



**NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE**  
**JAMAICA TRIP REPORT**  
**April 11, 2002**

***Introduction***

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted a political assessment mission to Jamaica from March 3 to March 10, 2002. The assessment team, which included Neil Nevitte, political scientist at the University of Toronto and elections specialist; Melissa Estok, an expert on organizational development and election monitoring; Matt Dippell, NDI's Deputy Director for Latin America and Caribbean; and Fabiola Cordova, Program Assistant, met with civil society, business, political, religious, and international community leaders. The team also met with the Citizens Action for Free and Fair Elections (CAFFE) board, election operations team, and parish coordinators. The team's goal was to learn more about the political situation and the pre-electoral context in Jamaica, as well as assist CAFFE to develop strategies to observe the upcoming general elections.

***Election Environment***

The backdrop to this year's general elections is unprecedented in Jamaica, and both political parties have much at stake. The ruling People's National Party has been in office since 1989, and its 1997 victory constituted the first instance in which a Jamaican party achieved a third consecutive reelection. A forth-consecutive term for the PNP and a third reelection for Prime Minister Patterson would further consolidate this historic political feat. Prime Minister Patterson has also stated his readiness to retire after winning this election. The Jamaican Labour Party has been out of power for 13 years, and many believe this will be the last election for its founding leader, Edward Seaga, who wants to cap his political career with an electoral victory.

In contrast to past elections where one party had a clear lead, this year the parties are running neck-in-neck, with Seaga ahead in the polls by only 3.7 percent, slightly above the margin of error. Many Jamaicans cited elections in Trinidad and Tobago, where the Parliament was equally divided between parties, as a possible outcome. Public opinion analysts noted that only 3 percent of the electorate could swing the election. About 50 percent of the electorate, however, is still undecided.<sup>1</sup> The concern is that a large percentage of "undecided" may not cast ballots, due to both dissatisfaction with the traditional political parties and fear of violence during the campaign period and on election day.

***Concerns about the General Elections***

The two main concerns voiced by Jamaicans about the elections are the prospects for politically motivated violence and widespread voter apathy. Electoral violence has not been

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Stone Poll conducted in February 2002, and published in *The Jamaican Observer*.

uncommon in Jamaica, and it is to some degree expected. A major argument against a fixed election date is a longer campaign period and the potential for higher levels of violence. While there is concern about general violence, the environment of anxiety and fear is more intense in certain constituencies, such as “swing” and garrison constituencies.

In the last general election, at least 23 marginal or swing constituencies were won by 1,500 votes or less.<sup>2</sup> Some political party officials believe there may be as many as 30 swing constituencies, while election authorities have identified 16 “problematic” constituencies with hardcore support for both parties. It should be noted, however, that polling data shows that demographic shifts may change the number and location of swing constituencies. One challenge in these constituencies is confrontations between party supporters during the campaign period and on election day. An additional concern is that because the election will be so close, a small number of irregularities could affect the results of the elections, both at the constituency and national level. The Electoral Advisory Committee (EAC) and the Electoral Office of Jamaica (EOJ) have decided to concentrate their efforts in swing constituencies. They intend to place more experienced election workers in these areas, and have also asked local observers to concentrate their monitoring efforts in certain polling divisions within these constituencies. Additionally, both political parties intend to have party agents at all polling stations.

Garrison communities pose other challenges. A garrison constituency most commonly refers to a pocket of housing erected with public funds for carefully screened residents who constitute the core of a politician’s supporters.<sup>3</sup> These communities were established throughout Kingston between the 1960s and 1980s. There are now about 15 core garrison constituencies, representing the two main political parties. One analyst observed that “political parties created monsters that they can no longer control.” Since the outcome is predictable, it is assumed that these constituencies will not shift the election results, even if all electoral irregularities were remedied. In these constituencies, past elections have been marred by allegations of ballot box “stuffing” and voter intimidation before and on election day. Violence, not necessarily related to political factors, was also cited as a concern. Many Jamaicans argue that elections in these constituencies are over shortly after the polls open, as they often record a “100 percent” turnout, all voting for the same party. As a civil society leader stated, “even the deceased vote in garrison communities.” These constituencies present further security challenges to election workers and observers, who often do not dare to confront these irregularities. Electoral authorities have had problems recruiting election workers in these constituencies, and often only one party has agents at the polling stations.

The second important concern about the election refers to widespread voter apathy and dissatisfaction with political parties, their leaders and the general economic situation of the country. There is a general perception that regardless of the party in power, the political, economic and social situation will not change. Jamaica’s economy has suffered in recent years, and was said to dedicate more than half of its budget to servicing external debt, one of the highest rates in the world. A common observation was that political leadership has not changed within the major parties. In fact, many believe that a change in leadership in one of the two main

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<sup>2</sup> “Marginal Seats Targeted- EOJ to Focus Resources on Non-Garrison Constituencies,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, January 15, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Patterson Orlando, “The Roots of Conflict in Jamaica,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2001.

parties could swing the election completely. A recent poll conducted by the Stone Organization found that over 60 percent of voters believe Seaga should step down as JLP leader.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the PNP, Portia Simpson Miller heads the polls as the person favored to become prime minister after the next general election, some seven percentage points ahead of P. J. Patterson.<sup>5</sup>

Allegations of government corruption in the media have had a twofold effect on citizen perceptions of political parties. While these charges have affected PNP support, they have also intensified apathy and dissatisfaction with the political system. During meetings with civil society organizations, the NDI team was told that such scandals “turn people off” on politics in general.

