



# Mauritius

**Country Report based on Research and Dialogue with  
Political Parties**



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## Methodology

Some 71 political parties were registered at the last general election in 2005, but for the purposes of this report three main parties and three smaller parties were interviewed. The former are the Labour Party (LP), the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM) and the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM). The smaller parties are the Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD), Nouveau Lizour and the Mouvement Republicain.

The main interviewees were the secretaries general, the representatives of the youth wing, the women's league and/or the women's wing, the campaign strategist, the treasurer and a longstanding candidate of all three main parties mentioned above. Interviews were also held with the Electoral Commissioner, the Commissioner of the Electoral Supervisory Commission, the Speaker of the Assembly, the Leader of the Opposition, a former President of Mauritius, trade union representatives, regional assembly members and the Clerk of the Assembly.

Focus group discussions with individuals at the grassroots level were held in some constituencies that are strongholds of different parties. In some cases these meetings enriched the research and confirmed some of the findings. In other cases they revealed how disconnected some people at the grassroots are from the activities of political parties and their central role in promoting democracy.

## Background

Mauritius is a small island in the Indian Ocean with a multi-ethnic population of 1.8 million, according to the 2000 census. It has no indigenous population. People were brought to the island from various parts of the world. Africans were brought as slaves, and then Indians arrived as indentured labourers. In the early 1900s, a small community of Chinese came as traders. The island became home to a number of ethnic groups, especially South Asians. Hindus and Muslims account for 52 and 16 per cent of the population, respectively. There are also Creoles of African ancestry (27 per cent), Chinese (3 per cent) and Franco-Mauritians of European ancestry (2 per cent).

Economically, Mauritius is often cited as a model to be emulated in the region. Its successful transition in the 1970s from a monocultural economy to one based on the export processing zone has been widely discussed. By the mid-1990s, the country had further diversified its economy with the launch of financial and banking services and, more recently, of information and communications technology services. Mauritius is somewhat atypical in Africa. For almost four decades, unemployment was below 2 per cent, the government deficit was only 2.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), and average annual growth rates surpassed 6 per cent while the rest of Africa stagnated. By the end of the 1990s, however, economic conditions had deteriorated markedly. The 2004 *Foresight and Competitiveness Report* by the National Productivity and Competitiveness Council notes that Mauritius is showing significant signs of economic distress.

Compared to many other developing countries, the literacy rate is quite high at 84 per cent (Central Statistical Office, 2004). Education has always been a priority for the government and, in contrast to many other African countries, Mauritius did not succumb to World Bank pressures on education and health spending. The country continued to provide free education and health care, and this relatively strong welfare state has contributed to such a high literacy rate. A gender gap in education is only discernible at the higher levels, especially at the tertiary level.

Unlike many former colonies, which achieved statehood by fighting wars of national liberation against the metropolitan powers, Mauritius—like some other parts of the British empire—achieved its independence by concession from the mother country. In many countries, independence was fuelled by nationalist sentiment. The experience of Mauritius was very different, inasmuch as there was no nationalist sentiment in the country. The Hindu majority expressed anti-colonial feelings, but large sectors of the other ethnic-religious groups preferred to maintain ties with Britain. Mauritius was divided as it negotiated its way to independence, and national unity was lacking. Some 44 per cent of the population voted against independence, which was finally granted in 1968.

Despite the tensions and conflicts that preceded independence, and the fear of 'Hindu hegemony', Mauritius has adopted the culture of the ballot. It has had a relatively sound track record of free and fair general elections since independence. Elections have been held regularly (in most cases, every five years) and there have never been any major disputes. Eight elections have been held, in 1976, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1993,

1995, 2000 and 2005. The procedures before, during and after elections are respected by all political parties, although there is often a problem of incumbency, whereby the ruling party creates and enjoys unfair access to the state media and other resources. Voter turnout during general elections tends to be relatively high (at the last general election it was 81 per cent) but there is a shortage of local research on voting patterns and behaviour. Studies in the field of political science are lacking, and research on the gender dimension of politics is even scarcer.

There is freedom of association to form political parties, but the constitution stipulates that every party must register with the Electoral Supervisory Commission at least 14 days before nominating its candidates for a general election. On the Freedom House Index, Mauritius scores 1 for political rights and 2 for civil liberties, and its average of 1.5 places it in the free category. The score of 1 for political rights reflects the freedom of association for all parties, as well Mauritian citizens' unhindered general rights to vote irrespective of race, colour, creed and gender. The lower score for civil liberties reflects constraints that have to be removed if the democratic arena is to be expanded. Trade unions, for example, do not have the right to strike; they are currently asking for that right to be included in the constitution.

### **Political development and democratization**

Since it became independent, Mauritius has developed into a relatively strong multiparty democracy based on the Westminster parliamentary model. The constitution was amended in 1991 and the country became a republic, with a president appointed for a term of not less than five years by the prime minister and ratified by Parliament. The legislature is unicameral and all seats are elected.

