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The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in Mauritius

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Introduction

Politics on the island of Mauritius is considered a national sport, one which generates both passion and excitement among the population. However, much of what takes place remains behind closed doors or within private spheres. This culture of secrecy is most tangible when it comes to what is termed as 'money politics' - the undue use of money during an electoral campaign. The practice of contributions to the coffers of political parties has a long history in Mauritius. The anti-independence campaign benefited from the support of the local 'sugar barons' or Franco-Mauritian elite.¹ But money politics has increasingly become 'a dominant feature of elections in Mauritius', with conglomerates, financial actors and potential benefactors actively involved in continuing 'to finance the different parties and buy election results'.²

In the November 2019 elections, the term 'money politics' was regularly alluded to by political leaders, candidates, political observers and civil society. Reddi stated that, 'there is no doubt that vast amounts of money are being spent not simply to defray election costs but to literally buy candidates and electors. We have seen it happening before Nomination Day and during the electoral campaign'.³ Money is not the only factor shaping the Mauritian political landscape. Identity continues to have a significant role too. But the increased and uncontrolled costs of politics raise questions about the accessibility of elected office to average Mauritian citizens. This state of affairs has a significant impact on voters' decisions and relationships with politicians.

In Mauritius, the accelerated presence of clientelism is contributing to the death of ideology and the thinning of party loyalty. Despite successive elections having increased the prominence of money, and ethnicity, in Mauritian politics, efforts to introduce legislation around political party financing have failed to gain widespread political support. This is further complicated by the fact that political parties in Mauritius, outside of an election, are non-registered entities making accountability and transparency around financial activities difficult to monitor even if legislation is in place. It points to a growing gap between what Mauritius exhibits for the international gallery as the 'picture perfect' democracy, and the reality.

Methodology

Data for this paper was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources included books, reports and academic journal articles as well as reports in local media. In fact, press articles, especially published interviews with politicians and key political observers provided a rich and valuable source of information. Primary data was obtained from 15 semi-structured interviews carried out with politicians and political observers, including journalists, academics, lawyers and members of think tanks.

At the planned start of the fieldwork in March 2020, Mauritius was put under strict lockdown to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the country. Consequently, 12 out of the 15 interviews had to be conducted via the digital platform Zoom during the months of May, June and July. Once the curfew was lifted, the remaining three interviews were conducted in person. The politicians interviewed were candidates during the November 2019 election - some successful, others had contested and lost - and were drawn from the main political parties, namely the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), Mauritius Labour Party (MLP), Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate (PMSD) alliance and Mouvement Libérateur (ML). Interviews were also conducted with two candidates from smaller parties - 100% Citoyens and 'Laliens Lespar'. Both candidates were unsuccessful.

Of the interviewees, only three of the eight women invited to be interviewed responded. Despite contacting several members of the Mouvement Socialiste Militant (MSM) - the holder of the most seats in parliament after the 2019 election - as well as writing formally to the secretariat of the party to request an interview with the secretary of the MSM or another representative, there was no response. It subsequently emerged that the party leadership had refused to give its parliamentarians permission to be interviewed on this topic. This was the case even though all interviews were carried out in strict confidentiality and interviewees were assured of anonymity in order to protect their identity, given the high degree of sensitivity associated with this topic.

I. Historical context

Mauritius is regarded as one of Africa's leading democracies. The country has enjoyed political stability and been a multi-party democracy since its proclamation of independence from Britain on 12 March 1968. In 2018 it ranked first in the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance and its Gross National Income of US\$12,740 in 2019 led the World Bank to declare Mauritius a high-income country in 2020.

