

A moment with the President

26th Dec 2011

Marceline: Welcome to 'A Moment with the President'. The last time we met was in April, just before the Presidential Elections. It has not been possible to meet with the President after that due to a number of very important events in the country which took his time. Tonight, precisely, we are meeting with him to discuss these events.

Marceline: Good evening Mr. President.

President: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline: Mr. President, as I was saying, we have had several important events in the country this year, starting with the carnival, the National Day, the Indian Ocean Games, and on the political side of course we've had the elections. With regards to the elections, the court has had to give a ruling on the interpretation of the Constitution several times. What is your analysis of all these developments?

President: I think we can look at 2011 in the light of the theme chosen for it, 'Victory for Seychelles.' I think that all that has happened and all the success we've had this year has really made this theme become a reality for us. We have also faced many challenges this year, and we have come out victorious.

It has been a very eventful and dynamic year for the Seychellois people, but in the end, we can be very proud of all that we have achieved. It has been a year in which the people have proved their sense of unity, patriotism and also their maturity, not only through our unified celebration of our carnival, but also through our wonderful performance in the Indian Ocean Games. I think that our success in the games has shown that the Seychellois people can achieve a lot. We can achieve so much more when we are united. As for the elections, we have shown that as a people, we can be mature and responsible, and do stand right by our country.

I would like to make one thing clear, however; we have a democracy that is functional and that works according to our established constitution. This constitution has established that the State has three arms: the Executive, the

the National Assembly and the Judiciary. All three arms are autonomous. Naturally, if any citizen or organization feels that his/her rights are not being respected, he/she can make an appeal to the Judiciary. For example, one person who was not satisfied with the electoral commission's decision had recourse to a court of law, and a ruling was made. When he was still not satisfied with the Constitutional Court's ruling, he appealed again. I think we need to understand that in the Judiciary, the judges make a ruling according to their knowledge of the law and their interpretation of the Constitution. We may not agree as individuals, with the ruling of the Court, but what is important is that we have to accept that the Constitution is the guideline by which these institutions discharge their responsibilities. In that respect, we should respect the decision of the court, even more so, the decision given by the highest court in our country, the Court of Appeal. It is this that shows that our democracy is in good health and is functioning well according to what has been established in the Constitution.

Marcelin: Mr. President, let us remain for the moment on the subject of the elections. There is an electoral commission that has been put in place to review the electoral procedures and to see whether the present laws governing elections currently are up to date. Some political parties have been absent from this process; they are not contributing to the electoral reform process. Without their contribution, shall we not find ourselves back in the same situation we were in before the September/October elections?

President: I would like in the first place, to make something clear; no individual or political party can take a country hostage. According to what I know and the information I have, most existing political parties are taking part in the consultation process for electoral reform with the electoral commission. I understand that one member is not participating, but the majority is participating. To me, this is a national issue, and it is not only political parties that should take part but the Seychellois people in general should also take part as their right and responsibility to contribute in this consultation process.

This discussion has the objective of ensuring that our electoral laws are updated according to what is agreed upon in the reform process and that these reforms are accepted by the Seychellois people in general when it is voted in the Assembly.

It has been quite a while since we have started this process of making electoral reforms so as to reinforce the functioning of our democracy in Seychelles. When I set up the Constitutional Review Committee, it made several recommendations which the Attorney General was already starting to work on. Some work had been done on the formulation of certain laws to be presented to the National Assembly, precisely, in the domain of electoral reform. The electoral observers who had come here had agreed that it would be a good thing to have these laws in place. What they did in fact was to reaffirm what I was already doing and what had already been announced.

You cannot have electoral reform without laws; and to have laws, you need the approval of the National Assembly. Given that the National Assembly had declared itself dissolved, of course we had to have an election to have another Assembly so that this same Assembly might later guide the consultation process and pass the laws that have been formulated. These laws can then guide the next elections that are called. I think it is a process that is going as it should and that everybody who is interested in electoral reforms has been able to participate and has contributed towards improving our democracy, making it more solid and more functional. After all, a democracy is not something that remains static; it evolves. It was with this in mind that we made the 1993 Constitution. In it, we included clauses to the effect that it should be reviewed after a certain period and be kept in line with new developments and situations that arise in the country. What we are doing is a normal process that happens in every democratic country, and I am happy to say that the Seychellois people, in their majority are mature enough to understand this and to appreciate the way that we are promoting the functionability of democracy in our country.

Marceline: Mr. President, the Opposition have a new leader in the Assembly who has declared that he is ready to work with the majority party and the government, especially on issues of national interest. Are you ready to accommodate him? And what about the other opposition parties which are outside the Assembly? How are they going to make their contribution?

President: Well, as you know, since I have taken up the post of President, it has always been my policy to consult the people. I have always done this and it is my way of working, if you like. Now, any consultation that

will benefit our country and our people is welcome to me. In that respect, I am happy to hear the new Leader of the Opposition say that he would like to enter into a dialogue with me. As soon as I can accommodate him, I shall invite him to meet with me and we can discuss issues of national interest and other topics that have a bearing on the advancement of our country. In fact, even in my last mandate, I did invite the then Leader of the Opposition to enter into a dialogue with me, and it was his decision not to have this dialogue. Only he knows his reasons for this, but I am happy to know that the new leader is taking the initiative. I think that with this new approach, we can work with the opposition for the good of our country.

