

Report on Jamaica for CLS – January 2021

On 3 September 2020 Jamaica went to the polls and re-elected the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) led by Andrew Holness, winning 49 seats in the lower house against the opposition Peoples National Party's (PNP's) 14. Yet it was not the endorsement it seems with the JLP polling 6% less votes than in 2016, despite the electorate growing by 5%. However, the ongoing division in the opposition PNP following a divisive leadership contest in 2019 shrunk their vote by 29%. The JLP's two-thirds majority is a concern, enough for Holness after the election to warn his MPs, and himself, not to be arrogant.

The timing of the election and the permitted activities were controversial because of COVID-19, preceded as it was by a partial re-opening of the borders. The subsequent spike in cases was enough to delay the resumption of face-to-face classes in schools. That resumption is only just now beginning, and only in a minority of schools. Less than half the students have been effectively engaged in on-line learning because of lack of devices, lack of connectivity and the cost of data. Tablets have been provided to some students but for many, their reading level precludes much learning without face-to-face classes.

Having become much too reliant on tourism, Jamaica's economy has been hard-hit by COVID-19, with GDP is forecast to fall by 12-14% over the year. Yet enough locals were taking up hotel deals over the Christmas period for many to be surprisingly full. The fall-out has also been softened by a significant increase in remittances from the diaspora – up 31% for April to November.. Unemployment rose from 7.8% to 12.6% with 135,000 jobs lost in the second quarter (these figures do not in any way account for under-employment). The government did however put in place a limited income support programme for April to July, parts of which have been extended. This has helped to bolster overall demand, although the support has only amounted to an insufficient 1% of GDP.

To increase this stimulus without increasing debt levels, I have been suggesting using direct monetary financing to families and small businesses since inflation here, as elsewhere, has been subdued in recent years. After years of austerity, and putting debt reduction much too high on the agenda with a primary surplus at 7.5% of GDP, the much-touted 'stable platform for growth' has still not yielded results, with growth falling yet again towards zero even before COVID hit. The IMF is disingenuous – it says it is perplexed despite its austerity medicine having also failed elsewhere. Personally I wonder how employment was previously increasing despite no growth – it can only mean the new jobs were coming from the informal sector and paying even less than an already low national average.

The effect on people's lives has been considerable, with a September report showing 44% of Jamaican households experiencing food shortage due to loss of income. It is indeed ironic that earlier last year some large commercial farmers were complaining of surpluses since they had lost their hotel customers. The need for better internal marketing and small-farm support has once again been exposed. With a food import bill equal to that of oil, Jamaica needs an agricultural industry at least as much as tourism, mineral extraction and call centres.

The heavy rains in October and November reminded us that almost half of Jamaicans live on capture land for want of better alternatives, many on precarious river banks. Yet successive governments continue to steal monies from the National Housing Trust for debt servicing, J\$11.4 billion every year, monies that could go a far way to providing low-cost housing solutions. A new retroactive law had to be passed several years ago when this dubious practice first commenced.

Murders continues at high levels although only in some areas, much driven by gangs which are the unsurprising result of limited opportunity. Before the election, nearly half the island was under States of Emergency or designated 'Zones of Special Operation' (ZOSOs) which have a social-rebuilding component

though too small to be effective. The opposition PNP reluctantly goes along with this para-military approach because it has no better short-term option. Since the election, the Supreme Court upheld a complaint by five victims against their unlawful detention under State of Emergency powers- the government is appealing that ruling. The Holness administration also has weakened INDECOM which was set up in 2011 to investigate police killings, and denied it the prosecutorial powers. And just this week, the Minister overseeing crime has called for greater executive powers, perhaps jealous of Joe Biden. It is all about re-imposing states of emergency even though their net effect in the past has been to push crime from one area to the next.

Thankfully there is some push-back against government arrogance. The National Identification System (NIDS) legislation was thrown out earlier in 2020 after being deemed unconstitutional. It has now been reintroduced on a voluntary basis with finger-printing now the only bio-metric. Yet the J\$2bn cost remains. There is also push-back against further bauxite mining on the edge of the protected Cockpit Country, with its recently designated boundary still disputed by many. Farmers have been in the news recently complaining that the compensation and replacement farm land in mined areas has been an insult. The government has also been heavily criticised for over-ruling the National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA) regarding a limestone mining application along the north-coast tourism corridor in an eco-sensitive area – the company involved has unsavoury connections with the ruling party.

A further encroachment on democracy is signaled by the changes made to various parliamentary committees with most now no longer chaired by Opposition members. Perhaps worse is that the committees which previously had eight Government members to the Opposition's seven now have twelve Government members to the Opposition's three.

The economic opportunities of cannabis production, especially for the small farmers, are being stifled by an over-cautious bureaucratic approach by the government, despite the UN removing it from the dangerous drugs list. Unwilling to take the lead on this matter and challenge both the USA and the banks, Holness has also been criticized for meeting with Trump last year, along with certain other Caribbean leaders. Similar acquiescence was displayed with the sinking of a Jamaican fishing vessel by the USA under the Ship-Rider Agreement, which was wrongly suspected of carrying drugs. And acquiescence also to the UK with another 13 deportees having been accepted in December.

Government is not however the only problem. Some months ago the courts upheld a decision by a school to exclude a seven-year old girl because she wore 'dreadlocks' (tidy braids in fact) – the parents eventually won their appeal. As for abortion, there is currently discussion about decriminalizing it but the churches have issued strong statements against any such progress on women's rights despite an estimated 22,000 abortions still taking place here each year.

As regards the COVID-19 response, most people comply with the usual protocols to some extent. The curfews have met with more resistance especially from those operating cook-shops, bars and the like. Until the last few days at least, the spread had been limited to what the hospitals can manage, despite a few hotspots. But in the last three days, positive cases have risen dramatically to 200 then 300+ in a single day with a 15% positivity rate most from the 20-30 year-old age group. The cause may be the new strain of the virus combined with younger people partying more (or so says the government). There are now 4,074 active cases, 130 in hospital, 21 moderately ill and 17 in critical condition. No vaccine was expected before the end of April but this week we are told it may now be at the end of February. Cuba, India and China are now being considered as additional sources of vaccine. Jamaica has recorded over 16,000 COVID-19 cases and about 350 deaths to date. It is not clear as yet whether there will be any widespread resistance to taking the vaccine.

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