

A Moment with the President – 6th July 2014

Marceline: Good evening and welcome to *En Moman with the President*. This is our first programme for this year and we will cover some major events that happened during the first six months. Good evening Mr President.

President Michel: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline: Mr President the first six months of the year were quite busy, very busy, on the national stage. There were different events. In the speeches you delivered you talked about national unity. Why do you continuously put emphasis on it?

President Michel: A country lacking national unity is a country moving towards destruction. There are many examples around us. Let us take a look at our own African continent. The countries of the great lakes were torn apart by conflicts. There were civil wars in the different countries. If we take a look at West Africa, we find countries that were once enjoying stability and prosperity also affected by civil wars, causing destruction. All of this happened because they could not safeguard the stability, and also the desire and ability to develop their countries together in unity. Let us look further. Syria is the example of another country torn apart by war. Its people have suffered a lot and they continue to suffer today. In Ukraine, again we see the damage caused by division. National unity is indispensable for a country's development, for a country's continued progress, for stability to prevail, for harmony between the different groups in society, and to be able to work together to take our country further ahead. I think that what is happening in the world is enough to make us realize that without national unity we won't go much further. Without unity there will be sufferings. There will be discord. There will be a lot of negative things that will affect the country's development. Economic development will suffer, and this will impact on the social cohesion which we have built during the decades we have existed as a people. Therefore, there is no other thing that is more important to me than national unity. It is important for the Seychellois people. It is important for Seychelles.

Marceline: Do you think this national unity does not exist?

President Michel: I am not saying there is no national unity. We have evolved in national unity, from the time of the formation of our nation. And we've had this unity among ourselves. We've learned to live together, to enjoy social and religious cohesion. We have built a unified nation, which makes us an example to the world. People admire us for this. We are proud of it. Our unity and cohesion have earned us respect in the world. But in all sincerity, when we do an analysis of the situations of yesterday and today, we see that our national unity is being eroded by the political polarization that has existed from the start of national political emancipation that was important in the process towards our freedom, a process to take our destiny in our own hands. The appeal I am making today is for the intensification of the effort we have to make to nurture national unity, to actually remove as much as possible the political polarization, to enable us to better progress to the future in unity, in a way that will make the

country move forward better, and whereby we will all be able to contribute to make our country progress further. We want to reach the new frontier that will take us to the next stage of development. It is only through national unity that we will be able to achieve that.

Marceline: Mr President, there have been certain important events and decisions which, it can be said, were announced by you in the spirit of national unity. There is the Liberation monument which has been relocated to Maison du Peuple, and in its place we see the Liberty monument. 29th June will, as from next year, be the National Day. All of this is in the interest of national unity, like I said about your announcements. Where these the links, the parts, that were missing to complete -- maybe not complete -- but to ensure that the chain of national unity remains strong?

President Michel: I can say that a monument alone, for example, does not make national unity. The spirit of national unity is in our minds, in our hearts, in our souls, in our desire to live together as brothers and sisters. The strong desire we have in us to move forward in unity. And we do it with the passion, the strong feeling of love for our fellow citizens, for our Seychellois nation. The sense of patriotism we need to have for our country. It is a feeling that goes beyond personal sentiment, a sense of patriotism that is evoked when we talk about the unity of our people, our national unity. A monument is a symbol, and often a powerful symbol which enables us to resituate ourselves in the various stages of our history. To remind us of the different stages our nation has gone through before reaching where we are today. When the symbol is powerful it inspires us to keep striving for the future. And these monuments are symbols that can allow us to rediscover our past. Let us take a look at the new Liberty Monument. It is a monument that represents the struggle of the Seychellois people from their beginning. Let us not forget that from the beginning people came from different races, from different continents. We came and lived together. But at the same time, right from the beginning there was a struggle for liberty. It was the struggle against slavery. As time progressed the struggle continued throughout the colonial period when there was a lack of opportunities, when there was also oppression. After then there was the struggle for independence. And this is a monument that represents various stages in our history. It is also a powerful symbol represented by two young persons directing us towards the future. The symbol tells us that our future is in the hands of our young people. They are holding a flag, indicating to us the path we should be taking, together in unity towards a better future. There are other symbols that have been erected before. There is the three-bird monument, or Bicentennial Monument, a symbol representing the origins of the Seychellois nation. Three birds coming from three continents came to implant their beaks in the Seychelles soil. This is how the Seychellois nation started. At the other end of the avenue is the monument of four fish entwined. When this monument was conceived at the time, this symbol, too, was to exhort the Seychellois nation to work in unity for our economic progress. The symbols are truly to inspire us to work towards the objective of national unity.

