



**Coalition politics under the tropics: office seekers, power  
makers, nation building  
A case study of Mauritius**

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## **Coalition politics under the tropics: office seekers, policy makers, nation building**

### **A case study of Mauritius**

Although coalition politics in Mauritius share some characteristics with other countries where coalition governments exist, there are some significant differences. At times the contrast can be stark. What determines coalition formation, its governance, its conflict management and resolution aspects and its termination is a delicate interplay among many factors. As suggested by political theory, institutions play an important role. Political actors adapt to institutional constraints when framing their coalition strategies. Probably, the most important of these institutions is the electoral system. Party elites in Mauritius also have to recognise the diverse ethnic outlook of the population and the need for all groups to feel integrated in the system, thus avoiding political alienation. Then, there are the behavioural strategies of parties that range from the motivation to be in office to the desire to influence policy. Finally there is need to take into account the personalities of the major players, especially when they are mercurial, charismatic and ambitious and would like to vie for the top position. In a small society, settling political scores can also be a major determinant of coalition politics.

Mauritius has some very specific characteristics in coalition politics that can be summarised as follows:

- i) While many countries that have adopted a First Past The Post electoral system usually have single party, majority government (UK, Canada) Mauritius has always been governed since its independence in 1968 by coalition governments of at least two parties. In some cases, there have been more than two political formations sharing power. For instance, the Government which is currently in office won the General Elections of 2000 on a platform shared by five parties ( two major ones and three small factions);
- ii) In many states where the norm is coalition government, political actors discuss the formation of such coalition after the election, even if in some cases they may indicate their preference prior to polling. The negotiation, bargaining and the finalisation of the coalition agreement takes place after the elections, often necessitating protracted discussions before forming a Government. In Mauritius all coalitions (except one) have been pre electoral ones. Basically the parties agree before the election on a common platform and programme which they

present to the nation. They also concur on how the important posts in the coalition would be shared, especially the top posts of Prime Minister, President, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and the Speaker of the National Assembly. Accordingly, there is no delay in coalition formation after the elections;

- iii) Usually in coalition governments, the top job of Prime Minister goes to the leader of the party with most popular support (Belgium, Austria). This has not always been the case in Mauritius. Incumbency and the fallback positions of the various parties have often played a very crucial role. For instance in 1983, the sitting Prime Minister who had a large Parliamentary majority broke away from his party and formed a new one. However the majority of the MPs of his party did not join him. He had to dissolve Parliament and to call for new elections. He built a new coalition with his previous opponents. However he insisted during the negotiation to keep the top post and to field a majority of candidates even if another party had more popular support. The new coalition won a majority of seats and he remained Prime Minister even if his party was new and did not have more than 15 % of the votes. This was an example of political opportunism and shrewd bargaining where a small party leveraged its position to stay in power for quite a long time. It happened again in 1987 and 1991 with the same PM being returned to power ;
- iv) There have been many cases of ideologically disconnected coalitions. This is attributable to the fact that political parties adopt strategies that maximise their chances of gaining office rather than to influence policies, even if many would argue that to shape policies, a party must first be in power. This is evidenced by the fact that there is hardly any vigorous debate on programmatic commitments; the emphasis is rather on how the benefits would be shared among the different coalition partners. There are two consequences of this 'office seeking strategy'. First, coalition partners start fighting each other once in power because of lack of policy cohesiveness. Second coalition governments have an unusually short life span.
- v) Ethnic politics is an important determinant of coalition politics on the island. While most major political parties project themselves as national formations that cut across all ethnic groups, the reality on the ground is that most of them draw their support from clearly identifiable segments of the population. Empirically this translates into parties having safe seats in constituencies where one particular ethnic group is in majority and it throws its support behind them;

- vi) Even if the Constitution provides that any Mauritian can become Prime Minister, up to now, the office has been held by someone coming from the 'majority among the majority'. Not only has he been a Hindu, but he has also belonged to a sub group that constitutes a majority among the 51 % of Hindus which comprise the Mauritian population. However this 'taboo' will change in September of this year when someone from an extremely small minority will become Prime Minister through a historic power sharing agreement;
- vii) Coalition termination usually leads to fresh elections. This is not true in Mauritius. Of all coalition governments that have collapsed, only one (in 1983) led to new elections. In other cases, a new coalition was formed to govern the country with Opposition members joining the ranks of Government or there were enough Mps to keep the Government in power; in some cases there were defections from the party that left the Government.

