

# Notes on the West Kingston Crisis and Party Politics

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## Introduction

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There has been an unprecedented national discussion in and out of parliament, in the Jamaica diaspora, in the Caribbean and international media over the past 10 months since the U.S. issued the extradition request for Christopher Dodus Coke.

I have been forced, with the rest of society, to think about the ongoing crises on the socio-racial, economic, cultural and political levels. As a result my presentation has been changed from a general treatment of Caribbean Politics to one that discusses the recent crisis in West Kingston. Imagine that Tivoli Gardens is a Caribbean island and the constellation forces around involves the U.S., the UK, EU, Canada, the international media, the Prime Minister, a former Prime Minister and a popular leader who is wanted by the United States and the Jamaican state. This person is a second generation leader known to his supporters as the

President and he is also an international businessman and one with access to state contracts. He runs a system of justice, provides security to the network of markets nearby and has considerable influence on all that happens in that place. What kind of political space is this? Does the term garrison really reflect this reality?

I want to approach this presentation from the standpoint of the necessity of redirecting attention to party political life. Very often the focus has been in the last twenty years on issues of governance and civil society and these are valid and important concepts that have been made popular by the debate over globalization, the ideology of the World Bank and IMF and the work of many scholars. However, there is silence on politics which undergirds so much in civil society and governance structures, culture and economics.

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### **Politics and Governance**

A distinction has to be made between politics and governance. The latter refers to administrative or bureaucratic, legislative and fiscal systems of the state. Politics is prior to governance. Politics undergirds activities in the state and influences notions of freedom and the way political life is conducted. I am concerned here with the way political life is organized, that is, the organization of

politics and here I give politics an autonomy, as a sphere of activity that cannot be fully explained with reference to economics - whether neo-liberal capitalism or state capitalism or socialism. Politics has its own forms, loyalties, personalities, commitments and traditions. I am concerned here with just one element in the organization of political life and that is the political party.

### **What is politics?**

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Politics is a very concrete activity that revolves around historically determined power relations. It is a sphere of practical activity with rules and procedures that characterize its conduct at times and with challenges to those rules that occur over time. Informal rules are important and are very often not codified and an outsider may misread codes of conduct that are familiar and routine to the political insider so the codes of politics are not apparent. Politics is also a sphere of complex inter-personal relations, ambitions and aspirations. Politics is contingent on circumstances that are shaped by what we understand as objective conditions and political economy places a high order on economic factors and these cannot be neglected in any discussion of politics but equally the subjective dimension of politics such as cultural, psychological, racial, ethnic and social factors play a huge role in shaping legitimate leadership. Political activity and political life, therefore, are forms of

subjectivity in conditions that subjectivity does not determine.

Political philosophy and theory provide some assistance in understanding and may illuminate particular areas such as explanation of the state and its relations with citizens, the elaboration of systems of rights, exploration of notions of justice, gender reordering, or the role of ideology and power. Political philosophy and theory also establish the principles on which political values such as rights, freedoms, citizenship, constitutional order and freedom are based. However, philosophy and political theory deal with static circumstances in political life and do not set out to explain the processes of politics. One of the challenges of political theorists working in post-colonial societies is the construction of new ways of thinking and theorizing politics geared not only to static issues but work that can explain the processes of politics.

C.L.R. James in the volume *Party Politics in the West Indies* argues the goal of politics "is to discuss and plan and to carry out some program and perspective of our own and then to judge how far you have succeeded or failed, and why...The more of this the people do, the bolder and more comprehensive the plans of a Government can be, the more it can defy its enemies. Otherwise as sure as day you find you have to shoot them down." [David Austin 2009, 300]. The shooting down of people,

to which we have long been accustomed in Jamaica has a long legacy that goes back to slavery , colonialism but one must now add the short but important post-colonial period. In the latter period the shooting down of people is partially a result of developments that have been induced by the transmission belt of politics which is the political party. This institution has been neglected as a target of political inquiry in the last twenty years especially since the death of Carl Stone and the focus has been on the state and governance procedures that highlight accountability and transparency in the award of contracts, policy frameworks and the legislative agenda. However, the current political crisis in Jamaica indicates that political control of constituencies is manipulated by dons whose financial and gun power give them influence and put them in a position to influence not only local but national politics as well. These individuals are active players in the party life at the grass-roots level. Moreover, these players have become part of transnational organizations that have more ready access to resources than many members of parliament.