Mauritius is usually seen as a model of civil and political rights, largely because a number of institutions ensure a functioning democracy. The media (the country has a strong tradition of free press) have helped enhance the democratic space. An amendment to the 1984 Newspaper and Periodicals Act, which had tightened control, was repealed in the 1990s, thus consolidating freedom of the press. The media, however, can be sued for defamation, libel and sedition. According to the *World Statistics Pocketbook*, newspaper circulation per 1,000 inhabitants stands at 74. The press is mostly controlled by two large concerns belonging to the Creole community. In recent years a multiplicity of newspaper titles has emerged and to some extent these are eroding the 'General Population hegemony' in the print media (see endnote 2). Some newspapers are close to certain religious or sociocultural groups, while others are close to some political parties. Only one newspaper, *Le Militant*, openly claims to belong to a party—in this case the MMM. The broadcast media have undergone some changes in the last three years with the introduction of private commercial radio stations. Previously, broadcasting was dominated by one public service broadcaster, the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The Mauritius Broadcasting Act of 1982 provides for radio and television broadcasting but the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 2000 provides for the liberalization of the airwaves. A number of private radio stations have emerged, and efforts are being made to liberalize the television networks.

In general, political parties have access to major media outlets but it is more difficult to determine if they have equitable access. The introduction of private commercial radio has expanded the parties' access to some extent, and has provided an outlet for the public to express its views. Free media coverage is evident in the editorial space and airtime given to parties. Despite the availability and accessibility of a host of media outlets, the average Mauritian citizen/voter reveals a high level of political illiteracy. That circumstance was evident during the 2005 general election, when the quality of debate between the audience/voters and candidates on private radio was poor. One notable finding of this research is that no citizen/voter education is conducted by the political parties, electoral management bodies or other stakeholders.

The Mauritian democratic model, often cited as an exemplar of success in the Southern African basin, is characterized by regular elections, a multi-party culture, a track record of political stability, the management of diversity and undisputed election results. The LP, MMM and MSM are the three major parties that have dominated post-independent Mauritius. In the last 30 years, these parties have all split several times and those divisions have spawned new parties. Some of the latter have been short-lived, others seek to further particular ethnic interests, and some have become single-person or single-issue parties.

The mainstream parties, such as the LP, MSM and MMM, are supported by particular ethnic groups. The LP's pro-independence struggle allowed it to rally the support of most of the Indo-Mauritian groups (Hindus, Muslims, Tamils and others), while the PMSD has essentially represented the Creole community and the

minority whites of European descent. A new party, the MMM, emerged in the post-independence period. The MMM challenged the LP old guard and appealed to certain groups, namely the Muslims, a sizeable sector of the Creole community and certain minority sectors within the Hindu majority. The 'hegemony' that the LP had acquired over the Hindu community as a whole was eroding, a circumstance exacerbated by the creation of the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM). This began as a splinter group in the LP that joined forces with the MMM for the 1982 general elections. The ethnic value of the PSM (ethnicity is an important feature of Mauritian political parties and most of them, especially when they are negotiating coalitions with other parties, use their ethnic representativeness as a bargaining tool) has been widely commented upon and to many observers it allowed the MMM to lessen the perception that it was comprised only of Muslims, Creoles and certain ethnic minority groups.

When the MSM was created in the early 1980s it won the backing of a large sector of the Hindus who had been staunch supporters of the LP before its 1982 decline. In fact, the 1983-1989 period saw the great reunion of the Hindu community as the MSM took on board, for two successive elections (1983 and 1987), the LP as well as other minority parties. As to the PMSD, its pre-independence backing among the Creole community steadily declined with the creation of the MMM. The PMSD has also undergone several splits, which have further fragmented its electoral base.

The formation of splinter parties has had little effect on the electoral balance, as revealed by several opinion polls, but the splinter groups have been able to chip away at the electoral capital of the three mainstream parties. The LP has spawned splinter parties such as the PSM, Rassemblement des Travailleurs Mauriciens (RTM) and the Mouvement Travailleur Démocrate (MTD), which represent the Hindu community.

The MMM has split three times since its inception, in 1973, 1983 and 1993. The only split that led to the creation of a significant party was in 1983, when the MSM was founded. The Renouveau Militant Mauricien (RMM) was created in 1993 but has not garnered substantial support. The MSM and RMM received the smallest share of the popular vote in any post-independent general elections, when they won just 19.3 per cent in the 1995 general election.

The MSM has experienced several episodes of turbulence, marked by the departure of senior party members. The party suffered its first official split in 1994 when a senior minister in Sir Anerood Jugnauth's cabinet, Madan Dooloo, left to create the Mouvement Militant Socialiste Mauricien (MMSM). The latter remains a single-person party and is currently part of the Alliance Sociale led by Navin Ramgoolam's LP.

The last decade or so has seen the emergence of ethnically-centered parties such as Hizbullah, the Mouvement Démocratique Mauricien (MDN) and Les Verts, which claim to represent certain sectors of the Muslims, Hindus and Creoles, respectively. These three parties have not had a great impact on the political landscape, but from time to time their ethno-political discourse has struck a chord among individuals in certain ethnic groups.

Each party's structure and organisation is determined by its constitution. This sets out the operational guidelines and the various substructures for views and decisions to be transmitted at all levels of the party. The three parties have similar structures and they pride themselves on taking an inclusive and bottom-up approach.

The mainstream political parties, as well as some smaller parties, have a four-tier structure comprising a Political Bureau that is responsible for devising policy, a Central Committee entrusted with decision-making, a General Assembly that meets at least once a year, and regional branches that bring together the grassroots members. Despite what seems to be a well-oiled party machinery, closer analysis of how the parties operate reveals that the party leader has overriding authority. That authority often wields veto power in crucial areas such as the nomination of candidates, party funding and the creation or dissolution of alliances.

