

Reflections on an epic election

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Who won or who lost the epoch defining electoral war? Did Manning lose it or did Kamla win it? Great historical events are invariably followed by intense debates as to who or what 'caused' the event. Invariably, however, great events are multi-causal and it is never easy to identify the specific causes of what occurred or the specific times when eras are said to have had their beginnings or endings.

Notwithstanding this caveat, we need to come to some tentative conclusions as to who or what caused the 'shocking' events of May 24, 2010. Why were all the pundits and the pollsters at a loss to predict the outcome? There is general agreement that more was at issue than property taxes, crime or a hubristic leader; regime change was also clearly in the wind. It is evident that deep seated social and economic pressures were building up inside the society and that on May 24, these erupted and burst asunder with volcanic intensity.

Arguably, Mr Manning and Mrs Persad-Bissessar were merely the leading actors who played the parts scripted impersonally for them by history. What one witnessed, in effect, was a cosmic battle between the old world set in train by Dr Eric Williams and the PNM in the 1950s and a newly-emergent generation that does not share the worldview of their elders. Many of the latter were involved in the election if only on their BlackBerries.

We hasten to indicate that the old is never ever totally vanquished or made obsolete. Inevitably, old and new combine dialectally to produce a new synthesis which contains aspects of both. At a concrete level, it may well be that what took place on May 24 was a formal realignment of Trinidad's economic, social and political power grids which had been kept disarticulated by an electoral system which favoured the PNM. The UNC had now 'risen' and had finally broken through the barriers which had hitherto constrained its ascent.

This structural interpretation of what took place would perhaps be challenged by those who claim that it ignores the agency role played by the day to day inputs made by ordinary men and women acting routinely as they go about their business, or by pumped up personalities acting 'heroically' or anti-heroically, as the case might be.



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make.

Henry Kissinger tells us that as a professor, he used to think of history as run by impersonal forces, but that when he saw it in practice, he understood the differences that personalities

Tolstoy, the author of War and Peace, disagrees. He wrote that 'one only has to penetrate to the essence of any historical event... to be convinced that the will of the historic hero does not control the actions of the mass, but is itself controlled'. Yet others, like Marx and CLR James, seek to combine the two perspectives and argue that great men do make history, but they cannot do so arbitrarily. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment.

How do all of these abstract issues relate to recent events? Most analyses single out Manning as the anti-hero who caused the crisis by doing a bunch of silly things including calling an election that was not necessary. Conrad Enill, Chairman of the PNM, in fact opined that the problems which confronted the electorate were caused by 'one man' and not by the 'great' PNM party which was expected to prevail forever. As he remarked following the election, 'the PNM is a very strong party. It has strong institutions in place. I think theelection revolved around one man, and what you see today is a reflection of that rather than the reflection of the party. That's the reality.'

Opinion is divided on Mr Enill's view as to what happened. One view holds that the party which Williams built was no longer suited to the age of democratic governability.

Another view blamed the satraps who allowed Manning to capture the party and to transform it into a personal instrument to be used for his own aggrandisement. They pampered, garlanded, and allowed him to do more or less as he pleased, all in the name of stability, discipline and styles of party governance borrowed from Lenin's model of democratic centralism.

The leader had the final say on most everything having to do with the party. His wife, Hazel in fact succinctly captured what was wrong with the PNM when she noted that when Mr Manning spoke, the party was deemed to have 'spoken'. When the party determined who should be screened as candidates to contest elections on behalf of the party, his was the final word, not the people who sustained the party on the ground. Interestingly, Mr Manning argued that the party was changing for the better under his leadership. As he observed, 'what you are seeing in this election is a whole change in approach by the PNM, a changing of candidates. The change that the people have been calling for has been taking place within the PNM itself.'

Mr Manning, however, had another unarticulated agenda to serve. He quite studiously removed all those who had crossed or had been disloyal to him in any way or whom he believed would stand in the way of him becoming the party's maximum leader and the country's first executive president, a position which he craved. Mr Manning thus came to personify the party and the government. He was correct when he complained that the opposition's artillery was trained mainly on him. With few exceptions, he had become the PNM.

During the campaign, Mr Rowley tried to effect a sort of disconnect between the party and the leader, urging party supporters to be good soldiers and vote for the institution which had served them well in the past. Many remained undecided up to the near end, and either heeded Rowley's advice and stayed the course or crossed over, hoping that they will survive the crossing. Some also saw a PNM loss as the only way to get rid of the political albatross that was snuffing out the life of the party.

Whatever their manner of resolution, there is no gainsaying that most Afro Trinidadians were angry with Mr Manning. One thus understands why there was so much outrage both at Balisier House and in the farflung community (including those in the diaspora) when it appeared that he was scheming to hang on to the levers of party leadership. As far as they were concerned, Manning had lost the election gratuitously and had to go, NOW.

Some of course see the matter through different lenses. They argue that Mr Manning heroically sought to gain a five-year term by sacrificing two and a half years of the present term, or that he stuck manfully to policies, (Property Tax, the Aluminium Smelter, the TTRA, defending Calder Hart and UDeCOTT) even though he knew he would pay a political price for doing so.

This 'doggie and the bone' initiative did not however pay off, and many wonder why Mr Manning did not use the time available to rehabilitate his government before facing the polls in 2012. The answer to the riddle lies in the heads of Mr Manning and his spiritual adviser and in his all consuming ambition to become executive president.

One cannot however determine what caused the MayDay election without examining the Kamla phenomenon and the role played by Dookeran and Jack Warner.

-To be concluded