4. The End of an Era

The Impact of Decolonisation on Franco-Mauritian Political Power

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Franco-Mauritians were still firmly established as the island’s hegemon; indeed, they had little opposition. In a way, they could be considered a de facto ruling elite since the beginning of the British period dominating, as they did, both the economic and the political sphere of the island even though the British held the ultimate political power. But as Scott argues, ‘power is intrinsically tied to the possibility of resistance, and the power of the elite must be seen as open to challenge from the resisting counteraction of its subalterns’ (Scott 2008: 38). The previous chapter analysed the onset of Indo-Mauritians gaining of momentum and in this chapter I will explain how in the course of the twentieth century resistance mounted, presenting a challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position and also reinforcing an awareness of ‘ethnic’ differences among Mauritians. Looking at what practices Franco-Mauritians had available to them to face this and other challenges will shed light on of how elites cope with adapting to new realities.

4.1 Mounting Pressure

In February 1936 the politician Dr. Maurice Curé, of gens de couleur origin, and some of his friends organised a public meeting at the Champ de Mars in Port Louis. This meeting marked the foundation of the Labour Party and was the final result of a process that had got underway in the preceding decades due to increasing attention being given to the situation of the labouring classes. This was not exclusively a Mauritian phenomenon but should be considered in the global context of the rise of socialism and the workers’ struggle. In Mauritius, the Labour Party was the first party completely devoted to the well-being and grievances of the labouring classes, regardless of these people’s ethnic background. According to Simmons, the party’s focus reflected the zeitgeist because at that time divisions were based on class differences rather than on ethnic differences (ethnic differences were not absent, yet they were largely ignored in the struggle of the working classes). The party’s leaders reflected this notion as well in terms of their make-up: they were a heterogeneous group of people, although initially the main leaders were gens de couleur. One of Curé’s aides was Pandit Sahadeo Rama, a follower of Gandhi and main link between the party and the Indian National Congress (Simmons 1982: 54, 58, 61).
At first the British colonial government ignored Curé’s primary concerns: constitutional reform and freedom to form trade unions. They considered Curé a ‘haphazard demagogue, windbag’ (Simmons 1982: 60) and an ‘agitator’ (Jackson 2001: 109). Hence, the British colonial government was not ready to accept demands for change from this front. This situation was not uncommon for colonial governments confronted with mounting pressure for more equal rights. In, for example, the Dutch colony of Batavia (present-day Indonesia) increasing emancipation of the native population and an undercurrent of nationalism were met with repression. More political representation for the natives was only sparingly granted and was always subject to Dutch control and supervision (Sutherland 1979: 87, 116). An important difference for the case presented here was that Mauritius had no indigenous population, however, and that Mauritian nationalism was largely absent from the demands for change.

In the years after its foundation, the Labour Party steadily increased its support among the working classes. As a consequence of this labourers and small planters became more and more politically involved. According to some colonial administrators, silencing the party’s leaders was the best way to keep Mauritius calm; repression, however, was never on the same scale as the Dutch repression of the nationalist movement in Indonesia. Some officials in London actually tended to be receptive to the grievances of the Mauritian labourers. They recognised the deplorable situation of the working classes and the unjustified monopoly on political power of the Franco-Mauritians (Simmons 1982: 62, 63) and this marked the beginning of the British colonial government’s changing attitude.

**Riots**

The emancipation of the working classes was fuelled by dissatisfaction with their situation. The global Great Depression of the 1930s had devastated the economy of the island, which was solely reliant on its sugar exports. The situation further deteriorated when the sugar mills reduced the buying price for a specific cane mainly produced by small planters. The sugar mills were still mainly in Franco-Mauritian hands, as was the control of the island’s scientific institutions – ‘access to sugar cane was a central grievance of protestors’ (Storey 1997: 142). In August 1937, this led to a number of strikes and riots pitting workers against their employers, the sugar plantations. Unlike the 1911 unrest, however, these were the first riots in Mauritian history where fatal casualties occurred. An angry mob of labourers from one of the island’s sugar estates attacked the factory which was owned by an economically powerful Hindu family (an exception to the general rule). The staff of the estate where the riots broke out were terrified when the labourers advanced and a number of them opened fire on the crowd, killing four labourers. Later
that same month riots caused the killing of another labourer, bringing the total of fatal casualties to five. These riots are considered a turning point in Mauritian history: the British colonial government could not ignore the grievances of the working classes any more and as a result changes were made. ‘[T]he Mauritian government began to incorporate non-elite groups within the structures of the state, to guarantee the peace’. Furthermore, ‘[t]he state and the elite learned a paradoxical lesson: that they could distribute sugar cane varieties, the lynchpins of the economy, as a way to quell social unrest’ (Storey 1997: 149, 152, 153). In other colonies, this was a time of labour disturbances as well, these generally being fuelled by inadequate colonial policies, economic depression (Simmons 1982: 64-68; Sutherland 1979: 120) and the unequal distribution of sugar cane varieties (Storey 1997: 153).

Second World War

Directly following these economically difficult years another major crisis in global history presented itself: the Second World War. Mauritius was not a battleground during the war but it was certainly affected in other ways. The war led to further economic hardship for the labourers, small planters and, to a lesser extent, the Franco-Mauritian elite.

A number of Mauritians served in the British army. They served to protect the island but also fought on fronts elsewhere in the world. A few, predominantly Franco-Mauritians, served in the Free French Forces as well. Supporting the Allied forces was, however, not a foregone conclusion for the Franco-Mauritians – a number of them supported the Vichy-regime and the Dodo Club, an important club in Franco-Mauritian socio-cultural life (as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six), was allegedly a pro-Vichy bastion. This caused frictions not only within the Franco-Mauritian community but also between Franco-Mauritians and the British; these frictions, however, never led to any substantial problems (Jackson 2001: 12, 172). Retrospectively, these frictions tended to be downplayed. ‘The division between Vichy and the Gaulle supporters was not that big or important’, said one Franco-Mauritian amateur historian. According to him, Marshal Pétain was seen as a traitor, something, he argued, ‘proved by the fact that many Franco-Mauritians fought for the French army and the British RAF – owing to their bilingualism the Franco-Mauritians were involved in special operations as well.’