Civil society and business leaders expressed also unease regarding the sources of funding for parties and their candidates. Jamaican law allocates minimal public funds for political parties, and individual candidates have to seek their own sources of financial support. Since the economic slowdown, party leaders complained the Jamaican private sector has been unable to match past contributions. Civic leaders expressed concern that this void could be filled by contributions from drug “dons.” Recommendations were also made for greater disclosure of party funders and reform of finance laws.

### ***Improvements in the Electoral System***

While the Jamaican electoral system confronts a number of challenges, there have been important improvements, such as the voter registration process, the recruitment of election workers, location of polling sites, the welcoming of national and international observers, and the planning for an Election Center to address potential campaign and election day conflicts. More importantly, these improvements have been initiated and implemented with the participation of the major political parties. All party and civil society leaders with whom NDI met expressed their satisfaction and support for these changes.

Changes to the voter registration process, a major source of controversy in the 1997 elections, are probably one of the most important achievements. Electoral authorities along with all political parties expressed their satisfaction with the current rolling registration procedures and inclusion of the parties in the process. Voter identification cards have been redone to include a photograph. In addition, “black books,” distributed at all polling stations to election workers, party agents and observers, will include a list of voters per constituency and also their photographs, thus preventing “double voting” and other electoral irregularities that plagued the 1997 elections. Every person registered has had his or her identity and residence confirmed, before the delivery of the voter identification card. Political parties have been actively involved throughout this process, in the registration and confirmation of voters, as well as the delivery of cards. According to the EOJ, almost 1.2 million people, 80 percent of the electorate, have registered to vote, and by January 2002 over 1 million cards had been delivered in person, leaving some 135,000 cards still to be distributed.

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<sup>4</sup> “Majority Say Seaga Should Go,” *The Jamaica Observer*, February 25, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> “Portia, Seaga in Dead Heat for PM Job,” *The Jamaica Observer*, February 26, 2002.

The second achievement has been the recruitment of new election workers. In past elections, polling place officials (“presiding officers”) were often accused of partisanship. As a result, the EOJ and EAC are replacing more than a third of their election workers, and have been leading an important recruitment drive. By the time of the NDI visit, the EOJ had already recruited 14,000 of the 18,000 volunteers needed on election day, and they believed they would not have a problem meeting their target. Electoral authorities reached out to nonprofit organizations and business groups and asked for a quota of volunteers. Names of potential polling place officials were submitted to political parties for review. According to election officials only 20 of 11,000 candidates were rejected. Election authorities noted that the most “serious challenge” is to train these pollworkers.

Further improvements were made in the placement of polling stations. The specific location of polling sites was a topic of discussion and protest through the 1997 elections, as some sites were thought to facilitate voting for one party or the other. The EOJ negotiated the location of all polling stations with officials from both major parties by October 2001. The process included both local and national party leaders to avoid reopening the negotiations after the nomination of candidates.

The EAC has invited 10 international organizations, including NDI, to observe the elections. This is a notable change since the 1997 election, when international and national organizations were not welcomed by all parties until later in the electoral process. Both parties are supportive of national and international observers. Observers are also being encouraged to monitor not only election day activities but the pre-electoral process and environment. Moreover, the EOJ expressed its openness to timely suggestions by international observers as the electoral process unfolds.

A final important initiative is the creation of an Election Center by the EOJ and the EAC. This Election Center will be presided over by a political ombudsman to be appointed in the following weeks, and include representatives from all major political parties, the commissioner of police, the military, national and international observers, as well as the media and civil society. The Center will be “activated” as soon as elections are called, and provide a platform for political dialogue, conflict prevention and election information. The Center will be equipped with computers, telephone lines and faxes, and facilitate a flow of information between parishes, the police headquarters and party operation centers, to allow for a rapid response should violence arise during the campaign period or election day. Political parties have responded positively to this initiative, and plan to participate in all activities developed at the Election Center.

### ***CAFFE’s Election Observation Efforts***

The NDI team found broad support for CAFFE’s monitoring efforts. The organization has earned a reputation for integrity and impartiality and its observation efforts are considered not only necessary but an integral part of the electoral process. Jamaican political and civic leaders noted that they had “confidence in CAFFE,” that the group was “well perceived” and that CAFFE “made a difference in the 1997 elections.” Others added that CAFFE’s role will be even more important this year in comparison to 1997 because of the closeness of the election. NDI

also found hopes that CAFFE would use its reservoir of support and national network of volunteers to strengthen democratic institutions between elections.

During NDI's visit, the assessment team met with CAFFE's board, operations committee and parish coordinators both to learn about their current organizational structure and offer alternative models for their observation effort. NDI discussed these models with CAFFE's board, and illustrated the different recruitment and training needs that would result from each approach. NDI presented new observation techniques that have evolved since the 1997 election. These include methods for collecting systematic qualitative and quantitative information on election day that enables monitoring groups to comment authoritatively on the voting and counting process, and project results on election day. At this point, CAFFE's board is in the process of making strategic decisions on the nature of its observation efforts. CAFFE intends to carry out a nationwide observation, and is examining ways to address the challenges of swing and garrison constituencies.

### *Conclusions*

It should be noted that Jamaicans expressed concerns about the health of democratic practices and institutions that went beyond the scope of the assessment team. Many individuals called for long-term political reforms. Some Jamaicans mentioned the need to reconsider fundamental aspects of Jamaica's Westminster-style parliamentary system, such as amending the constitution to allow direct election of national leaders with the aim of increasing accountability. Others expressed a preference for a fixed election date. More frequently, NDI's assessment team heard support for political reform and party renewal to address deep-seated voter apathy and politically motivated violence.