Electoral Reform Consultation Paper: A First Step towards Constitutional Reform

The electoral reform consultation paper, considered as a first step towards constitutional reform meant to reflect the evolution the country has undergone since Independence and chart the way forward for a system for the next generations, was presented by the Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam, on 24 March 2014 at the Treasury Building in Port Louis.

In his address, Dr Ramgoolam stressed on the importance of identifying ourselves as Mauritians and to unify in our diversity and not to think in terms of community. He also underlined the need to ensure that the modernisation of the electoral system continues to provide stable, responsive and fairly representative government in line with the evolution and aspirations of our nation.

The purpose of the White Paper, he said, is to create and foster a better understanding of Government’s intention to build consensus and to provide opportunity for informed comments prior to the introduction of legislation to reform the electoral system.

We must at all times ensure that whatever system we agree upon echoes the aspirations of our citizens, he stated, adding that together, we have to chart out a system that unifies the nation and provides for stable, responsible, fairly responsive and representative governments for the betterment of the nation.
The electoral reform consultation paper comes after forty-six years since the Constitution, along with its electoral system, was settled at Independence, in 1968. The current electoral system is, primarily, a multi-member cluster vote system whereby MPs are elected in accordance with the First-Past-the-Post System (FTPT). Once the votes are counted, a mechanism called the Best Loser System (BLS) is applied to seek to balance the votes with the respective populations of the four prescribed communities, in order that all the four communities are adequately represented without changing the outcome of the election under the First- Past-the-Post System.

In outlining the issues that need to be addressed, Government is guided by the following widely accepted criteria of a good electoral system for a plural society such as Mauritius, namely one that ensures Government stability; promotes party fairness; fosters broad based socio-demographic inclusion; and promotes fair gender representation; amongst others.

According to the proposals, there would be no change in the current FPTP system, that is the compulsory three votes in the 20 constituencies in the island of Mauritius and the compulsory two votes in Rodrigues, would be retained.

As regards the unequal constituency size and the number of voters per constituency, adjusting the number of electors per constituency will create more problems than it solves, estimates the White Paper.

For the Parliament to reflect the diversity of the population and for the unification of people around a single Mauritian identity, the electoral reform paper advises to include a dose of proportional representation in the electoral system but it remains to decide on how to do so.

The White Paper mentions three alternatives: (i) a closed, rank-based PR list, (ii) a closed unranked PR list published in alphabetical order and not necessarily in order of priority to be
submitted at latest on Nomination Day to the Electoral Commissioner, and (iii) combination of the two i.e. a closed rank list complemented by a number of candidates in alphabetical order.

A threshold of 10% of votes is proposed for a party to qualify for a seat under the PR system. This percentage has been worked out so as to reduce the danger of too much factionalism, to lower the likelihood of ethnically based parties from emerging, to preserve the system of strong and broadly representative parties and to prevent government instability.

Women

Currently, women represent around 50.5% of the population, however, their representation in Parliament remains low. Government therefore proposes a simple gender neutral formula that respects the equality between men and women in politics along the following model: to provide that at least one third of the total number of candidates from the FPTP constituencies be of either gender; to ensure on the Party list that neither gender represents less than 33% of candidates; to have at least one person of a different gender out of every 3 sequential candidates on the PR list; and in case the second alternative is adopted, at least one third of the PR lists chosen by party leaders should be of either gender.

Double candidacies

As far as double candidacies is concerned, if candidates are allowed to stand in both the constituency and on the list, then the names of candidates who succeed in being elected as constituency candidates would be deleted from the list and the seat they otherwise would have won would be assigned to the next candidate remaining on the list.

It is believed that double candidacies will provide candidates with a second chance similar to what exists currently under the BLS. However, Government recommends allowing parties to decide whether they would field the same candidate in both FPTP and PR modes.

Launching of the New Infrared Cane Testing System

With new challenges facing the cane industry we must be innovative and quality driven. Technology is just a component of the reform but without planters and small planters the cane industry cannot step into modernity. Every stakeholder is an important link to ensure that the cane industry moves forward.

