

Notes of the 2nd Meeting of MSF National Conversation Working Group

6/21/2007

Ethnic Relations Commission

MSF National Conversation Working Group Meeting

**NOTES of the 2ND MEETING OF THE MSF
NATIONAL CONVERSATION WORKING GROUP
HELD AT GRAND COASTAL INN
LE RESOUVENNIR, EAST COAST DEMERARA
On 19th June, 2007**

Present were:

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| 1. Bishop Juan A. Edghill | - Chairman, ERC |
| 2. Pandit Ramkissoon Maharaj | - Commissioner, ERC |
| 3. Ms. Cheryl Sampson | - Commissioner, ERC |
| 4. Mr. John Willems- | - Commissioner, ERC |
| 5. Shaffeek Khan | - Commissioner, ERC |
| 6. Reverend Roy Thakurdial | - Substitute Commissioner, ERC |
| 7. Ms. Christine King | - Chief Executive Officer, ERC |
| 8. Ms. Tusankine English | - Public Relations Officer, ERC |

Members of the Working Group

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| 1. Mr. Fitz Duke | - Region # 1 |
| 2. Mr. Rakesh Ramsamooj | - Region #3 |
| 3. Mr. Beni Singh | - Region #4 |
| 4. Mr. Shabbir Ali | - Region #7 |
| 5. Mr. Richard Sinclair | - Region #8 |
| 6. Mr. Eugene Isaacs | - Region #9 |
| 7. Mr. Carlos Angel | - Region #10 |
| 8. Mr. Renis Morian | -Region #10 |
| 9. Mr. Hydar Ally | - People's Progressive Party /Civic (PPP/C) |
| 10. Mr. Joseph Hamilton | - People's National Congress /Reform-IG (PNC/R-1G) |
| 11. Mr. Everall Franklin | - GAP /ROAR |
| 12. Mr. Ishmail Muhammad | - The United Force (TUF) |
| 13. Mr. Trevor Williams | -Alliance For Change (AFC) |
| 14. Ms. Kamla Devi Ross | - Women Affairs Bureau |
| 15. Mr. Norman Mc Lean | - Private Sector |
| 16. Mr. Eon Andrews | - Trade Union Congress (TUC) |
| 17. Mr. Kyle Solomon | -Youth Constituency |
| 18. Mr. Lennox King | - Ethnic Based Organization |

GENERAL

The Chairman, Bishop Juan A. Edghill welcomed the Working Group to its second meeting and advised participants that over the two days the agenda will be:

1. A formal Working Group meeting during the first half of the first day and
2. Training in Advocacy sponsored by USAID/GDCCR and facilitated by Ms Bonita Harris for the remaining period.

He said that the main focus of discussion was to find a system of governance which would ensure ethnic harmony and security in Guyana.

The Chairman reminded members of the Working Group that they were asked to discuss this issue with their constituencies and should have come prepared to present a proposal.

He pointed out that the forum was not a decision making one, but rather to continue addressing issues that arose out of the MSF National Conversation. The group, he said, will be talking about what it wants, and hopefully arrive at a common point of understanding of working together for the realization of the goals of the MSF.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was formally called to order at 9:14 hrs by the Chairman who requested that a moment of silent reflection be observed. Thereafter, members of the working group were asked to introduce themselves and the organizations they represented.

Outlining the procedure of the discussion, the Chairman said that the Commission had agreed that the Working Group would be broken up into smaller groups with each of them comprising representatives of political parties, civil society and regional representatives. The groups were expected to discuss the issue of governance and thereafter, a leader from each group was to report the group's recommendations.

It was the opinion of the representative from the PPP/C, Mr. Hydar Ally that the procedure would not be effective since the only other political party representative present at the time, was from the United Force (TUF).

The Chairman advised that the plan was suggested because the Commission had expected all representatives to be on time. He added that the Commission was not directing but was facilitating the conversation.

After some exchange on the suggestion, it was agreed that there should be an open floor discussion instead

The Chairman highlighted several issues relative to governance, and disclosed that the Private Sector Commission had already been involved in exploring the area.