The island's political organisation dates to its colonial days. From the early 1900s the local population, mostly constituted of indentured labourers, became politically aware and then organised. The divisions in the population of the island impact significantly on the way politics plays out. Mauritius has a plural society composed of the descendants of migrants who came to the island in different circumstances from: France as settlers, the African continent as slaves, India as indentured labourers and China as merchants and traders. The population is primarily composed of six 'ethnic communities': Hindus, Creoles of African or mixed African descent, Muslims, Tamils, Sino-Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians. For electoral purposes, the Constitution categorises the population into four communities - Hindu (50.3%), Muslim (16.1%), Sino-Mauritian (2.9%), and the General Population (30.7%) - weighted according to the 1972 census.⁴

Mauritian independence in 1968 was the result of three decades of political negotiations between political parties representing local interests of the different ethnic groups and British colonial authorities. At independence, multi-party politics was already well entrenched, ensuring political stability, economic diversification and social cohesion.

Three political parties - the MLP being the oldest, established in 1937; the MMM, born a year after independence in 1969; and the MSM, established in 1983 by individuals who left the MMM - have dominated post-independence politics in Mauritius. An array of smaller political parties also exist, but are mostly offshoots of the three major parties and are often personality driven, making them 'hostages' to their founder(s). The ML, for instance, was founded in 2014 by Ivan Collendavelloo, a lawyer and career politician, as a breakaway from the MMM to protest the MMM alliance with the MLP. Many of these smaller parties simply disappear after an election. In fact, the Mauritian multi-party system is characterised by a kaleidoscope of parties, often constituted for little more than electoral purposes.⁵ The 2019 general election was no different, with more than 70 political parties and over 800 candidates taking part.

Many of these smaller political parties become part of large coalitions headed by the three main political forces in the country. Systematic pre-electoral coalitions are an important feature that has defined post-independence politics. It has been noted that 'everybody has slept with each other in the Mauritian political bed'.⁶ Arguably these 'arranged coalitions' have replaced political ideology with political calculations and opportunism, as coalitions are built with the aim of winning the seats required to retain or obtain power. Observers point to the 1983 general elections and the creation of MSM as the tipping point for when ideological politics was replaced by power politics. This vote saw ethnicity, money and patronage coming to the fore in the electoral equation for the first time. This is a feature that has been amplified with the holding of subsequent elections.

Mauritius uses an adapted version of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) model to hold elections. Instead of one candidate standing per constituency, three candidates from the same political party can stand in each constituency,⁷ with voters casting their ballots for their three preferred candidates, irrespective of party. The three candidates with the biggest share of the vote are elected. In addition to the FPTP model, the Best Loser System (BLS), a corrective measure to ensure ethnic representation, was recommended by electoral commissioner Lord Banwell in 1966 and fine-tuned by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, John Stonehouse. BLS provides for up to eight additional seats to correct for any minority group's underrepresentation in the 70-seat National Assembly - 62 of which are directly elected.

This voting system has, over the successive post-independence general elections, delivered political stability and governments with comfortable majorities. However, there are shortcomings which, over time, have impacted on the way politics and elections are run in Mauritius.

Firstly, its highly confrontational nature often pits candidates, even those from the same party or coalition, against each other in a quest to win. It also creates an imbalance between votes won and seats obtained. Elections in 1982, 1991, 1995 and 2000 delivered what is known as the '62-0' phenomenon; where all the seats were taken by a single coalition or party, which in turn created a non-existent parliamentary opposition. Furthermore, the BLS provision has been contested by both political and civil society actors for 'institutionalising communalism'⁸ as it requires all candidates standing for an election to declare their community. In 2012 a judgement by the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled against this requirement as it deemed it in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In response to that ruling, the enactment of The Constitution (Declaration of Community) (Temporary Provisions) Act 2014 exempted candidates standing for the 2014 general election from declaring their community. However, this was merely a stop gap measure, as Section 3 of the Act clearly states that this 'shall only apply to the first general election after the commencement of this Act'. For the 2019 general election all individuals standing as candidates were required to disclose their ethnic community.