This statement was made by the Minister of Agro-Industry and Food Security, and Attorney General, Mr Satish Faugoo, at the launching ceremony of the Near Infrared Cane Testing System in Mauritius on 3 April 2014 at L’Escalier. The ceremony was organised in collaboration with Omnicane Milling Operations Ltd.

The minister expressed his conviction that Mauritius can tackle the forthcoming challenges facing the cane industry but pointed out that it is also contradictory that while investing in latest technologies, small planters are abandoning their fields. He underlined that various schemes have been put in place to ensure that small planters do not abandon their fields, and added that new measures will shortly be introduced to encourage them to continue cultivating sugar cane.

There are various ways to face the forthcoming challenges, the minister added. We must continue reducing costs, be quality driven, add value to our products and put in place a new model that is fully functional. While remaining economically, environmentally and socially viable, we must also ensure that small planters are a strong link, he said.

The new system for cane testing is the Jeffco Infracana II Cane Analyser, which can be operated by just one person and performs an analysis of a cane sample under four minutes. There are multiple benefits to be derived from this system such as automation, more representative analysis, speed of analysis, user friendliness and transparent as it is an open design. The system is also environment friendly as no chemicals or reagents are required.
PM Attends 4th EU-Africa Summit in Brussels

The Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam, was on mission in Brussels early this month, where he participated in the 4th EU-Africa Summit held on 2nd and 3rd April 2014.

The theme of the summit was “Investing in People, Prosperity and Peace”. The main objectives of the summit were to discuss the future of EU-Africa relations and cooperation, and reinforce links between the two continents.

In his intervention, Dr Ramgoolam drew attention to the fact that peace and security were intrinsically linked to prosperity, and stated that both Africa and EU should work as true partners to optimise on the tremendous potential and opportunities that the continent offers. He also stressed on the importance of the transfer of technology and know-how, especially in areas of food production and management of natural resources, and for mitigating the impact of climate change.

The Prime Minister appealed for support for generating wealth and creating employment in Africa. He informed the Summit that, in the context of the 50th anniversary of the African Union, Mauritius has offered 50 scholarships to African students in our universities. He urged the European partners to display flexibility in negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements, in particular on the issue of Rules of Origin, which represents a hindrance to the very concept of global value chains.

Bilateral Meetings

In the margins of the summit, the Prime Minister had bilateral meetings with Mr Andris Piebalgs, EU Commissioner for Development, and discussed several issues, including the fight against piracy, the abolition of the EU Sugar production quota by the EU, and support under Promoting Sustainable and Equitable Development.

During his meeting with Baroness Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Dr Ramgoolam reiterated the concerns of Mauritius on the abolition of sugar quota, support under Promotion Sustainable and Equitable Development and exchanged views on the implementation of the EU-Mauritius Transfer Agreement signed in 2012.

Dr Ramgoolam also met Mr Hery Rajaonarimampianina, President of the Republic of Madagascar, to whom he reiterated the unconditional support of Mauritius in the restructure of its economy. He also stressed on the importance of further strengthening cooperation between the two countries, particularly in the fields of air, maritime and digital connectivity, as well as agriculture, trade and investment opportunities.

The Prime Minister also met Mr François Hollande, President of France, and Mrs Angela Merkel, German Chancellor.
Meeting on Chagos Archipelago issue

The Prime Minister’s mission also took him to France and UK. In London, he had a meeting on the Chagos Archipelago issue with Mr Philippe Sands, QC, leading counsel. The main purpose of the meeting was to review latest developments in the case brought by Mauritius against the United Kingdom under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to challenge the legality of the ‘marine protected area’ which the United Kingdom has purported to establish around the Chagos Archipelago.

Cooperatives
Launching of Second Edition of Mauritius Excellence Awards

The second edition of the Mauritius Excellence Awards for Cooperatives (MEAC) was launched on 17 March 2014 by the Minister of Business, Enterprise and Cooperatives, Mr Jangbahadoorsing Seetaram.