Marceline: Earlier, we talked a bit about events that have occurred this year and which have really shocked the population. For example, we have the Air Seychelles redundancy problem. What is the situation really? Why is our national airline in this situation today?

President: Well, I think we should understand that aviation is a dynamic sort of business in the whole world. What has happened to Air Seychelles is not a unique situation. It has happened to many other airlines recently. We see it in the news every day – airlines that have gone bankrupt, others that have had to enter into mergers in the U.S and in Europe. British Airways, for example, has merged with a Spanish airline and another popular airline is merging with Lufthansa. These mergers are due to economic and financial problems being faced by these companies which make it impossible for them to continue functioning on their own. We are also seeing a lot of companies being bailed out by their governments. Air Mauritius is one, as is Air India and a lot more.

Even Gulf carriers like Emirates and Etihad are subsidized by their governments – the difference is that they have the means to do it, and we don't, even though we have tried. We tried for a certain period, when we were still able to do so. We must remember that today we are still in the middle of an economic reform. What is important is that we have done what we can; we haven't let the country sink with the problem. We are trying our best to solve the problem instead. If we find that we cannot solve it entirely, we have to see what our options are, and which options will be to our best advantage. In the case of Air Seychelles, we either reposition the airline and let it compete in an arena where it can better support itself, or we just keep on pumping more and more

money into the company just so we can say we have a national airline, and at the same time allow the country to go into deficit. Then we shall have hotels shutting down, and businesses and the economy generally coming to a halt. It is because we are a proactive government that we have foreseen all this and we have taken action based on the options that we have. Though it is true that I did reassure the Air Seychelles staff a while ago that they would not lose their jobs, this reassurance was based on information that was given to me at the time. It was based on the situation that Air Seychelles was in at the time.

But now this situation has changed. The crisis in Europe has become much worse. For example, the rate of unemployment in Spain at the moment is 23% and it is the same in Italy. Greece and other European countries are falling into the same pit. The majority of our tourists come from these countries. For those tourists still travelling, we are facing stiff competition from other airlines – in this situation, smaller airlines with less available money find it hard compete.

At the same time, tourists have less money for travelling and there are so many destinations in the world trying their hardest to attract whatever tourists there are. The competition is really stiff. All this has contributed to the operations problems of Air Seychelles. This is compounded by the fact that we have lost the two ACMI with the Falklands and Mozambique which has greatly reduced the revenue brought in by Air Seychelles. This has led us to make some quick decisions.

Naturally, a certain number of personnel will be affected; however, we are doing our utmost to negotiate with our partners on the number of staff who are made redundant. Whilst seeking to make the company more sustainable, we are also trying to look into the possibility of rehiring the personnel as much as possible later. We are facing a very dynamic situation where things change from day to day. We are having different negotiations with different partners for many hours every day. I imagine that we shall soon have some more concrete decisions with regards to staff and we shall make announcements that are better informed.

Marceline: Mr. President, we are reaching the end of our dialogue; in your election campaign, you promised a new Seychelles to the Seychellois people. What form will this take in 2012?

President: Well, I think that this vision for a 'New Seychelles' was elaborated upon in the manifesto. I'm referring to the Parti Lepep Manifesto which we presented to the Seychellois people before the elections. The people elected me on the basis of this manifesto and its vision for the development of Seychelles for the next five years. Beyond that, I have presented a broad vision that is covered by the manifesto. First of all, let me establish the fact that we have a vibrant, dynamic and performing economy. It is a strong economy - but most important, an economy that the Seychellois people can participate actively in and create his/her own wealth. It is by creating wealth for our country that we shall make it go forwards. At the same time, we could have other social benefits that are needed for our people's wellbeing.

Secondly, there is the social angle. I think it is important that we continue to promote a cohesive society; a society where we live together in harmony. At the same time, we have to be able to eradicate the social scourges that afflict our society. It is in this light that I began my mandate with a declaration that we would bring about a social renaissance in this country. As you know, there is an ongoing discussion about this issue. We are consulting with the public because we believe that it is important that they participate and put forward the problems that they see as being significant and how they they think we should address these problems. There are many social problems, including dysfunctionality within the family, drugs, etc... It is because of this that we have to think about how to bring about this social and moral renaissance and how to address these problems and solve them.

The third important point I want to emphasize on is the necessity of having a united community. We have to work together in our communities. People must participate in the development of the community and take ownership of it. This is another important aspect of empowerment for our people so that they are better able to take their responsibilities. It is my vision to make of our country, an isle of excellence. This means that all that we do, we do it well and be an example to the rest of the world, whether it be in the domain of renewable energy or in the domain of economics where we are being commended for the progress we have made.