If we look at political party formation in Jamaica from 1938 until 2010 we will see the following patterns. Both the People's National Party and the Jamaica Labour Party are products of the nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s. From 1938 to 1989 the PNP by and large was a social-democratic party with ideological components constituting a trade union based left-wing

that gave way in the 1970s to a left-wing based on the unemployed and underemployed with strong lumpen social forces who were consolidated in a number of garrison constituencies in the West and Central areas of Kingston. The shift to neoliberal politics in the 1980s in the PNP resulted in the collapse of party building in the traditional sense and its replacement by an electoral machine. This process of party erosion took place especially in the P.J. Patterson years from 1993-2006. There was also the abandonment of political education which was critical to explaining the ideological platform of democratic socialism that had been adopted in 1974. In the case of the JLP which was founded in 1943 Alexander Bustamante and the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union took a position that was conservative on economic and social matters and positioned itself to oppose the PNP's socialist platform without having to declare an ideological platform of its own that would carry forward its brand of Jamaican nationalism. The JLP stuck to the status quo in economic and social life. How Jamaica had been conceived and was developing in its evolution from British rule fitted neatly into Bustamante's famous statement "We are with the West". In the context of the Cold War years this meant support for capitalism and anti-communism. So while both parties were nationalistic the difference was in their conceptions of how Jamaica could be transformed given its racial, social and economic inequalities. The Jamaican

landowners and merchants saw the charismatic Bustamante with his extraordinary ability to communicate with the working class and the peasantry as a natural ally and the middle-classes, sections of the business community and urban workers saw Norman Manley, the well-educated Rhodes Scholar and brilliant lawyer as their hero. Both parties have rotated in power for 66 years since universal adult suffrage in 1944 with the JLP being the majority party for 33 years and the PNP the majority for 33 years. In the period since independence in 1962 the JLP has governed for 22 years and the PNP for 26 years with the PNP having the longest continuing period in office from 1989-2007, a tenure of 18 years. The PNP became an electoral machine with Prime Minister P.J. Patterson astutely taking political advantage of Seaga's crippling leadership of the JLP to have the longest tenure. During the long reign of Patterson the party became an electoral machine, with party structure, political education about the direction of the country in the changed global circumstances put on the backburner. There was a shift in the socio-racial leadership of the PNP from the brown middle-class to the black middle class leadership with a focus on using the state and its contracts for enrichment in the same way that Jewish and light-skinned and white Jamaicans had been doing from the 1940s. Parallel with this is the normalization of contracts to dons connected to both political parties. Secondly, there was anemic

economic growth, the rise of inequality, the escalation of the debt and the rise of the homicide rate.

The JLP regained power in 2007 under the leadership of Bruce Golding who returned to the party after abandoning the National Democratic Movement which he had founded in the mid 1990s. The JLP has been and continues to be an electoral machine with a structure based on the electoral system from PD's, scrutineers, runners, right up to the candidates for local government and the constituency caretaker or Member of Parliament. The candidates or representatives of local government and the MP dispense favours and provide a range of services from the Constituency Development Fund as well as social services such as assisting with the funding of back to school items, funerals, wakes and medical prescriptions. Political representation is onerous and the loyalties built up through these activities provide the party with its hard core support. However, from the standpoint of politics both parties have degenerated and have no other focus but to gain control of government.

### **What have been the frames used to discuss the crisis in Jamaican politics?**

I intend to briefly examine the work of Obika Gray, Brian Meeks, Horace Levy and Anthony Harriott provide important perspectives on the Jamaican crisis. Obika Gray in his summary of Carl Stone argued that "clientelism, linked to a competitive electoral system, produced a faction-ridden and violent political system.