The 2019 election, Mauritius's eleventh post-independence poll, gave victory to incumbent Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth whose coalition, headed by MSM, won 42 of the 70 National Assembly seats, with 37.7% of the vote. This continued a tradition that Mauritius has had since independence that only two family names occupy the post of Prime Minister - Ramgoolam (father and son) and Jugnauth (father and son). This position is also mirrored in the leadership of MLP and MSM. As for the MMM, Berenger, one of its key founders, has retained the position of leader since the mid-1980s. This dynastic or uncontested control grants considerable leeway to the leader when it comes to the nomination and selection of candidates and in forging electoral alliances. This status quo continues to encourage a more transactional approach to politics; one that benefits the three major political parties - MLP, MMM and MSM - who continue to dominate the Mauritian political landscape. Between them, they won over 90% of votes in the 2019 poll.

II. Current drivers of the cost of parliamentary politics

There are no primaries in Mauritius and potential candidates are selected or nominated by the party leader for whose party, or coalition, the candidate intends to contest the election. Although the actual selection exercise is shrouded in opacity, candidates tend to be selected according to their personal profile as well as their ethnic, religious and jati (sub-caste) identities in order to conform to the profile of their respective constituencies.⁹ The 21 constituencies in Mauritius have different demographic profiles partly for historical reasons and partly because of the way constituency boundaries have been carved up. Each constituency has its own specificities, and overlooking these may be detrimental to the electoral success of a mainstream party.¹⁰ The present electoral boundaries were drawn by British electoral experts prior to independence, to ensure 'adequate representation' of the two most significant sections of the Mauritian population; the Hindus and the General Population. The Hindus, who constitute 50.3% of the population, get adequate representation if, as has generally been the practice, the national parties field Hindu candidates in the rural areas. The General Population, which makes up 30.7% of the population, is the most important 'ethnic group' in urban constituencies with candidate selection a reflection of that reality. However, in their choice and nomination of candidates in the different constituencies, political parties do not merely look at the ethnic configuration of a constituency. They also factor in the sub-groups-caste, cultural and linguistic identities, ensuring that the different caste, cultural and linguistic groups of the Hindu community, for example, are represented in the parliament.¹¹

During the interviews, candidates also spoke about what happens in practice when candidates are nominated for an election. A candidate referred to a process of supply and demand, where 'ethnic profiling coupled with caste'¹² is very visible in certain constituencies. This practice of ethnopoltics is to a large extent operationalised through the presence of socio-cultural organisations that exist on the island. Examples of prominent socio-cultural organisations include the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation (MSDTF), Mauritius Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha (MARPS), Voice of Hindu, Hindu House, Fédération Créole Mauricien and All Muslim Congress. These bodies have historically held cultural and educational functions in Mauritius. However, with time, they have become increasingly involved in the politics of the country, with their leaders often seen at political functions and political leaders attending and speaking at religious events organised by these groups.

During the 2019 electoral campaign, Hindu socio-cultural organisations, led by Somduth Dulthumun, accused Dr Navin Ramgoolam, leader of the MLP, of wrongly interpreting Hindu sacred texts and therefore insulting the Hindu community.¹³ The press conference where Dulthumun criticised Dr Ramgoolam was given extensive coverage by the national television, just 48 hours before the election. Somduth Dulthumun was recently appointed President of the Board of the Mauritius Museums Council, despite his lack of experience or formal qualifications in the management of museums in what some analysts saw as a reward for his election 'contribution'.¹⁴

Several candidates interviewed confirmed that party leaders at times must align with the demands of socio-cultural and religious leaders and that their influence can even extend to them imposing their sponsored candidates on the party. Often these candidates are members of, or closely associated with, these organisations. Two young female candidates mentioned that they both faced strong lobbies when their names were first proposed. In fact, a senior party member confirmed that 'there is a gender bias as some of the socio-cultural groups most of the time sponsor male candidates. That can even go to the extent of them dictating who will be nominated as Ministers in case of electoral win'.¹⁵

The candidate selection process, which is heavily controlled by the party executive, who are in turn influenced by key socio-cultural leaders, explains why dynastic and nepotistic practices have remained a key part of Mauritian politics. One interviewee, a long time MP and a senior minister in several governments, described the 'the ability to bootlick most, the leader'¹⁶ as a key attribute for getting nominated. Another disagreed, arguing that 'a leader often has to strike the right balance between talent, expertise, ethnic community amongst others' when deciding on the candidates to put forward.¹⁷ Money is not really a factor at this stage of the process, although there have been instances when the financial support brought by competing candidates does matter. 'When you have two candidates - one that has money and one who does not, and both have the same profile, some parties might say, why should I fork out party money for that person who will eat my money whilst the other person might even make a contribution'¹⁸ said one candidate interviewed for this study.

