



Bipolarisation, a likely trend in Mauritian politics

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Abstract

When civil society is called to reflect upon change in the political system, it implicitly calls for political renewal in the form of new government, new leaders devoid of corruption and strategies, good governance, the spirit of entrepreneurship and forward thinking as well as an innovative approach to managing government. Despite all such expectations, new leaders rarely emerge in certain political contexts namely Mauritius because of a long-rooted tradition of bipolarity through democracy. There might still be a wave for change in the local political environment with new leadership stepping forward in the Mauritian society. This research article states that bipartisanship is embedded in Mauritian politics and is likely to be the trend in the next five years. It highlights the existence of bipolar politics in Mauritius, analyses an exception to it but predicts a bipartisanship trend. It concludes by affirming the strength of the concept while being critical of the gloom of new political leadership in Mauritius.

Keywords: bipolarity, democracy, leadership, trend, Mauritius

1. Introduction

The concept 'bipolarity' can be defined as a system of world order in which the majority of global economic, military and cultural influence is held between two states. Gilpin (1987) ^[14] examines the classic case of a bipolar world like the Cold War between the United States and the ex-Soviet Union, which predominated the second half of the twentieth century. International political economy according to Gilpin was 'the reciprocal and dynamic interaction in international relations of the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of power' (Gilpin, 1987) ^[14].

Coming to domestic politics, bipolarity explains the existence of two political parties or streams of political ideologies in society. It stems from the existence of two major contenders in politics that are likely to come to power alternately. There are general concepts that support this view worldwide. In the United States, there is the contention for power between Republicans and Democrats. Wolson (2008) ^[26] quotes the difference as 'the Democratic Party's vision of government is roughly equivalent to a powerful, nurturing mother figure protecting and caring for the needy and downtrodden. By contrast, the Republican ideal embodies a strong father figure who rewards people for taking responsibility for their own lives and who supports independent initiative.'

Elsewhere, in the United Kingdom, there is duality between the Labour Party and the Conservatives. In France, the trend is generally the coming to power of the 'Républicains' or the French Socialist Party although the recent polls gave a different verdict with the coming of 'La République en Marche' in power. Political bipolarity is a global trend except in cases where there is a single government in power in countries that are less developed like some nations in sub-Saharan Africa or monarchies having a single ruler in power like the Sultanate of Brunei or the Kingdom of the United

Arab Emirates.

2. Mauritius and Democracy

Mauritius, an island-nation in the Indian Ocean, located some 800 kilometres to the east of Madagascar, is independent since 1968 and enters its fiftieth year as a free nation in 2018. To this end, it is commendable that such a country has maintained a Westminsterian form of democracy based on the British system since gaining independence. The Parliament of Mauritius is modelled after the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, where members of Parliament are voted in at regular general elections on the basis of a first past the post system (PortLouisfund.net, 2017) ^[20]. Such democracy allows for free elections to be held every five years, the freedom of movement, assembly and expression as well as a secular government system with the Constitution allowing all religions, cultures and people to co-exist within the country on equal standards. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index awarded full democracy status to Mauritius, a quiet achiever with strong rule of law (Guardian, 2016) ^[23]. Being multicultural, Mauritius has preserved such democracy and remains among the top African nations in terms of human development, freedom of expression as well as economic growth and development in sub-Saharan Africa. Cawthra (2007) ^[7] states that Mauritius has been able to engage constructively with the SADC common security project, and play a leading role in its reform, less from existential need than from a calculation of opportunities.

Such democracy has endowed Mauritius with advantages over many other nations. Firstly, there is political stability with little strife within the Mauritian community. Secondly, democracy allows for the respect of individual rights and freedom and encourages free expression. This aspect is fundamental to the consolidation of democracy. Thirdly, secularism under democracy encourages the respect of fundamental rights of

individuals and a higher level of tolerance and acculturation in the Mauritian community since 1968.