His emphasis on political patronage and its dynamics reveals the anatomy of the postcolonial Jamaican political order. His analysis shows how that order combines authoritarian, democratic, paternalist and popular features to hold together a class-divided society." [Gray 2004, p. 3-4].

Carl Stone in *Class, State and Democracy in Jamaica* concluded that "Jamaican democratic traditions are in fact coping with severe pressures (both internal and external). Fortunately the political system has the asset of flexible leaders able to adjust to changing and variable circumstances"[Stone 1985, 189-190].

Jamaica has a long tradition of managing state violence with scant regard for human rights. Disturbance and protest, do not contribute to any real threat to political stability.

Gray's revision of Carl Stone are that firstly democracy is not a defining feature and one needs to take account of contrary features secondly there is a low estimation of the significance of the rebellious urban poor's politics.

For Gray therefore "the outstanding feature of the Jamaican political order is not to be found in its democratic credentials. On the contrary, it is not so much that Jamaican democracy survives and flourishes, but rather that a predatory state, which increasingly corrupts and violates existing democratic attributes

has flowered into maturity, particularly after 1972. p. 6" The Jamaican state is therefore held to be less democratic than Stone theorised. Gray concludes that "State power in Jamaica can simultaneously be predatory and populist; violent and paternal; as well as democratic and viciously abusive of human rights, depending on the exigencies of the political situation" [p.5]. This grasp of the contradiction is at the heart of Gray's contribution to theorizing the Jamaican state. These observations by Gray do not invalidate Stone's assessment of Jamaican political leadership.

Brian Meeks's contribution to the discussion of the Jamaican crisis has been the view that Jamaica is undergoing hegemonic dissolution. In 1996 Meeks argued "Politically, postwar Jamaica has been characterized by the existence of one of the tightest, most impermeable and consistent two-party systems in the hemisphere... This system was underwritten by a number of features, including clientelism, extreme Westminster centralization of power, the absence of an effective back bench, the exclusion of third parties, and the absence of a strong, independent civil society. Its success and relative longevity can be said to have derived from a series of unwritten pacts and compromises between the largely brown-skinned and educated upper middle classes who actually controlled state power, and the black working and lower classes who voted for them and occasionally engaged in internecine warfare in the rank and file of either

party" [Meeks 1996, 127]. The two significant changes are the undermining of the power of the brown and black middle-classes and the growth in the strength of civil society groups. Otherwise the political system is intact.

In 2007 in *Caribbean Futures* Meeks elaborated on hegemonic dissolution and argued that "The economic crisis, the collapse of the political project, the growing psychological independence of the subordinate classes are the conditions under which a moment of hegemonic dissolution has emerged...the social bloc in charge of the direction of Jamaican society is no longer ruling over a people convinced of its social superiority and its inherent right to 'run things'...(p.71). In Jamaica the creole nationalist moment has collapsed. This is essentially a Gramscian reading of the Jamaican crisis in which the hegemony of the social bloc of the Jamaican upper-class as well as brown and black middle-class control of the political parties and their right to rule no longer is accepted. It has been replaced in large pockets of the urban communities by other players. Yet West Kingston which on the surface offers an example of a new order is a complex political arrangement involving legitimate political leadership in parliament and local government coupled with donmanship. It is therefore a hybrid political form.

According to Meeks "The central problem in Jamaica, then, is not to be located at the level of productivity or technology, to cite two often-used examples, but rather in the character of the social and political arrangements." (p.115) It is the latter point of political arrangements which need empirical work not only from a crime point of view but from a political standpoint. West Kingston offers a fascinating location to begin thinking about political arrangements at the grassroots.

Meeks' prescription calls for a new consensus, a new social contract in three areas. First, 'a process of national reconciliation 'that would address, fully discuss and ultimately exorcise the national cataclysm of 1976-1980, the spectre of which still broods over the county and inhibits any initiative towards national healing.'" Secondly, extensive land reform, thirdly a Constituent Assembly of the Jamaican People at Home and Abroad. Before one can adequately deal with such a broad agenda there is a need to understand what political arrangements, what political or civic vehicles exist that could take on the journey proposed by Meeks.