The fact that many Mauritians served in the British army did not bring Mauritians of different social backgrounds closer together. Franco-Mauritian social and economic dominance was translated into the way people were incorporated into the army ranks and reflected the racial boundaries on the island: Franco-Mauritians served predominantly in commanding positions, while other communities mainly occupied lower ranking functions (Jackson 2001: 112).

Moreover, in the case of certain military units of equal rank Mauritians were racially segregated: some solely contained Franco-Mauritians, while others were staffed by gens de couleur (Sornay 1950: 252). Non-white Mauritians complained about the colour bar which had been banned more than a century ago but which was reintroduced in the army. In actual fact, however, numerous Franco-Mauritians were against arming other Mauritians in the first place. They had the feeling that it was dangerous to give the non-white population military training and that non-whites would never make good soldiers. The British government admitted the existence of racial segregation in the army but denied encouraging it. The Governor claimed that the races created the ‘divisions’ themselves and that, certainly in a time of war, it would not be sensible to conduct ‘social experiments’ in military units (Jackson 2001: 110-113).

Aftermath

Notwithstanding the war activities, the deplorable situation of the labourers received a fair deal of attention during the war. When wartime inflation and food shortages led to small-scale riots in 1943, this was picked up by the British press in publications such as The Economist. They denounced the harsh treatment of the labourers and the attitude of the British colonial government and Franco-Mauritians, who could no longer brush the issue under the carpet. The Colonial government did, however, get away with exiling and detaining the most prominent Labour Party leaders during the war (Jackson 2001: 152-155).

After the Second World War, the general course of events became influenced by the (new) ‘anti-colonial’ superpowers, the birth of the United Nations and a significant shift in the metropolitan view of empire. Economic hardship further increased when cyclones devastated the island at the beginning of 1945, leading to a 30 percent drop in the output of the sugar industry (Jackson 2001: 9, 152-155, 177). The 1937 riots, the emancipation of the labourers and the Second World War and its direct aftermath were, thus, to cause a radical shift in the island’s political landscape. Until then the Franco-Mauritians had successfully defended and maintained their elite position. Prolongation of this situation had been facilitated by the structure of colonial society and, as a consequence of this structure, the support and close co-operation existing between the British and Franco-Mauritians. The Franco-Mauritians were, notwithstanding, the source of occasional resistance to the British, ‘an effective collaborative elite through whom the British ruled the island from their takeover in 1810 until the postwar period’ (Jackson 2001: 171). The British shift in their handling of colonial affairs, however, was to have sweeping consequences.
4.2 Shifting Power

The developments of the 1930s and 1940s led to a situation that the Franco-Mauritians had not experienced before. They not only had to deal with the British colonial government but also with Indo-Mauritian and, to a lesser extent, *gens de couleur* politicians campaigning for the emancipation of the masses. In 1945 the drafting of a new constitution was suggested, an issue which was heavily debated in the columns of *Le Cernéen*. However, the new constitution-drafting process did not have the outcome that *Le Cernéen* and the Franco-Mauritians had hoped for. Under mounting pressure from non-white Mauritians, especially the Indo-Mauritians, the British drafted this new constitution in 1947.

The Franco-Mauritians were furious with the British because, contrary to in the past, the British colonial administration virtually ignored their suggestions for the new constitution. This new policy stemmed from the fact that the British were now of the opinion that, for the well-being of the colony, the working classes and counter-elites should be given a voice. The Franco-Mauritians knew that a radical change in suffrage would undermine their political power and increase the political power of the Indo-Mauritians (something that they had been afraid of from the end of the nineteenth century onwards). Franco-Mauritians’ practice of lobbying and using their political influence proved insufficient to protect their political position at this time. The changing attitude of the British resulted in a clear defeat for the Franco-Mauritians and a victory for the Indo-Mauritians. The new constitution substantially increased suffrage because it gave the right to vote to everyone above twenty-one years old who could pass a simple comprehension test in one of the specified languages of the country: English, French, Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Chinese (in the case of Mauritius Hakka) and the Creole patois (*Le Cernéen* 26 February 1948). The result was an increase in the electorate from 11,714 to 71,782 (*Le Cernéen* 2 April 1948). The 1948 elections, the first under the new constitution, therefore, marked the collapse of almost 150 years of Franco-Mauritian hegemony. They were now no longer a so-called ‘ruling class’ since their community ceased to have the almost exclusive right to dominate the most important spheres of Mauritian society. This led to functional elites, i.e. distinct political and economic elites, because Franco-Mauritians no longer had unlimited access to resources that could be mobilised for political power.

Only one Franco-Mauritian, Jules Koenig, who had never been part of the Franco-Mauritian sugar oligarchy, was elected. The Mauritian constitution, however, required that the government nominate the Legislative Council members. Here the historic ties between the Franco-Mauritians and the British helped them: the colonial government nominated a substantial number of Franco-Mauritians even though none of them had supported the new constitution.
Despite this, the Franco-Mauritians had to face a new political reality and to look for other means of securing political influence. The Franco-Mauritians involved in the sugar industry started to back Jules Koenig via *Le Cernéen*. This clearly represented an adaptation to the new circumstances and appears to have been motivated by Koenig’s ethnic background – an indication of the increasingly self-identification of the Franco-Mauritian elite as an ethnic group. Before the war Koenig had been considered a traitor and Bolshevist by the more conservative Franco-Mauritians and *Le Cernéen*. He had often defended the cause of the working classes, even though he did not support universal suffrage. According to Koenig, universal suffrage had dangers which could negatively affect the working classes themselves. He also feared moves among the Indo-Mauritians to team up with Indian nationalists (Boudet 2004: 122; North-Coombes 2000: 171; Simmons 1982: 100, 101, 107).

**Ethnic Politics**

Franco-Mauritian resistance appeared in the form of a rearguard action because universal suffrage was granted, against their wishes, in 1959. This initiated the turbulent 1960s which had, as its main issue, the question of independence. On one side were to be found most of the Franco-Mauritians, who opposed the idea of independence. They generally teamed up with the *gens de couleur* and the Creoles – hence creating an association between the descendants of the slave-masters and the descendants of the slaves. On the other side were, predominantly, the Indo-Mauritians. Initially, this group mainly consisted of Hindus. As a result of a legislative process which had been set in motion some decades before, Indo-Mauritians were officially classified in two different groups, Hindus and Muslims, from 1962 onwards (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2007: 124).