Mr. Norman McLean, Private Sector Representative informed the meeting that a number of issues had caught the attention of the Private Sector's Crime and Governance Sub Committee among which were the award of contracts, appointment of the Chancellor and Chief Justice and the voter registration process which he said were all governance issues that were considered sensitive by his organisation.

The Chairman advised that once the issues had been identified and discussed, recommendations that could be suggested to policy makers should follow. He then proceeded to encourage the expression of views from all participants around the table, beginning with the Representative from Region Nine (9), Mr. Eugene Isaacs.

Mr. Isaacs felt that since he was not present at the last meeting and not fully apprised about the topic for discussion, he could not give a regional perspective.

The Region Ten Representative, Mr. Renis Morian noted that from his constituency's perspective, institutions were not allowed to function outside of the political directorate. He gave examples of institutions in other countries such as the United States that are allowed to function independently. In response to the query on how institutions can function devoid of political influence, Mr. Morian suggested the adoption of models from other countries.

TUF representative, Mr. Ishmail Mohammed observed that enforcing of the law was a problem in Guyana. He said that laws were in place but they were not adhered to.

In summarizing, the Chairman noted the need for laws to be enforced, and for a judicial system that was not affected by political interference.

A SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE THAT PROVIDES ETHNIC SECURITY

In addressing this topic the Group agreed that professionals must be permitted to act free from political interference. The point was made that Government Ministers were expected to put forward policies while it was the responsibility of the professionals to implement them.

The Chairman emphasised the need for public education as it relates to the setting and execution of policies, since it was perceived that the system was not working because of political interference. He opined that there was need for some form of public information that clearly defined the role of politicians and the duty of professionals.

It was felt that there was no need to recommend new laws, but that it was necessary to ensure that the laws already established are made effective.

People's National Congress/Reform- One Guyana (PNC/R-1G)

PNC/R- 1G Representative, Mr. Joseph Hamilton sought to redirect the focus of the discussion by reminding the group what the topic was. He spoke about

- The recognition that the Westminster system inherited was not working.
- Ethnic groups in the country had major problems of security in various areas; and the perception that the present political system was not working.

Mr. Hamilton then suggested that the website guyanacaribbeanpolitics.com could be browsed for articles by various Guyanese and Caribbean writers on the topic of “governance”. He highlighted articles written by Eusi Kwayana, Kampta Karran, Charles Gittens, Clarence Ellis, Eric Phillips, Dr Prem Misir, Dr. Rupert Roopnaraine, ACDA and the PPP/C.

Mr. Hamilton stated that Guyana was not unique in trying to find ‘a system of governance which would ensure ethnic security’. He argued that all multi-ethnic countries have had to grapple with issues of power sharing, even those with the same ethnic group. He posited that once it was broken down into religion or language, we had to address inclusivity. He gave the example of Lebanon and its diverse religious composition with Jews, Christians and Muslim.

Mr. Hamilton in presenting a definition of power sharing said that it is:-

“Creating conditions for an executive government that includes all the groups whether ethnic, religious or linguistic”

Citing Germany as another example in support of his argument, Mr. Hamilton said that when there were elections in Germany, despite one (1) party gaining the majority of votes, there was an understanding of a coalition government.

Mr. McLean at that point enquired if Article 13 of Guyana’s Constitution made provision for such an arrangement. The PNC/R representative in response said that Article 13 was just a statement, and that there was need for movement beyond Article 13 to commit to a process. He added that much rhetoric was disseminated on this subject matter and it was his view that there needed to be concrete commitment on the issue of shared governance.

He then shared the PNC/R- 1G proposal which speaks to

- Changing the position of Executive President. He said in the alternative arrangement, the President will possess authority to intervene to resolve some of the political complications that might arise from time to time. According to him, the President will essentially function like a “political ombudsman”.

- Seeking to put this type of Government in place will not cause an abandonment of national elections, because it can only be determined who gains the most votes through the election process.
- The party that obtains the most votes will be eligible for the Prime Ministerial position.

