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The Politics of Bahamas

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Introduction

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, a vibrant nation nestled among the turquoise seas of the Caribbean, possesses a rich political heritage informed by its colonial past and shaped by decades of democratic development. Though best known for its idyllic beaches and warm climate, The Bahamas is equally notable for its robust parliamentary system and the unique evolution of its political institutions. Understanding Bahamian politics requires not only a look at its modern-day structures and parties but also an appreciation of how history, culture, and global relationships have influenced the political landscape.

The Bahamian political system traces its roots to British colonial rule, adopting the Westminster model and adapting it to suit local circumstances. As a result, The Bahamas operates under a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, with separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The journey from colonial governance—where authority was vested in British-appointed officials and the powerful Bay Street Boys—to majority rule and full independence in 1973 marked a profound transformation for the nation and its people.

Central to this narrative are the political parties that continue to shape Bahamian democracy. The emergence of the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) and the Free National Movement (FNM) signaled the beginning of competitive party politics, providing a platform for the island's black majority and dissenting voices to engage in governance. The alternating stewardship of these two parties has defined Bahamian politics since independence, giving rise to a stable, albeit sometimes contentious, two-party system.

Today, The Bahamas faces a range of challenges and opportunities that test the resilience of its political system. Issues such as governance and transparency, immigration, economic dependency on tourism and finance, and a vulnerable environment in the age of climate change are all part of ongoing public debate and policy consideration. Meanwhile, the constitutional role of the monarchy, the independence of the judiciary, and the function of local government persist as crucial elements in ensuring democratic accountability and public trust.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide to politics and the political system in The Bahamas. From the earliest days of colonial rule to the present, from parliamentary debates to foreign policy dilemmas, it examines the institutions, personalities, and events that have shaped the nation's political story. Whether you are a student, researcher, policymaker, or interested citizen, this volume offers both an introduction and an in-depth exploration of how Bahamian society governs itself.

As The Bahamas continues to navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the study of its political system offers valuable lessons in resilience, adaptation, and the enduring quest for self-determination. Through a careful examination of its history, constitutional foundations, and contemporary issues, we hope to illuminate the richness and dynamism that define the politics of The Bahamas.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of Bahamian Politics

To understand the contemporary political landscape of The Bahamas, one must first delve into the origins of its governance, tracing the threads from its earliest inhabitants to the initial stirrings of formalized political structures under colonial rule. Long before the arrival of Europeans, the islands were home to the Lucayan people, a branch of the Arawaks. Their societal organization, while not a "political system" in the modern sense, involved leadership structures based on caciques or chiefs, who held authority within their communities. These indigenous systems were tragically short-lived, however, as the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 marked the beginning of their decimation through enslavement and disease.

The Spanish, primarily interested in exploiting the islands for labor, did not establish permanent settlements. The Bahamas remained largely unpopulated by Europeans for over a century, becoming a haven for pirates and privateers who took advantage of the archipelago's numerous cays and shallow waters to ambush passing ships. This era, often romanticized, represented a form of self-governance by those operating outside the law, a chaotic and violent "politics" driven by plunder and survival. Figures like Blackbeard and Anne Bonny carved out their own spheres of influence, albeit fleetingly.

The formal political history of The Bahamas under European influence began in the 17th century with the arrival of English settlers, primarily from Bermuda. These early colonists, seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity, brought with them the foundational concepts of English law and governance. The first proprietary governors were appointed, tasked with establishing order and administering the scattered settlements. However, their authority was often challenged by the independent-minded settlers and the persistent problem of piracy.

The late 17th and early 18th centuries saw continued struggles for control. The proprietors faced difficulties in asserting their authority effectively, and the islands remained a hotbed of lawlessness. It wasn't until the appointment of Captain Woodes Rogers as the first Royal Governor in 1718 that a serious effort was made to bring order to the colony. Rogers is credited with suppressing piracy and establishing a more formal system of governance, including the introduction of the first legislative assembly in 1729.

The establishment of the House of Assembly marked a crucial turning point. While its powers were initially limited and representation was restricted to a small elite, it laid the groundwork for parliamentary governance. The early Assembly was dominated by a merchant class, many of whom were involved in wrecking and other activities

related to the sea. This group, which would later evolve into the "Bay Street Boys," began to exert influence over the colony's affairs, often clashing with the appointed governors.

The arrival of Loyalists from the American colonies after the Revolutionary War in the late 18th century significantly altered the demographic and political landscape of The Bahamas. These Loyalists brought with them their enslaved people, dramatically increasing the black population and introducing a more entrenched plantation economy, particularly on islands like Abaco and Eleuthera. This influx also brought new political ideas and a more assertive demand for rights and representation, largely from the white Loyalist elite.

The political system that developed during this period was characterized by a power struggle between the appointed governors, representing the authority of the British Crown, and the elected Assembly, representing the interests of the white settler class. The majority black population, enslaved or free, had virtually no political voice. The Assembly often used its control over local finances to leverage power against the governor, a common feature of colonial legislatures in the British Empire.