Table 1 details the situation prevailing in the Mauritian Parliament after the 2005 general election. The data confirm the ‘consistency’ of all post independent Mauritian Parliaments: the numerical dominance of the main parties (the LP, MMM and MSM), the recurrent pre-electoral coalitions among the different parties and the under-representation of women in the Mauritian Parliament. These circumstances stem mainly from the existing electoral system (first past the post, FPTP), which is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

**Table 1. Parliamentary situation as of 4 July 2005**

Party name	No. of seats	Additional seats	% of seats	% of votes	No. of seats for women	% of seats for women
Alliance Sociale*	38	4	60	48.8	4	9.5
Alliance MMM-MSM	22	2	34	42.6	8	33
Rodrigues People’s Organisation**	2	2	5.7	0.8	0	0

Source: Prepared on the basis of data from the Electoral Office of Mauritius, July 2005.

Note:

\* This is a coalition led by the Labour Party and consisting of five other small parties: the Parti Mauricien Xavier Luc Duval, the Parti Mauricien Socialiste Democrate, Les Verts, the Mouvement Republicain and the Mouvement Militant Socialiste Mauricien.

\*\* Rodrigues Island forms part of the Republic of Mauritius, which ensures the island has representation in the Mauritian Parliament.

## External regulation and environment

Post-independence Mauritius has a relatively good track record of free and fair elections, which have been made possible by an array of factors at both the macro and micro levels of political party functioning and management. The macro level comprises the constitutional and legal framework within which parties have to operate, while the micro level consists of the internal mechanisms that parties design and abide by.

### **Legislation governing political parties**

No electoral or political party law governs the creation and continuance of parties in Mauritius. Section 2 of the first schedule of the constitutions stipulates that parties must register with the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) at least 14 days before their candidates are nominated at a general election. The National Assembly Elections Act of 1968 sets out the method of registration, which should be recorded on a particular form and signed in the presence of the Electoral Commissioner by the party’s president, chairman or secretary as duly authorized by a resolution of the party’s executive committee. The application must be supported by a certified extract of the minutes of the meeting in which the committee passed the resolution. These rules apply solely in election periods. At other times, parties are wholly unregulated except by themselves.

The post of Electoral Commissioner, as well as his or her roles and responsibilities and those of the two Electoral Commissions (the ESC and the Electoral Boundaries Commission) are specified in the constitution. Their impact, however, is evident only in the brief period before, during and after the elections.

### **Nomination of candidates**

Candidates for elections must first be named by their parties, if they are members of one, and the official nomination can then proceed. Candidates can stand as independents without any party affiliation or nomination. Section 12 of the National Assembly Elections Act requires that candidates meet certain criteria, such as their nomination being supported by eight registered electors of the constituency in which they are

seeking election (subsection 2); that they declare themselves qualified to be elected as a member of the legislative assembly (subsection 4a);<sup>1</sup> that they specify the party to which they belong (subsection 4b); and that they state the community to which they belong. The latter criterion<sup>2</sup> is further reinforced in section 3 of the first schedule to the constitution, which deals with the official publication of the nominated candidate's community and the subsequent measures if its validity is contested. The requirement that candidates disclose their community has sparked several disputes, since it is seen in some quarters as underpinning a conception of ethnic politics geared towards segregation. A petition has been lodged with the Supreme Court to remove this requirement, but thus far the Court has not ruled on the matter.

### **Election campaigns and observation**

Election campaigns are officially launched on nomination day, which is 30 days before polling day. Unofficially, campaigns are of no particular duration and can vary from between a month and a year. Some politicians, in fact, start campaigning again on the day after the election results are announced. In the official campaigns, registered parties with candidates, as well as the candidates themselves (including independents), are expected to communicate with voters so as inform them of their proposed policies and electoral manifestos. They do this through public meetings (permission must be sought from the police commissioner under the Public Gathering Act of 1991), private meetings and party political broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> There is no official code of conduct with which politicians must comply, and often the language they use is not civil.

In election periods the streets of each constituency are strewn with banners and posters promoting the contending parties. This commodification of electoral campaigns has attracted attention to political party financing and the maximum amount that parties can spend on elections, especially general elections. Currently, parties should not spend more than Rs 150,000 (1 USD ≈ 30 Rs) on each candidate, while independents should respect a ceiling of Rs 250,000 (Representation of the People Act, 1958). Nonetheless, the report of the Select Committee on the Funding of Political Parties (October 2004) recommended, among other things, a ceiling for general elections of Rs 1,000,000 for independent candidates and for candidates from a political party.

At the operational level, campaigns officially end 24 hours before the day of the polls,<sup>4</sup> after which parties and independent candidates cannot make public addresses or hold rallies. The police are designated as the official authority during election campaigns, and they handle any individuals or incidents that disturb public order.

Because of the country's vaunted record of free and fair elections, the need for domestic or international observation has never arisen. Nonetheless, it is believed that sharing and consolidating best practices in the area of electoral procedures is desirable and should be encouraged. As a member state of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Mauritius has been invited by several institutions within SADC—such as the Parliamentary Forum and the Electoral Institute for Southern Africa (EISA)—as well as outside the Community—such as the African Union (AU)—to observe and monitor elections in the region.<sup>5</sup> The country's active involvement in the SADC and its current presidency of the Community requires it to display a strong commitment to the principles for election management, monitoring and observation (PEMMO).

