

Lessons of losing power: Grenada's New Jewel Movement

In October 1983 a US force of 80 000 marines invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada bringing to an abrupt end the five year revolutionary experiment of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) led by Maurice Bishop. Although condemned by anti-imperialist and progressive forces world-wide, the American invasion was apparently welcomed by wide sections of the Grenadan population. DIDACUS JULES, Deputy Secretary for Education in the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of Grenada, 1979-83, spoke to Barbara Creecy* about the lessons of losing power in Grenada.

For 25 years prior to 1979, Grenada was governed by Eric Gairy who assumed leadership of the 1951 revolution when the masses rose against the bad working conditions they faced. Although he was initially popularly elected, Gairy degenerated into a despot using repression and superstition to remain in power.

In the early 1970s, the Caribbean, influenced by the upheavals in the United States, was swept by a wave of Black Power. To many young Caribbean intellectuals, Black Power meant more than just putting black faces in office. For them, it had a class content which involved



*Grenada in the Caribbean
in relation to the USA*

questioning who were the black faces in office and whether they were serving the interests of the black masses.

There were a number of independent community-based militant youth organisations. One such was the Movement for the Assemblies of the People which had a black-power-cum-socialist orientation, partly influenced by Tanzania's Ujamaa socialism. There was also an organisation called the JEWEL (Joint Movement for Education Welfare and Liberation).

These were pressure groups raising critical questions about the path of development in the country,

* Barbara Creecy works for the Human Awareness Programme (HAP), in Johannesburg, coordinating a project which trains education officers in trade unions, community and political groups.

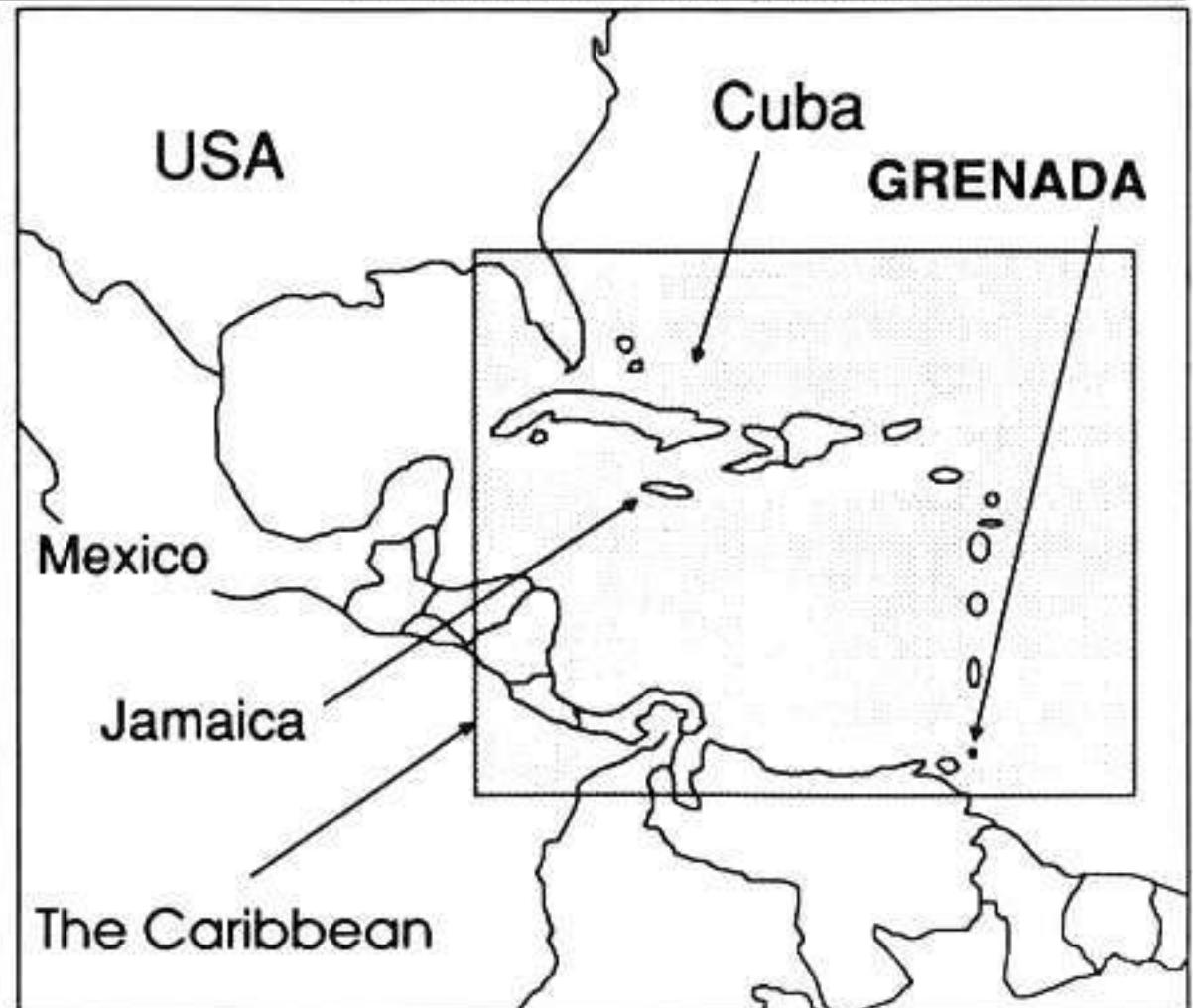
and looking for answers based on a nationalist pro-black majority perspective. Disturbed about foreign control of the Caribbean economies, they were also anti-imperialist. These organisations finally merged, in 1970, and called themselves the New Jewel Movement (NJM). The NJM took a more overtly political role by beginning to oppose the Gairy regime.