3. Political Leadership

Political leadership since the independence of Mauritius has been the key success factor for the country’s political and economic success. In 1967, a coalition government of the Mauritian Labour Party with the Independent Forward Block held power as the first government during and after Independence with another coalition with the Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate (PMSD) (Nolen *et al*, 1999). A similar trend took place after the 1976 elections with the Labour Party and the PMSD holding power for some further six years. In 1982, Labour Party coalition was ousted from government and replaced by a new political wing under the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM). Since 1983 to 1995, the Mouvement Socialiste Militant (MSM) held power with coalitions with the Labour Party and the MMM. Labour Party came back to power in 1995 with the PMSD. Then, the MSM-MMM formed a coalition in 2000. In 2005, the Labour Party and PMSD held power for a double term and as from 2014, the MSM-PMSD gained power while today, the MSM is the sole representative of the government in Mauritius. To the reader, this brief illustration is enough to explain permutations and combinations throughout alliances in Mauritius while stating the vibrancy of democracy through changing political leadership. It is worthwhile noting the keen interest in politics of the average Mauritian which also testifies societal participation in politics.

Political leadership has however been influenced by just a few leaders. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (Labour Party) was in power since Independence up to 1982. He was replaced by Sir Anerood Jugnauth (MSM) from 1982 to 1995. The first Prime Minister’s son took power in 1995 and alternately replaced by Sir Anerood Jugnauth up to now. For a span of two years (2002-2004), there was the Prime Ministership of Paul Bérenger, the charismatic leader of the MMM. Seen from this perspective, there have been political leaders in alternate but over long periods for the first political leaders. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam is known as the ‘Father of the Nation’ and has been a proponent of democracy based on Fabianism during his studies in England. Under his leadership, there was the Welfare State to alleviate poverty and provide social coverage to the lower levels of society but also the

community as a whole like free health and education. Sir Anerood Jugnauth is known as the ‘Father of development’ with his ability to industrialise Mauritius and bring the first economic miracle to the nation between 1983-1990. Alladin (2013) ^[1] states that in deciding of the creation of the Free Zone, bringing in Asian investors, in particular in Hong Kong, ensuring the growth of tourism and the hospitality, Prime Minister Jugnauth ensured the full employment in the island and in fact a model welcomed internationally.

Both leaderships have been different namely a capitalist approach of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam in the 1970s and a more entrepreneurship approach of Sir Anerood Jugnauth in the 1980-90s. With the foundation of the Welfare State, a pragmatic socialist approach was adopted by the leaders and remains to-date a top priority in the political agenda of Mauritian leaders.

4. Bipolarisation of Mauritian politics

Prior to discussing the bipolarisation of Mauritian politics, Table 1 below gives a roadmap of bipolarisation through alliances formed in every election. Forum (2011) ^[12] states that political alliances, revocations, resignations and political upheavals have formed an integral part of the Mauritian political landscape ever since independence. Yoon and Bunwaree (2003) posit that the election results in Mauritius reveal that the vast majority of voters usually vote for three candidates from the same alliance, or select two candidates from one alliance and one from the other. The author has sourced from Wikipedia to develop a table highlighting alliances in power since 1967 to date. The bipolarization variable gives an indication of tendencies since 1967 and might be considered as subjective although they are rationally developed. In 1967, there was a community-based power balance configuring elections. In 1976, new left-wing politics had a balance of share in bipolarised politics. Then the trend was a balance between traditional and socialist alliances. The demarcation has grown more blurred as capitalism linked with socialism is inherent in all coalitions in power, either in government or opposition. There is no place for independent, new left-wing or anti-globalisers which are extra-parliamentary but not in power. Note the shift of the MMM from new left-wing to socialist and more capitalist when its ideologies were defeated after globalisation.

Table 1: Illustration of alliance parties’ bipolarisation with variable. Facts sourced from wikipedia (2017) and variable developed from author’s source.