The model of the Awards which is based on international benchmarks has been designed in line with cooperative principles and values. It is meant to be a long term benchmark for Mauritian cooperative societies and geared towards performance excellence, using international norms, standards and quality management systems.

The objective of the MEAC is to encourage cooperatives to continually improve and strive for excellence. It also aims at rewarding cooperative societies for implementing innovative programmes and good practices. The Awards are open to cooperative societies in Mauritius and Rodrigues.

In a bid to encourage more participation, some innovations have been introduced for the 2nd edition, namely the introduction of an Award for cooperatives registered in Rodrigues, the introduction of an award on best practices, and the introduction of an award for the ‘Best Federation’.

More About the Awards

Cooperative societies in the following 13 sectors are eligible to participate: sugar, food crop, fish, transport, finance, livestock, consumer, food processing, women cooperatives and other services, Rodrigues, Best practices, and Best Federation.

The award criteria will be based on seven major elements of an organisation namely: leadership, policy planning and deployment, people and resources, information and communication, operations, customers and service excellence, and results.

The winner in each of the 13 sectors will receive the MEAC and a Grand winner will be designed among the one which has excelled in all categories. The Grand winner will receive a cash prize of Rs 100 000 and a trophy while each winner per sector will receive a cash prize of Rs 25 000 and a trophy.

The deadline to submit applications is 1st September 2014 and the award ceremony is scheduled for 30 October 2014.
PM Inaugurates New Eastern High Security Prison at Melrose

The Eastern High Security Prison (EHSP) at Melrose located on a plot of 42 acres of land and accommodating convicted criminal offenders was inaugurated by the Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolum, on 20 March 2014.

The newly built state-of-the-art correctional facility forms part of the reform process that the Mauritius Prison Service (MPS) has embarked upon and is in line with one of the six pillars of the MPS Strategic Plan focused on improving the services of the MPS to ensure compliance with human rights and international norms while reducing reoffending rate among detainees.

It has an operational capacity of 800 to 1 000 detainees. The residential prison comprises the following facilities: 13 accommodation blocks including a geriatric block and a high security block for 60 inmates, a transit unit for 30 detainees and a medical complex with accommodation capacity of 20 inmates.

As regards work complexes, two such blocks with a total capacity for 400 detainees have been constructed. Each complex comprises four workshops with a capacity for 50 detainees each. A central kitchen cum bakery has also been set up.

In his opening address, the Prime Minister recalled some of the measures implemented under the reform process, including the Enhanced Earning Scheme, the Pay Back Mauritius Project, courses offered by the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development after which detainees receive certificates, various other courses and vocational training offered to detainees. He also announced the upcoming construction of an Open Prison for Women. According to Dr Ramgoolum, the budget for the MPS has gone up from Rs 243 million in 2004 to Rs 837 million in 2014, an increase of 244%.
With regard to discipline, Dr Ramgoolam stated that the rule of the law should prevail and that those who commit crimes and break laws must be punished. He spoke in favour of a tough but intelligent approach to reduce reoffending behavior adding that a detainee should become a better citizen after his release.

The Eastern High Security Prison Project

Construction works of the prison started in September 2010 and were completed in October 2013. The contract was awarded to J.V Beijing Zhuzong /Hyvec Partners. The project value is Rs 2,147 billion.

Security is an important component of the new EHSP. It has a keyless mode of operation at the geriatric ward and the administrative block, as well as an all round perimeter protection system made of anti-scale fencing with fibre optics detection technology and security management system to alert the Control room in real time in case of any emergency. The high security block is encased with high walls and has anti-scale fencing on three sides which constitute a double gate system.

In addition to four towers in each corner, the prison is enclosed by a high perimeter wall topped with power fencing so as to strengthen surveillance. A fifth tower has also been provided in the Central Control Office, located at the highest level in the middle of the compound. Along with a jamming system to block mobile network signals, provision is made for walkthrough metal detectors and a body orifice security scanner chair.

