

Exclusive interview with President James A. Michel ahead of National Day 2010

'We stand proud among the nations of the world'

On the eve of our National Day, President James Michel speaks to *Seychelles Nation* on a wide range of important issues. The following are excerpts from the interview.

♦ **Mr President, on the eve of the anniversary of our National Day, how do you feel?**

Our National Day is always the occasion when we reflect on things that bring us together as a nation. Every National Day I have a sense of pride at how we have built up our small, prosperous nation from a former colony, dependent on others, to a united people that has firmly grasped its destiny and is determined to succeed. As a people, we have proved our resilience in the face of adversity, we have the will and courage to succeed, and today we stand proud among the nations of the world.

♦ **You have always insisted that ministries, departments, organisations be more open to the public and move closer to them. Do you feel that they have succeeded in doing so?**

I am the kind of person who is never satisfied. A lot has been done to bring government closer to the people. I personally, and other ministries as well, have had district meetings with the idea of bringing the government closer to people – making people more aware of how government is working – and so we can know more about the needs and hopes of the people.

But I think there are still occasions when service delivery is not up to standard, and when government has to do more to try to bring a better service to the people. This is what I keep telling ministries we must do our utmost to achieve. I think we have done a lot to reach this objective, but I think a lot more has to be done to improve on it and to bring a better service.

♦ **When you initiated the economic reform, you said one of your main priorities was to lower the cost of living. Although the reforms are on track, there is a general feeling that we are yet to see tangible results as far as the cost of living is concerned. What are your comments?**

When prices go up everybody feels it, but when prices go down it is hardly noticed. Having said that, I will always be searching for ways to bring down the cost of living. When we started the reforms, the changes meant that the cost of living went up drastically, interest rates went up, the value of the rupee depreciated and it was necessary for us to remove subsidies on various services that the government was providing.

As a result it was very difficult for people, and this is why we had to set up the welfare agency that would help people who were affected by the high cost of living. But I think as the reform has succeeded, we have seen that the high cost of living has dropped drastically; the prices of goods in the shops, as well as the cost of utilities, have come down.

I agree that although there has been a big reduction in the cost of living, there is a need for government to continue to look for ways to ensure people have access to services and goods that are affordable. But, of course, a lot depends on how much these goods cost where they are produced because we have to import most of the things that we consume.

But what is important, and the message I want to stress today, is that we have to continue to work hard to make the reform succeed. We have to make our country more prosperous and we have to create more wealth, as the more we produce and the more wealth we create, the stronger our country will become. The cost of some services will then definitely fall, and life will become more affordable for everybody.

♦ **You have been unwavering in your call for international help to tackle the scourge of piracy. Although the response of international partners has been positive so far in terms of deterring pirate attacks in our waters, there is no denying that our fisheries sector has been badly affected by the situation. What concrete measures are being taken to help our fishermen contend with this issue that is putting their livelihood at stake?**

Piracy has been a big challenge for us in the past two years, and I think Seychelles has done everything that was possible in view of its resources and capabilities to contain the effects of piracy on our economy, on our fishing industry, on tourism. Because of our limited resources, I called on the support of our international partners, and I am happy to say they have responded positively and quickly, and we have been able largely to contain the attacks by pirates that were affecting us.

But, of course, the Indian Ocean is vast, our economic zone is vast, and it is practically impossible for us to patrol every mile of it so as to protect fishing lanes and the fishing industry. But I think we've been able to contain it as much as possible, to the extent that attacks on our fishing boats have been minimal.

However, I think there is a need for us to continue to plan not only for the short term but also for the medium term, because piracy is going to be here with us for a long time, in fact for as long as the problem of Somalia is not resolved. As long as Somalia is a failed state, we're going to have the problem of piracy.

So we have to prepare ourselves. And this is why I am doing everything possible to reinforce our capabilities in terms of equipment and training with the help of our neighbours and others, with India for example, and the United Arab Emirates.

I have been discussing with the UAE specific plans to give more protection to our fishermen who have to go a bit further out to fish. We are also planning for a further *encadrement* of our fishing community to ensure they can fish in safety and earn their livelihood, and also to ensure we get enough fish for our own consumption and for export.

