8. When Powers Meet

The Complexity and Persistence of Challenges to the Franco-Mauritian Elite Position

Franco-Mauritians have been rather successful in maintaining their economic power despite the fact that newly emerged counter-elites have challenged their elite position at various times, especially in the run up to independence (see Chapter Four). The ethnic complexity of Mauritian society, as described in the previous chapter, helps entrench the distinctive features of the Franco-Mauritian elite, something which also affects the perpetuation of the sense of belonging (see Chapter Six) that has such a profound impact on the consolidation of economic power (see Chapter Five). At the same time, the multidimensionality of ethnicity, economic privilege and (historical) resentment complicates relationships with other Mauritians. In this chapter I will focus on how this affects the power struggles between Franco-Mauritians and counter-elites in present day Mauritius, especially those taking place in the political domain. Looking at the (historical) development of challenges to the Franco-Mauritian elite position from the onset of the first serious decline in the 1930s of their hegemonic power, as analysed in Chapter Four, up to the present will shed light on how an elite adapts itself and (re)organises its practices in order to achieve continuity of its (socio-economic) elite position.

The politically active Hindus are arguably the most powerful counter-elite and politicians in general tend to be those who challenge the Franco-Mauritian elite position most openly; these groups also need each other, however. By analysing the relationships between the Franco-Mauritians and the public sector (with a focus on several specific case studies) I will elaborate on how problems tend to flare up and then calm down again. The position of the Franco-Mauritian politician Paul Bérenger, for instance, provides a telling example of these often paradoxical relationships. In the past Bérenger was considered to be a Franco-Mauritian opponent and yet, as will be shown in this chapter, he also received his share of criticism and ethnic-labelling due to his white skin-colour, especially when he was prime minister. I will explain how this ambiguity impacts on the Franco-Mauritian socio-economic elite position and how the Franco-Mauritians try to turn these events to their advantage, often getting the short end of the stick anyway, however.
8.1 Public and Private

Just like in the past, for the economy to be a success and for the wellbeing of the island’s population in general the Franco-Mauritians and the public sector have to rely on each other. Government officials are joined by representatives of the private sector on exploratory missions abroad. The EPZ and IRS were thought up by the government, which seems to confirm Antoinette Handley’s argument that: ‘[i]n Mauritius, it was government that drove economic policymaking while business largely responded to government proposals’ (Handley 2008: 102). This perception is shared by government officials, who argue that they have often been pioneers and who demand that the private sector take more risks (L’Express Dimanche, 8 January 2006). Countering this view, the Franco-Mauritian Jacques Gougeard said, ‘the facts are that Mauritius has developed thanks to the private sector’ – an argument voiced more often by Franco-Mauritian businessmen who also tend to stress that it is the Franco-Mauritians who take the risks and invest locally. ‘We were the motors behind the development and the government never comes up with an idea’, said Jacques Gougeard, ‘though this might not be the general perception in Mauritius.’

Notwithstanding who actually initiated new business projects, the government and Franco-Mauritian businesses have nevertheless always been drawn to each other in order to further develop these projects once they were in place. Jacques Gougeard said, ‘the [Franco-Mauritian] private sector has, in general, always been on good terms with the government. Sometimes the relationship is a bit difficult, because it is normal that [the government tries] to put into practice some of its influence. But both know that it is necessary to co-operate.’ In the title of one of her chapters, Handley depicts this relationship as follows: ‘Business and government in Mauritius: public hostility, private pragmatism’ (Handley 2008: 101-135). Many of the so-called difficult moments appear to happen around the elections because politicians, in order to gain votes, criticise Franco-Mauritian economic power at these times. A widely shared perception is that after the elections the politicians tend to tone down their criticism because in the end the private sector and the government need each other. Dominique Dervillers said, ‘when I’m having a drink with politicians they tell me that [the white bashing] was just talking politics.’

In these settings, Franco-Mauritian businessmen have to carefully maintain their relationships with the government as (perceived) cultural differences significantly determine these relationships. Mauritius, as shown in the previous chapter, is a highly ethnicised society in which, it is often argued, politics generates ‘communalism’ by exacerbating ethnic difference as part of

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273 Interview: Mauritius, 14 April 2006.
274 Interview: Mauritius, 14 April 2006.
275 Interview: Mauritius, 16 February 2005.
the more general power struggle. For instance, a discussion in 2006 about the restructuring of the secondary school system was really considered to be a battle between the Hindu ‘state bourgeoisie’ and the Creoles, with the Catholic Church sometimes speaking on the latter’s behalf. Allegedly the Hindu minister’s propositions for restructuring the school system were to the advantage of the Hindus, with the Creoles getting the worst of it when, generally speaking, the Creoles were already in the least favourable position. This shows how ethnicity and politics can be a touchy subject in Mauritius, to the extent that almost all the different ethnic communities have at one time or another felt disadvantaged.

Joint Economic Council
In 1970, the Franco-Mauritians set up the Joint Economic Council (JEC), which was to function as a co-ordinating body between the private sector and the government at the highest level and which aimed at smoothing relationships with the government in general. The JEC supposedly represents the whole private sector and functions as an umbrella organisation for multi-sector institutions and sector associations – among others, the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), the Association des Hôteliers et Restaurateurs de l’île Maurice (AHRIM), and the Mauritius Sugar Producers’ Association (MSPA). The JEC can be considered as the institutionalisation of the practice of creating dialogue between the private and public sector since hostile relationships are seen to bear within them challenges threatening the Franco-Mauritian elite position. The success of the JEC has, however, been mixed.

Initially, the JEC was considered a Franco-Mauritian club. However, in line with the increasing ‘ethnic’ diversification of the private sector, which according to Handley is evidence of the softening of rigid ethnic divisions, the JEC is changing. Handley writes, ‘the appointment of non-whites to represent the JEC, the MCCI and the Chamber of Agriculture (all bastions of white business) would have been unthinkable in the 1980s and even in the early 1990s – but has since occurred’ (Handley 2008: 134). But the perception of the JEC being a Franco-Mauritian stronghold remains. According to one of the former non-white presidents of the JEC, the organisation is seen as a lobby group for the sugar industry. He said, ‘it is more the public perception [than anything else], although it might have been a reality in the past.’

Nevertheless, he alleged that in his role as president he had felt the difficulties of reconciling the pressure of Franco-Mauritian business interests with the JEC’s objective of representing the whole private sector.

Lack of success smoothing these relationships can be seen from the case of the last president of the JEC, a white Frenchman with a Mauritian passport and with a long history of

276 Interview: Mauritius, 8 June 2006.
service in the Mauritian private sector, during whose time the JEC openly criticised the government for its shortcomings. The JEC said that the absence of dialogue between the government and the private sector, due to lack of co-operation from the government, was unhealthy and harmful to the country. It was extremely disappointed at the government’s attitude and expressed its belief that the state must not interfere in spheres where it is not needed (L’Express, 11 May 2007; Le Mauricien, 28 June 2007). The JEC’s president, moreover, openly voiced another even stronger opinion:

*L’inefficience, la corruption, l’absence d’equal opportunities, de méritocratie ainsi que le communalisme sont évidents au sein de l’État et des entreprises publiques. Et le peuple le sait parfaitement. Le secteur privé est un exemple, même s’il faut toujours progresser* (Le Mauricien, 11 May 2007).