Rise of the New Jewel Movement

The movement articulated the need for a broader democracy, the widespread demand for social services, and an economy that was in the hands of the masses. The NJM rapidly gained a great following in the country. It also had a fearless leadership which was prepared to oppose the repressive forces of the regime.

In 1973 the New Jewel Movement won a number of seats in parliament and Maurice Bishop became the leader of the official parliamentary opposition. The Gairy regime reacted by further eroding parliament as a forum for democratic expression. When parliament was arbitrarily suspended, the NJM prepared to carry on the struggle on all fronts, including an armed seizure of power, if necessary.

In the early hours of 13 March 1973, the NJM attacked the army headquarters and the radio station. It issued a call for the masses to come out into the streets, to take control of their com-



Country profile

Grenada is a small country, 200 sq miles in area, with a population of about 110 000 people. A further 300 000 live outside Grenada, seeking employment in other Caribbean Islands [see map], the United States, Canada and Britain.

The economy of the country is based on agricultural production, with three main crops for export - bananas, nutmeg and cocoa. It is thus vulnerable to changes in international commodity prices at any given point in time. It is also very vulnerable to natural disasters, such as hurricanes.

Grenada has the largest peasantry in the English-speaking Caribbean. There is almost no industrialisation (except a few assembly-type factories) and the largest plantations are foreign-owned. Nonetheless, foreign penetration of Grenada has not been as deep as in other parts of the Caribbean. ❖

munities, arrest agents of the regime and ensure the surrender of police and military posts in their communities. The people responded, and that led to the consolidation of the revolution.

Achievements of the revolution

The New Jewel Movement established a broad-based

revolutionary government that immediately put into effect certain decrees. It promised the speedy return of the country to democratic elections and guaranteed the protection of human rights. Particular attention was paid to the rights of women workers and to women's democratic participation in the affairs of the country.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government also immediately repealed the most repressive laws that had been passed by the Gairy regime.