We can be excellent in the fields of health and education through our university that we have just set up. These are all areas of excellence that we

can develop and be an example to the world. We musn't forget that we already have a good reputation for good governance. In order for any country to remain strong, stable and to progress, there must be good governance. There must be transparency and accountability, meaning that the elements of democracy must function well. I am determined to do whatever is necessary to reinforce good governance in Seychelles.

We also have a very proactive diplomacy. This is the key to our partnerships with other governments and organisations. Thus my policy of proactive diplomacy brings us closer, if you like, to other countries that are ready to work with us in our bid for development.

Today, we have gained much respect from the rest of the world and we have much more visibility; this is due to our opening up to the world, something which I have insisted upon since the beginning of my presidency. It is important that we work together and that we have a common vision. We must be conscious of the instability the world is afflicted with today. That is why we must work together to build this new, solid Seychelles; one nation, one mind. I am ready to accept the contribution of anyone who has the capacity and the will, who wants to work for Seychelles. It does not matter what your political affiliation is, as long as you have Seychelles at heart. What is important to me is that as a small nation, we have to have unity. We have to put our differences aside and work for the common good.

Marceline: As part of your vision for the New Seychelles, you also announced a series of changes in the Government, which we haven't seen yet. When will this happen and what will be the dimension of this change? There have been comments about the way people have been moved here and there in the past, especially on the ministerial level; how will this work out in this round of changes when it is finally announced?

President: Marceline, this question gives the impression that nothing good has occurred in Seychelles recently. If we are honest to ourselves, we should accept the fact that there has been an unbelievable transformation in this country in the last seven years. Naturally, we have made a lot of progress before that but what we have achieved recently can be seen as the results of building on already established foundations. The economic transformation we

have undergone is remarkable. Such a transformation does not happen just like that. You have to work to make it happen. You have to have a vision. You have to have a strategy, a plan, and good leadership. I strongly believe that it is the work we have done in the last seven years that has taken us to where we are today.

If I sometimes move a Minister from one portfolio to another, it is because we have to be dynamic – we have to move with changes as per the situation. We have to meet the challenges thrown our way. If we feel that we have certain people with the right kind of experience and knowledge to deal with each challenge, then it is perfectly natural to want to move those people to the right position. Like I said, it is a very dynamic situation. I would like to take this opportunity to point out that no Minister or civil servant is appointed for life. Ministers are there to carry out certain tasks for a specific period of time, according to his/her experience and knowledge and ability to deliver. I am committed to ensuring that in the changes to come, everyone appointed to a position, delivers. If you cannot deliver, you should not be in that position because the Seychellois people expect us to do what we have said we shall do, within reason of course.

Thus, yes, we can expect some changes soon, but all in the cause of perfecting our structure. We want to do better than we have done in the past; we want to move forward, bearing in mind the new world dynamics and new local challenges. At the same time, I strongly believe in the accumulation of experience, skills, and also the enthusiasm and dynamic quality of our youths.

I strongly believe in youth empowerment. I believe in giving the youth opportunities to develop, in giving them skills and allowing them to contribute their own ideas and to participate in the development of our country. This is what we call the rejuvenation of a country. It is a society in which the youth is empowered and they gain more knowledge and experience by mixing with more experienced and older people. This is what will allow us to have continuity, sustainability, so that we do not fall behind in our bid for progress.

Marceline: Mr. President, how would you like the Seychellois people to view this coming year, 2012, in view of the instability and crises in the world, especially in the Euro zone, which of course has an impact on us here?

President: Well, I would like to point out to the Seychellois people that it is a very difficult situation. What is important is that we remain unified and ready to work hard. It is only through hard work that we will attain success and make progress.

For example, the banks should try and see how they can extend more credit to small businesses so that more Seychellois can have their own business. You cannot expect small businesses to grow if they do not have access to credit. The banks should give more credit and government institutions should enter into discussions with them on how they can increase the amount of credit available to small businesses, thus create more wealth. There will be many challenges, because there is so much instability in the world today. We have for example, the petrol crisis in the Arab countries which has caused the price of petrol to fluctuate; we have the financial crisis in Europe and in other parts of the world. All this will impact negatively not only on Seychelles but also on the rest of the world. This is where we have to see how best to ensure our survival. I am sure, however, that the Seychellois people has the capacity to be resilient and to be responsible and realistic. We cannot spend just because we want to. We have to be realistic about what we can get while we navigate through this difficult period and wait till our country has made more progress so we can all have more.

Marceline: In conclusion Mr. President, your theme for 2011 was 'Victory for Seychelles'; do you feel that the Seychellois people have lived this victory, now that the year is almost over? Has it really been 'Victory for Seychelles' during 2011?

President : Definitely! I am convinced that it has been a year of victory for Seychelles. We have seen this in the events that have taken place this year, where the Seychellois people have shown their capacity, their determination, and most important, they have shown that they are ready to move forward. They have shown that they are prepared to set aside their differences and work for the good of Seychelles. I have a lot of confidence and hope that we

shall enjoy many more victories in future if we continue to work together for Seychelles.

Marcelin: Well Mr. President, thank you for spending this moment with us, and thank you also to our audience. Good night.