The perception that the public sector favours Hindus is actually widely shared – Creoles in particular are of the opinion that they suffer from the public sector’s preference for this group (Boswell 2006). Access to political resources is, moreover, reflected in Hindu identification itself, argues Lynn M. Hempels, while this is unrelated to ethnic identification among Muslims and Creoles (Hempel 2009). A Franco-Mauritian CEO said, ‘the Asians copied the model of the private sector, where favouring your own kind was the rule. However, the public sector lags thirty years behind and the competence in the private sector is significantly better than in the government sector.’ According to him, nepotism is the standard paradigm in the public sector while competence is the last thing they consider; he argued that the private sector has, in contrast, been modernising a lot in order to be competitive – for many Franco-Mauritians this functions as a counter-argument when the government pressures the Franco-Mauritian businesses to open up.

Generally speaking, this criticism is not expressed openly because it can have unwanted consequences, as can be the case also in South Africa, where the white-dominated business community has to carefully weigh its criticism of the ANC government in order not to upset it (Handley 2008: 96). After criticising the government, the JEC president was strongly criticised for being white. Franco-Mauritians are aware of the negative connotation of their skin-colour in some contexts, and both the open criticism and the frank talk of the JEC’s president were not

277 Translation: ‘the inefficiency, the corruption, the absence of equal opportunities and meritocracy as well as communalism are evident at the heart of the state and the semi state-controlled companies. And the people know this very well. The private sector is an example, even though it always needs to improve.’
278 Interview: Mauritius, 31 January 2006.
279 It is also argued that ‘[i]n Mauritius, the Civil Service is too powerful and its lobby too effective for any attempt by any political party to point a finger at it. The risk of political toll is too high because every third family has a member in the service’ (Boswell 2006: 28).
entirely appreciated by all Franco-Mauritian businessmen, who tend to have learned from their past experiences in this respect. They preferred not to express such criticism openly, because it interfered with abstaining from having a ‘political’ opinion – in short, they thought this criticism could jeopardise co-operation with the government.

**Breaking the Monopoly**

The relationship between Franco-Mauritian business interests and the public sector and politicians actually appears to represent a perpetual power game. A retired Franco-Mauritian businessman said, ‘in 1987, the government put pressure on the board of … , on [the CEO] and on me to increase business with India. They said that it was okay that we traded a lot with South Africa, but we had to make it a bit more equal and give India a chance.’ He actually thought that the Indian government had pressured the Mauritian government by using the argument that ‘we are all Indians, but you protect South Africa’, since the Mauritian government was not directly involved in the trading itself. This pressure did not challenge the Franco-Mauritian elite position directly, however, since the government only ‘proposed’ to trade with India. In other cases, though, the Mauritian government has used its affiliation with India in order to try to break the Franco-Mauritian hold on the private sector.

The only local Mauritian beer brewery is controlled by Franco-Mauritians and has no local competitors. A Franco-Mauritian businessman said, referring to the past, ‘I was offered the chance to co-operate with a foreign investor in setting up another brewery. But I refused the offer because I did not want to have problems with [the Franco-Mauritian family controlling the brewery].’ Here, then, is another example of internal group dynamics restricting competition among Franco-Mauritians. Indians, however, were not limited by such restrictions. With the help of an Indian brewery, the Mauritian government managed to break the monopoly of the Franco-Mauritian controlled brewery – the government could use its political power to weaken exclusive access to economic resources that Franco-Mauritian power relies on. A well-informed non-Franco-Mauritian businessman said, ‘politicians, reinforced by their cultural ties, use India to break the hold of the Franco-Mauritians on the economy.’

The change in the island’s balance of power is visible from the government’s expressed intentions but, despite this awareness, the Franco-Mauritians have only limited power to counter these objectives. One way of resisting is to take decisions to court, as was shown by the case of the leasehold for the strip of beach which was offered to the Sino-Mauritian company (described

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280 Interview: Mauritius, 30 May 2006.
282 Interview: Mauritius, 13 April 2006.
in Chapter Five). In the case of the brewery, the Franco-Mauritians initiated an advertisement campaign to stress the ‘Mauritianness’ of their beer brand compared to the ‘Indian background’ of the new competitor (see Photo 8.1).

According to one Mauritian scholar, criticising Franco-Mauritians serves an internal political function. In his view, the state bourgeoisie (in the public sector) is an ethnicised bourgeoisie divided into different sections, and criticising the Franco-Mauritians distracts attention away from this division and is used to unite the state bourgeoisie.283 This indicates that even though the politicians have a strong sense of ethnic identification, they tend to have less elite cohesion than the Franco-Mauritians. Also, the Franco-Mauritians’ small numbers and the fact that they have adopted a low profile approach in the political domain makes them an easy target. Franco-Mauritians not only stand out with their white skin-colour, they also often do not defend themselves publicly. As a Franco-Mauritian CEO said, ‘there are so few whites that if the mechanism of white-bashing doesn’t work for you it doesn’t work against you.’284 One Mauritian journalist considered the white-bashing in the 2005 electoral campaign, further elaborated on below, as nothing more than political propaganda. He said that proof that it was only propaganda came from ‘the fact that [these Franco-Mauritian CEOs] have not been thrown off the island and still do business.’285

![Picture 5: Beer advertisement used in the campaign between the (Franco-)Mauritian brewery Phoenix and the Indian United Breweries, which was challenging its monopoly (Photo: Tijo Salverda).](image)

284 Interview: Mauritius, 9 October 2007.
286 The Franco-Mauritian brewery produces Mauritius’ most well-known beer which is called Phoenix. In response to this the Indian brewery came up with a beer called Black Eagle. This provoked an interesting publicity campaign
To a certain extent Franco-Mauritians are aware of their role in electoral campaigns and political rhetoric. A Franco-Mauritian CEO said, ‘the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the independent local press closely watch the Hindu majority in parliament and the government, which prevents intolerable discrimination.’\footnote{Franco-Mauritians, as is shown by dual nationalities and investment in property in Paris, are however to a certain extent prepared for the worst. Many (Franco-)Mauritians argue that the political exacerbation of ethnic divisions in Mauritius is only manifested in politics itself and does not affect daily relationships between the ethnic groups. However, in contrast to this perception, some Franco-Mauritians did express their anxiety during the 2005 election campaign. One Franco-Mauritian woman said, ‘I sensed hostility when I entered a shop during election time. The hostility disappeared again after the elections.’} Franco-Mauritians, as is shown by dual nationalities and investment in property in Paris, are however to a certain extent prepared for the worst. Many (Franco-)Mauritians argue that the political exacerbation of ethnic divisions in Mauritius is only manifested in politics itself and does not affect daily relationships between the ethnic groups. However, in contrast to this perception, some Franco-Mauritians did express their anxiety during the 2005 election campaign. One Franco-Mauritian woman said, ‘I sensed hostility when I entered a shop during election time. The hostility disappeared again after the elections.’\footnote{Interview: Mauritius, 3 February 2005.}