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 and the subsequent full emancipation in 1838 had profound social and economic consequences for The Bahamas, but political power remained largely concentrated in the hands of the white minority. The property qualifications for voting and holding office effectively excluded the vast majority of the black population from participating in the political process. This created a system where a small elite controlled the economy and the legislature, setting the stage for future struggles for political inclusion and majority rule.

The mid-19th century saw gradual, albeit slow, changes. Some limited steps were taken towards expanding the franchise, but these were often designed to maintain the existing power structure. The political system remained essentially an oligarchy, with the interests of the merchant class along Bay Street in Nassau holding sway. This period solidified the influence of this group, who became adept at using the existing political framework to their advantage.

The economic activities of the colony, heavily reliant on cotton initially and later on sisal, sponges, and tourism, shaped the political priorities of the ruling elite. Policies were often designed to benefit these industries, with little regard for the welfare of the majority of the population. The political discourse within the Assembly was largely focused on internal economic matters and the ongoing tussle for power with the governor.

The political landscape remained relatively static for many decades, with the established order facing few significant challenges from within the formal political system. Dissatisfaction among the disenfranchised black population simmered, but the

avenues for expressing this discontent politically were severely limited. The focus for many was on survival and building communities outside the direct purview of the colonial administration and the Bay Street elite.

The early 20th century saw the continued dominance of the white merchant class in the House of Assembly. Their economic power translated directly into political power, as they controlled the key industries and had the financial means to influence elections. The political system, while nominally a parliamentary democracy, was in practice a form of plutocracy.

The role of the Governor remained significant as the representative of the Crown, holding reserved powers and the ability to assent to legislation. However, the Assembly's control over finances gave it considerable leverage. This dynamic created a system of checks and balances, albeit one heavily skewed in favor of the local elite.

The social structure of the colony also reinforced the political hierarchy. A rigid class system, intertwined with racial divisions, meant that access to power and influence was largely determined by one's position within this hierarchy. The political origins of The Bahamas are thus inseparable from its social and economic history.

The gradual growth of an educated black middle class began to lay the groundwork for future political activism. Individuals within this group, often educated abroad, returned with new ideas about rights, representation, and self-determination. While they faced significant barriers to entering the formal political system, they began to organize and advocate for change through other means, such as civic organizations and nascent political groups.

The political discussions within the Assembly, while seemingly mundane at times, reflected the priorities and concerns of the ruling class. Debates often centered on trade regulations, infrastructure projects that benefited their businesses, and the perennial issue of taxation. The voices of the majority were conspicuously absent from these formal political arenas.

The political culture of The Bahamas in its formative years was characterized by a blend of English parliamentary tradition and the unique realities of a small island colony with a diverse population and a history of piracy and mercantilism. The foundations were laid for a system that would eventually evolve into a full-fledged democracy, but the journey from these origins would be long and marked by significant struggles for inclusion and equality.

The system of governance that emerged was a product of its time and circumstances, reflecting the power dynamics of a colonial society. The limitations of the franchise, the dominance of economic elites, and the exclusion of the majority black population were defining features of this early political landscape. These factors would become

the central issues in the political movements that would emerge in the mid-20th century.

The legislative process, even in its early form, followed the Westminster model, with bills being introduced, debated, and passed by the Assembly before being sent to the Governor for assent. However, the influence of the Bay Street merchants meant that legislation often served their specific interests.

The concept of political parties in the modern sense was not present in these early years. Instead, political activity was organized around factions and alliances based on personal connections, economic interests, and social standing. The idea of broad-based political organizations representing different segments of the population would come much later.

The role of public opinion in this era was limited. With no universal suffrage and limited avenues for public expression, the views of the majority had little direct impact on the political decision-making process. The concerns of the enfranchised few were paramount.

The origins of Bahamian politics are a story of the imposition of a foreign system of governance onto a diverse set of islands, the struggle for control between appointed officials and local elites, and the gradual development of institutions that would eventually form the basis of a democratic state. It is a history marked by exclusion and inequality, but also by the seeds of future change.

The experience of slavery and its aftermath left an indelible mark on the political landscape, shaping social relations and creating deep-seated inequalities that would take generations to address. The political system that developed during this period was inherently linked to the economic structures of the time, serving to maintain the existing power imbalances.

The legal framework, based on English common law, provided a degree of stability and predictability, but it also upheld the existing social and political order. The courts, while intended to administer justice, operated within a system that denied basic rights to the majority of the population.

The geographical nature of The Bahamas, an archipelago of scattered islands, also influenced the development of its political system. Communication and transportation were challenging, making centralized control difficult and fostering a degree of local autonomy on some islands, even within the colonial framework.

The early political history of The Bahamas is a complex tapestry woven from the threads of indigenous life, European colonization, piracy, slavery, and the gradual development of representative institutions. Understanding these origins is essential to

appreciating the trajectory of Bahamian politics and the challenges and triumphs that have shaped the nation's political identity. It is a story that begins with the establishment of a system of governance that served the interests of a few, but which would eventually be transformed by the aspirations and struggles of the many.

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