Marceline: Mr President, you are putting a lot of emphasis on the importance of national unity. Maybe there are others who are talking about national reconciliation. They are saying OK Zonm Lib has been relocated, and now we have the Liberty Monument, and that there are other monuments you have talked about. Yet, there are others who may be asking for explanations, apology for the 5th June event and what happened after. What is your comment?

President Michel: Explanations and apologies cannot come from 5th June. If we are to look for explanations and apologies we need to start from the very beginning, from the time our ancestors were uprooted from their origins. They came mostly from different parts of Africa. They were taken here as slaves. They, too, suffered. They were wrested from their families, from their villages, from their traditional lives, and taken to a foreign land. Therefore, the search for apologies should go that far back. As we evolved, as our nation grew, there was a lot of exploitation committed by the same colonizers, those who were oppressing the less fortunate. For these, too, we can seek apologies and explanations. And during the struggle for independence there were many injustices. Here, again, we can open doors to demanding apologies. 5th June is one of the events in our history, which has taken us to where we are now. We cannot deny history. History has happened, and it is a fact. We need to recognize that each stage in our history has its significance. It happened for a particular reason at a point in time. 5th June represents a big event for the majority of Seychellois today. They have a plot of the land which belonged only to a few property owners. They have their plots of land on which they have built their houses. 5th June means a lot to them, because 5th June gave them access to land ownership. It is the radical change which brought reforms in the economy, land redistribution, education, health. It is because of the change that today we have many Seychellois professionals who come from ordinary families. Professionals are highly respected today. Would have they benefitted from the opportunity? And for these people 5th June means a lot, too. At the same time I accept that for a group of people 5th June brought sadness. Some have lost loved ones, because there were people who lost their lives on both sides. The sadness is deeply regrettable, but history has happened. Let us now move forward. We need to work together, which is something good for us all. Let the lessons of our history, the lessons of our past, guide us to do better and to not repeat the mistakes of the past. And also not to repeat the sufferings our ancestors, the people who came before us, were subjected to. They were also fighting for their liberty. And now, finally, it is their descendants who have achieved the freedom. We now need to work together for a better Seychelles. For me this is what has become national unity. It is the strong feeling of love for our country, the feeling of working together, the sense of patriotism, putting our country first, putting our Seychelles first. This is the only way to have stability, to have transparency, in order to continue developing our country.

Marceline: Another subject you talk about a lot, Mr President, is consultation. In your National Day address you announced the setting up of the consultative forum which you will personally chair. But there are many mediums in place which allow you to exercise the consultations. On top of that you are a people person, you personally go out to meet people. Is the announcement of the forum suggesting that

there were people in our society with ideas that were not reaching you, and now you want to hear them?

President Michel: Marceline, a performing democracy is a democracy that believes in consultation. It is a democracy that practices consultation, not only at one level but at all levels possible. And this is what gives you a functioning democracy, a democracy that works, a democracy that is effective. This forum is not substituting the National Assembly. The National Assembly has its functions and it continues its work. Other councils, committees or forums continue their work. The consultations I undertake with people from all layers of society will continue. All these are ways for the leadership to know the aspirations of people, and to realize these aspirations in the interest of our nation, in the interest of all. The forum I announced will be another medium of consultation, of a different level, to hear different ideas which would help government do its work better. I have said it before that no one has monopoly of ideas. We all have a contribution to make, in one way or another. Any contribution which is valuable helps government do its work better. This forum will comprise several distinguished persons, who will share reflections, and help government take decisions that will strengthen unity, and promote a more inclusive society. It will bring more people together, to find ways to work together. After all, this is what makes a nation. This is what creates the sense of belonging. When as many people as possible are consulted, they share ideas. The best ideas are gathered and then actions are taken. This is my objective of setting up this council.

Marceline: A high-level forum, and I believe there will be restriction on the number of people who will be appointed to serve on it. Will other people have the opportunity to make their contributions, forward their ideas?

President Michel: As I have already said there are many organizations to which people can express their opinions. There are, for example, LUNGOS, religious organizations, SCCI for the businesses. On top of that there are individuals who have the capacity and knowledge to contribute. I expect that this forum will comprise several distinguished individuals, without taking into account their political affiliations. You may belong to any political party. In this forum we have to learn to respect opinions, irrespective of the political affiliations. Naturally we come to the forum with the responsibility to participate. Already I have had several proposals, about people who are interested in being part of the forum and participating in its work. A final list will be made and the forum will be announced. This will help generate additional ideas that will serve the interest of our country. Several political, economic and social issues will be discussed in the national interest.

Marceline: Do you have an idea when it will meet for its first meeting?

President Michel: I believe that we can finalise the composition of this forum and hold its first meeting before the end of the month.