One of the recurrent problems of election campaigns in Mauritius is the matter of incumbency, especially the use (and perhaps abuse) of state resources. Doubtless this directly influences the effectiveness of certain parties' and candidates' campaigns. An amendment to the Representation of the People Act now provides for the presence of international election observers. For the 2005 general elections, the Mauritian Electoral Commission issued official invitations to a host of electoral observers from the SADC region.

### **Electoral system and party political competition**

The FPTP system has been operational since 1886, together with the 'best loser' system. The FPTP is in fact a 'first-three-past the post' system that allows for 60 elected members to be represented in the National Assembly: each of the 20 constituencies returns three Members of Parliament (MPs) and the island of Rodrigues returns two. Additionally, a system of best losers (variable correctives) assigns eight seats to non-elected candidates on the basis of their ethno-religious affiliation. Many observers believe that the FPTP and best loser systems have been at the root of the proliferation and dissolution of party alliances and have spurred high levels of political instability. Moreover, they have brought about a crude 'ethnicization' of political parties that have devoted their attention to the electoral benefits of forming party alliances.

The constant ethnic calculations that parties undertake is legitimized by the constitution, which demands that candidates in a general election to the Assembly declare the community to which they belong, and that the community shall be stated in a published notice of the nomination. This deliberate 'ethnicization' has been exacerbated by electoral boundaries that perpetuate a rural-urban divide based on ethnic concentration.

Electoral reform has been among the main parties' pledges and has appeared in their manifestos. In 2001, the government instituted a Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform, presided over by a retired South African Judge, Albie Sachs. The Committee completed its report a year later, after which a Select Committee of the Assembly was appointed to review the report and make its own recommendations. Both reports recognize the distortions inherent in the prevailing FPTP system, since 'the three-member constituencies frequently produced results which were grossly disproportionate to the share of votes obtained by the different parties. At times, although obtaining a substantial percentage of the popular vote, the opposition was completely or nearly completely eliminated' (Sachs et al, 2002, paragraph 33). The two reports sought to ensure an electoral system marked by fairness and representativeness, especially as regards 'correcting the over-representation of the leading party or alliance' (Sachs et al, 2002, paragraph 37).

Substantial time and resources were invested in these two committees but little seems to have happened as a result, and hopes have been dashed that a dose of proportional representation might be introduced in the general elections scheduled for late 2005.

Electoral reform is expected to consolidate Mauritian democracy. The absence of any electoral or political party law is unfortunate: it is far from enough that political parties merely register, especially since some do so only at election times. The Electoral Commission should be endowed with a more proactive role and provided with the necessary authority to give operational and regulatory guidelines to political parties, individual candidates and even voters in both election and non-election periods.

As mentioned, all political parties or independent candidates wishing to contest an election should register with the ESC. Political representation in Mauritius is ensured through a fully competitive electoral process based on universal adult suffrage and expressed through secret ballot. The voting age is 18 years and above. In post-independence elections, and most particularly in general elections, there has been a high turnout: 81 per cent at the 2005 general elections (Electoral Commission Database, 2005). This is usually matched by the parties' interest in fielding candidates and by the number of independent candidates that contest elections. Electoral Commission data indicate that at the 2005 general election, there were some 71 political parties and 535 candidates contesting the 60 National Assembly seats. Despite this surge in candidates, the political and thus the electoral landscape remain dominated by three mainstream parties: the LP, MMM and MSM. Most of the time, and especially when two of these parties form a pre-electoral coalition, they win most if not all of the seats, as in the general elections of 1991, 1995 and 2000. The outcome of the 2005 general election was slightly different, in that the Alliance Sociale led by the LP and a cluster of smaller political parties won a majority of seats (see Table 1). Hence smaller parties and independent candidates cannot compete on a level playing field, since they face significant difficulties in raising the necessary resources. The issue of party financing, as well as the current electoral system, to some extent underscore how unfair the competition can be, despite the country's excellent record as a strong democracy.

### **Parliament and party representation**

The President appoints the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister (Section 58 (1)). These, with the cabinet of ministers, are accountable to Parliament, which has the power to approve a resolution of no-confidence in the government. If the Prime Minister does not resign within three days thereafter, 'the President shall remove the prime minister from office' (Section 6 (1)). Even the position of leader of the opposition is enshrined in the constitution (Section 73) and appointed by the President. The leader of the opposition is chosen from among those members of the Assembly who command sufficient opposition support. Two offices of the legislature, the Speaker and the Attorney General, may be held by non-elected members.

The legislature's mechanisms for oversight include parliamentary questions, motions and matters of adjournment. Parliament also institutes a number of statutory committees to facilitate its various functions, including the legislative committees, the standing order committees<sup>6</sup> and the public accounts committee.<sup>7</sup> Select parliamentary committees are *ad hoc* bodies created to make recommendations to Parliament and the

executive on any matter deemed to require study, debate and consultation among the parliamentary parties. The most recent select committees were set up to examine the Sachs Report and party financing.

As a result of the electoral system, party representation in the post-independence parliament has been varied. On several occasions the numerical dominance of the ruling party in the legislature, together with the often limited representation of the opposition, has given rise to an unbalanced Assembly that is unable to generate constructive and engaging debate. That circumstance is exacerbated by the fact that MPs have to display absolute party allegiance. Members who dare to support another party are reprimanded.