### **Electoral system as a driver of pre election coalitions**

Mauritius has a unique electoral system made up of two components: 60 Mps elected through a FPTP formula in twenty constituencies of three members each, supplemented by a Best Loser system that returns 8 Mps among communities that are underrepresented in Parliament. For the purpose of the election to the Best Loser System, there are four constitutionally accepted communities: Hindu, Muslim, Chinese and General Population.

The effects of different electoral systems on the behaviour and strategies of political parties are well known. Proportional Representation models tend to produce a multiplicity of parties while majoritarian and plurality systems favour the emergence of a strong two party system. However in the specific case of Mauritius, allegiance and loyalties primarily along ethnic and sub ethnic lines have made it impossible for a single party to win an overall majority of seats on its own in order to govern alone in spite of the First Past The Post electoral formula. This situation has been further weakened by the electoral boundaries designed by the British administration prior to Independence and which have remained intact. Demographically, the country is made up of 51 % of people of Hindu faith who migrated from different parts of India, 16 % Muslim (also of Indian origin), 30 % General Population consisting people of African origin, coloured and a small white minority and 3 % Chinese. There has been some gerrymandering in the delimitation of electoral boundaries. This was done 'on purpose' so that all ethnic groups are adequately represented

in Parliament. Hindus are in relatively large majorities in around 40 % of the constituencies while they are in minority in another 40 % of the districts. The remaining 20 % of seats are fought in marginal ridings. To compound the problem, there is an urban-rural dichotomy with an ethnic bias. Hindus are predominant in rural constituencies while non Hindus are in majority in urban areas. In one election (1983), the Opposition party which was supported by the minorities, did not win a single seat in any rural constituency. It captured all of its seats in urban districts, in spite of polling 47 % of the votes nationally.

The electoral system, the drawing of electoral boundaries, the absolute necessity to have all communities represented both in Parliament and in Government and the fact that political loyalties are divided along ethnic lines have led political actors to forge strategies that maximise their electoral benefits. All elections since Independence have been fought between two coalitions of parties, except in 1976 when it was a three horse contest. In all cases, save 1976, the coalition was formed before the election. In a FPTP system, there are huge electoral benefits for coalition partners to field joint candidates as opposed to fighting the polls independently. When two of the three major parties come together before the election and present common candidates, the FPTP gives them a disproportionate advantage and the outcome of the election becomes a foregone conclusion. For instance in the last election held in 2000, the major parties had two coalition possibilities one month before polling. The outgoing Labour Party Govt believed that it would be a three cornered fight which it could win easily with around 40 % of votes. Especially as the other two parties had just split and were criticising each other. However at the last minute ( basically on the eve of nomination day), realising that they would lose by splitting their votes, the MMM and the MSM came together and formed a coalition. They fielded joint candidates, captured 51 % of the votes and grabbed 90 % of the seats.

Another electoral system would have probably led to the adoption of different strategies. Under a PR system, each party would have contested the election under its own independent banner. And bargaining and negotiation would have taken place after polling as it exists in many countries with PR model. For a long time, the MMM proposed to add a dose of PR to the current FPTP formula. A Constitutional Commission was appointed by Govt in 2001 to consider electoral reforms. The Commission has proposed a mixed electoral system with 30 PR seats while keeping the current 70 FPTP MPs. However no decision has yet been taken to modify the electoral system. It is clear that a new electoral formula would change the behaviour and strategies of political parties. However the requirement of a very high threshold of 10 % of total votes cast to be entitled to PR seats would act as a deterrent to party fragmentation and would penalise single issue and extremist parties. It may even continue to

encourage a strategy of pre election alliance as the share of seats returned through FPTP would be very high at 70 out of a total of 100. Under these circumstances, presenting joint candidates would still yield considerable benefits to the coalition partners.