Year	Party/Coalition in power	Opposition	Bipolarisation variable
1967 (prior to Independence)	Labour/IFB/CAM	PMSD	Community-based power balance
1976	Labour/PMSD	MMM	Traditional vs New left-wing
1982	MMM/PSM	PMSD	New Left-wing vs Community-based
1983	Labour/MSM/PMSD	MMM	Traditional vs Socialist
1987	Labour/MSM/PMSD	MMM	Traditional vs Socialist
1991	MMM/MSM	Labour	Socialist vs Traditional
1995	Labour/MMM	PMSD	New socialist vs Traditional
2000	MMM/MSM	Labour	Socialist vs Traditional (repeated scenario of 1991)
2005	Labour/PMXD/Les Verts	MMM/MSM/PMSD	Socialist capitalist on both sides
2010	Labour/PMSD/MSM	MMM	Socialist capitalist vs Socialist
2014	MSM/PMSD/ML	Labour/MMM	Socialist capitalist on both sides

Political experts state that Mauritian politics have been bipolarised since Independence and this might be today's concern regarding new political leadership of the country. The illustrations provided earlier firstly depict the stay in power of a few political parties like the Labour Party, MSM, PMSD and the MMM. There has been no or barely any other movement coming to power since 1968. Generally, political advisers state that it is a question of leadership of a few families who are in power since 1968 like the Ramgoolam, Jugnauth or Duval and an opposition comprising emblematic leader, Paul Bérenger. Politics in Mauritius, a nation of just 1.3 million people, has long seen a few families dominating top posts in the decades since independence in 1968 (News Agency of Nigeria, 2017). Politicians, members of the civil society and onlookers argue that it is the same people, the same family or simply the same dynasty in power over the past fifty years and that such a trend is likely to permeate over the next five or ten years. Then, what about political renewal or the bringing of new leaders with innovative leadership to power when politics are under bipolarity through the different alliances that have existed? According to Aumjaud (2017) ^[2], It would be suicidal to continue to maintain a breathless political system in which citizens no longer have any confidence and whose main actors have been in place for decades.

There have been various debates regarding the need for a new political force to hold power. The argument might have justification in the sense that the longer people stay in power, the greater will be the degree of corruption and scandals over the years. Maier (2010) ^[17] states that support for politicians and political parties can be significantly eroded after exposure to scandal coverage. This is partly true with the lots of scandals that each government brings forward and which is also the reason why one government is repealed after a mandate, but followed by a former government or a coalition where the same leaders coming from the political dynasties remains in power.

This condition has really embedded the political configuration of Mauritius with a lower percentage of young people willing to join in politics or merely being interested in politics. Traditional politicians are old and have matured over time but they might need to be replaced by younger leaders who can bring in a new vision or perception. To-date, the level of interest of young people within the group (25-34) is very low including their level of participation in elections. There is a broad perception that politics is corrupt, demands heavy political and financial support and, worse, bipolarisation stays embedded in the Mauritian society, which despite having the right for free vote, calls the same people in power. In a study by Transparency Mauritius (2013) ^[24], more than half of young people have no interest in politics. But this attitude would only change if politicians offered them a reward. For example, if political parties did not provide them with certain facilities, young people would not be interested in them.

5. Is bipolarity a necessity?

Mauritians have voted in the same way over the years. People vote for established political parties and the four main ones; Labour Party, MSM, MMM and the PMSD gain higher percentage of votes in most legislative elections. There has been the emergence of new parties in the course of time but

these have disappeared soon after the elections. In recent times, there were parties like 'Ensam nou capav' (Together we can) and Reform Party that offered an alternative to voters with new leaders emerging. Such new politicians entered the political arena on presenting themselves as socialist leaders with a higher community involvement. They boasted being 'clean' politicians without a shaky history filled with corruption or legal pursuits as well being visionaries with new political visions like open political systems, broader governance and higher political accountability to the citizens. In spite of their new agenda, the new leaders failed to come to power in the recent elections held in the country. Boudet (2014) ^[4] supports the view by stating: 'Even though those emerging parties pretend to challenge the traditional parties from outside, they have constituted themselves in an elitist mode, as the initiative of a few individuals. They are not the product of mass mobilisation.'

From this perspective, the leaders of the mainstream parties continue to stay in power and this trend looks perennial. There is an intense manifestation of joy following every election as an alternate leader comes to power but, in essence, the same leaders are in the arena in and out. This situation crystallises the idea that bipolarisation is both a good thing and an evil for Mauritius. On the one hand, traditional political parties remain powerful and stable over time and keep up the vote of confidence from voters. On the other hand, if the same families stay in power alternately, there is little or no political renewal in society and this could be an 'ill' if one peers into the democratic tradition of an independent nation.