The Hindus had the mass of people on their side but, and of equal importance, by now a Hindu elite had been firmly established as well. This elite was a less cohesive group compared to the Franco-Mauritians: it had a shorter history as an elite; caste and religious differences prevented widespread intermarriage; and a much larger pool of potential elite members, the Hindu community, made difficult the consolidation of an interconnected elite (as had happened in the early days of the island’s white elite). There were just too many members for too few political positions to prevent competition, even though there also appeared to be a certain level of solidarity based on a shared (ethnic) background. The members of this Hindu elite were, typically, descendants of the overseers and job-contractors; in the late nineteenth century they had been the first to move socially upwards. Their elevated status made it possible for them to
send their children to school and over time an educated class of Indo-Mauritians had appeared; this group was now reaping the fruits of its progression up the ranks.

Many of the newly emerged Hindu elite had joined the ranks of the Labour Party. Gradually they became a dominant factor in the party which they used as a political vehicle to connect with the Hindu masses. What had begun as a party promoting the interests of all labourers was increasingly considered a party favouring the interests of the Hindu masses. This fostered the growth of ethnic politics, in the Mauritian context predominantly defined as ‘communal politics’. According to Simmons the shifting balance of power, power which until the 1948 elections had been more or less stable in the hands of the Franco-Mauritians, was of specific influence in this process (Simmons 1982: 157).

As a consequence of losing political power the Franco-Mauritians increasingly considered the Hindus as their main enemy. This was, for example, reflected in the slogan Péril Hindou, coined by the Franco-Mauritian editor-in-chief of Le Cernéen, Noël Marrier d’Unienville, in the early 1950s (Boudet 2005: 38). Jules Koenig also campaigned against the ‘Indianisation’ of Mauritius – he supported the interpretation that India wanted to annex Mauritius (Selvon 2005: 399). The Hindu elite’s domination of the Labour Party contributed to the existence of increasing hostility experienced along ethnic lines. Even though the Labour Party played the ethnic card less openly – in principle they supported the cause of all labourers – than Le Cernéen, support on the basis of ethnicity was to their advantage because it mobilised support among the majority of Hindus. The Labour Party did not really need to lower itself by using ethnic rhetoric, though: the party’s politicians only had to counter-attack the ethnically motivated attacks of their opponents (as is shown by the example of Le Cernéen in the final battle over independence) to come out on top.

Deciding Independence

As one of the oldest French-language newspapers in the world, Le Cernéen, founded in 1832, was from its inception unconditionally linked to the Franco-Mauritian community and the sugar industry’s interests. Its founder, Adrien d’Epinay, was after all the most prominent anti-abolitionist in the British and Franco-Mauritian slave-masters’ struggle to resist the abolition of slavery. Thereafter, defending the Franco-Mauritians and the sugar industry’s interests remained at the core of Le Cernéen’s existence – the perception was that when the upper-echelon of the sugar industry disliked a government decision Le Cernéen, ‘fréquent porte-parole de l’industrie sucrière’, attacked the government (Le Mauricien, 15 October 1976).

27 Translation: ‘frequent mouthpiece of the sugar industry’. 

99
In the process of the growing political control of the Hindus, *Le Cernéen* played a role illustrative of the position in which the Franco-Mauritian community found itself. When the question of independence presented itself, the newspaper was used by scaremongers to mobilise most of the Franco-Mauritians and other minorities, like the Creoles, Sino-Mauritians and Muslims, as part of its opposition to independence (L’Estrac 2005: 251). The newspaper proclaimed the Labour Party and its leader Seewoosagur Ramgoolam to be its main enemies. According to Simmons, it was not only Ramgoolam’s own political abilities but also *Le Cernéen’s* campaign that assured him the leadership of the party. Cynically, she remarks, ‘a goal just about the opposite of the one the paper had set for itself’ (Simmons 1982: 113).

**Concocting Alliances**

The new Franco-Mauritian strategy for establishing alliances with other ethnic groups, propagated by *Le Cernéen*, proved effective. The renowned writer V.S. Naipaul, who visited Mauritius in the 1960s at the invitation of Ramgoolam, writes, ‘[t]he coloureds [i.e. the *gens de couleur*], following the white example, became anti-Indian. Then the Creoles (blacks) also fell for that. The main agent for that change was [Gaëtan] Duval. That is the importance, the malefic importance of Duval; bringing over the blacks on to the sides of the whites’ (Naipaul 1972: 283). The Creoles’ choosing of an alliance with the Franco-Mauritians had a similar explanation to that for the *gens de couleur’s* support for the Mouvement Rétrocessioniste in the early 1920s: they feared being pushed out of their jobs by upwardly mobile Indo-Mauritians. Many Creoles most likely also regarded the Franco-Mauritians as natural authority; according to Rosabelle Boswell, among Creoles, emulation of and ‘admiration’ for white families still exist, relics of colonisation and of the impact the dominant value system and its practices had on the colonised (Boswell 2006: 51).

The Creole Duval encouraged the fears of the Creoles and of others. He had taken over the *Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate* (PMSD), the main party opposing independence. This party had been founded by Jules Koenig and was considered a Franco-Mauritian stronghold. Koenig, however, was aging and the party needed a larger support-base. With the energetic and imaginative personality of Duval, the PMSD managed, as Naipaul remarked, to rally many Creoles behind its campaign. Duval was considered to be the personification of the coalition of Creole and Franco-Mauritian interests, as is remarked on by Simmons: ‘[i]n 1963 he was content with his new title “King of the Creoles,” and with an allegedly handsome salary supplied by the sugar estates’ (Simmons 1982: 157). Duval, together with *Le Cernéen’s* Noël Marrier d’Unienville, was the driving force behind the denouncing of the Labour Party’s demands for independence.
Driven by the coalition between Franco-Mauritians, Creoles and other small communities, *Le Cernéen* dedicated many of its columns to attacking Hindu politicians. Its journalists boldly argued that the electorate would vote against independence (*Le Cernéen*, 1 July 1967). Initially, this proved an effective strategy because many ordinary Mauritians also feared ‘Hindu domination’. This was certainly to the advantage of the Franco-Mauritians: on the basis of their small numbers they could never make a difference in electoral terms. Yet the coalition seems not to have been completely ‘orchestrated’ by Franco-Mauritians. There was a genuine fear among other communities, specifically among *gens de couleur* and Creoles, that in an independent nation dominated by Hindus they would lose their positions in the state apparatus – a substantial number of them, doubting the outcome, had actually already emigrated in the years before independence, predominantly to Australia and Europe (Dinan 1985).