### **Coalition among rivals to heal the wounds of a bitter ethnic contest**

The General Elections of 1967 was bitterly fought along ethnic considerations. The Hindu majority supported massively political independence while the minorities, fearing political domination by the Hindus, voted overwhelmingly against Independence and in favour of political integration/association with the UK. The Independence Party which comprised three political formations won 56 % of the votes while the anti independence bloc captured a sizeable 44 %. The country was deeply divided and there was an absolute necessity to heal these wounds. Two years later, the coalition Govt that won the elections collapsed and a new one was sworn in between the main party that fought for Independence (Labour Party) and the one that opposed it (PMSD). It was hailed as a path breaking move to build bridges between the two camps, to prevent political alienation, to encourage broad based participation in the running of the country, to nurture the newly born nation and to avoid a descent to hell. It was a power sharing strategy that allowed the country to get on with the task of nation building and economic development rather than be engulfed in acrimonious ethnic rivalry. It worked well for years and delivered socio economic progress to the country.

### **Post election coalition for ideological affinity**

A political vacuum was created as the two main political parties that had contested the Independence election of 1967 formed a coalition in 1969. This was effectively occupied by a radical left wing party (MMM) that embraced a very nationalistic and an ethnic free platform. As it was new and had never participated in an election, nobody could gauge its real electoral force. When the LP/PMSD coalition of 1969 eventually collapsed, the two parties contested the 1976 General Elections separately. However they had to face the daunting challenge of the MMM. We thus have a unique situation where an election was fought by three major parties without a pre election coalition. It was the relative uncertainty of the strength of the MMM that led to such a predicament. The election produced a hung parliament with the new party, the MMM, capturing 34 of the 70 seats. The other two main parties won 36 seats between them ( 28 for the LP and 6 for the PMSD).

There are no conventions, rules and procedures to govern the conduct of inter party negotiation to form a coalition in Mauritius. For instance, unlike

the situation in some countries, there is no provision for appointing 'formateurs and informateurs' and the Head of State is not expected to play an active role in these negotiations. The process is very much left in the hands of party leaders who are free to adopt whatever means appropriate to maximise the benefits to their parties in the coalition building process. It depends very much on circumstances and on the different personalities of the protagonists. In some countries, the leader of the party that comes first would have been given the chance to form a Govt. This was not the case in 1976. Although the MMM was the strongest political party with 34 out of the 70 seats, it was not able to form a government as it did not have an overall majority of 36 Mps to do so. There was significant policy differences between the MMM and the other two parties represented in Parliament. Both had deep ideological differences with the MMM which advocated extreme socialist measures like nationalisation as a policy platform compared to their social democratic tendencies. As a consequence, the second strongest party (the Labour Party) entered into a coalition with the third one that held the balance of power with 8 elected representatives. Even if these two parties had fought against each other during the elections, they came together and formed a post election coalition Govt in order to prevent their common enemy from being in power. It was a government with a very small majority. However, had they come together before the elections and fielded common candidates, they would have won around 50 seats instead of 36. In most constituencies won by the MMM, the combined votes of the LP and the PMSD were significantly higher than those of the MMM. Everybody drew the necessary lessons from that episode and since then all elections have been fought between two coalitions of different parties constituted before polling.