However, it is clear from all those interviewed for this research that for those who are chosen, competing in the election costs a lot of money and that with each passing election it gets more expensive. Nonetheless, candidates interviewed were not willing to disclose the actual sum of money spent for fear of contradicting their submissions to the Electoral Commission Office. Under the Representation of People's Act (1958) all party-belonging candidates must not spend over 150,000 Mauritian Rupees (MUR) (US\$3,600) and 2019 filings fall within the prescribed limits.

The death of ideology and rise of mercantilism

Political party ideologies are expressed in election manifestos that present their social, political and economic vision to voters. In the last three decades, party electoral manifestos have become less programmatic and more clientelistic in Mauritius. These documents are increasingly tantamount to a public relations exercise, released just a few days before polling. This means there is limited, if any, discussion of their content which, in any case, is more of a list of pledges to be initiated in case of electoral win, many of which are conveniently 'forgotten' once in power. A number of these pledges recur across the different party manifestos. During the 2019 general election, both the MLP (driver of the Alliance Nationale coalition) and MSM (driver of the Alliance Morisien coalition) went head to head promising to substantially increase old age pension contributions and decrease the price of cooking gas and electricity.

Incumbency has always been used in previous general elections, but according to a well-respected political observer, what was different in 2019 was the 'extent to which incumbency was used'. Government funds were used 'to make promises not as part of the party's electoral manifesto but as part of government policy'.¹⁹ On 1 October 2019, to mark the International Day of Older Persons, the prime minister promised a substantial hike in old age pensions if he were to be re-elected the following month. Those who stood to benefit constituted around 15% of the voting-age population. In response the opposition party leader promised a similar policy change if elected. In December 2019 old age pensions increased by 70%.

A candidate who had contested multiple general elections and occupied senior ministerial positions put voters in three categories - the poor, the middle class and the rich - each with specific demands and expectations that parties or candidates need to meet:

'The poor essentially think along the line - what is in for me and this can be referred to harvest time and it is a sort of auction where you use one politician against the other to bargain and get more money or perhaps a low skill job. The middle class do not take money but have huge expectations on what they would like and often take the best of the system but make the least contribution. As for the rich, it is a sort of investment and then wait for payback by hedging their bets across all the key political players.'²⁰

One candidate spoke about the genuine hardships facing voters, 'they were looking for basic food items such as milk or rice to feed their families'²¹ Candidates who provide these basic goods, not those whose party promises more systematic reform in its manifesto, are likely to have the greater electoral success. Three long-standing candidates from the MMM, MLP and ML spoke about the thinning down of party loyalty among voters and the readiness of certain voters to change political allegiance in return for personal gains. One candidate was saddened by what he called the 'lack of [party] loyalty among the voters which has amplified with the passing of each general election'.²²

Influencing or cajoling the voter is part of the political game and without doubt some politicians are better than others at doing this. One interviewer mentioned the case of a politician who in the early 1970s would 'tear a bank note in two and ask the voter to come back for the other half once the election is over'.²³ Despite bribery being an offence in the Representation of People's Act (1958) the practice of vote buying seems to be well anchored within the Mauritian political psyche and increasingly prevalent.

A veteran politician, who has stood for the MMM on several occasions since the 1976 general elections, reminisced with nostalgia about the selfless engagement of the activists of the party who contributed financially to the organisation of political assemblies, rallies, and refreshment for agents during polling and counting days. By the end of the campaign some successful candidates 'had hardly spent any money - they relied on voluntary contributions from those believing in political activities as a service to society'.²⁴ Today everything has a cost and money has a far greater say in how people choose to cast their votes.