Horace Levy's monograph entitled **Killing Streets and Community Revival** provides a theoretical approach to the crisis in addition to the documentation of the activist work of the Peace Management Initiative which intervenes in armed conflict in garrisons and other inner-city communities and has brought about peace in several communities which means the absence or lowering of armed conflict and the conversion of the young males into sports and gainful employment. Levy argues 'that the root of the problem is to be found in what the political parties with popular consent have done in their quest for power- converted communities into garrisons and transformed instruments of unity and solidarity into war machines. Authoritarian garrison structure with violent ways turned communities into killing fields, robbing them of their cohesion, vitality and ability to function as communities" [Levy 2009, 12-13]. The garrison is essentially a constituency in which the core of its political capacity among the grass-roots is based on the power of the area leader or don who controls the use of violence and scarce benefits and keeps the constituency aligned to the party with a huge plurality of the votes so the member of parliament is guaranteed a safe seat. Edward

Seaga's tenure in West Kingston for over forty years until his retirement in 2005 is testimony to the power of the garrison. The Tivoli garrison was a mini-state within the Jamaican state system with its own system of punishment and rewards. There have been three generations of dons in Tivoli from the 1960s to 2010 with the last Don who is now on the run being the most powerful deriving over \$140 million of state contracts in construction and being in control of a powerful multinational Shower Posse gang that is said to trade in drugs and guns. This don, the adopted son of Jim Brown who died mysteriously in prison in 1992, was called the President and he controlled Tivoli and when Golding was seeking a seat the 'President' was influential in the party's decision to have Golding replace Edward Seaga.

Levy therefore identifies the political party in the community as part of the problem of violence. Levy draws on the theory of civil society as a cardinal part of his discussion and talks about governance. Civil society stands between the state and the rest of society and in practice usually refers to middle-class leadership in a range of organizations that cut across

class. Prominent civil society organizations that have been active in recent times in Jamaica would include Jamaicans for Justice, Citizens for Free and Fair Elections, the Media Association of Jamaica, the Churches, Private Sector to name a few. These organizations provide an important mediating function and intervene in the conflict between citizens and the state. Over the past ten months civil society organizations have grown and new groups have become active. If as Levy discusses it the root of the problem lies with the political party then civil society organizations are important in shaping public opinion and exerting pressure on the conduct of the political parties and the state. Civil society therefore has an important role in defense of human rights and in influencing the agenda of political parties as well as the views of the electorate.

Anthony Harriott's book Organized Crime and Politics in Jamaica - Breaking the Nexus is a very important text and it speaks directly to the state of Jamaican politics. Where Gray and Levy see the urban poor Harriott sees gangs and criminal networks in many communities. Harriott argues that 'if Jamaican

politics is in some ways responsible for the extraordinarily high rate of violent criminality that the country is now experiencing then successive political administrations since the 1970s are even more responsible for the emergence and rise of organized crime. The political methodology of the political parties is profoundly and directly implicated in the rise of organized crime" [Harriott 2008, 2]. Harriott argues co-partnership between crime and politics. If political parties are responsible the logical conclusion is that they are part of the crime problem. The recent crisis in West Kingston and the killing of over 73 people in Tivoli Gardens started on May 24, 2010. Tivoli Gardens has been the main symbol of a garrison but it is one of many but none are like it. According to Harriott "some 20 per cent of all constituencies and approximately 60 per cent of all urban constituencies have already been fully or partially garrisoned [Harriott 2008, 20]. Garrisons are therefore a central part of the political system in that they are safe political seats. Moreover they assist in the task of political mobilization in other constituencies.