### **Office seeking coalition**

An important theme in the study of politics concerns the motivations of politicians. Do they seek to win office or to influence policy or both? In Mauritius, coalition formation and governance has been influenced more by office seeking strategy than policy making orientations. Especially, as all parties have moved towards the political centre and radical formations have had to jettison their extremist policies to become electable. This has been facilitated by the end of the deep ideological cleavage of the Cold War era and the adoption of market forces as an instrument of economic management. Even if policy differences remain in some specific areas and some parties lay greater emphasis on certain aspects of policy making and their consequences on society. Like the difference between a 'market economy and a market society' and what should be the exact role of the state in a modern economy. Since 1983, the office seeking theory represents the dominant model of coalition government in Mauritius. Ideological and platform affinity have taken a

backseat role. Personality clashes and ambitions assume greater importance. Very often the binding factor is the necessity to 'get the rascals in power out of office' rather than policy affinity and ideological resemblance. Three main political formations (MMM, LP and MSM) dominate the political scene of Mauritius since that period, even if there are many other small formations which gravitate around one of these major parties at election time. During coalition bargaining, there is not much debate on programmatic differences and commitments. However there are long and arduous discussions on how the benefits of power will be shared. Parties place a high premium on holding office. This has resulted in disconnected coalitions that are short lived because of deep personality clashes between party leaders, and different ways and styles of government. The motto of all important political parties in Mauritius seems to be 'no permanent allies, no permanent enemies; only permanent interests'. This is borne out by the changing nature of coalition politics in the island and the adoption of strategies by political actors to maximise their benefits. There have been many shifting alliances with any two of the three parties being in a coalition government. Most of the time it has been a marriage of convenience, a coalition to fight a common enemy, rather than a coherent set of political choices and economic policies that bring parties together. The three main parties have been friends and enemies during the last twenty years. When two of them come together in a coalition, they offer a broad based alliance where the major components of the population feel secure. In effect, the three can combine in three different ways for the establishment of a coalition Government. All three have been tried and in some cases more than once. The LP/MSM won power in 1983 and in 1987. In 1990, the LP was thrown out of Government and the MMM which was the official opposition joined in. The MSM and the MMM went together at the General Election of 1991 and captured a large majority. However the coalition broke up after two years. In the subsequent General election in 1995, the LP and the MMM coalesced their forces to take all the Parliamentary seats. The coalition collapsed after two years and in the last election of 2000, the MMM and the MSM came together again to contest the polls and won a large majority. Basically each party has worked with the other two political formations at some time; equally each party has opposed the other two during some period. A politics of accommodation based on 'fighting the common enemy at a given point in time' and at 'seeking power'.

### **Frequency of coalitions and coalition collapse**

In terms of frequency of coalitions, Mauritius is near the top when compared to other countries. Most coalitions have been majority cabinets. However their duration has systematically been much shorter than the normal five year life of Parliament. One coalition ( 1982)

collapsed after nine months in spite of the fact that it had an extremely large majority ( it won all the seats in Parliament). Many turned sour after two years and there has not been a single one that lasted the full five year term. Better there have been many cases where a new coalition among old adversaries is formed to defeat recent friends. Best there are instances where an Opposition party walks into Government and a Government party goes into Opposition without going through elections; based essentially on conflict of personalities and a belief that the distribution of benefits is not fair to all coalition partners.

### **Coalition as nation building device**

The multi ethnic and the multi cultural nature of the country dictate the necessity of coalition politics. While officially most parties have the ambition to present a 'broad church' platform, in effect all of them derive most of their support from one main ethnic group. Coalition government has thus become an important instrument towards nation building in a small plural society like Mauritius. Conflicts are thus resolved within the framework of some unwritten rules and people feel that they are not politically alienated. Coalition governments provide an 'insurance' against polarisation. They ensure integration, participation in decision making and empowerment, thus promoting national unity. There is an attempt to reconcile descriptive representation with substantive representation, to combine the politics of presence with the politics of ideas. In most coalition Governments, the Prime Minister comes from one ethnic group while the Deputy Prime Minister hails from another. The Ministerial Portfolios are also distributed in such a way as to reflect the 'different colours of the Mauritian rainbow'. Similarly for the key posts of Junior Ministers, Ambassadors and Chairpersons of Parastatal companies, it is a delicate exercise of ethnic balance to avoid political alienation, even if, at times, the price can be quite high in terms of effectiveness and competence.