There is no code of conduct and practice for MPs; Parliament has been the venue for vulgar verbal exchanges and, at times, physical confrontation. Hence the urgent need for Parliament to provide a framework that enables MPs, especially newcomers to the legislature, to observe proper decorum.

## **Internal functioning and structure**

### ***Founding of parties***

The LP, founded in 1936, was created with the aim of bringing independence to what was then a British colony. It was urgent to address the exploitation of labour and fight for workers' rights. Shortly after independence, the party implemented a comprehensive welfare system and instituted a culture of government subsidies that has continued to date. More recently the party's support base has expanded to cover all sectors of the population. The party's strongest support, however, is still among the Hindu group, and especially those who live in the rural areas.

The MMM was founded in 1969 to foster human-oriented development. It is a socialist party inspired by the ideas of the non-aligned movement. Since the end of the Cold War, the party has acknowledged that its ideological alignment has been pragmatic.

The MSM was founded in 1983 following a split in the MMM. This party, and particularly its leader, Sir Anerood Jugnauth, is often credited with having made possible the country's economic success. Despite its overtures to all ethnic groups it has often been seen as the party of the Hindu community, since it appeals (as in the general elections of 1983 and 1987) to certain voters' sense of belonging to an ethnic group. It describes its ideology as socialism combined with pragmatism.

### ***Internal structures and election of leadership***

All three parties are governed by their constitutions, which regulate their activities, and in addition there is a series of operational guidelines. In all three there are well defined structures and sub-structures to ensure both a top-down and bottom-up approach to party matters. Each of them advocates a grassroots approach and has instituted mechanisms—branches for the MMM and MSM, and a Constituency Labour Party (CLP) for the LP<sup>8</sup>—to enable potential and current party members to take part in matters related to promoting the party. Above the party grassroots there are middle to high 'management' structures with different names in each party.

- In the MMM, the Central Committee is the party's national executive body. Its members are elected by the delegates to the party's General Assembly and by members of the regional branches.
- The LP's national executive body is the National Labour Executive Committee (NLEC), the membership of which is determined by a combination of election and selection. Each CLP elects three members (of which one should be a woman). Of a core group of 60 'proposed' candidates, the party's leader and a small caucus make the selection. All of the party's elected MPs automatically become members of the NLEC.
- The MSM's national executive body is its Political Bureau. When the party is in power, the Political Bureau comprises all of its MPs plus five additional members from the regional branches. When the party is in opposition, however, the membership of the Political Bureau is at the discretion of the party leader, who assigns shadow cabinet responsibilities to its members.

Each party has established regional and sub-regional clusters, the number of which varies depending on the size of each constituency. Each of the MMM's 20 branches is managed by an elected executive committee

comprising a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer, who hold office for two years. The basic structure of the LP's CLPs is determined by the number of polling stations in a given constituency, and the leadership of each CLP is elected. The MSM takes the same approach as the MMM in setting up its branches, but in this case the leader of the MSM has discretionary power over the appointments of the branch leadership. The various party structures are not marked by formal quotas for women or youths, although the MMM and the LP have instituted a process of inclusion for these groups.

It is plain that the party leader has much leeway and, in most cases, the right to select the members of the various party structures. Party loyalty is an important criterion in this regard, and party members are often rewarded if they have displayed sufficient allegiance. Members of the different structures are unpaid and are expected to volunteer their time and skills.

### **Policy development**

Policy development is an important feature of all parties, since it allows them to inform the public of initiatives that they plan to implement if they win power. There are significant overlaps between policy and political manifesto development: most interviewees stressed that policies have to be packaged to make them attractive to voters.

All three parties have committees working on particular issue-areas. The LP recently set up a formal National Policy Forum (NPF), while the MMM and the MSM continue to use *ad hoc* committees. The LP's NPF examines the main challenges facing the country and makes recommendations on how to address them in the context of rapidly changing socioeconomic and political conditions. The aim is to produce better and more innovative policies, and to build some consensus among stakeholders. The NPF has ten sub-committees working on a range of social and economic issues.

The parties do not invest in any particular sources of information, such as surveys and opinion polls, but the various party structures promote the exchange of views among members. Party officials interviewed for this study stated that individuals who are not officially party members, but who are sympathetic to party ideals, regularly contribute to policy development. It is clear that all three parties have excellent networking capacities, which help them significantly in developing and disseminating policies and manifestos.

### **Membership and recruitment**

Membership and recruitment procedures vary among the three parties. The LP has a national register. All its members pay dues and are party cardholders. There is no official count, but a senior party member estimated that there are some 200 active members in each constituency. Membership fees vary depending on the position that members hold, ranging from 5 per cent of the monthly salary for current parliamentarians to Rs100 a year for ordinary members.

The MMM does not have a national membership register, a circumstance that dates to its founding in the early 1970s when the ruling party viewed the MMM with a great deal of suspicion as a radical movement with communist tendencies. Senior party officials claimed that maintaining a membership register at that time would have put members at risk. Unlike the LP, the MMM does not charge membership fees. Government ministers and MPs, however, have to contribute Rs5,000 and Rs2,000, respectively, each month.

The MSM also lacks an official membership register, but the party's various structures keep account of party members. Like the MMM it charges no membership fees, but voluntary contributions from members are always sought.