The effect of the post-revolutionary decrees was to create a certain amount of democratic space. People felt free to organise and to express themselves. These initiatives were encouraged. A number of spontaneous initiatives were taken by the people. For example, people got together in a collective way to clean up their communities, and to repair public facilities and roads.

Democracy was an important promise of the government. The policy of NJM was that the British parliamentary system should be transformed into a more participatory system of government. They believed that the people should have a more active say in the formulation of policy.

The New Jewel Movement began setting up 'zonal' councils in the regions where the people could discuss problems of their communities as well as national problems, and hold dialogue with the leadership.

In the councils, the people expressed many needs which later became concrete programmes of the revolution. There was a strong call for transformation in education (especially the upgrading of teacher training and the organisation of a national literacy campaign) and the creation of a national transport service.

Democratic consultation on economic planning

Following the inherited British tradition, the budget was a national secret until presented in parliament. One of the big changes made by the Grenada revolution was to completely change that procedure.

Firstly, the Ministry of Planning prepared a review of the national economy based on information they had collected. That review, together with certain guidelines, was sent to the cabinet for its consideration so that it could follow up some of the different options.

The review was then discussed in a number of workshops, using the village and zonal councils. People at

this level thus had the same opportunity to hear about the condition of the national economy and what the government was considering for the coming year. The people had the opportunity for feedback on these options, and to make further recommendations and suggestions.

There was then a National Conference of Delegates on the Economy where every sector was represented - women, youth, and other mass organisations - as well as community representation. In the third year of the revolution, there was even representation by age with specific representation of senior citizens.

At the National Conference of Delegates on the

Economic strategy of the New Jewel Movement

The economic policy of the NJM was constrained by the reality it inherited. The Provisional Revolutionary government declared the economy to be a mixed economy with the state sector dominant. It was felt that this was the only realistic way the country could go because it needed foreign expertise and investment. Three hundred years of colonial capitalism had not produced an answer to underdevelopment.

There were three aspects to the NJM policy. The first was the creation of a strong state sector, reserving for the state national transportation, utilities, and the banking sector.

The second aspect was the promotion of the private sector within certain limits and within a published investment code. This gave priority to local investors over foreign investors and provided concessions for labour-intensive projects which made extensive use of local investment.

The third was the encouragement of a co-operative sector especially in agriculture. To make this a reality, the government created the National Agency for Co-operative Development which provided finance and training for young people wanting to go into agriculture or into the formation of co-operatives. ❖

Land and agricultural policy

During the 60s and 70s, the Gairy regime had seized large estates claiming that it was going to give land to the landless. This did not happen. The land was kept by the regime or given to its supporters. After the revolution, all the land that had been seized by the Gairy regime was taken over. There was no need to appropriate further land because the state had enough land.

The revolutionary government established a land reform commission whose task was to go around all the communities in the country, looking into the availability of land and identifying idle land. The PRG then passed a land reform law which called for all idle land to be put into production. Failure to do so would result in the government leasing the land from the owners and sub-leasing it to producers. In certain cases the law allowed for land expropriation. This was a cautious approach to the land, but one which allowed for idle land to come into production. The slogan for this campaign was "idle land plus idle hands equals production."

There was a discussion on land nationalisation. It was felt that this does not necessarily lead to the results hoped for, because you need people with experience in running farms. Greater yields from the land are wanted and this requires expertise not just from the managers, but from the workers themselves. This was one of the tremendous weaknesses that we had.

The basis of the Grenadan economy was agriculture and we needed to export agricultural products to earn foreign exchange. So we could not afford to alienate the most productive farmers. One of the programmes which the PRG had was to provide encouragement to local farmers to produce more.

At the same time, there was a need for land for the landless and justice for farmworkers. To do this, the government tried to progressively ameliorate the conditions of workers by establishing a minimum wage for agricultural workers, ensuring the right to unionisation, and combating the exploitation of women on farms by establishing equal pay for equal work. The government also set up a commission of enquiry where conditions on farms were considered intolerable.