### **Coalition as 'opportunity grabbing' to remain in office**

Since 1983, the smallest of the three main parties, the MSM has been able to leverage its strong hinge position to dictate the course of events while its leader has used the 'incumbency' factor to stay in office as Prime Minister. As a matter of fact, the leader of that party has been in power as Prime Minister for 14 years since 1983 even if his party does not have more than 15 % of votes. The LP and the MSM draw most of their support from the 'majority' Hindu population while the MMM gets most of its votes from the minorities. As such the leader of the LP and the MSM have always been Hindus while the leader of the MMM has most of the time been a minority (even if there have been instances when its leader too was a

Hindu). From 1967 to 2000, the Prime Minister has always been a Hindu. He also hails from the most important subgroup in the Hindu community.

### **Coalition Govt to change history**

However this situation will change shortly through a strange twist of events and excellent bargaining by the MMM. The leader of the MSM who was the Prime Minister from 1982 to 1995 was defeated in the 1995 General Elections; he even lost his seat and his party did not have a single MP in Parliament. On the eve of the General Elections of 2000, the main opposition party (the MMM) which is led by a representative of the minority group started negotiation with the MSM to form a coalition to fight the outgoing LP Government. The MSM was in a weak bargaining position as it did not have any representation in Parliament; it would have been defeated in a three horse contest. After some hard bargaining, the two parties reached a landmark agreement. For the first time in the political history of the island, a coalition presented a sharing of power for the top position of Prime Minister between two leaders during one single mandate. The leader of the MSM ( a Hindu) would be PM for 3 years and then would go on to become the President of the Republic; while the leader of the MMM ( someone from a very small minority group) would be PM for the last two years of the five year mandate. As a matter of fact, this transition would take place in September of this year. It was excellent negotiation by the MMM. Had it gone into the election on its own, it would have lost to the outgoing Labour Party government. The situation would have been worse for the MSM; it had no chance of winning any seat with only around 15 % of the votes. Yet by combining their electoral forces at the last minute, they created an electoral synergy that propelled them to power with a thumping majority. The prospect of making history with a minority becoming PM galvanised the overwhelming proportion of the minorities behind the newly formed coalition.

### **Coalition bargaining and negotiation**

As most parties embrace social democratic policies, there are not major differences on programmes and manifestoes. However as they often represent different segments of the population with diverging and even contradictory vested interests, there is often a strategy to minimise these differences before elections. Policy options are not spelt out in detail; only a general statement of policy couched in very broad terms is enunciated so as to appeal to most people. As a result, it is not difficult to negotiate and agree on common policy programmes.

However there is long and protracted debate on how to share the benefits of power and how to distribute the different key posts among the coalition parties. Often coalition building has collapsed because it has not

been possible to reach agreement on the distribution of benefits, especially the key posts. For instance prior to the elections of 2000, the MMM was negotiating with the LP also. In addition to the post of Deputy Prime Minister, it wanted to obtain the key portfolio of Finance too. This was turned down. However the MSM, which was in a weak bargaining position, accepted to give not only the Ministry of Finance to its coalition partner, but also to share the top PM position. No wonder the MMM entered into a coalition with the MSM. Better distribution of benefits.

### **Coalition Governance in a multi ethnic society**

Power sharing creates a fundamentally different framework for government, especially when the parties comprising the coalition have different constituencies and vested interests to defend. There is need to develop and maintain trust among the different parties comprising the coalition government. While the PM still wields considerable power in the Westminster-type political system of Mauritius, such as the power to dissolve Parliament and to appoint and fire Ministers, he is often constrained by his coalition partners, especially if the latter has enough Mps to bring down the Government of the day. For instance in the current Govt, the party of the PM has a minority of seats in Parliament. This considerably reduces his room for manoeuvre. In fact he is often criticised as 'being in office but not in power'.