The members of all three main parties have voting rights at their parties' general assembly meetings. Representatives of each of them stated that their membership criteria are non-discriminatory, but members have to prove their commitment to the party at all times. The party officials interviewed claimed that their parties had experienced a substantial increase in membership in the last decade. There are various party-specific reasons for this increase. The MMM has always fostered involvement through its various structures,<sup>9</sup> thereby ensuring that its membership has risen. MSM membership has been increasing because the party has been in power for much of the period since its founding in 1983, a circumstance that has enabled it to extend certain privileges to members. LP membership has undergone marked growth, especially in the last three years. According to some of its officials, this is largely because of the unpopularity of the present MMM-MSM coalition government. The three parties lack an official recruitment strategy, although they use existing

party structures, specifically their women and youth wings, to identify potential members and encourage them to join.

Party members have different roles in and responsibilities towards their parties. The party structures ensure that there are regular meetings involving members at the various levels within the party, at which members can freely express their views. These take place once a month for the local/regional branch; every two weeks for the national party; and once a week for the party's executive/political bureau.

The parties interviewed had no other means of communicating with their members. Each of the three main parties has its own website but the response rate to this technology is minimal. It might be worthwhile for parties to invest in different communication strategies, so as to ensure that most of their members have access to information on party matters.

The parties do not have any official training scheme for members, though the women and youth wings of the three main parties provide training through workshops and other events.

Membership recruitment drives are important to all three parties. Sustaining the members' involvement and commitment in non-election years is challenging, but the parties interviewed stated that there are always opportunities to ensure that members remain active and committed. The political meeting held on May Day is an important occasion to rally all members and is usually a litmus test of the parties' popularity.

### **Primary elections, candidates and campaigns**

The process for selecting and nominating candidates is party-specific. In all three parties, however, the leader ultimately decides who is nominated as a candidate. In each case the main criteria for candidate-selection are age, party membership and proven party loyalty. All three parties follow certain procedural rules in selecting candidates. In the MMM, eligible candidates are suggested by the Political Bureau and must then be approved by the party's Central Committee and Assembly of Delegates. The MSM establishes a pool of candidates, informally known as the 'MSM family', who have been coached in the ways of the party. From this pool the party leader draws up the list of candidates following consultation with the Central Committee and its regional branches. The LP institutes an official selection committee chaired by the party leader. The committee prepares a shortlist of names from a longer list drawn up by the party's various bodies. Very often there is a high level of competition among members to be nominated as a candidate.

The official list of a party's nominated candidates for a general election is made public on nomination day, which is 30 days before the scheduled polling date. Most parties wait for nomination day to announce their lists, but there is much prior speculation about possible names. The list of nominated candidates often includes individuals who have stood as candidates in previous elections, since there is no restriction on the number of terms that sitting MPs can be returned to their seats. Additionally, competition among party members to be nominated as a candidate is fierce, and some members often use their bargaining power to induce the party leader to meet their demands, thereby leaving little space for newcomers.

Parties are nonetheless under some pressure to nominate fresh candidates. At the last general elections, the LP and the MSM nominated a fair number of new candidates whilst the MMM re-nominated most of its old guard. It is important to note that the nomination of fresh candidates often depends on the dynamics of the coalition between the different parties. Since the various post-independence general elections in Mauritius have always been marked by pre-electoral coalitions, there has been very little leeway to inject new blood into the parties. Elections are the climactic moments for all parties, and all of them invest much time and money in their campaigns. The official campaign starts on nomination day and ends 24 hours before the opening of the polls.

The officials of all three parties interviewed stressed the importance of election manifestos, which they see as the blueprint of their party's vision for the country in the next five years. Each of the three parties has a distinct strategy for developing the ideas at the heart of their manifestos. In the MMM, *ad hoc* committees are set up to research specific issues, after which an editorial committee works on the final manifesto. As to the MSM, when the party is in power, each minister devises his or her own policies, which are then given the necessary political touch. When in opposition, the party creates several committees whose outputs are reviewed and later adopted by the party as the template for the manifesto. A diversity of views is sought in the preparation of the LP's manifesto, but the NPF is the main body responsible for developing party policy and drawing up the document. When one party enters into a coalition with another, their manifestos have to

be merged or a new one devised. Most general elections in post-independence Mauritius have been contested by two of the three mainstream parties in a coalition.

Manifesto development is part of the broader campaign strategy of a party or coalition contesting an election. All three parties claim to have effective campaign machinery that becomes fully operational once the official campaign is launched. The MMM's campaign strategy is often determined by whether the party is in power, in opposition or about to join a coalition with another party. As the elections approach, the campaign becomes more focused and a dedicated team working on key issues tries to promote the ideas in the manifesto. The development of slogans is an important feature of the MMM's campaign.

The MSM has a central campaign committee that develops a general plan of action for a national campaign, and 20 campaign sub-committees meet daily to address constituency-specific matters. In addition to these daily campaign briefings, there are weekly meetings at which the central campaign committee takes stock of the progress in all 20 constituencies. The LP also has a central committee to coordinate campaign strategy, but most of the work—such as updating electoral lists and mobilizing voters—is carried out by the various CLPs.

### ***Party outreach programmes***

None of the parties interviewed has a firmly established mechanism for civic or voter education. This is largely because the individual parties, through their regional and local branches at the grassroots level, maintain regular contact with their supporters. Such contacts intensify during election campaigns. The party officials interviewed were aware of the need to inform and sensitize voters, but this need was seen largely in terms of securing electoral support. Hence the concern is much more for partisan backing than for civic education.

