

JAMAICA-The 'Dudus' Coke Affair: Lessons for Eastern Caribbean

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BRIDGETOWN, Barbados, CMC - Thursday, 27 May 2010: - 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.

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 Jamaican security forces and the organised criminal gangs of Golding's Constituency determined to protect their 'don'.

Unconfirmed reports said that as many as 60 people may have been killed, including a police officer. The gravity of the situation cannot be overstated, particularly since it has brought to the fore the deep links between the political directorate and the organised criminal elements of Jamaica.

Indeed, Golding would not have been Prime Minister of Jamaica today, had Coke not sanctioned his 'taking over' of the Garrison constituency of West Kingston, in place of former PM Edward Seaga, following Golding's re-entry into the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP).

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 Jamaica problem, we should all take careful note of similar trends in Caribbean politics. We have not yet seen the emergence of "garrison constituencies", but we have had too many examples of the criminalisation of the state, for us to be comfortable.

Thus since 2006, St. Lucia has witnessed: the emergence as Foreign Minister of a US ex-convict, ; the interference of the Executive arm in matters best left to the courts; cabinet cover-ups of criminal wrong doing by Ministers of Government; and evidence of a foreign power shaping foreign policy decisions through private inducements to individual parliamentarians.

In St. Vincent the dependence of some constituencies on the largesse of the ganja farmer, is well established. The shenanigans of the Bird family of Antigua have been well documented in the book "Caribbean Time Bomb" by Robert Coram and do not need repeating here.

In Dominica, several voices were raised in protest when Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit re-appointed Ambrose George to his 2010 Cabinet, against a background

where former Prime Minister Pierre Charles and Skerrit himself had both fired George from previous cabinets.

These incidents stand apart from the usual allegations of corruption and graft which have grown to monumental proportions in recent times. 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 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 that 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 the Barbados-based CBC TV's "The Peoples' Business" on Sunday May 23rd.

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 persons, 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.

Golding was willing to risk political death for a criminal, when he would be moved by self-preservation in far more noble and worthy causes. The first defence against US interference is principled domestic 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 Caribbean 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. Ultimately, therefore, the lesson from the 'Dudus' Coke affair is that we cannot leave the protection of our fragile democracy to the politicians.

The defence of our democracy must be the work of a truly independent judiciary, an honest and non-partisan media, a well educated and fearless intellectual class, and a committed and truly patriotic civil society that is not a slave to the political directorate.

In this regard the callers to the Peoples' Business who queried what appeared to be the "double standards" with which the courts treated the 'big man' on one hand and the small man with one spliff on the other, were not off the mark.

The many who claim that the judiciary should step in as the natural defenders of the democratic order in the face of the failure of the executive, should take note. The ordinary Caribbean person has lost confidence in the executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. It is this which has set the stage for the legitimization of criminality. There is a need for honesty and principled politics at every level of the political system.

We therefore need to take a fresh guard, and begin a new innings. Most importantly, Caribbean society must agree collectively on the value system by which it wants to be guided well into the next few generations.

Central to this value system must be a collective rejection of all manifestations of criminal behaviour. In particular, the society must agree that criminals should not hold public office of any kind. Every effort should be made to keep the political order free of the stench of criminality. We must all agree on these things and we must drill them into our children from birth.

The Jamaica situation, bad as it, 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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