♦ **On several occasions the government has spoken strongly against "big fish eating small fish" so to speak, and yet it is generally felt that much attention is being given to big five-star hotels while small establishments, especially guesthouses run by Seychellois, are being left to their own devices. Do you share this feeling?**

No, I don't share this view. I think it is not correct – perhaps it is a perception. I think large hotels were given concessions at a time when there was a need to do this to encourage them to come here. We were then in competition with other destinations that were trying to attract big investment, and I think the concessions we gave did play their role in attracting investment in top-class hotels here.

Today this has resulted in Seychelles becoming a *destination de marque*, a high-class destination where we have a lot of rich people who can come and spend money and stay in these resorts. So at that time, when we were in competition with other destinations, it was a good strategy to attract these large hotels to come here.

But at the same time I think our success today in this difficult world economic situation has been because we have not neglected the small guesthouses. We have not neglected small

hotels but on the contrary the tourism industry, together with the Seychelles Tourism Board, encouraged our small guest-house owners, our small hotels, to build themselves up.

For example, we introduced the Seychelles Secrets programme which gave specific concessions to these owners to upgrade their facilities, and they did it. Today it is a niche that is proving to be very popular. You have a lot of people now coming to these small hotels because they provide a Seychellois quality of hospitality and a Seychellois experience.

I think one of our reform successes has come through these small hotels upgrading their facilities and attracting tourists. In fact today Seychelles is doing much better than its neighbours because of that approach. We have the large hotels but we also have the small hotels which are giving a high quality of hospitality and service.

Today we have a wide range of tourists coming to Seychelles and being accommodated in all types of hotels. I think our strategy has worked, and government will continue to give its support to small entrepreneurs, trying to empower them so they can help to ensure our people can take part and benefit from the wealth created by the tourism industry.

♦ **The National Drugs Enforcement Agency has been doing a great job as far as arresting and prosecuting drug users and traffickers is concerned, and many are behind bars serving their sentences. But you must agree that there is no point in convicting drug traffickers if when they come out of prison it's business as usual for them. What is being done to rehabilitate such people so when they come out of prison they are ready to turn over a new leaf and be productive citizens?**

I think first of all we have to look at the judiciary. The judiciary needs to – and I think it has started to – play a more proactive role in ensuring proper justice is dispensed quickly.

In fact I will submit to the National Assembly in the next few weeks an amendment to the penal code to empower the judiciary so it can deal with criminals as quickly as possible. After that, the prison will continue to bring in reforms so prisoners are not only punished for what they have done but are also rehabilitated, as you say, so they do not commit the same offence later on.

We have started this process and it has to continue. With the reforms now taking place in the prison, things will move faster but of course this requires the support of the whole community. I am happy to say that today there are organisations that are giving their support to the prison authorities by advising and counselling prisoners, and trying to rehabilitate them.

The prison will very shortly start a programme of rehabilitation aiming to get prisoners to move into specific skilled work. This will give them the necessary training so when they get out they have the skills to do jobs and should not fall into the trap of being involved in drugs again.

To sum up, the judiciary is empowering itself to deliver swift and efficient justice, and the penal code will be amended to ensure this is done in a more coherent manner. The prison itself is gearing itself up, with the help of the communities and certain groups, to introduce a programme to give skills to prisoners so they can develop themselves and later move away from drugs.



♦ **On the one hand the government is encouraging local farmers to flourish by introducing all manner of incentives, but on the other hand we have seen a liberalisation of the market which has resulted in a flood of sometimes cheap goods entering the country, to the detriment of our own local produce. To what extent has liberalisation affected our local farmers and what steps are being taken to ensure our food security is not threatened?**

In this modern age and this new globalised world, you have to move with the times. You cannot live in isolation. Even though we are a small country we are part of the world and today in the liberalised world we have to fit in, especially as a member of various regional bodies and international communities. Since we will be joining the World Trade Organisation soon, we have to meet certain norms and rules, and also adhere to certain principles involving liberalisation of trade. And, definitely, any time you have liberalisation and free import of goods it affects local production.

But what the government has done is to take steps to ensure the farmers and the producers are given support so they can produce their goods at prices that are more or less competitive with what is being imported. I think over the last two years there has been a lot of innovation in food production in Seychelles, be it livestock or agriculture. People have found ways to produce and at the same time – with the support the government is giving – are able to maintain a cost of production that makes it possible for them to compete on the international market.