8.2 Paul Bérenger

The persistent power struggle taking place between Franco-Mauritians and politicians is perfectly symbolised by the case of Paul Bérenger even though he does not represent Franco-Mauritian economic power. As discussed in Chapter Four, he was the odd one out who chose to stay in politics after the Franco-Mauritians had retreated from politics in general. Owing to his fierce criticism of Franco-Mauritian economic power and to his struggle to bridge ethnic differences Paul Bérenger was for much of his career hardly associated with the Franco-Mauritian community at all and was actually disliked by many members of this group. But he and his MMM were also resented by other politicians. In the early 1970s, Bérenger’s MMM overtly campaigned against the importance of ethnicity in politics. To criticise the political parties’ standard practice of listing candidates according to the island’s constituencies’ ethnic composition, the MMM put up a Hindu in a predominantly Creole constituency. However, over the course of time, the MMM abandoned its own policy on this issue and started to choose candidates in the same manner as their main political opponents, the Labour Party, i.e. corresponding to the ethnic composition of the constituencies. Furthermore, after the party narrowly lost the 1976 elections it created an alliance with a party strongly focusing on Hindu support (Eriksen 1998: 68) – thus breaking even since Phoenix responded with an advertisement with the slogan *nou pays nou labiere* (Kreol for ‘our land, our beer’). In another advertisement a game of checkers is being played with beer bottle caps symbolising the two brands – needless to say Phoenix is on the winning side. The position of Phoenix was not fundamentally undermined by the foreign challenge and remains a popular beer among all Mauritians, regardless of their ethnic background. However, as with many other things, many Mauritians are aware of the ‘ethnic’ colour of certain products such as cars and edibles. For example, one Franco-Mauritian at a party treated a popular (international) beer with disdain because he knew that it was brewed in a franchise agreement by the Indian brewery. Not many Franco-Mauritians will opt for Black Eagle, while Hindus and others with a dislike for Franco-Mauritians may specifically decide not to buy Phoenix, buying Black Eagle instead.\footnote{Interview: Mauritius, 3 February 2005.} 

\footnote{Interview: Mauritius, 28 March 2006.}
more with their past when they opposed the use of ethnicity in Mauritian politics. This coalition then went on to win the 1982 elections by a landslide. Bérenger, however, did not become the prime minister. The relatively recently obtained political power of the Hindus represented an obstacle to Bérenger becoming prime minister since it had become an unwritten rule that a Hindu would always be chosen for this position, showing the impact of ethnicity on Mauritian politics. Fourteen years after independence proved too early to undo this implicit understanding. Instead the Hindu Anerood Jugnauth took the position of prime minister in 1982. A year later Jugnauth left the MMM with a number of others and started the Mouvement Socialiste Militant (MSM); he remained prime minister, however (Eriksen 1998: 69).

When Paul Bérenger changed from being the opposition to representing the government the general perception of him started to change and he became more associated with Franco-Mauritian economic power, even though he had hardly ever been associated with this at all before. Franco-Mauritians also started to perceive him differently. One Franco-Mauritian said, ‘you have the Bérenger from the 1970s, when his political ideas and support for the cause of the labourers was perceived as an attack on the white community. And the one thereafter, when Bérenger and the MMM formed part of the 1982 government and beyond.’

One view is that once in government Bérenger could not simply shout at the Franco-Mauritian businessmen - he had to co-operate with them as well. Franco-Mauritians tend to say that Bérenger became more realistic. As a consequence of his co-operation with the private sector he was forced into a complicated position and became an easy target for other politicians. Handley says, ‘ultimately Bérenger lost his job as Finance Minister [in the early 1980s] by making what were considered overtly generous nods in the direction of the sugar barons without extracting any significant concessions from them in return’ (Handley 2008: 110, 111).

Paul Bérenger, however, has a remarkably resilient character and has remained in politics up until today. His long career has made him an important figure in Mauritian political history. He has influenced many of the present generation of politicians although his often brusque manner has also led to a cohort of politicians who dislike him and who, whenever there is an opportunity, publicly associate him with Franco-Mauritian economic power.

The Illovo Deal

Paul Bérenger’s ambiguous position especially shows for one particular case. In February 2001, the South African company Illovo Sugar decided to sell its Mauritian assets, which comprised large interests in the sugar industry and two hotels (L’Express, 10 February 2001). A number of Franco-Mauritian businessmen, with the involvement of the government, bought the Illovo

289 Interview: Mauritius, 3 March 2006.
assets. All but one of the Franco-Mauritian businessmen involved were directly linked to the sugar industry. Consequently, a non-Franco-Mauritian businessman said, ‘why were there only whites involved in the Illovo deal? Why were there, for instance, no Sino-Mauritians involved?’

Confronted with this remark, a Franco-Mauritian involved in the deal said, ‘it was logical to choose the ones with experience in the sugar industry [i.e. the Franco-Mauritians].’ However, the way the deal happened appears once more to be related to the functioning of Franco-Mauritian business networks rather than anything else: a wealthy Franco-Mauritian businessman residing outside Mauritius initiated the deal and, it seems, simply turned to Franco-Mauritians instead of other Mauritians because this was more logical for him.

Bérenger, who at that time was serving as minister of finance in the MMM-MSM government, was responsible for the government’s input and finally sealed the deal between the different partners. He qualified it as a *mari deal*, i.e. a fantastic deal (*L’Express*, 20 November 2007). This opinion was not shared by everyone, however. The opposition seized on the opportunity and attacked the deal, discrediting Bérenger and challenging Franco-Mauritian economic power. Navin Ramgoolam, the present prime minister and son of Mauritius’ first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was the leader of the main opposition party, the Labour Party, at that time. He was quick to associate the white skin-colour of Paul Bérenger with the *oligarchie blanche* and stressed that only five families were benefiting from this deal (*5-Plus Dimanche*, 25 February 2001). Referring to these five families is a strong form of symbolic politics and a proven recipe for successfully alluding to Franco-Mauritian families while avoiding actually naming them. As has been previously shown, Paul Bérenger made use of similar rhetoric in his younger years.

Through the deal, sealed on 14 February 2001, the Mauritian state obtained thirty-five percent of the assets of Illovo Sugar in Mauritius (*L’Express*, 12 February 2001). Moreover, the state obtained part of the land belonging to Illovo for the symbolic price of one Mauritian rupee, while more land was obtained below market price (*L’Express*, 14 February 2001). Much of this land was eventually used for the development of Cybercity, a project initiated by the public sector and intended to jump on the bandwagon of the growing global IT-sector (*L’Express*, 20 November 2007). The Franco-Mauritians involved bought the other assets, among them two hotels – allegedly a number of them made substantial profits. Bérenger’s opponents hammered away about this profit and how it had been made at the expense of the public. The affair proved an easy method for associating the white Paul Bérenger with Franco-Mauritian economic power (Salverda 2002: 68, 69). In a sense, the opposition criticised the Illovo deal in order to obtain

290 Interview: Mauritius, 21 April 2006.
291 Informal conversation: Mauritius, date unknown.
vertical loyalty themselves: by linking Bérenger to the negative perception of the Franco-
Mauritian private sector they hoped to obtain support. Considering that at that moment general
elections were still some years away, the Illove deal then disappeared into the background. But it
was to come back with a vengeance later on.