About three years into the revolution the Centre for Popular Education planned to give all workers on these farms accelerated agricultural training and improve their technical capacity. One of the things that the government did on the state owned farms was to encourage a system of profit sharing. Once a farm was able to break even, a third of the profits went to the workers, a third went to the national treasury and a third was re-invested in the farm.

The demand for nationalisation was based on the need for employment and a better quality of life. Once people saw that these were being met, they no longer saw that nationalisation was that necessary. ❖

Economy, a draft budget was presented based on the zonal discussions. The national conference delegates discussed and make further recommendations, so that by the time the national budget was finalised, a very large cross-section of the country had had a chance to make an input into that debate. All the recommendations were then compiled by the ministry and submitted to the cabinet for its final consideration.

Because the budget is such an important instrument of political and economic policy, people had an opportunity to make an impact in a real way. As a result, many things that became part of economic policy were recommendations from the people. One example was taxes on luxury goods, an increase in the welfare allowance and tax relief and exemption for old and retired people.

Sectoral mass consultations

In addition to these regional consultations, the New Jewel Movement also had sector-specific forums: women, youth, workers and farmers councils where these people could express their needs according to their sectors.

Before the revolution of 13 March, trade unions were the main form of mass organisation in Grenada. But these had become ineffectual under the Gairy regime. The Grenada Manual and Mental Workers Union, for example, was Gairy's creation. It did

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express the wishes of agricultural workers and other workers in the 1950s, but by the 1970s that union had become a shell of its former self and was simply a lackey of the regime. There was a need for autonomous unions that could defend workers from a rapacious black bourgeoisie. In that context, the NJM moved to organise

workers.

They made a significant breakthrough in organising workers into the Bank and General Workers Union. However, official recognition of the union was never granted until after 13 March.

Youth and women's organisations were non-existent before the revolution. The NJM had tried to

start youth and women's organisations before the revolution but, because of the repression, this was very difficult to get off the ground.

It was limited to only the most militant sectors of those social groups. So mass organisations only blossomed after the revolution. ♦

The revolution commits suicide

These radical experiments in new forms of popular consultative democracy, economic change and educational reform, were watched with interest by progressive groups elsewhere in the Caribbean. They also caused concern in the ruling elites that had developed in the Caribbean islands after independence. Above all, imperialist interests were soon accusing the NJM of turning Grenada into 'another Cuba' in the Caribbean. The United States was looking for a pretext to overturn the Grenadan revolution. Unfortunately that opening was provided by developments within the New Jewel Movement itself. Didacus Jules explains.

There are many views on what went wrong and even those of us who were involved in the process are really not sure exactly which analysis is correct.

Generally speaking, what happened during 1983 was that disagreements existed for some time within the Central Committee of the NJM. However, even members of the party were unaware of the existence of these problems.

These disagreements led,

some time later in 1983, to a proposal within the Central Committee for the establishment of a joint leadership structure.

The feeling was that Maurice Bishop, excellent a Prime Minister as he was, had certain weaknesses which should be counter-balanced by the appointment of a co-leader within the party. Bernard Coard, his Deputy Prime-Minister, who was widely seen within the party

as being the main ideologue, was proposed as joint leader.

Agreements were reached and then broken over the question of the joint leadership. Some people see the whole thing as a conspiracy by the Coard faction to assume control over the revolutionary government. In some quarters it has been compared to the so-called Escalante Affair in Cuba.*

What is clear is that Maurice Bishop accused

* On the other hand, another perspective was that there was no real conspiracy but that what happened was the escalation of an internal leadership conflict which assumed crisis proportions.

Tribute to the resistance of Grenadan soldiers

There was very stiff resistance to the American invasion by soldiers of the Grenadan revolutionary army. It took a long time for the US to occupy Grenada. Over 80 000 American marines were involved in trying to conquer a small country of 110 000 people, with a fighting force which was reduced, by then, to 2 500 soldiers using obsolete weapons against an advanced super power.