In this innovation there is also the question of quality. There are farmers who are now growing on a large scale in a way that makes them competitive with imported goods. At the same time you have some farmers who have moved into a niche to produce organic vegetables which appeal to a special market, with people now becoming more health conscious and wanting to buy quality produce even if it is more expensive.

So I think all these innovative practices are helping farmers to survive in this liberalised age where we have no other choice. Government will continue to give support as we have, for example, by imposing a levy on certain imported items and using that money to support the farmers and producers. But at the same time there is a need for us to learn how to compete in this new environment. Liberalisation is here with us to stay, so we have to learn to live with it, manage it and try to gain from it.

♦ **Anyone've been told that there are jobs available for anyone who is fit to work, and at this point in time there are more jobs available than unemployed people. How successful has the government been in getting people to take up the jobs on offer?**

I think, generally, people have been very willing to take on new challenges. We have had schemes of voluntary departure from public service, and most people have managed to secure jobs in the private sector. And today, with the new impetus of businesses being set up in the private sector as a result of the reforms, there are more jobs being created.

tests are complete, the wind turbines will be installed and part of the energy we use today from the generators will be provided by these turbines.

But we are also actively discussing with other partners the possibility of helping us to produce more energy through solar panels. We are talking to agencies to help us design buildings, for example, that will use solar panels and will meet their own energy needs. And the government is now also ensuring that most, if not all, major new buildings have solar panels.

So we are moving along in the right direction. Solar energy can be tapped, but it's still rather expensive; however, some countries are working very quickly to develop technologies that are cheaper so it will be easier for developing countries, especially small island states, to tap into that kind of energy.

♦ **We've just entered the second half of this year and it has already been quite a busy schedule for you on the international front with two major state visits – to China and more recently to India. How has tiny Seychelles managed to attract so much world recognition?**

I think today Seychelles has got a lot of credibility. We have a vibrant democracy. We have worked hard to ensure there is good governance, we have transparency and the international community today has a lot of respect for us, for what we are doing and for the courage we have shown in introducing our reforms.

And this is why the international community is prepared to help Seychelles in its development and also with the new challenge that is piracy. Seychelles today has managed to create an image internationally that makes us proud. Today, when Seychelles speaks in the international arena, people sit up and listen because we make our views heard, we defend our interests, we defend the interests of other small island states, we defend the interests of good principles in the world. We defend the interests of humanity.

We are not playing a role that is good only for Seychelles, we are also playing our part in the international community where we defend what we feel is for the good of humanity, for the good of peace, for the good of stability in the world.

We say so when we speak at the United Nations. We say so when we speak at other international forums. We say what we believe in. We believe in stability, we believe in peace, we believe in nations living in harmony and I think all this has been recognised by the world community. Today they see Seychelles as an example, not only in its courage in being able to achieve economic reforms which nobody believed possible, but also in showing we are a nation that can live in peace and harmony, with good governance and freedom of expression.

♦ **Seychelles has always been known as a country where its people are friendly and welcoming, but certain negative elements are slowly rearing their ugly heads in our society, threatening to destroy the social harmony that has underpinned our very existence. A case in point is the xenophobic feeling that the controversy over the La Misère water pollution incident has aroused. How can this affect our image in the eyes of foreign investors?**

Xenophobia and racism breed hatred, breed violence. I think in Seychelles over the years, with our ancestors coming from different continents, we have evolved as a nation that has learned to live in peace and harmony, and today this harmony is earning us the admiration and respect of the world.

This harmony and racial cohesion has built a very strong social unity in our country. Some people even call us the United Nations in microcosm because we are a nation that has come together and has learned how to live together as one people. Today this is what gives us courage to do what we are doing, and today we are an example to the world.

Today we have shown what our Seychellois people are capable of doing. We have shown resilience and courage. But unfortunately we have a few people in the opposition who because of their own failures – failure to get people to elect them as leaders, to do what they wanted to do in their own selfish way – are frustrated, bitter and want to divide the nation. They want to stir up hatred, xenophobia, they want people to reject foreigners who come to this country to invest, to be part of us, of our development and bring capital that will help Seychelles develop further.