In the 2019 election the asking price for a vote - depending on the constituency and whether the fight was a close one between contenders - could vary between MUR 5,000 (US\$132) and MUR 10,000 (US\$264).²⁵ For a whole family the price could shoot up to MUR 100,000 (US\$2,600). Some voters were given money only after showing a picture of their vote bulletin taken on their mobile phone.²⁶ But money was just one of the means used to sway a voter's decision. Promises were made about jobs, small plots of land or business permits in exchange for a votes.

Campaign costs

All the candidates interviewed for the purpose of this research were unequivocal in saying that the 2019 general election campaign was costly. A long-standing candidate added that 'not only is politics expensive but money counts'.²⁷ Costs increase with the length of the campaign which 'shall not be less than 15 days or more than 30 days' according to Section 41(2) of the Representation of People's Act (1958). Most candidates 'pray that the campaign is short'.²⁸ However, a short campaign does not always lessen the costs as it is the few days prior to the polling day when the ante goes up and all mainstream political parties and their candidates feel pressurised by voters' demands on one hand, and their competitors on the other, to pump more resources, often directly from their own pockets, into the campaign. According to a senior party member the more competitive an election, the more the costs escalate.²⁹

Campaign costs operate at two levels - constituency and national. Candidates usually cater for the bulk of constituency-related expenses with this generally being shared equally among the three party or coalition candidates. All the candidates interviewed from the MMM and MLP mentioned that they also received

resources - money, posters and banners - from their party. Although they were unwilling to give details as to the actual amount, they acknowledged that it helped to ease the financial burden incurred during the campaign. Although there are no official records of how much a party or coalition spends during an election there are estimates. In a 2014 newspaper article,³⁰ a politician and one-time leader of a small political party estimated that MUR 330,000,000 (US\$8.25 million) would be spent to run a 30-day campaign for one political party. This figure correlates with what the leader of the MLP, Navin Ramgoolam, mentioned in an interview in December 2015.³¹

Although parties contribute to the campaign expenses, this is not sufficient.³² Candidates contesting for a parliamentary seat predominantly rely on their own money, with family and friends the next port of call for financial support for most candidates. This places first-time candidates at a disadvantage as they are new to the process and do not necessarily have access to the networks that experienced aspirants have had the opportunity to nurture. A first-time candidate mentioned that he dug deep into his personal savings during the 2019 elections.³³ Another candidate mentioned that she obtained a loan from the bank to fund her campaign when she contested for the first time in the 2014 general election.³⁴ Most candidates interviewed stressed that networks matter when running as a candidate and often 'the quality, depth and even the prosperity of these networks can make a difference' to the outcome.³⁵ Elaborating on the importance of networks, a candidate mentioned that 'certain networks do not always bring money - but people who can talk to people on the ground and even speak to certain socio-cultural groups do have value'.³⁶

Candidates interviewed mentioned a whole array of items that they must provide for during the campaign. These ranged from voter information pamphlets, agents' payroll, banners, t-shirts, transport and sound systems, to holding rallies and public meetings. But the biggest expense is the *baz*. The *baz* is an ad hoc political quarter or camp where political agents meet and coordinate campaign-related activities. The *baz* is a physical representation of the political party's or coalition's presence and is decorated in party colours and with political posters. The number of *baz* will depend on the size of the constituency and the level of competition between the different political parties. It is an extremely resource-hungry item as there is the 'need to provide fuel, food, alcohol and entertainment for all the *baz* in my constituency for the duration of the campaign; and here we are talking about a minimum of 20 *baz* which can easily go to 100' revealed one candidate.³⁷ Running the *baz* can cost up to MUR 5,000,000 (US\$131,000) per constituency.³⁸ The Election Commission issued a 'Code of Conduct' for the 2019 general elections that banned the setting up of *baz*. However, this was to a large extent ignored as the Code of Conduct was not legally binding.



