundary changes. Even under the old boundaries he may still have won the election had two of his charters not been delayed because of self-inflicted flight manifest issues in the US.

The country breathed a sigh of relief when Labour lost the election. There was strong sentiment in favour of term limits and other governance reforms to deter similar abuses in future. The need for fundamental changes to the electoral system was widely recognized. Team Unity won the election in very large measure because it promised a comprehensive programme of transparency and accountability and it promised fundamental changes to the electoral system.

What then has happened since? Where are we after 54 months? The answer is not very far:

1. Political tribalism is alive and well and continues in the personal battle between Harris and Douglas. Each clings to power in his faction and claims the other to be unfit for office. Yet neither has backed his contention with facts.
2. But Harris has followed Douglas in consolidating power in himself and his close associates. You will be forgiven if you forgot that the PAM party and CCM have 6 of the 11 seats in the National Assembly while Harris' PLP has but 1.
3. Unity claimed that the Douglas regime had looted the SIDF and had illegally infiltrated the computer system of the Electoral Office. Investigations were ordered but 54 months later no report on either of these serious allegations has been published.
4. The list of persons who were granted diplomatic passports by Douglas and what and to whom they paid for same remains a State Secret. Why the secret given all the noise which Unity (quite rightly) made about this?
5. Unity has delayed in pursuing the process for new constituency boundaries. They are still relying on the injunction granted by the Privy Council in 2015 to keep the 1984 boundaries in effect despite the enormous shifts in population among the old constituencies. This is undemocratic but obviously a position of political convenience.
6. The electoral system remains fundamentally unchanged. Are we to assume that the system which they shouted to high heaven was corrupt has been automatically uncorrupted or does it now suit them nevertheless. The fair conclusion is that in this too convenience trumps democracy.
7. The much touted good governance agenda has hardly got off the ground. Given their ambivalent attitude chances of that agenda being fulfilled in a second Unity term are for obvious reasons infinitesimal.

8. Term limits for the Prime Minister are still awaited.
9. A constitutional amendment to expedite the debate and vote on Motions of No Confidence is still awaited.
10. Civil Service reform is another unfulfilled promise. Douglas claimed to start reform in 1995 but did nothing in his 20 years. Harris seems to enjoy just as much the power of acting like a British Administrator which the colonial era Civil Service rules give him.

I could go on and on but I think the point is clear that our democracy is as much at risk now as it was in February 2015. Despite the ongoing promises the cycle remains unbroken. We are reminded there is still a whole year to go before the deadline for the next election. The jury is still out but the clock is beginning to alarm.

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