

The Mauritius Consensus

By Samad Ramoly

Any observer emancipated from the blinkers of partisan politics, the tipsiness of the "Mauritian miracle" and the relativism of benchmarking with countries entangled in an even more "autistic" state than we are, would cast doubt over our achievement as a nation since our independence. So would the thousands of Mauritians who have sought greener pastures abroad and the thousands more presently tempted by emigration sirens. What exactly went wrong ?

So as not to taint further the credibility of our political masters since 1968, it must be acknowledged that among the many misguided policies endorsed by our successive governments, there have certainly been many that are forward-looking too. What has been conspicuously missing is a strategic plan that synergises all the policies as they are implemented so that the benefits of one policy do not weaken the benefits of another. A piecemeal and haphazard approach can only yield short-term gratification.

Reality Check

Through the compulsive demise of cross-border regulations and technological breakthrough, the world is moulding itself into a "global village". Subtly but in dynamic terms, globalisation is shaping our lifestyle. Arguably, even if it wants to, a nation cannot stop the disruptive impact of globalisation, it can only strive to minimise it, without downplaying it, while endeavouring to grab the opportunities unleashed.

The prerequisite for citizens to integrate globalisation comfortably is a domestic system that has successfully integrated them. That is an environment where a decent standard of living comes as a reward for the diligence and talent expressed on a level playing field. For a right-minded Mauritian, this is hardly a depiction of post-independence Mauritius. If your interlocutor does not concur, you can be sure that she is just a ruthless self-seeker !

Fundamentally, our model of development revolves around privileges. At the local level, the modus operandi is essentially determined by a citizen's skill to activate her social network : the common citizen thrives through small privileges, the mighty citizen cruises through big privileges. Not surprisingly, goods and services are even bartered in some circles. All in all, a collective schizophrenia persists where on the one hand "refuseniks" lag behind and on the other hand, "cheerleaders" indecently exploit the rigged contest.

At the international level, our economic expansion has been secured through a series of negotiated privileges from "developed" countries to access their markets with dissimulated reciprocity. The problem with preferential treatment is that the more you get, the more you expect. To maintain a status quo as long as

possible, the end justifies the means. No matter how smart our "economic diplomacy" proves to be, our survival in the post-privilege era will ultimately depend on our tireless stimulus to improve our real competitiveness.

The predominant "nous" and "bann-la" mindset pervades every sphere of our society. In the process, the whole political system is perverted : it particularly offers disenfranchised citizens a democratic wishfulfilment of booting ineffective governments out during periodic elections while cynical voters and candidates, a minority one would like to believe, merely participate in a bid to *rode enn bout*. In the absence of an adequate mechanism of checks and balances and a proportional electoral system conducive to the emergence of alternative voices, our "democracy" itself is hijacked. What a waste for the beacon of civic responsibility and its absolute disregard of how much citizenship and civility are subsequently trampled on !

How much louder the wake-up call before our political, business and intellectual elites whistle the end to the *pas-moi-li-sa* game, restrain their greed and wrestle their conceit ? Yet the protectionist impulse and the downbeat mood, namely, are distinct symptoms of a nation dreading the future. The longer we ignore the symptoms the fitter we will be to join the league of "sick states of globalisation". The more we procrastinate before dealing with the root causes, the longer it takes to defuse the social time bomb.

Placebo Effect

The enlightened leadership the great majority of Mauritians have been yearning for is still elusive. Once the public is honestly exposed to the dire state of affairs, she will be more inclined to tolerate a shock therapy. The ideal blend of leadership would then be one with a measure of the resoluteness of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to drive comprehensive structural reforms and a measure of the detachment from petty considerations of legendary Sufi icon Djalaludin Rumi to empathise with the people, especially the marginalised, so that they feel secure.

A leader must not only have a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities of globalisation but also a precise assessment of our own failings and intrinsic potential. Everybody, indiscriminately, must be aware of where we are heading and constantly reminded of how we are getting there with all the stages clearly defined. Globalisation is a multidimensional phenomenon that can only be embraced with hybrid and contextualised domestic policies. It does not matter from which economic thinker we draw our inspiration, Karl Marx, Adam Smith or Amartya Sen. All our policymakers need is to focus on how to sustain our momentum for growth, not the growth rate per se.

This will happen when policies are implemented with a win-win perspective, rather than coercively and doctrinally. For instance, more employees will tend to accept the much-needed flexibility in the labour market if there is a safety net in

the form of unemployment benefits. "Conjoncture internationale" cuts both ways and the prospect of creating a "second miracle" derives more from fetishism than anything else. Consensus cannot rest on a flimsy foundation and an abstract concept, but around the whole package. We have no alternative than to shift our paradigm from our delusive model of development to an inclusive society operating with global, predictable and transparent norms.

Policymakers have a primal mission to prevent us from drifting further away from English language and the American dollar, not because we are mesmerised by "God save the Queen" and Britney Spears, but because they are the medium of exchange in the "global village". The wider the gap grows, the more the number of Mauritians who will remain entrenched in their "local village" that an exposure restricted to "Bollywood", "Premier League" football and Gallo-centric intellectualism can only exacerbate. Little wonder our "debates" emanate more hot air than they light up our way.

To cope with the pluralism globalisation fosters, albeit under Western hegemony, we need to celebrate it jointly with our roots to build a "composite identity" or else an inward-looking "borrowed identity" with a binary psyche that sees "*bijoux*" everywhere will flourish ! Pragmatism, not to confuse with realpolitik, must be the engine of our policies. We must not hesitate to travel as far as Chile, Finland or New Zealand, for example, to seek fresh ideas instead of relying exclusively on the benevolence of our pays amis or the one-size-fits-all "expertise" of the World Bank.

Whether global capitalism becomes a rollercoaster or a bandwagon ride will depend firstly on the solutions we devise for ourselves ; then on how the people chairing our institutions safeguard our rights and crucially on how civil society and the media keep our politicians on their toes. Simply put, we must make our mediocrity history.