Through its systematic campaign in favour of the anti-independence coalition, *Le Cernéen* hoped to aggravate the population’s feelings of anxiety and insecurity. It accused the Independence Party (a political alliance which was dominated by the Labour Party) of being ‘racist’ and of ‘insulting the Creoles’ (*Le Cernéen*, 4 July 1967; 22 July 1967). *Le Cernéen* compared the alleged racism of the Labour Party to race riots in Detroit in the United States (*Le Cernéen*, 25 July 1967), a clear reminder of what it thought could happen should the Independence Party win. Moreover, in order to mobilise support behind the PMSD *Le Cernéen* also used graphics to depict the situation. Picture 4.1 shows Mauritius balancing on the edge of the abyss. The Independence Party is trying to pull it into the abyss, where the Grim Reaper awaits the Mauritians. Conversely, the three cockerels, symbol for the PMSD, are trying to save Mauritius, where sunshine and the tree of plenty await the Mauritians.
**A Narrow Victory**

The question of independence finally culminated in the decisive 1967 elections. These turned out to be a close call between supporters and opponents of independence: the pro-independence block won but received only 54.82 percent of the votes (*Le Cernien*, 9 August 1967). This figure corresponded closely to the percentage of Hindus, although it would be wrong to simply equate the supporters of the pro-independence movement with the Hindu community. In the end, for example, Ramgoolam did manage to gain the support of a Muslim political party. The election
results, however, show how many Mauritians had been drawn into the anti-independence camp, apparently not having much trust in an independent nation. They feared Hindu domination and the deterioration of the economy without the help of the UK. This demonstrates how Le Cernéen and the PMSD had managed to mobilise large numbers of people behind their anti-independence programme even though the direct participation of Franco-Mauritians as politicians was very limited. In the 1967 elections they numbered only eight out of a total of 139 candidates; these eight were all standing for the PMSD (Le Cernéen, 11 and 13 July 1967). And since the slender majority of the 139 candidates belonged to the pro-independence alliance, Le Cernéen’s and many Franco-Mauritians’ most dreaded outcome became a reality: in 1968, Mauritius was granted independence under the leadership of its first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam.

4.3 An Independent Nation

The issue of independence and its eventual outcome pushed the island into a state of amplified ethnic divisions. Initially inspired by the actions of individuals such as Noël Marrier d’Unienville, with his Péril Hindou, Jules Koenig, Gaëtan Duval and Hindu politicians dominating the Labour Party, these divisions gradually became more salient, and determining many facets of everyday life. It thus became a ‘structural’ aspect of Mauritian society, redefining socio-political and ethnic relations. In the final months before independence, this situation had led to the first ethnic riots in Mauritius resulting in numerous casualties (Simmons 1982: 160, 186) – though Franco-Mauritians had not been the target in the riots, despite their active role in the political campaign. The riots mainly occurred in the Port Louis region, where no Franco-Mauritians resided. The riots were also not only politically related; they reflected a feud between semi-criminal gangs of Muslims and Creoles (Eriksen 1998: 151). Apart from the ethnic riots, the exacerbation of ethnic differences led to the institutionalisation of ethnicity in Mauritian politics.

In the years after independence, the Best Loser System was incorporated into the constitution. This system guaranteed parliamentary representation for the smaller ethnic communities via a complex weighting system based on figures relating to the official ethnic classifications. However, the official ethnic classification did not, in fact, reflect the island’s daily reality. Franco-Mauritians, for example, were grouped together with the Creoles and all other Mauritians who did not belong to the Hindu, Muslim and Chinese categories, under the heading ‘General Population’. The category ‘Hindu’ also grouped everyone of Hindu denomination together and ignored differences between Mauritians of southern Indian origin, such as the Tamils, and of northern Indian origin – the latter being the majority. For this reason the Best Loser System has frequently been criticised. But it has also been criticised because it reproduces a
political system with a strong focus on ethnicity. Every politician has to indicate his/her ‘ethnicity’ on the ballot paper and thus every politician’s ethnicity is officially known to the electorate. Subsequently, ethnic background becomes an issue in the electoral campaigns. For example, political parties list members with ethnic backgrounds representing the constituencies’ ethnic composition. The Best Loser System does also, however, have its supporters. They argue that it maintains political stability. Ethnic groups who would otherwise not be in parliament are represented and thus ethnic conflict on the island is avoided (Le Mauricien, 15 May 2008). However, the real impact on decision making of this system is limited: the allocated Best Loser seats number only eight out of a total of seventy parliamentary seats (Salverda 2002: 61-64). Moreover, these representatives are seldom awarded executive power, i.e. cabinet seats (Wake Carroll and Carroll 2000: 136).  

**Ironing Out the Tensions**

That the ethnic tensions did not further worsen after independence, quickly calming down in fact, is often credited to the first prime minister, Ramgoolam, and his Labour Party. They were able to identify areas of common interest with opponents such as the Franco-Mauritians; the economic well-being of the island, in particular, was of intense concern to both parties. The Labour Party also included a number of very wealthy traders and landowners whose economic interests directly coincided with those of the Franco-Mauritians. Besides, as Smith-Simmons argues, ‘[h]owever distasteful Ramgoolam may have been to the Creoles and the Franco-Mauritians, almost all of them knew someone who knew and thought well of him. This interdependence has helped the Franco-Mauritian community to relinquish peacefully its position of dominance to the Indians, the largest community; in turn, the Franco-Mauritians rely on the Indians for the preservation of civil order and for the labor necessary to maintain the sugar estates’ (Simmons 1982: 200).