Prime Minister Bérenger

During the last two years (2003-2005) of the MMM-MSM term, Paul Bérenger became the prime
minister – he was the first non-Hindu prime minister of Mauritius. Bérenger was not elected
directly as prime minister, however. He attained this position as part of a deal between his and
the other government parties that had won the elections in 2000, i.e. Bérenger’s MMM and
Anerood Jugnauth’s MSM. Jugnauth served the first three years as prime minister to then become
president of Mauritius (a more ceremonial position), paving the way for Bérenger’s to become
prime minister. A non-Hindu becoming prime minister represented a break with the past and it
appeared that Mauritius was ready to decrease the influence of ethnicity on politics.

Bérenger appears to have been aware of his unique position. He carefully tried not to
upset the different ethnicities. He attended, and adapted himself to, many festivities related to the
different ethnic groups: on 1 February 2005 at the celebration of the abolition of slavery he wore
an African style suit; and at Chinese New Year he wore a Chinese outfit. Bérenger also always
addressed parliament and the population in general in the Kreol language. The choice of Kreol
had twofold reasoning behind it. Firstly, it had become the common denominator in Mauritius
and the mother tongue for the majority. Secondly, it had no ‘negative connotations’ as did, for
instance, Bérenger’s mother tongue, French. But despite his general popularity among Mauritians
of all kinds, other Mauritians continued to associate Paul Bérenger with the Franco-Mauritian
community and were convinced that he was favouring the economically powerful Franco-
Mauritian families. According to one Mauritian journalist with a dislike for Bérenger and highly
critical about Franco-Mauritian economic power in general, it is a deadly sin for a politician to get
too close to the Franco-Mauritian private sector.292

White Bérenger

The 2005 electoral campaign showed how the perception that Bérenger was ‘favouring the
whites’ could come back with a vengeance and how ethnicity was still, in fact, very much present
in politics. Bérenger was accused by politicians of favouring his ‘cousins’ (L’Express, 31
December 2006), of being a ‘descendant of the colonists’ (L’Express, 21 June 2005) and (with the

292 Interview: Mauritius, 23 March 2006.
Illovo deal) of giving a ‘present to five families’ (*L’Express*, 15 November 2006). In response Bérenger, shortly before the July 2005 elections, said:

> Notre [c à d. MMM/MSM] campagne se termine dans l’unité nationale, tandis que de l’autre côté [c à d. alliance sociale], elle se termine dans le communalisme. Ils parlent encore de Blancs mais moi je sais que les jeunes et les travailleurs en assez de tels commentaires (*Le Mauricien*, 29 June 2005).  

The Labour Party alliance seized on this and campaigned on the basis that once in office they would bring certain projects favouring the (Franco-Mauritian) private sector to a halt. For example, a number of IRS projects (which focused on attracting foreigners to buy expensive and luxurious villas on the island) had been approved of by Bérenger’s government and were to be stopped. Politicians related to the Labour Party referred to these projects as evidence of ‘a complicity between land barons and people in South Africa’, ‘d’apartheid économique’, and ‘conçu pour le gros capital’ (*Week-End*, 5 March 2006).

The political attacks on Bérenger and the strategy of casting him as a ‘white’ were partly opportunistic. After Bérenger and his alliance had lost the elections, the new (Labour Party coalition) government did not, in fact, end IRS-projects as it had said it would but actually co-operated with the private sector involved (*Week-End*, 5 March 2006) – a Hindu was granted the first approval for a small IRS-project he had initiated but this was allegedly just for show. From then onwards Franco-Mauritian initiated projects received approval and the new prime minister, Navin Ramgoolam, even expressed his hopes for new sectors similar to the IRS (*L’Express*, 4 April 2006). Some Franco-Mauritian businessmen hinted that the new government had co-operated and given their approval to projects much faster than Bérenger’s government.

As had been the case in the past, the new government had to accept the reality that one needs to co-operate with the Franco-Mauritians in the private sector, at least to a certain extent. Contrary to Bérenger, however, the new government could not fall victim to being criticised for having a white skin-colour.

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293 Translation: Our [i.e. MMM/MSM][electoral] campaign ends in national unity, whereas the other side [i.e. the Labour Party alliance] ends in communalism. They talk again about Whites, while I know that the young and the workers have had enough of such comments.

294 Translation: ‘economic Apartheid’ and ‘for big capital’.

295 When Paul Bérenger became prime minister, according to one journalist, he jeopardised the implicitly accepted power sharing deal whereby politics was the domain of the Hindus and the private sector that of the Franco-Mauritians. Before Bérenger had been tolerated because he was not associated with the Franco-Mauritian private sector and did not hold the highest government position. This perception changed when he became prime minister, however, because it enhanced the perception that the Franco-Mauritians controlled both the private sector and the political domain. The journalist argued that this situation stirred up the whole white-bashing anti-Bérenger campaign and led to the eventual victory of the Labour Party. This may, indeed, have heightened resentment but the Illovo deal shows how Bérenger was already being heavily attacked because of his white skin-colour before this.

296 Informal conversations: Mauritius, various dates.
The (ab)use of white skin only makes sense in a situation of power. Steve Garner rightly states ‘whiteness is a phenomenon unthinkable in a context where white does not equal power’ (Garner 2006: 262). Of course, Franco-Mauritians’ persistent economic power coupled with memories of colonial injustices are at the core of the power battle. Bringing the past up, as already illustrated by the Minister of Land in Chapter Five when he referred to the ‘mishap of history’, is indeed frequently used as a strategy to undermine the Franco-Mauritians. Associating white skin-colour with the past appears to be too good an opportunity to miss.

**Perceptions**

The moment Bérenger became obliged to co-operate with Franco-Mauritian businessmen, or allegedly even favour them, he became easy prey.\(^2^9^7\) This case, therefore, clearly shows the ‘relevance’ of his white skin-colour. Bérenger had always been a white Franco-Mauritian but he was widely perceived as a politician for all Mauritians and as someone taking a stand against ‘white’ economic privileges. When he allegedly became too close to the private sector Bérenger’s skin-colour suddenly became ‘visible’: he was a ‘white’ favouring other ‘whites’. The strong associations between Franco-Mauritian economic privileges and the colonial past and its injustices backfired on Bérenger in spite of his intentions. Whiteness in Mauritius, then, mainly has a negative connotation when it is linked to economic privileges.

In reality Bérenger appears not to have favoured the Franco-Mauritians with malice aforethought, nor, apparently, did he have an ethnic preference. He may have been on good terms with certain high-ranking Franco-Mauritian managers but these kinds of relationships are difficult to avoid on a small island like Mauritius – the present vice prime minister’s son works for the largest non-Franco-Mauritian business group. In other areas, however, Bérenger was not close to Franco-Mauritians and their points of view at all. Moreover, Paul Bérenger was not unconditionally supported by the Franco-Mauritian community either. Gradually he had come to be received more favourably by the Franco-Mauritian community and a Franco-Mauritian businessman even said that it may have been good ‘to have someone with the same way of thinking’ (i.e. sharing a culture) in power.\(^2^9^8\) However, many Franco-Mauritians (and other Mauritians) also disliked him for his confrontational political style. A Franco-Mauritian businessman said, ‘you can’t be proud of his offensive manners and the things he sometimes

\(^{2^9^7}\) *Le Cernéen* provides a comparable example in the sense that it had to close down too because it was too strongly associated with economic privileges. It is also not comparable, however, in the sense that it was actually defending these privileges, while in Bérenger’s case that is highly debatable.