### **Conflict management and resolution in coalition government**

Coalition works better if the leaders are sufficiently well informed to be able to build consensus or to manipulate the decision making process in the preferred way. There are no clear rules to manage conflict and to resolve disputes in coalition government in Mauritius. The actors realise that they must strike a balance between policy, people and procedures. There are free styles arrangements to prevent conflict and to attempt to sort them out when they arise. Special coordination committees and support structures are set up to iron out major policy differences, especially with respect to the vested interests of the respective electorate of the parties comprising the coalition. As it is often a zero sum game, compensatory policies are often adopted to offset measures that are perceived to be against the interests of a major party in the coalition. Regular meetings are held between senior members of the coalition parties, especially between the two leaders so that they can address policy differences before they reach the Council of Ministers. At times a special committee of the Cabinet consisting of a very smaller group of Ministers from both parties meet to thrash out difficult issues and make decisions. On ad hoc basis, common external friends intervene to act as mediators between the partners, especially to cope with external shocks.

## **Coalition termination in Mauritius**

Cases of coalition collapse abound in Mauritius. Invariably it is due to deep personal rivalries and differences that cannot be reconciled, incompatible styles of managing the affair of the country, the Deputy Prime Minister trying to steal the show from the Prime Minister or a partner not willing to share collective responsibility for necessary but unpopular decisions. As there is no formal rule and agreement on coalition government, problems arise once the parties are in power and they become unhappy with the operation and the effectiveness of power sharing. The junior partner may feel that it is not getting a fair share of the benefits, especially in terms of jobs for its party followers. As a result, it may start negotiation with another party (in Opposition) in order to seek a better deal, even if it is in office with its coalition partner. There may not be enough incentives for a durable coalition. In case of a major setback at a by- election or a municipal election, a party may feel that it is not in its long term interests to sustain the coalition.

If the distribution of benefits is not heavily frontloaded, the probability of coalition duration increases. For instance the current coalition in power has lasted for almost three years, a record by Mauritian standard. This is mainly attributable to the unique power sharing agreement with a change of PM after three years. The MMM has no incentive to rock the boat as its leader would have the top post shortly. The payoffs to wait are worth it. If pay offs accrue to one party only, then there will be pressure to break the coalition. Or if all the payoffs accrue to one party earlier on, then it has no incentive to comply with the coalition agreement in the later part of the coalition life.

## **Two models of coalition government in Mauritius**

Broadly speaking, there have been two models of coalition government in Mauritius. One consists of a model of two or more parties with one dominating party and a second one with many parties and two dominating ones. The balance of power varies depending on the model. For instance, in a system where power sharing is the norm, the power of the PM is likely to be weaker. The nature of policies, how 'considered and consensual' they are, depends on whether there is a dominant party or not. A balanced coalition may slow the speed of its decision making process as legislation becomes the subject of protracted consultation, difficult negotiation and uneasy compromise. The larger the number of parties in a coalition, the more conflictual is decision making. A strong coalition government weakens the position of Parliament vis a vis the executive. Parliament simply becomes a party caucus to approve policies decided by the Executive. There is also the danger of abuse of power

when a coalition has a huge majority of seats that allows it to make fundamental changes to the Constitution.

### **Concluding Remark**

Coalition politics in Mauritius represents a very interesting research subject as it is influenced by a combination of factors that makes it quite unique. First political parties devise shrewd strategies to maximise the benefits to their parties in the light of the electoral system that prevails. Second the distribution of benefits is of significant importance. Third it is imperative to present a broad based platform where all segments of the population feel integrated so as to avoid political alienation. Fourth parties vie for office and their coalition strategies are articulated with that objective in mind. Fifth, personal rivalry among the political leaders can dictate which coalition is formed. Sixth, except for the post electoral coalition of 1976, ideological and policy affinities have not been major determinant of coalition formation. This cocktail of factors determines how coalition politics is played out under the tropics.