The Franco-Mauritian Nicolas de Boullencourt, who had joined the PMSD in 1965, confirmed this attitude. He said, ‘[t]here wasn’t a lot of animosity after Mauritius was declared independent. I have friends in the Labour Party, which is like in the UK: we fight in parliament, but we’re on equal terms after politics.’ Furthermore, de Boullencourt argued that the PMSD was not actually against independence. They had just wanted to wait until the UK had joined the European Common Market, so that Mauritius could gain independence within this economic

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28 Around the 2008 celebration of forty years of independence, the Prime Minister and son of Mauritius’ first prime minister, Navin Ramgoolam, suggested that it was about time that everyone called themselves Mauritian (Le Mauricien, 13 March 2008) – an indirect reference to abolishing communal representation (L’Express, 9 March 2008). Whether or not this results in the abolition of the Best Loser System remains to be seen.

union. The only difference, according to him, was that the Labour Party wanted independence at that particular moment. Contrary to these retrospective arguments, however, the whole preamble to independence shows that the PMSD, in reality, rallied strongly against independence without expressing the desire to become independent at a later moment in time.

A New Reality

As Dogan and Higley have noted, ‘crisis often occurs when territories achieve national independence’ (Dogan and Higley 1998: 8). And the direction of change from a colonial dependency of the British Empire to an independent democratic nation had arguably been a crisis for the Franco-Mauritians: these events had gradually deprived them of their political power. Compared to, for example, the communist transition to the market economy, it was in a way more difficult for the Franco-Mauritians to adapt to the new reality: they stood out because of their skin colour which made it difficult to take on new roles. Moreover, a new role would imply their opposition to their own economic resources and privileges.

Franco-Mauritian Migration

In the transition to independence, Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians also left the island, as the British and many whites in other former colonies had done before them. Creoles and gens de couleur predominantly migrated to Australia and in smaller numbers to Europe. With reason they feared for their jobs in the public sector because the Hindus had, apart from taking control of the political domain, entered en masse into the public sector. Consequently, right up to the present day there is a widespread perception that other communities have difficulties entering the public sector. According to a retired Mauritian journalist, ‘you have the [state bureaucracy] in which the Asian communities have an advantage over the other communities.’

It is to be noted, however, that the Hindus were never a unified block, something which, as previously suggested, also affects elite formation. Mauritius’ largest political parties may all be dominated by Hindus or have at least a strong input coming from Hindus, however, these parties fiercely compete over the support of the electorate amongst themselves, implying that the Hindus are competing with each other. Besides, like Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam’s Labour Party, these parties have never been exclusively Hindu: all contain politicians with different ethnic backgrounds, such as Creole, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian and, occasionally, Franco-Mauritian.

The emigration of Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians was not only initiated by fear of Hindu domination, declining political power and anxiety over the economic position. In the final decades of the British period, the population had increased tremendously due to, amongst

other things the eradication of malaria around 1949. In the period from 1901 to 1931 the population had been more or less stable, at just under 400,000, and then it increased significantly. Many Mauritians started to look for greener pastures particularly in Australia, Europe and Canada. Monique Dinan estimates that 66,415 persons emigrated (officially and unofficially) in the period 1961-1982; of these a small number, 1,630 approximately, went to South Africa (Dinan 1985: 21) – these latter predominantly being Franco-Mauritians.

So numerous Franco-Mauritians emigrated to South Africa, in particular to Natal on the east coast. This represented a migration pattern which, as Boudet (2004) has thoroughly shown, already had a history dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. Fear over independence simply encouraged much larger numbers of Franco-Mauritians to depart for South Africa. Franco-Mauritians’ choice of South Africa was related to its geographic proximity, a similar climate and the presence of the sugar industry amongst other reasons. Boudet argues that until the end of the Apartheid regime, the existence of a political system which reproduced the conditions for white dominance was an important reason to choose South Africa as a migration destination (Boudet 2004).

With respect to the consolidation of their elite position, the migration patterns of the Franco-Mauritians are important. In general, the Franco-Mauritians who migrated to South Africa did not belong to the wealthiest group of Franco-Mauritians, those who most often controlled the island’s most important economic resources. Historically, the ‘poorer’ Franco-Mauritians had been those more inclined to migrate. Or, as a Franco-Mauritian born in Durban, South Africa, said, ‘my father at the age of thirty had reached his top. He was working for a sugar estate as an employee and all the higher jobs [in the sugar industry] were divided among families owning the estates. Thus, in 1939, my father, who did not belong to the wealthiest families but had the ambition to make a career, decided to leave for South Africa with my mom and eldest brother.’ The transition of Mauritius into an independent nation did not significantly change this pattern: while the Franco-Mauritians may have been deprived of much of their political power, they still controlled the sugar industry and owned much of the land. The wealthy Franco-Mauritians continued to have substantial assets and economic resources to look after. Other Franco-Mauritians also stayed and were sometimes able to buy the property of departing Franco-Mauritians for a bargain price. They just had to find their place in the new reality.

**Facing Reality**

One frequently heard argument is that ‘a deal was struck’ at independence: ‘[t]he local capitalists who chose to remain in Mauritius (at least half) accepted an implicit bargain in the early 1970s.

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They yielded their political dominance and accepted some redistribution from growth in exchange for the legitimacy that modest social-democracy would generate – provided social reform excluded exorbitant taxes or asset redistribution’ (Sandbrook 2007: 133, 134). Despite this claim, a closer look at different sources suggests that Franco-Mauritians did gradually come to an end of their political role and did not strike a deal.