\(^{2^9^8}\) Informal conversation: Mauritius, 2 February 2005.
Another Franco-Mauritian said (some months after Bérenger had lost the elections), ‘he is becoming like a dictator now that his term is ending.’

Illustratively, Franco-Mauritians criticised Bérenger by way of a strategy common to them, gossiping about the ‘purity’ of his skin-colour. Many Franco-Mauritians had not forgotten about Bérenger’s attacks on the Franco-Mauritian community. A retired Franco-Mauritian businessman said, ‘I wondered whether Bérenger’s attacks on [Franco-Mauritian] privileges had to do with the fact that he was métis?’ With this remark he insinuated that Bérenger was jealous of and wanted revenge on the white community because he was not completely white himself. Other Franco-Mauritians and Mauritians argued that Bérenger was a Petit Blanc who did not belong to the Franco-Mauritian families controlling the sugar industry – as a matter of fact, this was true; Bérenger did not have any direct family links to the economically powerful Franco-Mauritian families. At the same time, the MMM and Bérenger had always received lots of support from all kinds of Mauritians. A gens de colour woman said, ‘the racist attacks on Bérenger were the only arguments the opponents could come up with because his style of governance could not be blamed since he worked hard and was not corrupt.’

The political rhetoric of Bérenger’s opponents influenced the perceptions of many Mauritians. Arguably, the resulting general perception was fuelled by a lack of information: many Mauritians simply did not know the ins and outs of politics and of the economy, and many were of the opinion that the government, in general, represented the interests of the Franco-Mauritians the best (Hempel 2009: 468). They thus easily accepted (and accept) the explanation that Franco-Mauritians have ‘all the economic power’ and that Bérenger ‘favoured’ them. However, a number of non-white businessmen with a good knowledge of the relationships between the public and private sector also shared this perception. They knew that Bérenger was not from the same upper echelon that most Franco-Mauritians in the private sector belong to but they felt that he, nevertheless, still favoured the largest Franco-Mauritian business groups. Moreover, some argued that Bérenger became the idol of the Franco-Mauritians when he became the island’s prime minister. Discrediting Bérenger because of his white skin-colour shows how strongly perceptions are influenced by (historical) resentment over Franco-Mauritian economic power.

This does not explain the whole story, however. As mentioned, many Mauritians, and also Franco-Mauritians, disliked Bérenger for his political style. Besides, as a retired Mauritian businessman put it, ‘Bérenger made some strategic blunders, and did not lose the elections only because he was a Franco-Mauritian or was perceived as favouring whites.’ After Bérenger had...
lost the elections the association between him and Franco-Mauritian economic privileges became less prominent, since this link had lost its purpose. Only rarely are remarks now made about the Illovo deal and his ‘preference’ for Franco-Mauritian businesses. This has not, however, stopped politicians criticising Franco-Mauritian economic power and privileges in general, as they normally do after elections.

8.3 Perpetual Struggle

In Mauritius the fact of politically defending the ‘ethnic interests’ of the Franco-Mauritian community does not generate much support. As has been shown, strong ties between Franco-Mauritian business and politics have been severely disrupted. This situation is in contrast with, for example, the landed sugar elite in the Philippines which has great political influence – many Filipino congressmen are directly identified with the sugar planters (Billig 2003: 167). Unlike in Mauritius however, in the Philippines ethnicity is not a marker of difference between the sugar planters and politicians. But the relationships Vogt describes between Békés and politicians in Martinique appear different in that respect also: here, it is no secret that Békés support black or ‘mulâtre’ politicians (Vogt 2005: 272). The example of Bérenger shows how being associated with Franco-Mauritian economic power can jeopardise one’s position, especially if you have a white skin-colour. Franco-Mauritian economic power or domination is, thus, often attacked by politicians in order to mobilise support even though the politicians’ rhetoric does not always correspond with their actual practices.

Since being in power (2005 – present), the Labour Party has been transmitting mixed messages. The government did, indeed, approve a number of Franco-Mauritian led projects but at the same time politicians continued to challenge Franco-Mauritian privileges in general. Firstly, it decided to change the conditions for the lease of the campement sites (discussed in Chapter Six). Secondly, it introduced a policy designed to allow for the ‘democratisation’ of the economy. The idea behind this is to reform the economy, open it up internationally, break the economic monopolies and, especially, to also ‘increase chances for other local players’. The president of the government’s commission on the democratisation of the economy justified the new policy by stating, ‘La concentration des richesses entraîne des distorsions au libre jeu du marché et ne permet pas au système économique de fonctionner de manière optimale’ (L’Express, 30 December 2005).303

This issue seems, however, to not only be about the concentration of wealth. A Mauritian journalist close to the Labour Party said, ‘the unequal distribution of land is at the centre of the

303 Translation: ‘The concentration of wealth delays the distortions of the free play of the market and does not allow the economic system to function in an optimal way’.
problem; without a change nothing will happen.”

But the distribution of land is a complex matter on Mauritius because initially the land belonged to nobody. Land distribution through expropriation cannot be justified as the reasoning for this based on ‘unequal land ownership’ has little (international) legal basis.

**Problems of Coherence**

Many Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians critically observed the present government after their smear campaign of Bérenger during the electoral campaign. The government’s proposal for the democratisation of the economy – and how they associated this with the issues of concentration of wealth and unequal distribution of land – quickly became muddled and more and more ‘ethnicised.’ As a result, the government’s urge to restructure the economy has become rather problematic; even so, this policy still certainly constitutes a challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position.

Franco-Mauritians, in response to the new policy, accused the government of once again resorting to ‘white-bashing’. Other Mauritians also shared this opinion. One of their arguments for this is that there is a hidden agenda to the democratisation of the economy, namely the consolidation of Prime Minister Ramgoolam’s (political) power. According to this view he intends to take the wealth from the whites in order to distribute it to his own community and other proxies. With respect to this issue, repeated comparisons are made with Zimbabwe where Robert Mugabe expropriated the white farmers’ land, causing the free fall of the economy. Many Franco-Mauritians said that, in principle, they adhered to the idea of the democratisation of the economy, although this depended on what exactly this implied. They support the idea of sharing the cake out with everyone but oppose the idea of taking wealth from one person (Franco-Mauritians) and giving it to another (Ramgoolam’s cronies and supporters). Franco-Mauritian businessmen involved in the large business groups (the main targets of the ‘democratisation’ initiative) also say that there is already a fundamental democratisation in process: their businesses are listed and, thus, they argue, everyone can buy shares in them. (It should be noted however, as illustrated in Chapter Five, that in case these companies are listed they are still controlled by the Franco-Mauritians because they have the majority of controlling shares – this appears, therefore, to be somewhat of a non-argument.)