The Chairman observed that this arrangement will necessitate some constitutional changes in terms of the procedure for appointing cabinet members and Ministers of government.

Copies of several documents on the topic done by the PNC/R- 1G were later submitted to the ERC

LABOUR UNIONS

In his contribution to the discussion, the Labour representative, Mr. Ian Andrews said that the Trade Union Congress (TUC) was concerned about:

- A volatile situation that seemed to be developing, that workers have been overworked and underpaid.
- There seemed to be an element of fear among the labour force. Workers were going to work without knowing what was going to happen, especially those working with expatriate companies or powerful companies with political connection. He noted that there was no substantial representation for workers in expatriate companies.

Mr. Andrews said that because of the action of some expatriate companies, the ILO and other international labour conventions were being violated. He added that the Termination of Employment and Severance Pay Act was riddled with discrimination and injustice and that the TUC was pressing for a review of this Act.

The Chairman supported the call for an environment in which fear was eliminated and for conditions of employment that provided security. He said that part of what was creating this fear was how various acts were being interpreted and used to the letter to the benefit of the employer. He then asked for suggestions for the creation of the kind of environment in which workers can feel a sense of security. Mr. Andrews suggested that the ERC should lobby for a sitting of Parliament to review the Termination and Severance Pay Act.

A question was asked about the power of the labour union, regardless of political affiliation.

It was felt that some of the problems faced by the TUC were as a result of the weakening of the labour movement. An example was illustrated regarding sugar workers. It was pointed out that regardless of how close GAWU seemed to be affiliated politically, it commanded power to the benefit of its workers.

Mr. McLean pointed out that whether or not there were new labour laws, there was still need for the exertion of power and unity within the labour movement to make sure that issues were resolved in the interest of workers.

PPP/C representative, Mr. Hydar Ally made reference to the dynamics of the TUC. He said that although GAWU was the largest trade union in Guyana, that union (GAWU) never held the leadership position of the TUC. He suggested a re-examination of the evolution of leadership in the Trade Union Congress.

In response, the labour representative stated that the process of election in the TUC was a democratic one.

GAP/ ROAR

The representative of GAP/ROAR, Mr. Everall Franklin, said that his party's position was that there was

- Need for the Regional System to be strengthened
- Need for a National Development Plan in order that each region could specialize in a development trust
- If the Regional system is allowed to work, the ethnic dilemma will be lessened

ETHNIC BASED ORGANISATIONS

Mr. Lennox King, representing Ethnic Based Organisations expressed concern about the same type of partisan politics existing even within the arrangement of power sharing. He said that there must be an evolution of power from the centre to the local community. It was his view that whatever form of governance was on the table for discussion, it had to be one of equity in which citizens could fully participate to their capacity. He suggested therefore that

- The evolution of power could begin with Local Government Elections.
- There was need for "decent" fiscal transfers to be given to municipalities to carry out services that cannot be acquired through rates and taxes paid by residents.

The Chairman in supporting the views shared said that rather than a change in the system of governance, there must also be a change in political culture.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIVE

Ms Kamla Devi Ross, representing women observed that

- There needed to be a mechanism in place for women in Parliament to represent issues affecting women as a special group.
- Women's representatives in Parliament voted against the nominations for a Women and Gender Equality Commission

Ms Cheryl Sampson, ERC Commissioner, in response explained that Parliament had sent out a list of nominees for the Women and Gender Equality Commission. She said that the entire process went through, but it was stalled because of disagreement over the names of persons recommended to serve on the Commission.

The point was made that the Group should not be swayed by the need for equity while ignoring competence. They were advised to avoid a pre-occupation with having equal representation of ethnic and religious groups or gender in institutions, lest the importance of competence is diminished.

ALLIANCE FOR CHANGE (AFC)

The AFC representative, Mr. Trevor Williams, stated that the Westminster system of governance has failed. He stressed the need for a system in which everyone felt that he/she had a contribution to make, and informed the gathering that the AFC was prepared to be part of continued discussion on that 'model'.