Marceline: We move to a new subject, and that is about business. On the economy you've always said that you wish that the private sector becomes the motor of the economy. A lot has been done towards achieving this objective. The private sector itself has acknowledged that government has done a lot, in its capacity as facilitator, for it to become the motor of the economy. There is assistance for people starting a business and for those already in business. But it appears that we have not really reached the objective. There is the rating by the World Bank of the time it takes a person to start a business in different countries. Seychelles has lost a few points. SIB recently organized a meeting and the participants, together with representatives from the business community, voiced certain deficiencies impeding their progress. Also recently the SCCI chairman talked about these deficiencies. Why do you think the difficulties remain even after you, as the President of the Republic, put a lot of emphasis or attach a lot of importance to business development? Yet, people continue to encounter problems regarding the ease of doing business in Seychelles.

President Michel: Yes Marceline. Problems remain. Deficiencies remain. I agree with you that we have done a lot, from the time we undertook the reforms. A lot has been done to facilitate the creation of businesses, to promote the spirit of entrepreneurship, to make the private sector become the motor of the economy. We have made a lot of progress in this direction. But weaknesses remain. I agree with the chairman of SCCI when he said that we needed to continue looking for improvements. Truly we need to fix the weaknesses. In the past I urged the different organizations, the ministries, to do more. Still there are deficiencies. Just now I have instructed the Minister for Finance to ensure that by the end of the year many structures continue to develop in order to facilitate the businesses. It is important that we do this because business is an important sector in the growth of the economy. It is also important to make it work for the creation of wealth. The first hurdles are the outdated regulations. There are laws that we need to continue amending. As you are aware, we have already amended and rewritten many laws following the reform. The Office of the Attorney General is busy every day writing new laws, and also amending them. But there is still a lot to be done because there are many regulations that are outdated and do not ease access to a liberal economy. An economy like we have today. Therefore there is a lot to do. There are deficiencies in the legal instruments. At the same time there is the issue of attitude, the issue of mindset. Sometime, this attitude of wanting to control everything remains embedded in the minds of some of our civil servants. Many have changed and are putting in a lot of effort, especially the young ones who are coming with new ideas. I think control has to be supported by its own regulations, by its own *raison d'être*. It has to be done in a way that does not bind the hands of other people. Attitude is one, but there is also the lack of competence in certain organizations, certain agencies. And then there is also the issue of motivation. Employees are there to ensure that facilitation is faster. Sometime you get the impression that when someone comes with a business plan we look for all the minor reasons why the proposed activity could not be undertaken, instead of facilitating the project. Do

you understand it? These are the mindset, the mentalities we have to change. People need to be more proactive when somebody comes forward with a business project. The person should be assisted when there are deficiencies in the project proposal. Help the person to develop. There is also a problem with the banks. The banks remain too conservative in their ways. Sometime there are too many procedures when applying for a loan from a bank. It frustrates people a lot. Changing mentalities is a constant undertaking. Now with modernization, with information technology, a lot of things can be put online, and processing done more easily. We have started doing this and want to do more. It is my conviction that we need to accelerate things, and do better. I will continue to give my support to the chamber of commerce. I will continue to support the business promoters, to enable them to develop their business activities. The chamber of commerce, for example, is a key organization that can provide us ideas on how to do better. They are the ones hearing these complaints, and they can tell us where to improve in order to serve the business sector better. This forum, comprising of representatives of the businesses, can tell us what are the deficiencies, in order to help us better improve things.

Marceline: Mr President, a last question. The United States is organizing its first US-Africa Summit. Seychelles has been invited and we have accepted the invitation. What are your expectations of this summit, and what will it bring us?

President Michel: I think the summit that the United States is organizing is a good initiative. This has been accepted and welcomed by all African heads of state. There are already other summits on Africa. There are TICAD, the Sino-Africa, Franco-Africa, EU-Africa and India-Africa summits. I think that the United States has now realized that it has been lagging behind and that it has to join in. It is an initiative I appreciate. It is a good initiative. The summit will allow the American government to better understand the specific problems of Africa. During discussions with African leaders the United States will look at ways to work with Africa. I am not saying to provide aid, but to build partnership. Today I prefer to talk about partnership instead of countries receiving aid. We will discuss how to build the partnership, using the technology and knowhow the United States has, and to help develop Africa's potentials, its capacities, its resources, in the interest of the world. It is good for Seychelles because it will allow us to interact with the American authorities. I can say that today we enjoy an excellent relationship with the United States. We are in partnership in several domains, namely the fight against piracy, security, maintenance of peace, and other sectors. The partnership is working very well. There are other forms of assistance and partnership we have been developing. I believe this summit will help elevate to a higher level the excellent relationship Seychelles has with the United States. It is a traditional partnership. I believe that Africa will gain some positive elements which will help deepen our engagement with the United States, like we have with other countries helping to develop our continent.

Marceline: Thank you very much Mr President for finding the time to answer our questions. It is on this note that we end our programme today. Thank you for listening and good night.