Politicians stress that their intentions are not ethnically motivated and argue that there is no white-bashing (*Week-End*, 27 May 2007). However, the problem remains that Franco-Mauritians still have an unequal share of the island’s wealth and the intended democratisation of the economy is thus easily ‘ethnicised’. This is comparable to the late 1970s and early 1980s

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Interview: Mauritius, 23 March 2006.
when, as Simmons argues, the MMM with its anti-capitalism rhetoric appeared anti-white not because it was anti-white but because most whites were capitalists (Simmons 1982: 195). It is, nevertheless, difficult to avoid resorting to exploiting resentment of the colonial origins of the Franco-Mauritian privileged position for political gain.

Suspect

As a retired Mauritian journalist once said, ‘both sides are suspect, the whites in the private sector and the Indians in the public sector.’ A common practice is to emphasise ethnicity in any discussion in order to divert it away from the ‘real’ issues. In this sense, the counterarguments of Franco-Mauritians and others alike almost seem like an excuse for inaction and for maintaining the status quo. Franco-Mauritians say they are in favour of true democratisation but by discrediting, correctly or not, the government’s intentions they end up not actually feeling any urge to oblige in this process. Playing the victim, however, appears to be a common strategy used by elites coming under siege from counter-elites. With regard to the situation in the Philippines, Billig writes, ‘[o]ne would think by talking to the planters that they are the much-beleaguered objects of government conspiracy to undermine them in every possible way’ (Billig 2003: 156) – even though this elite has a lot more political connections than the Franco-Mauritians do. In short, this is a practice to suggest absence of power. At the same time, though, this practice reinforces the perception among other Mauritians that Franco-Mauritians ‘do not want to share’, simply wanting to maintain their economic privileges at all costs. Ethnicity, clearly, is thus not only a structural phenomenon but as much a question of the agency of individuals (politicians and others alike), actively sustaining the role of ethnicity in Mauritian society.

Data also suggests that the government does, indeed, have its own agenda. The electoral campaign of 2005 and the attacks on Bérenger show how the present government, when it was in opposition, did use ‘white-bashing’ in order to gain votes. The present wish to decrease the Franco-Mauritians’ unequal share of the wealth, in the form of the so-called democratisation of the economy, is consequently perceived as electoral campaign rhetoric: ‘[l]e Premier ministre et son gouvernement seraient-ils perpétuellement en campagne électorale?’ (L’Express, 19 May 2007). Contradictory statements coming from the politicians involved further heighten these suspicions. One politician denied that the democratisation of the economy was ethnically driven: ‘Cette politique ne constitue pas une considération raciale et ethnique, un arbitraire idéologique ou une revanche sur l’histoire’ (L’Express, 26 May 2007). But another stated:

305 Interview: Mauritius, 9 June 2006.
306 Translation: ‘The Prime Minister and his government, are they on a never-ending electoral campaign?’
307 Translation: ‘This policy is not racially and ethnically based, nor based on an arbitrary ideology or revenge for past history’. 

242
Firstly, when the national economic development process started in the 1970s, the oligarchy, which was then mostly sugar-oriented, was the only social group which was in a position to invest in the new economic sectors and therefore to reap the benefits thereof. Secondly, this was obviously due to the then political and economic situation of that group - which was already dominant in the immediate wake of the socio-political and economic configuration of our specific colonial history (*Le Mauricien*, 28 May 2007)

And:

No economic democratisation policy can leave untouched the present pattern of land ownership, inherited from historical circumstances of inequality and dominance linked to the colonisation - slavery - coolie labour paradigm and subject to an unacceptable level of concentration of ownership. Therefore, the economic democratisation policy needs to address the land ownership/control and management issue as a matter of urgency (*Le Mauricien*, 28 May 2007)

Even Prime Minister Ramgoolam took an opportunity to associate Franco-Mauritian wealth with colonial injustices when he gave a speech at the British bicentenary celebration of the abolition of slavery in Hull in the United Kingdom:

In my own country, it has left us with a distribution of wealth that is still skewed in favour of those who benefited from slavery [emphasis added]. One of the legacies of slavery, that continues to hamper development, is the concentration of ownership of assets. This concentration is unfair in a way but also gives rise to misallocation and inefficiency in the utilisation of resources, and impedes growth. My Government is aiming to reform the national economic structure and open doors of opportunity to the population at large. We will achieve this by enlarging participation in mainstream activities and opening access to land ownership. As we see it, the key to economic democratisation is empowerment.308

From the above mentioned quotes it appears that the underlying idea is to offset the perceived ‘unfair heritage of the colonial period’. This shows how easily a situation can deteriorate into a blurred debate in which both sides have a point but are also equally suspect in terms of their motives. One of the rare good analyses of this matter is the following:

308 For a full transcription of the Prime Minister’s speech, see: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/pmsite/menutilm.ade81d8b85e53623040d013400b521ca/?content_id=a78c5c7483033110VgnVCM1000000a04a8c0RCRD [accessed: 18 September 2007]
Is it the fact that (a) too few large groups control too much? (b) that many large groups are Franco-Mauritian? or (c) that some Franco-Mauritian groups are perceived to have had an ‘unfair historical head-start’ through slavery and preferential land-ownership? Obviously, each is a subset of the other as not all large groups are Franco-Mauritian and not all Franco-Mauritian groups can be ‘accused’ of having been unfairly privileged.

Again, let us proceed by logical elimination. We would like to believe that our elected representatives are not racists so this eliminates (b). Option (c) might seem legitimate, but in the cold light of day, it would be devilishly hard to implement as policy; how far back in history does one go, how does one distinguish between wealth earned from the result of sweat and hard work and that received through patronage or favours many centuries back? Assuming that such historical fieldwork would not be possible, much less be used as a basis for important policy decisions, we are left with option (a) -- that economic power is too concentrated within large groups, irrespective of their race or the origin of their economic power (*Mauritius Times*, 25 May 2007).

Notwithstanding the expressed hope that ‘our elected representatives are not racists’ the quotes from the politicians show how they mainly focus on Franco-Mauritian business interests, something which fuels the perception of a power struggle. Historical resentment appears difficult to put aside as becomes apparent when we look at negotiations between the (Franco-Mauritian) sugar industry and the government.

*Pay Off*

Franco-Mauritians not only remain neutral in the public debate, they also stay behind closed doors. A Franco-Mauritian CEO said, ‘I was once invited after the elections to a meeting with the top of the Franco-Mauritian businessmen. They were discussing whether they were going to support the new government.’ However, according to him, these gatherings have now ceased to take place.\(^{309}\) It appears that among Franco-Mauritian businessmen a consensus opinion has gradually developed that it is best to support the government in place and remain neutral during the electoral campaign – these men have most likely also learnt from the fact that often after campaigns filled with ethnic resentment the government comes back for business as usual and co-operates with the private sector.