The first independent government was led by many of the politicians *Le Cerniéen*, the Franco-Mauritians and Duval had fiercely attacked in the run-up to independence. The two sides did not become joint collaborators overnight, even though the issue of independence soon became irrelevant. Scaremongering about a Mauritius dominated by Hindus stopped appearing in the columns of *Le Cerniéen*, even though the newspaper continued attacking its opponents. *Le Cerniéen*’s new strategy for depicting its opponents came to be more and more in line with depictions of the two primary global opponents, the democratic and capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union. A preference for the anti-communist block was not completely new to the newspaper, since during the preceding decades it had already taken a stand in this respect by referring to the alleged communist preferences of its opponents. As has been mentioned before, the Franco-Mauritian politician Jules Koenig was also accused of communist sympathies in his early career. Nor was this something specific to Mauritius; branding opponents as communists was, according to Max Gluckman, a habit not uncommon among other ‘whites’ in Africa: ‘These events provoke violent reactions from the White group and, without apparent basis but in line with modern witchcraft-thought, the immediate accusation without enquiry that they are due to Communist propaganda’ (Gluckman 1958: 17). The Apartheid regime in South Africa also tried to unite the entire white community under the pretext of a ‘total onslaught’ by communist forces (Handley 2008: 50). And Ian Smith, the last prime minister of Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), argued that his opposition to the Black Nationalist movement, which emerged in the early 1960s, was related to the movement’s communist ideology and not its members’ skin-colour (Smith 2001).

*Le Cerniéen* considered independence a good moment to revive its former positioning and aligned itself with the US. These were the heydays of the Cold War when the spheres of influence of the two superpowers reached well into Africa and the Indian Ocean. The Franco-Mauritian businessman Jacques Gougeard clarified the actual influence the Russians had on life in Mauritius. He said, ‘Ramgoolam senior was for most times a reasonable prime minister. Only during the periods that Russian [officials] visited Mauritius he got a bit tougher [on Franco-Mauritians and their businesses].’ Jacques Gougeard’s comment is, however, a retrospective comment, even if his views may be closer to reality than to how *Le Cerniéen* represented it at the

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time. The newspaper perceived communism to be its main adversary and frequently associated itself with Apartheid South Africa, which was the US’ most loyal partner in Africa (*Le Cernéen*, 1 April 1968). In many of the former colonies the established (white) elites feared - probably rightly so - that communist and also socialist tendencies would deprive them of their privileges. But fiercely opposing communism also helped to assure the support of the US. The US was more than willing to support anti-communists around the world that even being a democracy was not a requirement, as proven by the South African case. It is not entirely clear what the US involvement in Mauritius was, but most likely it would prevent the Mauritian government from implementing policies that would go too much against its free market ideology. US support, thus, facilitated the protection of (Franco-Mauritian) private property. At home *Le Cernéen* criticised relationships with opposing Mauritian politicians and associated these with African leaders with doubtful political credentials. For example, in the aftermath of the raid of Israeli soldiers on Entebbe’s airport to free a number of hostages, *Le Cernéen’s* editor-in-chief accused the head of foreign affairs of sympathising with Uganda’s Idi Amin (*Le Cernéen*, 7 July 1976).

*Classe Possédante*

Nevertheless, opponents continued to accuse *Le Cernéen* of racism because of its language and its defence of Franco-Mauritian economic privileges. Shortly after independence the newspaper even managed to find itself a new enemy, this time one from the Franco-Mauritian community itself: Paul Bérenger. Bérenger was a young politician who openly condemned Franco-Mauritian control of the island’s economic resources – when Mauritius gained its independence he was studying in France and had allegedly been on the barricades in Paris during the student revolts of 1968. Together with an ethnically mixed group of young sympathisers he founded the party *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM). Bérenger became the most visible member of the party and, over time, its de facto party leader. The party said it sought change ‘for the benefit’ of the workers, dockers and labourers working in the sugarcane fields (Eriksen 1998: 106). This was just like the Labour Party in its early days. The difference was that the MMM made a more outspoken stand against the ‘ethnicisation’ of Mauritian politics.

Contrary to the pre-independence period, Franco-Mauritian political power was at this point of little importance in the political debate. Instead of focusing on this, Bérenger and the MMM focused on the concentration of wealth in the Franco-Mauritian community – Bérenger himself did not belong to a rich land-owning family and was, as will be elaborated on in Chapter Eight, not considered ‘one hundred percent’ Franco-Mauritian by many other Franco-Mauritians. According to the MMM and Bérenger, the *classe possédante*, as they called the Franco-Mauritian
businessmen, ‘control the sugar industry and behind it the banks, the insurance companies, the docks etc.’ They also referred to the Franco-Mauritians as a handful of families controlling the economy (Le Mauricien, 18, 26 and 29 November 1976). This brought Bérenger great popularity among Mauritians from all ethnic backgrounds – but not so much popularity among Franco-Mauritians. In a way, Bérenger’s criticising of privilege made him one of the ‘oppressed’ and freed him from the label ‘white’, so to speak.

The MMM did not just oppose the Franco-Mauritians, though, but also the independent nation’s founding father, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. His government was criticised for its alliance with the economically powerful Franco-Mauritians (Simmons 1982: 192) – the MMM also argued that a ‘deal had been struck’ between Franco-Mauritians and the governing Labour Party. The Hindu politicians involved in the Labour Party were now depicted as allies of the Franco-Mauritians. Indeed, the two sides did co-operate to a certain extent: the government and the economic players had to do so to make a success of the independent nation and, as is illustrated by Jacques Gougeard’s comments, Franco-Mauritian businessmen did not consider Ramgoolam as their main enemy anymore. Yet, the two sides’ interests did not always coincide. Nor, it appears, had Hindu politicians really ‘struck a deal’ with the Franco-Mauritians that they should abstain from politics.

*No Deal*

The 1976 elections were the first to be held in independent Mauritius and were a test-case for the political balance on the island. Le Cernéen backed the PMSD again. The popularity of their main opponents, the MMM, was on the rise which not only frightened the Franco-Mauritians but also the Hindu politicians of the Labour Party. Le Cernéen dismissed Bérenger as a ‘Trotskyite’ and published ‘proof’ that the MMM was attached to communist ideology (Le Cernéen, 4 May 1976; 14 May 1976). This anti-communist resentment was especially driven by Franco-Mauritian control of economic resources and landed-property – the Franco-Mauritians feared the nationalisation of the sugar estates. Le Cernéen accordingly acted upon the fear that the MMM would implement a system that did not allow private property and that would curtail Mauritians’ freedom:

*Une chose est cependant claire. Tous ceux qui dans ce pays SONT EPRIS DE LIBERTE AURONT A FAIRE FACE A UN ENNEMI COMMUN DE CETTE LIBERTE: LE MMM, d’obéissance marxiste (Le Cernéen, 2 November 1976).*

33 'Translation: ‘One thing is, however, clear. All in this county who cherish their freedom have to confront a common enemy: the MMM, and its obedience to Marxism.’