Despite what happened on the 4 October, history should record the fact that Grenadan soldiers defended the sovereignty of their country. We must pay tribute to the bravery of these young Grenadan soldiers who did not necessarily believe in what the Central Committee had done, or what had happened on the 4 October, but who thought it simply wrong that an external power should land its forces on their shores. Many died for their bravery. ❖

members of the Central Committee of wanting to have him killed. Because of his enormous popularity amongst the masses, the reaction of the people was immediate. This led to Bishop being placed under house arrest by the Central Committee.

That agitated the masses further. So a stalemate developed between the Central Committee on the one hand, who had by then assumed control over the armed forces; and Maurice Bishop, some followers and the masses on the other hand.

Neither side would compromise on their respective positions. On 4 October 1983 the people moved in a decisive way to free Bishop from house arrest, declaring that the will of the people should supersede the will of the party. He was freed from house arrest and

proceeded with some supporters to occupy the main military installations in the capital. A battalion from the army came to regain control and in the process many people were killed.

Again there are many versions of this tragic event. One version is that the army fired first on the people. Another version is that the people fired first and the army responded. Whatever the truth of the matter, a massacre took place on the 4 October and Maurice Bishop and several key supporters were taken alive, lined up against a wall and shot.

That evening a broadcast was made by what was known as the Revolutionary Military Council, consisting of several members of the former Central Committee of the NJM. They claimed that

Maurice Bishop and several followers had been killed in the cross fire.

They also instituted a 72-hour shoot-to-kill curfew. At that moment the Grenada revolution had effectively committed suicide because they had totally lost sight of who the enemy was.

These events gave Washington the pretext it was looking for. Within days, the United States had staged its invasion of the country. Ironically, many Grenadans welcomed the American invasion. Many people wonder how that could have been. How could there be a popular revolutionary process in place for almost five years, and the masses of the people welcome an invading counter-revolutionary force?

The truth of the matter is to understand, I think, the trauma that the Grenadan people had experienced in October. They had gone through a fundamental experience of betrayal by leaders whom they had trusted, believed in and followed. So that even those who had been labelled enemies of the people by those leaders could then be seen as the saviours of the people.

They saw no future in the Revolutionary Military Council. They knew that the revolution had been destroyed. They saw the brutality that took place on the 4 October and they really feared for their future. In that context one can understand their welcoming the Americans.

The main errors of the NJM

Didacus Jules argues that there are a number of reasons for the ultimate failure of the New Jewel Movement. The rejection of parliamentary democracy and the failure to establish an alternative democratic constitution meant that the rule of the party became the law of the land. The people were consulted but they did not hold power.

Rejecting parliamentary democracy

The first thing was that the NJM made a serious miscalculation in imposing an ideological model which did not take account of some of the traditions of the people themselves. By that I mean that there had always been a very strong critique in Caribbean left circles of the inadequacy of the British 'Westminster' type of democracy.

But, in criticising the British model of parliamentary democracy, the NJM failed to recognise sufficiently that parliamentary democracy was not just something that had been imposed by the colonial power. The parliamentary system was based on universal adult suffrage (one person one vote).

This was a result of the struggle of the Caribbean working people for the right to representation.

So, while there are many criticisms that can be made of the Westminster parliamentary model, the fact of the matter is that the right to vote and to choose their own government was something that was won as a result of very intense struggles by the Caribbean people in the 1950's.

One could not sweep that experience under the carpet and get rid of the whole parliamentary democracy system, without putting in its place a superior form of democracy which maintained some of the better features of parliamentary democracy. Although the people of Grenada were very happy to be part of the zonal councils and the new forms of democratic expression, the fact of the matter is that people still wanted to maintain the right to elect a government of their choice.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government was criticised by many people in the region, including the Caribbean council of churches, for its failure to hold elections, and that contributed to the problem. There is no question from anyone, even opponents of the revolution, that if the PRG had held free and open elections, the NJM would have won hands down. There was a plan to have an election for a constituent assembly after the completion of the constitu-

tion. But there was never that opportunity.