Source: Defimedia.info

In an interview given to a local newspaper a couple of days after the results of the 2019 general election, MLP candidate Arvin Boolell, who subsequently became the Leader of the Opposition, was outright in his condemnation of the role that money played in the campaign:

'For the first time in my political career, I have witnessed so much money in circulation. Big means were used. Millions of Mauritian rupees were laundered. In each constituency, vast amounts of money were used.'³⁹

Boolell's sentiment was, by and large, mirrored by individuals interviewed for this study. A senior party member expressed his bewilderment concerning 'the amount of money that was out there and its blatant use - people were not operating in the dark but with open faces'.⁴⁰

Keeping constituents happy

The Mauritian legislature is an important oversight body where MPs serve those who voted them into office. Speaking about the role and function of a parliamentarian, current and past MPs mentioned the need to juggle between regional (constituency-based) and national (policy-making) duties. A former long-term MP who also occupied senior Ministerial positions emphasised the fact that it is extremely difficult to be an efficient MP and part of the executive. According to him it is 'a fine balancing act between being good as an MP in your constituency, a good parliamentarian and a good policymaker'.⁴¹

There is a 'cost' involved in keeping constituents happy and retaining their support. One MP mentioned that certain constituents had a knack of reminding him 'that we voted for you, campaigned for you, made people vote for you and now you must serve us'.⁴² Essentially, 'serving' constituents entails helping the latter in different ways. Another MP mentioned that he met his constituents on a regular basis, helped them and even provided free legal advice to constituents.⁴³ The constituency-related costs associated with being an MP can therefore be monetary, in-kind or even professional advice.

The benefits of office

All the candidates interviewed mentioned 'their desire to serve' as the main motivation to stand as a candidate. But this very idea of 'serving' is laced with ambiguity and can be flipped from serving the people to serving one's self interest. Being a member of the legislature certainly has its advantages - a good salary, a host of privileges and for some a significant rise in status (see Table 1). This is applicable for both opposition parties and ruling coalition party MPs, though the benefits are enhanced for those in the ruling coalition party as positions in the executive are up for grabs. This no doubt explains why so many MPs are keen to hold on to their seats.

Following the 2019 general elections, 33 of the 42 MPs elected or nominated through the BLS are now part of the executive. Furthermore, elected MPs can continue to pursue their professional activities whilst in office. This means that they can draw two salaries, allowing some of them to build the war chest for the next general election. Another privilege is a lifetime pension that is given to an MP if they serve two terms. In some cases, MPs have been in office for more than three decades.

Table 1: Salary (monthly) of legislative and executive members⁴⁴

| Position | Amount (MUR) | Amount (US\$) |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| MP | 157,500 | 4,144 |
| Parliamentary Private Secretary | 246,000 | 6,500 |
| Minister | 330,000 | 8,700 |
| Leader of the Opposition | 254,000 | 6,700 |
| Speaker | 360,000 | 9,500 |
| Deputy Speaker | 234,000 | 6,150 |
| Chief Whip | 240,000 | 6,315 |
| Deputy Chief Whip | 178,000 | 4,600 |
| Opposition Whip | 189,000 | 4,970 |

Loyalty to a political party's ideology or set of values has subsequently been replaced by political calculations driven by a desire to maintain the benefits of office. Reflecting on this, a long-standing MP bemoaned the fact that:

'Increasingly most candidates have no real allegiance to the political parties that they join. They know very little of the political history of the party, that is why unfortunately we see at times the crossing of the floor [Mauritius does not have any laws to prevent representatives changing their political party when in office] as the individual is more concerned with self-interest than party interest.'⁴⁵

Limited scrutiny

Under current legislation, contributions to political parties from the corporate sector are legal. The rationale for such contributions is that the private sector, which also benefits from the operation of a working democracy, should contribute to the costs of holding regular general elections.⁴⁶ Since 2005, in line with corporate good governance principles, some private companies have publicly disclosed the amount contributed to political parties through their annual reports, but this is not a mandatory requirement. Estimates of contributions made by individuals, organisations and companies to political parties over the past 35 years range between MUR 1-1.5 billion (US\$24-36 million).⁴⁷ But the status of political parties in Mauritius makes an accurate assessment of the money raised by parties a difficult task.

