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The Politics of Mauritius

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Introduction

Mauritius, a vibrant island nation in the Indian Ocean, has long stood out as a bastion of democratic governance, ethnic diversity, and relative political stability in a region often challenged by instability. Its political system—firmly rooted in the Westminster parliamentary model—reflects both the legacies of its colonial past and the unique complexities of its multi-ethnic, multicultural society. Since achieving independence from Britain in 1968, and later becoming a republic within the Commonwealth in 1992, Mauritius has developed a nuanced, dynamic, and sometimes contentious political environment.

The Mauritian polity is shaped by a rich historical tapestry woven by waves of migration, colonization, and the resulting demographic transformations. The influences of Dutch, French, and British rule, as well as the profound demographic shifts brought by the influx of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent, continue to echo within the country's social and political structures. The result is a legal, cultural, and institutional hybrid, where laws and customs sometimes overlap or coexist, contributing both to societal resilience and to the presence of underlying tensions.

At the heart of Mauritius' political system is the principle of checks and balances among its legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The operation of government combines formal constitutional provisions with established political traditions—such as coalition-building and the unique “best loser” electoral mechanism—intended to ensure inclusivity and stability. The chaptered structure of this book explores each layer of governance, from the presidency and cabinet to the local government councils responsible for daily civic administration.

Mauritian democracy does not exist in a vacuum. Political life on the island is deeply influenced by questions of identity—ethnic, religious, and linguistic—as well as by concerns regarding representation, equality, and the limits of patronage and dynastic politics. The prevalence of coalition governments speaks to the necessity of accommodation among diverse groups but also introduces challenges, such as shifting alliances and the potential for political gridlock. Social cohesion and consensus-building are often tested against the backdrop of electoral contests, allegations of corruption, and calls for institutional reform.

Recent years have seen the Mauritian political system confronted with new challenges, from high-profile scandals and claims of government overreach to broader debates about the need for electoral and institutional reforms. Yet, the multiparty landscape, regular and generally peaceful elections, and robust civic engagement underscore Mauritius' democratic credentials. The 2024 elections, marked by vigorous public

discourse and the transition of power to a new government, reflect both the strengths and the evolving pains of this political system.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Mauritius. By delving into historical context, governmental structures, electoral dynamics, party politics, grassroots governance, and contemporary challenges, it seeks to furnish readers with the tools necessary to understand not only how Mauritius is governed, but also why its political culture has developed the way that it has—and how it may yet change in the years to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: From Uninhabited Island to Colonial Prize

Long before political parties debated in a National Assembly or judges donned their robes, the island now known as Mauritius lay in wait, an unpopulated gem in the vast Indian Ocean. While Arab and Malay sailors likely knew of its existence as early as the 10th century, the island remained largely untouched by human hands for centuries. Its political history, therefore, begins not with indigenous populations developing complex social structures, but with the arrival of European powers seeking strategic outposts and resources.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to officially stumble upon the island in the early 16th century. Portuguese sailors, including one Diogo Fernandes Pereira, encountered the Mascarene Islands – a group that includes Reunion, Mauritius, and Rodrigues – naming them after another Portuguese figure, Don Pedro Mascarenhas. While they visited, the Portuguese didn't establish a lasting settlement, perhaps finding more immediate opportunities elsewhere.

It was the Dutch who first attempted to make the island their own. In 1598, a Dutch squadron landed near Grand Port and, with a flair for naming things after important people, christened the island "Mauritius" in honor of Prince Maurits van Nassau. The Dutch saw potential in the island, establishing a settlement in 1638. They dabbled in exploiting ebony trees and introduced sugarcane, a plant that would profoundly shape the island's future. They even used Mauritius as a base for exploration, with the likes of Abel Tasman setting off from its shores.

However, life for the early Dutch settlers was far from idyllic. They faced a barrage of challenges – cyclones, droughts, pest infestations, and a general lack of supplies. They even, rather famously, contributed to the extinction of the now-iconic dodo bird, which they apparently found quite tasty. The hardships eventually proved too much, and the Dutch abandoned their settlement in 1710, leaving the island once again sparsely populated.