6. Exception to the rule

There has been an exception in the political history of Mauritius. In 1969, just after Independence, a left-wing student union, Mouvement des Etudiants, debated the need for unity within diversity in a country that had immediate teething problems in its early years of development and freedom from British rule. Based on Marxist-Leninist ideologies like class society, greater equality through sharing of wealth, reduction of poverty, common ideals of leadership, the student movement grew into a political force, Mouvement Militant Mauricien, and won a by-election in 1970. Under full swing of pro-Communist ideals like the influence of ex-USSR, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in the developing world, the young political party nearly won the 1976 elections with more elected members but failed to hold the majority after a coalition between an ailing Labour Party and the PMDS took place. In 1982, the MMM allied with the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM), a dissidence from Labour Party, and won the legislative elections with a sweeping 60-0 to get absolute control of the Mauritian National Assembly. Dhar (2017) ^[9] commented that such dissidence, along with worsening economic conditions, helped the MMM-PSM alliance inflict a crushing defeat on Labour in the 1982 elections. This victory, awaited by Mauritian citizens, was a first call to change of leadership and political governance at a time when the unemployment rate was over 20% and the economy, over dependent on monocrop cultivation of sugarcane, was dwindling in the middle of economic uncertainties, poor governance and corruption. Only a transition to the manufacturing sector helped the economy recover between

1982 and 1988 (Chernoff and Warner, 2002)^[8]. This situation firstly depicted the loss of credibility of traditional parties while, additionally, explained the enthusiasm created by young leaders brewed in a non-capitalist ideology that drew crowds in developing societies.

This victory was short-term based as just nine months later, a government formed by Sir Anerood Jugnauth came to power and ruled comfortably for some thirty years within a climate of prosperity and unequalled growth.

7. Today's call for new political revival

New political revival in Mauritius is a slogan vaunted by political onlooker, media people and society members. The reason is clear because the majority of political leaders along with those in power do have legal cases to fight for based on allegations of malpractice or corruption. So far, nothing can be confirmed regarding allegations but there is a feeling that members of society are keener to accept aspiring politicians with clean agendas and, particularly, without some affiliation with the political dynasty since Independence.

The call for new political revival is reasonable as existing leaders are ageing and 'new blood' is expected to be injected within the traditional political parties. Fakun (2016)^[11] says that it all depends on the demand of the public because certain voters want some new blood to be injected in the political party they support. New parties have stemmed from the disagreement of existing politicians or simply from dissidence from the core parties. What has happened looks like new political groups or 'satellites' that have developed from the mainstream parties with leaders having similar agendas but evidently fewer followers as they are new.

New leaders seem to be technologically savvy as they use social media to draw their followers. But the question is whether the new political revival will exist in the next five years?

8. The plausible forecast

A recent by-election on 14th December 2017 brought a Labour Party candidate back to the national Assembly after his party's defeat in the 2014 elections. All other parties took part, except the ruling one, in the campaign and this showed the resilience of a traditional leader whose success was based on his personality and evidently the party he represented.

Emerging parties like the 'Reform Party' or 'Mouvement Patriotique' and smaller ones like 'Rezistans ek Alternativ' or 'Mouvman 1er Mai' failed despite they got sympathy votes in reasonable numbers. This by-election was considered as an acid-test for new parties and their defeat brings back bipolarity to reality. Although onlookers would consider abstention of voters as a reason to overlook Labour Party victory, it was a clear signal that traditional parties stand strong in the minds of voters during major elections. Following the victory of the Labour Party candidate, the traditional parties are likely to court new party candidates that fared reasonably well in the by-election making it really tough for new parties to envisage coming to power in the forthcoming elections. Politics is about winning power and holding on to it for as long as possible (Editorial MK, Mauritius Times, 2017)^[10].

9. Certain reasons underlying the weakness of new

political revival

There are certain reasons that can explain the weakness of new political revival that cannot outweigh the existing dominance of traditional political parties in Mauritius. They are summarised below:

Too fragmented political parties

New parties look to be both small and fragmented. Actually Mouvement Libérateur (ML) and Mouvement Patriotique (MP) are two recent political parties that have sprouted after their respective leaders left the MMM. Hence, several parties are created while they might cater for the same electoral base. The emergence of a political landscape is littered, as never before, with 5 Opposition parties and 2 Independent member—until yesterday divided, resource-poor and hardly seeing eye-to-eye with one another—is enough to make us sit up and take notice (Forum, 2017)^[13].