Probably they see that if progress comes to Seychelles, and more investors come to help us create more wealth, this is going to make it even more difficult to get people to accept them because people have no more confidence in them. This is why they are fomenting this hatred towards foreigners.

They want to create a situation whereby this will affect our progress and our stability, and will affect the image and credibility of Seychelles. But to me, fortunately, the majority of Seychellois want to live in a peaceful and stable country and will reject outright these manoeuvres to stir up xenophobia and hatred in our country.

And I call on the Seychellois people to reject forcefully the attempts being made by these frustrated and bitter people who

want our country to be divided. United we are strong, united we will succeed, but divided we will fall. The Seychellois people, I am convinced, want progress, want peace, want to move forward and this is why we will always remain united and be a force that will deal with any attempt to divide us.

♦ **Seychelles is set to host a major event next year in the form of the Indian Ocean Island Games. How far are we into the preparations, and what message do you have for the people of Seychelles with regard to this event?**

Of course it is always a challenge to host a major event, especially for a small country like us here, but we are ready for it. We have hosted such major games in the past, and I am sure we will make a success of it. I think the Seychellois people and the athletes themselves are gearing up for the games to ensure the Seychelles flag is raised high and we will again make our mark in the Indian Ocean in the field of sports.

It is also an event that not only brings our people together, showing pride in what Seychelles can achieve, but it is a sort of inspiration for patriotism, for pride in our country. But let us not forget that it is an event which has as its purpose to bring the people of the Indian Ocean together.

I think we must look at it more in this way, that we are creating a brotherhood in the region. We are all part of the same ocean, we are all island nations and we all share the same culture. We all share the same way of life, and the games are a way for us to get together to take part in sporting activities and create the closeness that comes from the fact that we are the children of the ocean.

To me this is the beauty of it as we get together as children of the Indian Ocean, play together, compete together, and at the same time try to make our nation's mark. So it is a very important event, it is an event to bring the region together and at the same time I think it will help Seychelles in another way because we have to create the infrastructure such as in housing and in other areas to host the games. This spurs us on, and after the games, of course, it is the population who will get the benefit of this infrastructure. It's part of a scenario that will bring benefits to everybody in Seychelles.

♦ **Mr President, you've just announced sweeping changes in your government and one notable change is that you have taken over the portfolio for tourism. Why have you felt it necessary for you to do so?**

Tourism, as you know, is the mainstay of our economy and we have developed an industry that today is bringing us many benefits. Tourism is very fragile, and we have to ensure that we build our tourism industry in such a way that we can sustain its development.

I have taken on this responsibility because I feel I have managed today to bring Seychelles into the limelight of the international community. I think now it is important in my position that I also take tourism a stage further. We have an established market today in Europe, but we must not concentrate only on one market because anything can happen and then you have the collapse of your industry.

We have seen this with the global financial crisis which badly affected Europe, we have seen it with the volcanic eruptions in Iceland, which paralysed most of Europe and had an effect on our tourism industry.

I think the time has come for Seychelles to open itself up more and diversify our industry. There are other economic powerhouses mushrooming around the world, and there is a need for us to look at these countries and see how we can develop tourism promotion there so we diversify our markets. We have, for example, China, India, Korea and South Africa where we can develop very important tourism markets so we do not depend entirely on one continent or a few countries.

And there are areas where tourists have plenty of money, for example the Gulf region, and there is a need for us to tap into these markets or else we will lose out to other destinations.

So my decision to take on this portfolio is to further develop the diversification of our tourism industry and to ensure that the STB is restructured to respond to this need for us to modernise our tourism promotion, our tourism development and look for areas where we can benefit more.

I am convinced that the credibility I have built in the international community will help me to ensure that tourism is diversified and develops in a way that will benefit the industry.

♦ **Finally, Mr President, what is your message to the people of Seychelles as we prepare to celebrate the 17th anniversary of our National Day?**

I will tell the people of Seychelles that we have come a long way from independence to the First Republic, to the Second Republic and now the Third Republic. We have matured along the way, we have worked hard, we have developed a nation that today can stand proudly among the concert of nations and stand united. We must continue to work hard to ensure our progress and our unity so we may prosper and remain a country that shines in the world.