But throughout independence a pattern of applying economic power in the form of financial contributions and donations paid by Franco-Mauritian businesses to government related projects has emerged as a form of *realpolitik*. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI),

\(^{309}\) Interview: Mauritius, 31 January 2006.
although it is a politicised institute, is situated on a plot of land donated to the government by a large Franco-Mauritian business group.\textsuperscript{310} In general, Franco-Mauritian businesses make approximately equal payments to the different (large) political parties (see also Handley 2008: 123). In the past these donations were not officially declared, something which led to a system with a marked lack of transparency. Donations were paid under the table in ways which could amount to corruption. A significant number of old and recent cases of corruption involving politicians and Franco-Mauritian businessmen and related companies still regularly come to light. However, any real and definitive insight into the scale and impact of corruption is hard to obtain.\textsuperscript{311} Today financial donations are made more in the open and one of the largest Franco-Mauritian controlled business groups even published details of their donations to political parties in their annual report in 2006.

The sugar industry appears particularly vulnerable to government pressure due to its (symbolic) associations with the colonial period, land possessions and Franco-Mauritian domination. In 2005, for example, the European Commission’s ending of the system of preferential prices for Mauritian sugar plunged the sugar industry into a recession. Reform was required which would involve the closing of mills and, subsequently, social programmes for the laid-off workers – in these cases the government often demands land from the sugar industry to bring these social programmes to a successful conclusion. Initially, a deal was struck between the sugar industry’s owners, the government and the EC (which was willing to financially contribute to the reform). But the government stalled and brought the issue back to the negotiation table, demanding extra compensation of 2,000 \textit{arpents} (one \textit{arpent}, an old French unit for measuring land, is about half a hectare) to be paid by the sugar industry for social projects, as it considered the deal to be too advantageous for the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry. It also wanted electricity plants affiliated to the sugar mills (these plants partly run on bagasse, a by-product of sugarcane production) to cede some of their shares and to decrease the price of electricity. This would, according to the government, compensate for the (allegedly) exorbitant profits they had made on the backs of the Mauritian electricity users – interestingly it was under the previous government

\textsuperscript{310} In an article published in \textit{Le Matinal} (3 March 2008), a pro-Labour Party daily newspaper, the writer’s reference to the donation made by the (Franco-Mauritian) sugar-estate had been deleted and instead changed to ‘the MGI was built on a vast terrain.’ Apparently, the editor of the article considered it better not to show the relationship between the government and Franco-Mauritian donations too openly.

\textsuperscript{311} One view, though hard to prove, is that the consolidation of Franco-Mauritian privileges also relates to corrupt relationships with politicians: the Franco-Mauritian businesses pay politicians and civil servants secretly - almost as employees - in order to guarantee a smooth working relationship with the public sector. Obviously, the backroom nature of corruption makes it hard to study. Most likely there has been corruption, yet with an increasing focus on corporate governance among, especially, the listed companies this is most likely on the decrease – now companies have to state their financial contributions to the political parties more openly. Besides, it appears that corruption has never been to such an extent as to make it the main factor for the continuity of Franco-Mauritian economic privileges.
headed by Prime Minister Ramgoolam that contracts were signed between the state Central Electricity Board and the sugar industry.

The result of all this was deadlock with the owners accusing the government of making excessive demands and not respecting the rules of fair play: at no point had the extra compensation been brought up in the (initial) deal and then when this had already been all agreed the government came up with this jack in the box. The government was also accused of having an ethnically motivated agenda (Week-End, 4 November 2007) designed to offset the unfair heritage of the past. The government, on the other hand, blamed the industry for trying to avoid its social responsibilities (Le Mauricen, 9 June 2007). For other politicians this scenario provided a good opportunity to raise the issue of the unequal distribution of land.

In the end the Franco-Mauritians had to give in to the government pressure. Then the government came back with yet more additional demands. Again, the sugar industry said it could not possibly meet these demands before eventually agreeing to satisfy a substantial part of them. The two sides subsequently came to an agreement. The final result: the sugar industry gave 2,000 arpents of land for social programmes and opened up thirty-five percent of the shareholding of the mills – the government demanded forty percent and the industry was initially only willing to give thirty percent (L’Express 6 December 2007). These shares were, however, not given for free as the government had demanded. And tricky issues like shareholding and other matters relating to the electricity plants were postponed until a later date in order to safeguard the EC’s financial contribution to the restructuring programme since the EC demanded that the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry and the government come to an agreement (L’Express, 15 May 2007) – someone involved actually considered that the EC had been effectively taken hostage by means of a local feud between the two parties.\textsuperscript{312} It was obvious that the Franco-Mauritians and the government were highly dependent on each other and needed to come to an agreement, however, even though the Franco-Mauritians eventually got the short end of the stick. Briefly put, mobilisation of political power by the government through its privileged access to political resources is difficult to stop by Franco-Mauritians and their economic power resources – in this case only ceding resources (land) appeared to help.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Mauritian economy nowadays relies far less on the sugar industry than before, since agriculture, of which around half is sugarcane-related, now makes up only six percent of Mauritian GDP,\textsuperscript{313} the issue reinforced the perception that the Franco-Mauritian ‘sugar barons’ dominated the private sector and that ‘private sector’ essentially meant ‘white’ (Le Mauricen, 7 June 2007). This symbolism was to the advantage of the

\textsuperscript{312} Interview: Belgium, 18 March 2008.
government when it was stressing its demands. Clearly, the sugar industry, despite its resistance, came out second best here: it had to give in to most of the government’s demands even though it had initially said that it could not comply with these. Hence, this was clearly a challenge to Franco-Mauritian economic power even though it also enhanced solidarity among Franco-Mauritians. Businessmen as well as other people who were not involved in the negotiations and who had little interest in the sugar industry took a stand for it anyway and often used the same counter-arguments that they used against the democratisation of the economy: ‘the government is not interested in using the land demanded for social reform but would distribute it among its friends and proxies.’

Responses from the Heart

The limited response of Franco-Mauritians to attacks on their interests surprised Mauritians. A Mauritian writing a letter to the editor wondered how Creoles, Muslims or Hindus would have reacted had they been attacked in the same manners as the Franco-Mauritians were. According to this person the whole Franco-Mauritian community was being hounded for the sins of the past (Le Mauricien, 11 May 2007). At one point, however, some Franco-Mauritians did feel that they could not remain silent any longer and deviated from their strategy of keeping a low public profile. Notably the campement issue, the demands for the democratisation of the economy (up to now nothing substantial has been implemented that actually jeopardises Franco-Mauritian economic power), and the sugar reform were perceived as serious challenges to the Franco-Mauritian elite position, which contrary to their normal practice of maintaining a low profile in public debate, urged them to defend themselves more openly.

One of these people was the Franco-Mauritian politician Eric Guimbeau, a politician with relatively little influence compared to Bérenger since the political party he belongs to has only two parliamentary seats. At one point this party joined the Labour Party-led government alliance, although the two of them then resigned because they disagreed with certain government allied politicians’ verbal charges made against the Franco-Mauritian community (L’Express, 16 and 18 September 2007). Guimbeau clearly took a stand against certain politicians by defending Franco-Mauritians – interestingly, Paul Bérenger largely held his tongue in this respect. Guimbeau said, ‘the politicians who attack the whites want to kick them out [of Mauritius] and take their place. It’s revenge for the past.’ ‘But we’, he continued, ‘have created a lot of work and invested a lot in Mauritius. The companies are at the stock exchange, so everyone can buy shares.’ The reference to ‘we’ here is interesting because it refers to the Franco-Mauritians, when the politician in

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314 The letter-to-the-editor was a reply on the foreman of the Green Party, which is not part of the government. However, it happened in the whole context of the ‘white-bashing’ and, therefore, is illustrative for the situation.
question was not elected by Franco-Mauritians only. Moreover, he said, ‘I would be the first one to approve of the democratisation [of the economy], but this is not about real democratisation. The sugar estates have always accepted their social responsibility but with the government’s demand for the 2,000 arpents this no longer has any logic.’