Common Agendas

The above example might also illustrate common agendas. If parties stem from the mainstream one with the same agenda as the former one, there might not be a real drift from voters who do not easily perceive the difference or are being seduced by a new political agenda. Being non-corrupt, socially involved, egalitarian remain on the agendas of most parties. Bromund (2017)^[5] justly sums up the situation in the United Kingdom where 'what stands out is how much Labour looks like the Democratic Party. Both used to be parties of the working class. Now they're both parties of the New Left'.

Lack of charismatic leaders

New parties have leaders who were deputy leaders or in a subordinate position in their former party. This might look diminutive if people are looking for new and powerful leaders that demark from others. Charismatic leaders do still appeal to the common voter. Sithanen (2003)^[22] comments that ideological and platform affinity have taken a backseat today.

Weak political experience

New political parties have little or no experience in the political battle. Being less known to voters, these parties fail to appeal to them and might take long time enough to gain grass root experience of politics and its impending challenges. In the last general elections there were a whole bunch of new political parties—they were born and died without anyone remembering them. A 'strike in the flash pan' effect is not quite possible (Lallah, 2017)^[16].

Lack of funding

Definitely, elections demand money and traditional parties are adequately funded to have the critical mass to draw crowds, manage the campaigns and perform well during the campaigns. Finance could be an impediment for the progress of small parties in elections that consume lots of funds. Bunwaree (2014)^[6] supports that those who wish to see real transformation of the society do not have the kind of money that the mainstream parties possess.

Embeddedness of voters

Is it possible for voters to experience a change in mindset? Their exasperation is evidenced in social media and related

platforms but when it comes to voting, traditional parties in bipartisanship take the lead in Mauritius. No great change has been encountered since long and the existing 'first past the post' system allows only those crossing the line (3 candidates only) to succeed.

10. Conclusion: The persistence of political bipolarity

This research paper, based on findings, either chronologically or rationally, claims that there is little to hope from new parties or a 'third power' for the forthcoming term. Here, care is taken to state the next five years or slightly more. A longer period is not practical as unexpected changes could take place. So far, this judgment has been rational based on facts collected and examined over the years. The argumentative element was that there might be the collapse of bipolarisation in Mauritian politics. Servansingh (2016) adds that the erstwhile leaders—Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Paul Bérenger and Navin Ramgoolam—who have no doubt contributed immensely to the progress of the country since independence each in his own way, should now honourably leave the scene and allow a new generation to take up the challenge. Seen from what is yet being experienced and the long-term standing of traditional parties, new political leadership might not be created in the near future. Existing parties are courting one another to form a new coalition for the next mandate and the race will be evidently among them and not in the reach of new parties.

Definitely, the coming of new leadership like that of Emmanuel Macron and his party 'La République en Marche' or the election of Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, remain a dream for emerging Mauritian politicians. Unexpected changes in the Mauritian political arena could occur but, with the new vigour claimed by existing parties with their alliances, the possibility of breaking bipolarity is not clear in the near future. There is an interesting citation shared by Karvonen (2004) explaining the paradox where 'with few exceptions political parties cannot be regarded as a success story. Although they became the key institutions for political recruitment and government formation, they generally failed to establish solid links with voters.' Wholly new parties emerged at successive elections. Parties split or merged, adopted new labels, or shifted their ideological positions. Many disappeared altogether (Karvonen, 2004). Certainly, this school of thought imperils new political leadership, new political agendas for Mauritius and a clearer vision of a modern society. Since the game is democratic under free and fair elections in the country, the final verdict has to be accepted as 'sacrosanct' and that is so much for the better.

11. Disclaimer

Under no circumstance, this research article should be considered as a personal point of view of the author. Based on research practice and foundations, the paper considered views, value judgments and statements supported by facts. Only the interpretation is personal although it follows a rational perspective in analysing and debating the issue. There is no acquaintance or allegiance with any political party or related people in this qualitative research.

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