To some extent civic and voter education was deemed unnecessary, since turnout at general elections has always been high. Such education, however, involves much more than ensuring that people vote. It concerns the quality of democracy and should give voters a better understanding of the electoral system, thereby helping them to make more informed decisions. Mauritius needs a more integrated and inclusive approach to civic and voter education, one that involves the Electoral Commission, the political parties and other stakeholders such as the media and sectors of civil society.

### ***The parties' external relations***

The parties' links with external partners vary according to who those partners are. All three larger parties are affiliated to the Socialist International. They have also forged links with other parties, such as India's Congress Party and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP); China's Communist Party; South Africa's African National Congress (ANC); Britain's Labour Party and Conservative Party; and Madagascar's Malagasy Party. The level of exchange with these parties, however, remains minimal. It consists mostly of Mauritian party members and delegates attending these parties' conferences when they receive an official invitation, and sometimes reciprocating.

At the national level, the parties maintain relationships with each other if they are part of a coalition or about to join one. At present, the MMM and MSM form the coalition government and have announced their intention of presenting themselves as the MMM-MSM coalition party. The LP and five other small parties—the Mouvement Republicain (MR), the MMSM, Les Verts, the Mouvement Socialiste Democrate (MSD) and the Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval (PMXD)—comprise L'Alliance Sociale. Although some parties are in a coalition with another, it is the responsibility of each individual party to attend to its internal matters. There are common platforms at press conferences and public meetings, and common work is undertaken to develop a joint manifesto and a campaign strategy.

Only at election time do the parties have a relationship with the Electoral Commission and its ancillary bodies, the ESC and the Electoral Boundary Commission (EBC). As mentioned earlier, all parties and independent candidates must officially register with the ESC before polling day and must abide by all the Commission's regulations. There has been some discussion of extending the official relationship beyond election times so as to foster a deeper exchange between the Commission and the parties.

The three parties have no formal links with civil society organizations, business groups, trade unions or religious bodies. The absence of a formal relationship, however, does not preclude these three parties'

maintaining informal links with such organizations. Indeed, the MMM, MSM and LP have cultivated a 'special relationship' with certain ethno-religious organizations in Mauritius. This relationship seems to intensify as general elections approach, when some of these organizations decide to endorse a given party.

### **Gender equality**

Mauritius is a signatory to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender, which calls for the better representation of women in legislatures. Despite this, Mauritius persistently has one of the lowest levels of women's parliamentary representation among the SADC countries: 5.7 per cent before the 2005 elections, 17.1 per cent after (Inter-Parliamentary Union Database, 2005).<sup>10</sup> The 'invisibility' of women in politics, and by extension in Parliament, is highlighted by the Sachs Commission Report. The latter describes this state of affairs as 'a grave democratic deficit' and blames the present electoral system, which 'will never do justice to the true role of women in society and will never enhance the empowerment of women' (Sachs et al, 2002).

In recent years civil society groups, particularly those comprising women, have begun advocacy work, but much remains to be done. Mauritius has been adept at the politics of recognition of different ethnic groups but this approach has not addressed the issue of women. The matter is not simply numerical (that is, the presence of women in politics) but also one of social transformation (the politics of ideas). Politicians and ordinary citizens increasingly recognize the importance of having more women in Parliament, but resistance persists in some quarters.

The three parties interviewed were conscious of the need to promote intra-party gender equality. Each of them has a well-structured women's wing that usually raises its own funds. Women representatives of these parties mentioned the level of autonomy that their wings have in addressing gender-related matters. They expressed concern, however, that they had minimal impact on other party matters, which remain male-dominated.

The LP is the only party to have instituted a party quota. The party's constitution was amended recently to ensure that a third of CLP representatives are women. According to the president of the women's wing, this makes women more visible in party operations but does not necessarily secure them a seat as a nominated candidate. In the MMM, two members of its women's wing are *ex-officio* members of the party's national executive body. Nonetheless, the party's constitution stipulates that at least 20 per cent of its candidates for legislative and municipal elections must be women—a percentage the party has never attained. The MSM encourages women to join its regional and local branches so that they become integrated into the party structure and eventually advance to higher levels of responsibility within the party.

### **Party funding**

Party financing has attracted much attention but little has been resolved. Access to funds and the amount spent in an election campaign remain largely unregulated, since the Electoral Commission has a very limited role in scrutinizing the parties' spending. The Select Committee on the Funding of Political Parties issued a report in October 2004 but thus far there is no real consensus on which financing model (state funding or common public/private sector funding) to adopt. The 2005 general election was similar to previous general elections in that the different parties' access to funds was unequal.

All three parties interviewed were somewhat reticent about financing, and their treasurers were unwilling to disclose spending amounts on the grounds that it is the sole prerogative of the party leader to divulge such information. According to the treasurers, spending is devoted mainly to publicity, salaries, transport, and national and regional meetings. In election years, most expenditure is on campaign activities. Party representatives stated that their parties abide by the legal provisions governing spending on elections.

None of the three parties requires candidates to pay a sum in order to secure their candidacy. Once they have been nominated, however, candidates must be ready to spend significant resources on certain aspects of their campaigns. Each party has its own methods for the management and distribution of campaign funds. In the MMM the responsibility falls to the official campaign manager, while in the MSM some items are centrally financed by the party and the rest are self-financed by candidates from each constituency. In the LP, every aspect of campaign financing and the distribution of funds remain solely in the leader's hands.

