

Jamaica: New Prime Minister - new era?

Rachel Brooks Mon, 09/01/2012 - 14:42

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Despite having relative independence, it is often forgotten that Jamaica is part of the British Commonwealth. The Queen remains the Jamaican head of state, and the final court of appeal in the country - the judicial committee of the privy council - is a group of judges from the UK's supreme court. The legacy of colonialism and white domination of Jamaica is still very much in place in the country.

However, all this could change if the newly elected Prime Minister's words are anything to go by. Portia Simpson Miller, representing the social democratic People's National Party, has this week declared that she thinks that it is high time that Jamaica became a republic. Whilst flattering the Queen's 'beauty and wisdom', Miller suggested that it was time that Jamaica completed the road to independence and become a republic. The queen is currently represented in Jamaica by a governor-general who exercises all of her powers, including appointing the Prime Minister and selecting commissioners for important positions. Miller's proposal represents a potential move to the left in Jamaican politics. During the election debates she opposed the Jamaican Labour Party's (a conservative political party with some links to the Labour Movement) former Prime Minister's claim that he would never allow a homosexual man or woman in to his cabinet. Jamaica has been dubbed 'the most homophobic country in the world', with regular assaults and even anti-Gay killings taking place, with little police response to the crimes. Miller's openness to accept homosexuality as a fact of life is a brave move politically, especially during an election. Miller's political project is, as some commentators have noted, to bring together the nationalists, the republicans and the human rights activists.

As impressive as Miller's party is being right now, it must not be forgotten how incredibly poor Jamaica is, and decades of plundering the country's resources by the imperialist west and local elites, have left its people living in shanty towns with poor health care and education opportunities. As many studies into homophobia in Jamaica have concluded, the hatred of homosexuals comes from a lifetime of an entire nation being kept in gross poverty. Independence from the UK would be a positive shift, however it does not solve the issue of lifting millions of Jamaicans out of poverty.

The danger is that the progressive statements that she is making threaten to detract from a policy agenda which seems bereft of real ideas to deal with the urgent social situation in her country. In her inaugural address she promised to "ease the burdens and pressures of increasing poverty, joblessness and a deteriorating standard of living". But she has also committed her government to a 'tight fiscal policy' and to increase payments on international debt. Working class Jamaicans are within their rights to ask, will she be another Obama figure, promising hope and change, but delivering nothing meaningful?

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