109
In actual fact, *Le Cernéen* perceived itself and the Franco-Mauritian community as the principal victims here. According to the newspaper, the anti-capitalism of Bérenger and the MMM was anti-white and it complained about ‘les attaques presque quotidiennes du MILITANT contre la communauté blanche’ (*Le Cernéen*, 8 March 1977).³⁴ Or more indirectly: ‘pour attaquer *Le Cernéen*, bête noir (ou faudrait-il écrire “bête blanche”) des communistes’ (*Le Cernéen*, 4 March 1977).³⁵ Continuing this line of thought, the newspaper argued that the Franco-Mauritians were being used as scapegoats (*Le Cernéen*, 9 March 1977). The editor-in-chief of *Le Cernéen*, who considered the newspaper the mouthpiece of white community, had put himself in charge as their spokesperson. According to him, almost the whole Franco-Mauritian community, for different reasons, was against the MMM. He argued that the MMM’s anti-capitalist stand was in essence justified but that it mixed its anti-capitalist opinion with being anti-white, thus making the MMM a racist party (*Le Cernéen*, 31 December 1976). Simmons, however, argues that the MMM was a class party and not anti-white. If it appeared anti-white, she states, it was because most whites were capitalists (Simmons 1982: 195).

In the end *Le Cernéen*’s continuing voice in the public debate yielded few results in independent Mauritius. The 1976 elections can be considered another blow to the already diminished Franco-Mauritian political power, at least to that political power applied in the defence of Franco-Mauritian elite interests. Direct political representation had diminished and a few young Franco-Mauritians were even standing as candidates for the MMM (*Le Mauricien*, 22 November 1976). Nevertheless, Franco-Mauritians still did not withdraw entirely from politics. For example, a Franco-Mauritian CEO of one of the island’s three most powerful business groups continued to combine economic power with political power. The CEO was not only a candidate for the PMSD in Curepipe but also one of the party’s most influential advisers (*Le Mauricien*, 9 November 1976).

In the first decade after independence Franco-Mauritians thus remained directly and indirectly active in politics, continuing to make financial contributions to political parties as before. This was all to be in vain, however, because in 1976 the PMSD was severely defeated by the big winner, the MMM (*Le Cernéen*, 21 December 1976) – and yet a coalition between the Labour Party and Duval’s PMSD eventually formed the new government thus preventing the MMM from obtaining power. Unlike the 1967 elections when, amongst others, *Le Cernéen* had been able to rally significant support behind the PMSD, most supporters had abandoned the party ten years later on – the party only obtained eight seats out of a total of seventy. The most valid explanation here, then, would be that the Franco-Mauritians and their associates had

³⁴ Translation: ‘the almost daily attacks of the Militant against the white community.’
³⁵ Translation: ‘for attacking *Le Cernéen*, black sheep (or should we write “white sheep”) of the communists.’
become alienated from the electorate’s needs and wishes rather than having ‘struck a deal’ with their opponents. In a democratic Mauritius they were just not able to draw sufficient support, despite Le Cernéen’s active voice in the public debate.

**Closing Doors**

Le Cernéen represented a publication marked by its double defence of the sugar industry’s business interests and Franco-Mauritian ‘ethnicity’ and history. These two concerns were, of course, difficult to separate since the sugar industry was fundamentally linked to the Franco-Mauritian community. Yet, in the new reality of an independent Mauritius this combination came under pressure. Not only had Mauritius gained independence, in two successive elections the politicians backed by the newspaper had also lost; the newspaper’s contribution to public debate was then, in some senses, becoming problematic for Franco-Mauritian economic resources – the (re)main(ing) pillar of Franco-Mauritian power.

Around 1980, Le Cernéen’s combination of defending the whites and the sugar industry came to be perceived by many Mauritians as ‘not opportune’ anymore. Franco-Mauritian businessmen also realised this. They required good working relationships with the government and considered Le Cernéen’s rhetoric to be problematic for these relationships. Moreover, these businessmen were thought to have the power ‘to do something’ about the newspaper. Le Cernéen had always existed by the grace of Franco-Mauritian businessmen because they partly financed the newspaper. Consequently, the newspaper had to care about the opinions of the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry. Yet Le Cernéen had its own traditions and convictions which sometimes clashed with what the businessmen were striving for. This resulted in an ambivalent position as is illustrated in the novel La Plume du Corsaire, written by the last editor-in-chief of Le Cernéen, Jean-Pierre Lenoir. The information in this book is here complemented with data obtained via personal communications with him.

According to Lenoir, the newspaper ‘had to be in line’ with the sugar industry’s opinion. However, it did not always actually adhere to the sugar industry’s opinion. The newspapers’ criticism of politicians was not well received by these politicians and government officials. They were increasingly putting pressure on the Franco-Mauritian businessmen to silence Le Cernéen. As a result, these businessmen started to mount pressure on the newspaper. They tried, for example, to change its stand on certain issues by blocking advertisement income. Lenoir said, ‘it was not

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36 They had also financed the last editor-in-chief’s journalism studies in France – in return he had to work for the newspaper in this role.

37 La Plume du Corsaire is an account of events written in the style of a novel; the text may, therefore, have been altered for the sake of the storyline. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the novel (in combination with other data) gives an indication of what led to the downfall of the newspaper.
about advertisements of the sugar industry, but other businesses that advertised in the newspaper: the sugar industry just had the power to pressure other [Franco-Mauritian] businesses to stop advertising in *Le Cernéen*.\(^{38}\) The newspaper’s historical stance on key issues was now also seen as a disadvantage. Firstly, many politicians had not forgotten the newspaper’s anti-independence stand (Lenoir 2000: 62, 69). Secondly, the reputation of the founder of the newspaper, Adrien d’Epinay, as mentioned in the previous chapter, started to haunt *Le Cernéen*.