Maritime Surveillance

Mauritius and India Sign Contract for Acquisition of 10 Interceptor Boats

A contract for the design, construction and delivery of 10 fast Interceptor boats for the Mauritius Police Force was signed on 4 April 2014, in Port Louis, by the Senior Chief Executive of the Prime Minister’s Office, Mrs K.O Fong Weng-Poorun, and the Head of delegation of Goa Shipyard Ltd, Mr Shrivastava.

These boats will be procured from Goa Shipyard Ltd, an Indian public sector undertaking, at a cost of US $ 6 million dollars. The 14.5 metre-long Interceptor boats will be fitted with the most advanced navigation and communication equipment including weapons. They will have a top speed of around 5 knots (ph) with a cruising speed of 20 knots (36 kmph).

The boats will be deployed for patrol in shallow waters, limited deployments from the coast in special cases and operate with Force Protection vessels and other crafts. They will also be used for interception and boarding of high speed vessels, search and rescue operations and Special Forces operations.

In her address, Mrs Fong Weng-Poorun said that the signing of the contract between Mauritius and the Indian shipyard is a valuable addition to the long standing partnership between India and Mauritius in the domain of maritime security.

She also expressed her appreciation to the Government of India for all assistance extended to the National Coast Guard (NCG) to beef up surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone of Mauritius.

The signing of the contract is a follow-up to the state visit of the Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam, to India in February 2012 where the Government of India agreed to extend assistance to Mauritius in various fields. In that context a Credit Line Agreement between the Government of Mauritius and the Export-Import Bank of India for an amount of US $46 million dollars was signed in February this year for the acquisition of specialised defence-related equipment and vehicles for the Mauritius Police Force.
Distribution of Tablets to Students to Enhance Learning Opportunities

An official ceremony at Gaëtan Raynal State College, Quatre Bornes on 3 April 2014 marked the presentation of Tablet PCs to students of Form V.

The objectives of the project, which applies to Form IV students, and exceptionally to Form V students this year, are to induce a paradigm shift in teaching and learning process at secondary level as well as empower teachers to innovate in their teaching methods through the use of teaching materials available online.

Some 20,000 tablets, a digital tool to enhance learning opportunities for students in accessing learning resources and to develop their skills in searching for information and in communication, are being distributed by Government to Form V students. Form IV students will receive theirs later during the year.

The tablets contain pedagogical content prepared by iProf in the core subjects of Mathematics, English, French and other subjects such as Pure Sciences and Social Sciences. They are also equipped with pedagogical contents relevant to Forms IV and V curricula, aligned with the teaching of Cambridge GCE O Level syllabi for Mauritius.

The tablets can be used for educational purposes in both online and offline modes. Moreover, the tablets will support the teaching conducted in class though the use of Classroom Management Software enables a virtual environment in which teachers and students can better collaborate and interact within the classroom.

The Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) is also in the process of preparing additional resources. Those resources will enable the 5,500 teachers who also have their tablets and who have also been trained by the MIE on the usage of the tablet and resources, to be even more active generators and adaptors of knowledge. Furthermore, security aspects pertaining to internet access and proper usage have been integrated in the form of parental control software on the tablet as well as through access filters.

Visually Impaired Students Receive Braille Display Tablets

In line with Government’s commitment to education for all and in a bid to enhance the learning experience of blind students in a growing technological 21st century environment, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources has handed over Braille Display tablets PC to 18 students in schools catering for the visually impaired.

The handing over ceremony was held on 10 April at the MITD House in Phoenix in the presence of the Minister of Education and Human Resources, Dr Vasant Bunwaree, and the Chairperson of Lizié dans la Main, Mr Reynolds Permal.

In his address, Minister Bunwaree stressed that the distribution of Braille Display shows Government commitment to promote holistic education in the country. ‘Each child should be offered the chance and tools to study no matter his disabilities. We should give equal chance to all to succeed in life,’ he said.
Launching of Housing Empowerment Scheme for Middle-Income Families

The Housing Empowerment Scheme meant to support middle-income families earning monthly revenue of up to Rs 50 000 to own a house, was launched on 27 March by the Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Mr Xavier-Luc Duval.