Regarding the campements, Guimbeau also used the widely shared Franco-Mauritian argument that nobody wanted the land at the time and that now that it had increased in value the government wanted to reclaim it. Frequently he and other Mauritians referred to Zimbabwe where white-owned land has been expropriated. Lobbying in the interests of the campement owners does not create support beyond the Franco-Mauritian community and a few other Mauritian campement owners. In a way comparable to the pre-independence period, Guimbeau talked about the unification of the Creoles and the whites – he tapped into the, at that time, widely campaigned on issue concerning the official recognition of the Creoles within the Mauritian constituency (instead of being termed ‘General Population’). This appears to only represent a change of name but Eric Guimbeau presented it differently: ‘the government is trying to divide the Creoles and the whites. But the Creoles see they have to be with the whites, because they help them and the Hindu public sector doesn’t.’ This is a reference to Franco-Mauritian companies employing Creoles and it assumes that the latter should be thankful for being employed by the Franco-Mauritians. This comment gained Eric Guimbeau much support among the Franco-Mauritians but probably did little for his popularity with other Mauritians since he had moved towards defending specific Franco-Mauritian interests. However, Guimbeau was not sure whether the Franco-Mauritian businessmen were very pleased with his politics, saying, ‘the possédants [i.e. the economically powerful businessmen] want to be on good terms with the government because they need them. They are a bit apart.’

Anxiety and anger among the Franco-Mauritian community did indeed lead to more Franco-Mauritians openly responding to the government’s alleged ‘white-bashing’. A special radio emission was devoted to the debate about the democratisation of the economy and the alleged white-bashing on 13 June 2007. This was like a public relations exercise offensive to alter the perceptions of the Franco-Mauritians, stressing their Mauritianness. This could be compared to the Jamaican case:

Many Jamaicans presume that whites are racists and unpatriotic, that they spend all of their time in Miami and London and that they are not ‘real’ Jamaicans at all. Others, especially

315 Interview: Mauritius, 12 October 2007.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
those who knew some members of the prominent families, have more sympathetic and respectful views (Douglass 1992: 54).

Most Mauritians who personally know Franco-Mauritians also tend to be much milder about them and are aware of differences between individual members of the group – it should be noted, however, that many of the Mauritians who have befriended Franco-Mauritians have similar class and educational backgrounds. These people often criticise the structure and socio-cultural patterns of the Franco-Mauritian community but hold little against the individuals they know personally. They do, however, argue that when socialising with befriended Franco-Mauritians one often ends up in a circle predominantly made up of Franco-Mauritians with few other Mauritians.

But out of the island’s total population, the Mauritians who personally know Franco-Mauritians are few and far between. It also emerged that the Franco-Mauritians and the radio producers of the 13 June 2007 transmission believed that many Mauritians have little knowledge of Franco-Mauritians other than that they are economically powerful. In the radio emission language and food habits, amongst other things, were brought to the forefront – everyday practices to do with culture in other words. The two Franco-Mauritian guests in the studio and most Franco-Mauritian interviewees spoke Kreol, for example, avoiding the negative connotations and symbolic superiority related to their mother tongue, French. Apart from the above, a Franco-Mauritian family was also interviewed at home to give an impression of Franco-Mauritian family life – one of the studio guests and some interviewees also stressed that they eat **farrata, carry, and piments**. With their comments on language and food they wanted to make it clear that ‘we are as Mauritian as you are’.

The perception among Franco-Mauritians was (logically) that ‘we have to stand up for our rights, as the government is after us.’ Pressure on them had mounted to such an extent that they considered this situation to be different. In retrospect Franco-Mauritians may, however, perceive this differently: as in the past government pressure has calmed down again and the democratisation of the economy has become a less urgent item on the political agenda. In the process, though, the Franco-Mauritians may have lost some of their power and have had to accept new government demands, such as the recent policy regarding the **campements**. They may have been weakened, then, but they are still very much a socio-economic elite and their (elite) solidarity has once again been reinforced.

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318 These are national Mauritian dishes and chillies.


8.4 Conclusion

The current situation of the Franco-Mauritians shows how a number of their symbolic markers of elite distinction are not only remarkably functional in maintaining elite cohesion but make them vulnerable at the same time. Their white skin-colour coupled to memories of the past and to their present economic power is a fact so symbolically charged that Franco-Mauritians become an easy target for politicians trying to mobilise support. Not only Franco-Mauritians use the past to (symbolically) distinguish themselves from most other Mauritians, then; other Mauritians also use history against the Franco-Mauritians for a variety of purposes. Paul Bérenger, for that matter, is a perfect example of the inextricably complex nature of political and economic power, Franco-Mauritian symbolic elite distinction and the present-day Mauritian political spectrum.

The relationship between the Franco-Mauritians and the government has remained paradoxical as it entails rivalry as well as ways of collaborating. Moreover, (verbal) attacks on the Franco-Mauritians come and go. These attacks are not made all the time, though they are always latently present and Franco-Mauritians often have to use their economic power defensively by ‘offering’ the government land in exchange for a ‘return to normalcy’, for example. In the power struggle between Mauritian politicians and Franco-Mauritians both sides, as the retired journalist cited above correctly points out, are to blame for certain problems. Franco-Mauritians are few in number and associating them with slavery has, in my opinion, more to do with symbolism than to do with the fact that the heritage of slavery has really had a significant impact on their current position (although one could agree with the idea of a legacy of structural advantage for Franco-Mauritians coming as a consequence of the past colonial system). This political rhetoric nevertheless has a problematic impact. Political smear campaigns and ‘white-bashing’ easily discredit politicians (and their authority) even when some of their suggestions can be ‘objectively’ justified.

The structural phenomenon of ethnicity in Mauritian society, with its function of consolidation the Franco-Mauritian sense of belonging and their economic privileges, also contributes to the complexity. Not only do politicians use this phenomenon to their advantage, it also always gives others a ‘weapon’ for objecting to (policy) change. Franco-Mauritians do sometimes resist (often through discourse) and do try to change the course of events. Their (ethnic) rhetoric helps to a certain extent when resisting challenges to their elite position. Franco-Mauritians argue that they would agree to a more equal distribution of wealth if this was not only to the advantage of the politicians suggesting the new distribution. In short, disqualifying opponents by saying that they are driven by ethnic prejudices helps Franco-Mauritians to maintain the status quo, whatever the merits of the opponents’ arguments. In this respect,
agency, and not only ‘structure’, clearly contributes to the continuity of the role of ethnicity in Mauritian society. It should be admitted here, though, that Franco-Mauritians may feel genuinely victimised, as do many other Mauritians. The structural phenomenon of ethnicity in Mauritius has left such a mark on society that the frame of reference of many Mauritians is highly influenced by it.