"Dictates of the party became the law of the land"

What happened was that the dictates of the party became the law of the land in practice. Although the party created democratic space and there was a lot of democratic expression amongst the masses, the fact is that all of these expressions did not become fixed or channelled as the supreme law of the land. In effect it was a one party state.

The one other party which did exist was the Grenada National Party (GNP) which had not actively campaigned against the Gairy regime before the revolution. The result was that, after the revolution, the people did not support them and chased them off the platform. They said that - now that the revolution had come - the GNP were taking advantage of space that they had not helped to win. This was also one of the errors of the NJM in not deploring that kind of behaviour. They should have allowed for a political pluralism that would permit the expression of alternative views.

Failure to institutionalise participatory democracy

In retrospect one of the great mistakes of the revolution was that the party did not do more to draw up a constitution that would institutionalise the role and

powers of the new democratic bodies. The zonal structures did give suggestions for laws which were passed by decree. For example, equal pay for equal work, and maternity leave law were things which came from the demands of women. However, the structures in themselves were not law making structures.

The procedure for law-making was through decree by the revolutionary government. This is what I mean when I say that these structures were not law-making structures. They were only consultation structures, with no power above the party to make laws.

This meant that, when the crisis came in 1983, there were no procedures in place to deal with differences which emerged at the top level of government. So that, although the experience of the Grenada revolution was very rich in terms of experimentation in democratic forms, the failure of the process was that, when it really mattered in the end, this process was not used to resolve the conflict.

It was the aim of the revolution to institutionalise these structures but this had not happened by the time the crisis erupted. In August 1983, Maurice Bishop announced the formation of a constitutional committee which was to look at the experiences and experiments of the revolution and draw up a new constitution after consultation with the mass organisations. The process

had begun but it was overtaken by the crisis itself.

One of the lessons of the Grenada experience is that revolutions need to move to institutionalise participatory democracy in the shortest possible time. Even though we recognise that the quick institutionalisation of a system will not necessarily yield the best results, we need to recognise that democracy is a system which can only improve on itself. The more opportunities people have to have a say, the more democracy becomes strengthened and the better the form of democracy that will eventually evolve. The people themselves, through their participation, will have had a say over the shaping of the final form.

Fratricidal strife within the leadership

The other aspect is that one has to recognise that the Grenada revolution effectively committed suicide by its handling of the events in 1983. The fact that the revolution degenerated into fratricide meant that it created a very traumatic experience for the people. The confidence of the people was destroyed.

The left in the Caribbean, as a whole, has taken a lot of blows because of that. I think that, while people have had that taste of a new type of democracy, they are still cynical of the way in which what they see as an external ideology degenerated and yielded such a result.

The fundamental promise

of the revolution had been broken, namely that the army would never be used against the masses and that the weapons would never be turned against the people. The will of the masses, which had been spoken about so much during the whole of the revolutionary process, and which in many other instances had reigned supreme, was clearly flouted. It was subordinated not just to the will of the party, but to the will of a very powerful minority within the party.

An "advanced vanguard" should never "supersede the will of the people"

There are certain lessons which need to be learned from the Grenadan revolution. No matter how wonderful a leadership may be, no matter how democratic they may be in allowing expression of ideas, the important thing is that there must be procedures and structures that allow for the people's voice to be heard. The will of no party should ever supersede the will of the people in the country.

No matter how politically advanced a vanguard may think they are, if they are too far ahead of people then they degenerate into ultra-leftism. They take decisions which are not agreed on by the people, and which lay the basis for their alienation from the people. In that case, they cease to be a leadership, and that leads to the demise of the revolution. ☆