

Constitution Reform Forum TT

From maximum leader to maximum participation

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August 9, 2014

STOP THE DEBATE; THE PEOPLE MUST RESUME THE DISCUSSION

The CRF joins with other citizens and organizations in calling for the recall of the Constitution Amendment Bill 2014. In spite of all the rhetoric, this proposed Bill shows that the government has scant regard for the contributions of hundreds of citizens who participated in the consultation exercise conducted by the Constitution Reform Commission.

The CRF wishes to make the following observations about the three proposed amendments:

Several participants supported the proposal to set term limits on the office of the Prime Minister. However it is difficult to see how it would work in the absence of other fundamental changes. Such a provision is only possible if there were a separate election for the Prime Minister; and this has implications for the method used for electing the President and thereafter for matters pertaining to the powers of the Prime Minister vis-à-vis those of the President. One cannot simply introduce this measure in isolation of the other related ones. In any event, the main area of concern was not term limits but about how to ensure that there were checks and balances on the functioning of these high office holders.

The right of recall for MPs was certainly widely supported during the consultations. But again, it cannot be viewed in isolation. One just has to look at comments made in the wake of Mr. Anil Roberts' resignation as the MP for D'Abadie/O'Meara to get a sense of the confusion that can arise. Remarks by his constituents about his non-performance, followed by those of the newly appointed caretaker MP that she was going to continue the projects he had started, followed by those of the current mayor of the Arima Regional Corporation that they were going to ensure that the constituents were adequately served, all point to confusion about what really constitutes the role of the MP versus that of the local government body. Constitutional provisions on this matter would also have to be addressed if the right of recall is to be workable.

As many citizens have already said, the issue of the run-off election is a major cause for concern. Not only did it not come out of the consultations but the problem that it claims to be addressing did not surface either. Participants highlighted the effect of the rigid two-party system that divides the electorate along racial lines, and prevents the emergence of third-party interests. Some proposed the introduction of a proportional representation system either to replace the first-past-the-post or to be used alongside it in order to ensure the widest possible representation. That was what the people meant when they said let every vote count. So the perceived problem that the Prime Minister described about candidates who win with less than 50% of the votes and the need to have a run-off election to address that, seems to have come from nowhere. How did it get into a July 18, 2014 addendum?

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The CRF is convinced that if this Bill is passed, it will have the effect of undermining the ongoing efforts of the people to reform of the constitution in a manner that strengthens rather than weakens our democracy. We are therefore calling on citizens to convene our own forums so that meaningful discussion and debate can resume, unencumbered by narrow political interests.

Signed:

Olabisi Kuboni

Chair, CRF