As a founder, his name was in the colophon of the newspaper. Lenoir was asked to remove d’Epinay’s name from the newspaper by one of its Franco-Mauritian financiers. He, however, was proud of the newspaper’s founder and refused to remove the name. The Franco-Mauritian businessman then decided to cease his financial support to the newspaper (Lenoir 2000: 104, 114, 115). In effect, the editor-in-chief then started looking for financial support in France. He hoped to convince the French to contribute to the preservation of the newspaper since *Le Cernéen* was one of the oldest French-language newspapers outside France. He did not, however, find sufficient support.

When the MMM finally came to power in 1982, the fate of the newspaper was sealed. Twenty-five years later, Lenoir said, ‘someone wrote how I was fighting the MMM and its communist connotations, while under the table the [Franco-Mauritian] sugar barons and the politicians were discussing important matters.’\(^{39}\) His suspicion was that the MMM had made it clear to the Franco-Mauritian businessmen that it would be appropriate to cease financing *Le Cernéen* in order to stop the newspaper from interfering in the political debate. According to Lenoir, the representatives of the sugar industry never told him about their objections personally but, nevertheless, he said, ‘I felt how I was an obstacle to them.’\(^{40}\) In the new reality, the business community was no longer able to unite itself behind a publicly voiced single communal message (Lenoir 2000: 204) and therefore realistically saw no other option other than to stop financing the newspaper. After one hundred and fifty years of existence the newspaper had to close its doors on 15 May 1982.\(^{41}\) This was symbolic of the Franco-Mauritians’ changing position in Mauritian society. Most Franco-Mauritians seemed to finally realise that their part in the public debate was

\(^{38}\) Interview: Mauritius, 6 February 2006.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
\(^{40}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) More than twenty years after its downfall, *Le Cernéen* restarted as an online newspaper (www.lecerneen.com). On the 23rd of October 2006 it started publishing again, this time online, and, like in the past, the newspaper defended the interests of the Franco-Mauritian community – it now provides interesting insights into Franco-Mauritian perceptions of government policies and political opponents. Internet has been important here because of how it created the opportunity to defend Franco-Mauritian interests along with other interests – both almost always in the context of opposing the Hindu domination of politics – openly and without financial aid from the Franco-Mauritian private sector. From what can be gathered, Franco-Mauritian businessmen actually seem to avoid providing any open input, although they may privately have approved of *Le Cernéen’s* reopening.
over. They completely withdrew from politics and, as a community, stopped voicing a public opinion in relation to their elite position. In a sense, they adopted a low-profile position in the public debate, focusing instead on their economic interests.

4.4 Conclusion

The transition to an independent Mauritius, a key event, and the new political players were challenges that truly led to a decline in the Franco-Mauritians’ elite position. With all the means at their disposal, Franco-Mauritians tried to put up mounting resistance in order to turn the tide. But they had to accept the new political dominance of the Hindu elite, backed by the more numerous Hindu community. Indeed, their political power proved most vulnerable. The Franco-Mauritian case study shows, though, how a redistribution of political power does not happen overnight. Nor does an elite easily accept its defeat. From 1945 to 1968, the Franco-Mauritians employed their power in order to try and avert the inexorable course of events. Although confined to the geographical locality of Mauritius, the process of decline of Franco-Mauritian political power was also fuelled by global processes of decolonisation, the Cold War and changing attitudes in the United Kingdom. These were factors of change beyond the Franco-Mauritians’ sphere of influence which significantly affected their power. A new reality emerged, one with which the Franco-Mauritians only gradually came to terms.

It appears that the Franco-Mauritians were so accustomed to their role as the ones in command that even after 1968 they tried everything to maintain this position. One assumption we can make is that cultural patterns affected their drive to maintain political power: for generations Franco-Mauritians had passed on their elite dominance and coming to terms with counter-elites who successfully challenged their (political) power was not easy for them. Only gradually did the Franco-Mauritians come to realise that their (in)direct political role was played out in a democratic Mauritius and that they were no longer the designated political power. They could no longer obtain sufficient political support while the Hindus had the advantage of vertical loyalty based on ethnic affiliation. Just like the patricians in Dahl’s New Haven (1961), the Franco-Mauritians were an electoral minority and probably realised that rebellion was useless. To a certain extent this process indicates that in the political domain ethnicity was constructed as a force to be reckoned with; not that ethnic differences were not already present, but the result of agents stressing divisions in the struggle over independence was a society marked by ethnic contrasts (the profound and persisting impact of this on the Franco-Mauritian elite position will be further analysed in Chapter Seven). Like in Dahl’s New Haven, where new elites were able to gain popularity from ethnic affiliation due to the large influx of migrants (Dahl 1961), large ethnic

113
groups in Mauritius also had an advantage. This invoked ethnic politics, though. Especially the combination with an emphasis on class equality seems to have harmed Franco-Mauritian political reputation: their ethnicity overlapped just too strongly with an (economic) elite position. With the closing down of *Le Cernéen*, a highly symbolic event, Franco-Mauritians finally sacrificed their public voice. This was a reality, however, more difficult to accept for *Le Cernéen*'s editor-in-chief, Jean-Pierre Lenoir, than it was for the Franco-Mauritian businessmen: the latter proved more pragmatic and were the first to adjust to the new reality.

This ongoing process of finding a new equilibrium, in my opinion, invalidates the idea of a prearranged deal between Hindu politicians and the Franco-Mauritians. In no way, however, am I suggesting that Franco-Mauritians and politicians did not co-operate at all. The case of *Le Cernéen*, for example, implies how Franco-Mauritians were sensitive to government pressure, a further indication that the power balance had truly changed: not only did Franco-Mauritians have to accept competition from others, the new powers could also enforce their will on them by mobilising (political) resources. The final outcome of serious challenges to Franco-Mauritian hegemony was their withdrawal to the private sector in order to safeguard access to their economic resources – this to such an extent that Franco-Mauritian businesses did not even allow their employees to interfere in politics (*Le Mauricien*, 11 May 2007). Most Franco-Mauritians would logically follow the example of the businessmen because the economic interests of these people trickled down into the whole community. More or less all Franco-Mauritians chose a low-profile attitude in the context of public debates related to their ethnicity. In that respect, they had become like the white elite in Martinique who had already and for a much longer period displayed a similar fear of every criticism, especially when in the public sphere (Kovats Beaudoux and Giraud 2002: 12).