He suggested the implementation of the recommendations of the Discipline Services Commission.

The Chairman summarising the discussion stated that in order to have ethnic security, there must be inclusivity and that the independence and integrity of institutions must to be maintained.

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE

According to the Youth Representative, Mr. Kyle Solomon, youth advocated the strengthening of the Regional Democratic Councils as a mean of giving governance power to the people, and that Article 28:01 should be observed once RDCs were given certain authority.

People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C)

Mr. Hydar Ally, PPP/C representative giving his Party's position from "Towards Inclusive Governance in Guyana" stated that:

- The PPP was open to the discussion on a system of governance which would ensure ethnic security in Guyana, but a convincing effort by all stakeholders was a pre-requisite to continue this process towards inclusivity
- The PPP/C was open minded in its approach to shared governance as suggested by the Opposition
- People must be economically secure. He said that there was need to create an economy that will help the country to grow
- The PPP/C believed that all political parties needed to work together in trust and unity for the greater good of the country

After the presentation, the youth representative asked what had to be done to create the trust suggested by the PPP/C for the creation of a system of governance that ensures ethnic security.

In response, Mr. Ally said that harmony was essential to effect political agreement. He said also that decisions/agreements made at round table discussion must be carried out in all circumstances by the stakeholder. For him, this would create trust and eliminate suspicion.

Mr. Ally promised to submit a copy of the PPP/C document to ERC.

REGIONAL PRESENTATIONS

The following points were noted from presentations by representatives of the undermentioned Administrative Regions.

Region # 1

- Politicians needed to be more accountable to the people and refrain from the blame game
- There was a need to monitor expatriate companies setting up operations in the administrative regions
- The residents were asking for at least 50% participation in decision making in the region.

Region #3

- Policies must be agreed upon by all stakeholders before implementation.
- Not only government and men should be involved in Local Government business, everyone needed to be involved since everyone was affected.
- Policies must be agreed upon by all Parties.

Region #4

- There was a lack of interest in citizens' participation and there was need for a change.

Region #7

- Un-employment, lack of opportunities and cost of living were issues affecting the region.
- Need for interest at the grass root level.

Region #8

- The finances of the region were not distributed equally and this needed to be changed.
- There should be a decentralization of authority within the region.
- Re-energizing of people at the community level.

Region #9

- The need for proper legal mechanisms to ensure ethnic security.
- Need for checks and balances in the regions.

Region # 10

- Need for the liberalization of the media in Linden. Residents are forced to view one television station controlled by the Government.
- The workers were disillusioned because of little or no labour representation. Expatriate companies are not recognizing the rights of bauxite workers.

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Need for continued engagement on the issue of a system of governance to ensure ethnic security in Guyana
2. Manifestation of change in the political culture could be realised at local government elections.
3. There was need for the strengthening of the Regional Democratic System and active civil participation at the NDC level.
4. Fiscal transfers should be proportioned to each region based on a nationally accepted plan of development that would see each region specializing in a development thrust.
5. There was a perception of general malaise/ apathy at the grassroots level and the need for an activity to revitalize and re-invigorate grassroot participation so that citizens could ultimately get involved in managing their own affairs.

6. There were concerns expressed that Article 28:01 had not been working in the manner for which it was intended. As a consequence, government institutions and RDCs were not allowed to function in a manner that was free from political interference.
7. The recognition that there should be some sensitization in the media about the process of policy making- who was responsible for setting policies and for implementing them, and how the two co-ordinate to ensure that professionalism and integrity at the level of institutions are maintained.
8. If there was to be ethnic security, professionalism of institutions must not be compromised.
9. The creation of a new political culture that allowed for the evolution of power.
10. The need for conducive conditions or environment to allow for the participation or inclusion of all groups.
11. In creating a new political culture, efforts must be made to free the environment of fear and intimidation.
12. Ethnic security must be considered alongside economic security.

Tusankine English

Scribe