

Jamaica: Upcoming Local Government Elections

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As Jamaica gears up for its long overdue, local government elections on February 26, 2024, there are number of critical insights that I would like to share about the overall state of our democracy, based on interpretation and analysis of national poll ratings conducted by (Don Anderson Market Research Limited and Blue Dot), regional studies over the past decade and recent global reports on democracy.

The current efforts of the Jamaica Debates Commission must be highly commended for ensuring that citizens have the opportunity to listen to the policy proposals presented by the People's National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) as well as to ensure a vibrant, democracy at the level of local government and community development. However, the question that still lingers is to what extent will these national debates influence public opinion of the two major political parties, party leaders and voting behaviour especially given the fact that our dominant political culture is heavily predicated on tradition and clientelist attitudes of the two major political parties?

While the Don Anderson Market Research Limited and Blue Dot poll ratings display projections in differences and consistencies in patterns in voting behaviour and political participation, the most profound and consistent poll results from the two national polling agencies illustrate the top concerns of Jamaicans both at the national level and the local government level and these concerns range from rising cost of living, poverty, food insecurity, vulnerability to natural disasters, alarming crime and violence rates, high actual and perceived political corruption, social marginalization and lack of equitable access to social and economic opportunities including jobs, infrastructure and health care.

On the topic of corruption, we are quite aware that corruption significantly hampers social and economic development and is also a threat to national security. This is evident in the 2023 World Justice Project survey which reveals that corruption stifles fair access to opportunities and 78% of respondents in Jamaica believe that hiring, recruitment practices

and awarding of contracts in the public sector is based on friends or family ties to political parties rather than on merit and at the regional level, this rate stands at 81% among the 14 Caribbean countries surveyed. Additionally, 66% of respondents in Jamaica also believe that those working for political parties are corrupt. Regional studies such as the 2023 Americas Barometer notes that democracy in Latin American and the Caribbean is under duress whereby public attitudes and support for democracy is significantly lower than other regions of the world. The Latin American and Caribbean region underwent its 8th consecutive decline in support for democracy in 2023. In Jamaica, citizens' trust in elections is as low as 35% and in addition to this, only 18% of respondents believe that elections are crucial levers in advocating for and driving meaningful social changes.

Public dissatisfaction with the political status quo is becoming more glaring and prevalent. This is due to a combination of factors but primarily, there is pessimism with a lack of good governance and a lack of inclusive economic growth wherein development has not delivered widespread benefits for majority of our population. This is seen where although we have been ranked for high human development by the United Nations Development Programme with a score of 0.709 in 2021, there are still vast inequalities in income and wealth distribution and access to opportunities. One of the most intriguing emerging trends from the region that we should pay attention to as citizens and as political analysts and commentators is the fact that the 2023 Americas Barometer Report notes that younger generations in the Latin America and Caribbean region are increasingly interested in social change and show a higher support for democracy. This underscores the importance of youth development in strengthening democracy and reforms.

I end with the statements for our reflection, “broader national issues need to be localized, this is the central ethos of local government” and “political choices affect policy outcomes”.

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