

GUEST COLUMN: Lesson from Jamaica

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THE CARIBBEAN has watched in bewilderment as the Jamaica government has slid into crisis over Prime Minister Bruce Golding's involvement in efforts to block the extradition to the United States of an alleged gun and drug runner, Christopher "Dudus" Coke.

Emerging first as a disagreement with the US on the "legality" of the extradition of Coke, the situation has since descended into an all-out war between the security forces and the organised criminal gangs in Golding's constituency determined to protect their "don".

As this is being written, the reports are that six policemen have been shot, and two have died. The gravity of the situation cannot be understated, particularly since it has brought to the fore the deep links between the political directorate and the organised criminal elements of Jamaica.

Crime and Politics Linked..

The link between crime and politics has now been crudely exposed. The international dimension has only served to exacerbate the difficulties for Jamaica.

Before, however, the rest of the Caribbean begins to shrug the problem off as a Jamaican problem, we should all take careful note of similar trends in Caribbean politics.

We have not yet seen the emergence of "garrison constituencies" in Barbados, but we have had too many examples of the criminalisation of the state for us to be comfortable.

On top of all this is evidence of organised gang activity, linked to a growing gun and drug trade, which have taken root in many urban constituencies across the Caribbean.

Indeed the Eastern Caribbean differs from Jamaica in degree, but not in kind.

Since the end of the ideologically-based politics of the 1970s to the mid-1980s, politics in the Caribbean has tended to be fought along lines largely revolving around the material comfort of voters, state handouts to citizens, and contracts for large and small public works.

The Politics of Money

The politics of money has replaced the politics of ideas, freedom, democracy, sovereignty and national self-determination. In this context, men of ideas, skill, talent, honesty and true ability count for very little.

A new genre of politician has emerged whose skills set is no different from that of the petty thief and average con man. It is such persons whom voters now find attractive, and it is such men who they swear to defend to their death.

In this context vote buying and auctioning, particularly among the urban poor youth on the block, is now a common practice. Voting on principle has been replaced by voting for money.

A clear sign of the confusion of the impact of the new value system on the attitudes of Caribbean voters was revealed during the airing of Barbados' Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) TV's "The Peoples' Business" last Sunday May 23, 2010.

During that programme, several callers tended to interpret the "Dudus" Coke affair as a sovereignty issue in which the internal affairs of the Caribbean needed to be defended against US interference.

However, whilst it is true that the history of the US subversion of Caribbean sovereignty remains a sensitive issue for many Caribbean people, it was interesting that many of the callers seemed to want to look past the allegations of criminality which led to the extradition request in the first place.

There have been several breaches of Caribbean sovereignty in the recent past by the US to which Caribbean leaders have responded only with silence or acquiescence.

In light of this, the energy and passion with which Golding sought to defend the rights of Coke, a wanted criminal with a deep power base in his constituency, reveals much of the new directions in Caribbean politics.

Given the pervasive nature of this new value system, it is clear that the Caribbean has travelled a long way down towards the Jamaica situation.

The region should remember, however, that politics is a one-way street. Once we go too far down the wrong way, it is extremely difficult to reverse course.

The Jamaica situation, bad as it is, now presents us with a chance to stop the rot.

It is a lesson that civil society will either embrace, or be damned by future generations for their failure to do so. History is paying studious attention.

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