Outside an electoral campaign, political parties have no legal status in Mauritius, allowing them to 'escape' any system of control or monitoring. But legislation for electoral expenses does exist. As per the Representation of People's Act (1958), a ceiling is imposed in terms of electoral expenses incurred by candidates that belong to a party of MUR 150,000 (US\$3,950), and for those that run as independent candidates it is MUR 250,000 (US\$6,500). This ceiling has not changed since 1989, despite campaigns becoming more costly and elaborate. These expenditure limits are highly unrealistic and according to the 2001 Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform, 'observed only in their breach'.⁴⁸

Once the election results are officially announced, candidates have one month to swear an affidavit and file their returns to the Electoral Commission Office (ECO) confirming that they have not gone beyond the imposed ceiling. But there is no means for the ECO to check the accuracy of the returns as the latter has no power of sanction outside an election when political parties revert to being non-legal entities. The limited scrutiny acts as a form of 'opportunity' for certain political parties, their leaders and candidates to use

money, resources and patronage networks to significantly drive the costs of politics. 'This requires other parties to keep up. Those who have resources keep playing the game whilst those who don't are excluded.'⁴⁹

III. Outlook

With the costs rising for those seeking to enter politics, there is a need to search for ways to make contesting for political office in Mauritius not solely a club for rich and connected candidates, where women and youth are often excluded.

Despite overarching consensus among political parties, civil society organisations and the broader public that the electoral system is dated and needs to be adjusted to reflect modern Mauritian societal realities, no substantive changes have been made in the last two decades. Recommendations made by the 2001 Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform (Sachs Report) to adopt a proportional basis within the existing system, to enhance transparency around the funding of political parties and to empower the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), were not acted upon. The same is true of the recommendations of the 2004 Select Committee Report, the 2011 Carcassonne Report, the 2012 Sithanen Report, the 2014 Consultation Paper on Electoral Reform and the 2016 Ministerial Committee on Electoral Reforms. Each of these have highlighted the urgent need to propose an electoral system that is less divisive and more representative, and one that allows for greater accommodation and is less prone to money and corruption.

Two pressing issues surround the need to address the funding of political parties and to review the monitoring of electoral expenses. Political party funding has been at the centre of debates by consecutive parliamentary assemblies, but the inability to adopt a bipartisan stand on this matter indicates that legislative change may be difficult to achieve. In 2019, a 'Political Financing Bill' failed to gain the required three-quarter majority in parliament to become law. The bill proposed to widen the functions and powers of both the ESC and ECO, make the registration of political parties with the ECO mandatory, ensure greater transparency exists in the process of political donations and require that political party accounts be audited and records filed.

The registration of political parties beyond an election can help lift the veil of opacity and secrecy. This would require the filing of records and disclosure of sources and might be the first step in creating a culture of transparency and accountability within parties. This culture of transparency could then be extended to the way candidates are selected and nominated.

As for electoral expenses, the gap that exists between what the law allows and what is spent during a campaign needs to be urgently addressed. To that effect it is imperative that the ECO, and more specifically the ESC, which is responsible for the running of an election, be given the necessary enforcement capability. This was proposed as far back as 2001 in the Sachs Report, which recommended that the ESC have the authority to annul a candidate's election if a breach of the electoral ceiling is established in court.⁵⁰ But its continued inability to monitor electoral expenses means that the gap between what is officially filed as campaign expenditure and what is spent continues to grow.

Finally, whilst Mauritius has a tradition of a high voter turnout - averaging above 75% for the 11 post-independence elections - there is a continued need to ensure that this is accompanied by a clear understanding as to the meaning and value of one's vote. Investing in voter education and political literacy can help contain the advent of money politics and transactional voting. Here, the media - via television, radio and the press - as well as non-governmental organisations and trade unions, can help by assisting with organising educational talks on this subject for the people across the island. Last but not least, political parties themselves need to work to establish a less mercantilist and more ideologically-driven relationship with voters.

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