The parties were equally reticent about their main sources of income. Representatives of all three used the term ‘well-wishers’ to describe those individuals or corporate bodies that donate money to their parties. They were unwilling to disclose the names of these well-wishers or the amounts donated. None of the parties has a fundraising strategy and they rely to a great extent on donations, especially for election campaigns. As regards party assets, the MSM mentioned its ownership of a building and the MMM said it owns a party newspaper.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

Democracy prevails in Mauritius but some important challenges persist. The latter include improving the representation of women in Parliament and electoral reform to ensure that parties that secure a high level of votes are not excluded, as it is often the case under the present system. Another challenge is the question of party financing. A start has been made by the Select Committee on Political Party Funding, chaired by the Attorney General and the director of the Joint Economic Council (JEC). The latter body has proposed that companies should record all donations to political parties in their accounts.

A third challenge is the fight against communalism—that is, loyalty to a sociopolitical grouping based on religious or ethnic affiliation. In many ways the Representation of the People Act and the ‘best loser’ system perpetuate communalism. The Representation of the People Act demands that candidates standing for elections state the community to which they belong. Mauritian unity and a sense of ‘Mauritianness’ can only be achieved if the ethnic and racial dimensions of the Act are removed. Note, however, that the Representation of the People Act is gender-neutral and thus it is important that the gender dimension be taken into account.

Doubtless the country’s well-defined constitution is an asset that offers many opportunities to develop people-friendly legislation. The broad outlines of the present constitution can be amended to allow for the enactment of electoral laws that would facilitate and deepen Mauritian democracy. Specific electoral laws could help rectify the piecemeal approach that has to be adopted in seeking legislation and information related to parliamentary and political democracy.

The rapidly changing media landscape offers an excellent opportunity for party representatives to engage in dialogue with the population on key national issues. Before liberalization, the broadcast media were geared towards propaganda, and in many ways they consolidated the politics of incumbency. Liberalization now allows for a multiplicity of voices, and for alternative visions of the parties and other stakeholders, thereby helping to deepen democracy. Currently there seems to be growing awareness of the extent to which incumbents abuse the state apparatus, especially the public broadcast media. The growing discomfiture about this in some quarters may help to mitigate the problem.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

There is a need for:

- Voter education at all levels, especially to demystify the operations of certain institutions and to ensure that citizens appreciate the need for improved state-society relations.
- The promotion of dialogue between political parties and the various stakeholders. There are mechanisms and structures within the parties but often they are inadequate.
- Citizenship education at the level of primary and secondary schools, so as to develop a culture of accountability and transparency.
- New guidelines to lessen the problem of incumbency. There is a need to develop an appropriate institutional framework that monitors the implementation of these guidelines.
- An expansion of the role and responsibilities of the Electoral Commission, so as to deepen democratic governance.
- The consolidation of good corporate governance. The JEC’s recommendation that companies should record donations to political parties in their accounts should be implemented.
- A formal code of ethics on issues such as funding, the avoidance of improper language and the declaration of assets, at the level of the parties and the legislature.
- A fresh review of the Standing Orders and the inclusion of new ones, since the last review was in the 1970s.

- Legislation to make it harder for parliamentarians to cross the floor.
- A greater and more effective use of the media, so as to promote a culture of dialogue between stakeholders and thus promote participatory democracy.
- The broadcasting in full of parliamentary sessions and debates, so that party representatives acquire a higher profile and the issues being addressed are made known to their constituents. This can help improve the relationship between the people and their representatives.
- A much more democratic use of languages, which is important in promoting an inclusive democracy. Parliamentarians currently use either English or French, a circumstance that excludes large segments of the population from full participation in the political arena.
- Training at party level, as well as for parliamentarians, on key national, regional and international issues.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The criterion concerning qualification is further detailed in the constitution (section 33), which states that the nominated candidate should be, among other things, a Commonwealth citizen of not less 18 years of age, should have resided in Mauritius for a period amounting to not less than two years before the date of his or her nomination, and should be able to speak and read the English language with a degree of proficiency that enables the candidate to participate in the parliamentary debates.

<sup>2</sup> The First Schedule of the constitution recognizes the following communities: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian and General Population (see section 3, subsection 4).

<sup>3</sup> The elections scheduled for 2005 will be interesting, since this is first time that private commercial radios will be operational during a general election. Nonetheless, caution is required to ensure a level playing field for all parties and candidates.

<sup>4</sup> The polls open at 6 am and close at 6 pm.

<sup>5</sup> In 2004 and 2005, Mauritius was invited to observe elections in Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

<sup>6</sup> This committee sets the procedures to be adopted for carrying out the functions of Parliament during its mandate.

<sup>7</sup> Its main function is to screen and scrutinize the Director of Audit's report tabled at the Assembly.

<sup>8</sup> There are 20 branches in the MMM and MSM, and 20 CLPs in the LP. This reflects the number of constituencies in Mauritius.

<sup>9</sup> The MMM is one of the first political parties officially to have instituted well-defined party structures.

<sup>10</sup> According to the updated IPU chart, at the election in July 2005, women's representation increased to 17,1% . IPU ranks Mauritius now on rank no. 62: out of 70, 12 parliamentarians are women.

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### **About IDEA**

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that seeks to promote and develop sustainable democracy world-wide.

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