To this effect, the Mauritius Housing Company (MHC) and the Mauritius Bankers’ Association signed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining agreed conditions between the Government and the commercial banks. Twelve banks are involved in this project.

Presently, some 89% families in Mauritius own a house. The rationale of the Home Ownership Programme, announced in the 2014 Budget, is geared especially towards families who cannot afford to have a home of their own because of financial constraints or they cannot mobilise the necessary down-payment to qualify for a bank loan. The programme also aims at giving a boost to the construction sector.

In a bid to facilitate construction and save on costs, the MHC is providing on its website at least 12 types of architectural plans free of charge for each house of an area of 1 000 and 1 200 square feet.

The Housing Empowerment Scheme

Under the Housing Empowerment Scheme, banks will require only 5 per cent as minimum down-payment on the purchase of a property instead of the usual 10 per cent or more currently applicable.

The housing unit should be of 1500 square feet with a construction cost not exceeding Rs 2.5 million. Banks will advance loans up to 95 per cent of the cost of a residential unit. The loans will also carry a moratorium period of 2 years on capital repayment. Government is, furthermore, guaranteeing 20 per cent of the loan amount.

To reduce the cost of acquiring a unit, Government is also reimbursing VAT up to an amount of Rs 300 000 on the construction of any house or purchase of an apartment costing less than Rs 2.5 million.

Green Economy: Mauritius chosen as pilot country for PAGE

Mauritius has been chosen as a pilot country for the new Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE). The United Nations (UN) Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Mr Simon Springett, handed over the related document to Mr Osman Mohamed, Executive Chairman of MID Commission, on 7 April 2014 in Port Louis.

PAGE is a response to the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), entitled The Future We Want, which recognises green economy as a vehicle for sustainable development and poverty eradication.

PAGE will support 30 countries over the next seven years in building national green economy strategies that will generate new jobs and skills, promote clean technologies, and reduce environmental risks and poverty.

Four UN agencies, namely the United Nations Environment Programme, the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, will provide a comprehensive suite of green economy services that will enable countries to transform their national economic structures to meet the growing demands and challenges of the 21st century.

More specifically, PAGE will build enabling conditions in participating countries by shifting investment and policies towards the creation of a new generation of assets, such as clean technologies, resource efficient infrastructure, well-functioning ecosystems, green skilled labour and good governance.

The four agencies have previously undertaken joint green initiatives. However, this is the first time that all four partners have come together to coordinate their support, expertise and resources at the national level. During the first two years of the partnership, PAGE will focus on seven pilot countries and scale up this support to a total of 30 countries by 2020.
Mauritius and Japan Sign Agreement on Capacity Development on Climate Change Measures

An Agreement between the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for the provision of technical assistance for the implementation of the project on Capacity Development on Climate Change Measures in Mauritius was signed on 27 March 2014 in Port Louis.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, Mr Premhans Jhugroo, and the Project Formulation Advisor of JICA, Ms Kaoru Takahashi, signed the Agreement in the presence of the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development, Mr Devanand Virahsawmy.

In line with the National Climate Change Adaptation Policy Framework which identifies socio-economic impacts of climate change on key sectors such as water, agriculture and coastal management, JICA is assisting the Ministry in developing sectoral guidelines/policies on climate change adaptation, enhancing public awareness on climate change and strengthening the function of the recently set up Climate Change Information Centre.

It is recalled that with the assistance of the Government of Japan through the United Nations Development Programme, Mauritius has already benefitted from a grant of Rs 90 million under the Africa Adaptation Programme on climate change.

Moreover, under the Agreement, JICA will donate equipment to strengthen climate change education and awareness raising as well as provide training to stakeholders. Japanese experts will also assist in formulating climate policies. The duration of the project will be two years and the cost is estimated at Rs 25 million.

Japan is also providing Mauritius with a meteorological radar to help in mitigating the negative impacts of cyclones and other natural disasters. JICA’s assistance to Mauritius dates back to the 1980’s and since then, JICA has offered various assistance in accordance with the policies of the Government of Mauritius, such as Maurice Ile Durable.