A mere five years later, in 1715, the French arrived, sensing an opportunity where the Dutch had faltered. Guillaume Dufresne d'Arsel claimed the island for France, renaming it "Isle de France." The French approach to colonization was more strategic and systematic. In 1735, Governor Mahé de La Bourdonnais arrived and set about developing the island, establishing Port Louis as a crucial naval base and shipbuilding center. This decision was pivotal, positioning the island as a key hub for trade in the Indian Ocean.

Under French rule, the economy began to flourish, largely thanks to the expansion of sugarcane cultivation. This agricultural focus, however, came at a significant human cost. The French imported large numbers of enslaved people from various parts of Africa and Madagascar to work the burgeoning plantations. This influx of enslaved labor laid the groundwork for a complex social hierarchy that would have lasting repercussions on Mauritian society and its political development. The French East India Company initially administered the island, but by 1767, the French crown took direct control.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw Isle de France become a thorn in the side of the British, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars. The island served as a base for French privateers who happily disrupted British merchant shipping in the Indian Ocean. This made the island a strategic target for the British, who eventually launched an expedition to capture it.

Despite an initial setback, the British were successful in December 1810, gaining control of the island. The surrender agreement, however, was remarkably generous to the French settlers. The British, in a move that perhaps prioritised a smooth transition over imposing their will entirely, agreed to respect the existing French laws, customs, language, and traditions. This unique arrangement meant that while sovereignty passed to the British, a strong undercurrent of French influence remained, creating a fascinating blend of legal and cultural legacies that persists to this day. The island reverted to its Dutch name, Mauritius.

With the British firmly in control, Mauritius entered a new phase of its history. The British administration, led initially by Robert Townsend Farquhar, brought about significant social and economic changes. One of the most monumental was the abolition of slavery in 1835. This was a watershed moment, legally freeing enslaved Africans who had been brought to the island over the preceding centuries.

The abolition of slavery, while a moral imperative, created a significant labor shortage on the sugar plantations, which remained the backbone of the economy. To address this, the British embarked on what was termed the "Great Experiment," a system of bringing indentured laborers to the island. This marked the beginning of a massive influx of workers, primarily from the Indian subcontinent, though laborers also came from other places like China, Madagascar, and Mozambique.

Between 1835 and the early 20th century, hundreds of thousands of indentured laborers arrived in Mauritius, transforming the island's demographic landscape. These laborers, often arriving through the Aapravasi Ghat in Port Louis, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, worked under harsh conditions on the sugar estates. This period of indentured labor profoundly shaped the ethnic and cultural composition of Mauritius, laying the foundations for the diverse society that exists today.

The abolition of slavery and the subsequent arrival of indentured laborers created a new social dynamic. The descendants of enslaved people, the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy, and the newly arrived Indian laborers formed distinct communities with their own challenges and aspirations. This demographic shift, particularly the growing population of Indian origin, would become a crucial factor in the island's political evolution, eventually leading to demands for greater representation and self-rule.

The British period also saw the development of infrastructure and administrative structures. Port Louis continued to grow as a major port. While the French legal system and language were retained, British administrative practices were introduced, contributing to the hybrid system that characterizes Mauritius today. The economic focus remained largely on sugar production, making the island susceptible to fluctuations in global sugar prices.

As the 20th century unfolded, calls for greater political participation and self-determination grew louder. The diverse communities, shaped by the distinct historical experiences of slavery and indentured labor, began to organize politically. The establishment of the Legislative Assembly in 1947, with elections based on a limited franchise, marked an important step towards self-rule. These early political developments were intrinsically linked to the social and demographic changes that had occurred over centuries of colonization.

The historical foundations of Mauritian politics are, therefore, deeply intertwined with its colonial past and the waves of migration that shaped its population. From an uninhabited island visited by early sailors to a strategic colonial outpost built on the labor of enslaved and indentured people, Mauritius's journey has been one of transformation. The legacies of Dutch, French, and British rule, the painful history of slavery, and the mass arrival of indentured laborers all contributed to the complex social fabric and laid the groundwork for the political system that would emerge as the island moved towards independence.

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