## How useful is the theorizing in understanding the recent social and political crisis in Kingston?

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What does the extradition request tell us about the political system? It confirms Harriott's thesis that there is co-partnership between politicians and dons in governance. The party and the state had ceded certain functions to Christopher Coke's multifaceted operations. Shower Posse of which he had become the reputed leader was a product of the Cold War battles against the PNP in the 1970s and 1980s and it had grown way beyond those days to becoming an international drug and gun syndicate. Governance in Tivoli Gardens had its own justice and security system, its own system of execution and welfare and economic activity around Jamaica's largest network of markets and popular Passa Passa took place in a relatively orderly and peaceful way. Secondly, sections of the Jamaican middle-class are a core part of the criminal-political linkage on both the PNP and JLP sides of the political divide. Thirdly, the Jamaican population by and large accepted the status quo and Christopher Coke's role. Arguments on the ground included the safety of Coronation Market and downtown and of course for JLP supporters loyalty to a hardcore supporter was a factor that was justified because the PNP had their dons and godfathers as well. In Parliament the defense of Coke was on the basis of defending the rights of a Jamaican.

It took over 9 months for Prime Minister Bruce Golding to decide that the extradition order requested by the U.S. Government would be signed. Without the pressure of the US Justice Department on the extradition and the pressure exerted by the UK, Canada and EU missions there would have been no crisis. The co-rulership between the MP and the Don would have gone on as normal. The Prime Minister's first critique of the Americans was that the evidence against Coke was illegally obtained. The second was his denial that his government had any dealings with the U.S. law firm Manatt, Phelps and Phillips. The Prime Minister later admitted in parliament that it was on his instructions that the JLP secured the legal skills of Manatt, Phelps and Phillips to lobby against the extradition of Mr. Coke. Facing calls from civil society for his resignation he went on retreat with his party hierarchy which endorsed his leadership and then he faced the public in a broadcast asking for forgiveness. As soon as he announced in that broadcast that the extradition order was going to be served Tivoli Gardens went into battle mode. They had had nine months to prepare. They had arms, they constructed barricades, they organized a march of women in white to show their love and support for Mr. Coke. Drawing on their experience of the police offensives in 1997 and especially 2001 when twenty seven of their number were killed they were prepared to fight another police battle but this time

the army and police were mobilized with different tactics . Moreover, the attacks and burning of police stations in West Kingston put public opinion on the side of the security forces for the moment. The military offensive saw the blasting of new entry points into Tivoli avoiding the booby trapped barricades that were said to be connected to electricity. The security forces had some aerial support from a special aircraft, maybe a drone, that enabled the security forces to pick off gunmen on the roofs of buildings and provide operational intelligence. Coke and the militia in Tivoli fled.

### **What are the implications of this for politics?**

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Firstly, a searchlight has been turned on the connection between drug and gun running and the ruling party. But no politician has been connected. Secondly, there is an awareness that the JLP connection with crime does not absolve the People's National Party which has its dons, garrison constituencies and its supporters who are also in the business of the trade in drugs and guns. Thirdly, hadn't the U.S. Justice Department and the State Department acted it would have been 'Jamaica no problem' as the Tivoli status quo would have remained intact. Fourthly, these patterns are not unique to Jamaica and they exist and threaten states in Latin America and Caribbean countries such as Mexico, Columbia and Haiti. Fourthly, the Jamaican political elite have little political will to take on the drug dons. Actions that have been taken against

dons have been a result of U.S. pressure. Fifthly, the lumpen proletariat's rise in Jamaican politics is phenomenal and it coincides with the decline of the role of the middle class in the political parties and a co-optation of a part of the middle-class and business community in and outside of the political parties in criminal enterprise.

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#### **What are some of the consequences for daily life?**

The first is fear, fear of speaking out because of the threats of violence and the possibility of being killed. In addition there is enormous stress compounded by the impact of the global economic contraction and the indebtedness of the state. The Jamaican population has been weakened after decades of futile politics and economic impoverishment.

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#### **Are Jamaican politicians capable or willing to reform the political system?**

The defeat of democratic socialism in the 1980s represented a fundamental shift not only to enterprise politics in the JLP but more importantly in the PNP and this was raised to a level of serious political ingenuity by PJ Patterson who abandoned political education and created a party that would not only be capable of winning elections but would assist the politically connected black middle class to become a bourgeoisie through the award of state contracts. The young PNP and JLP activists at the UWI in the past twenty years have learnt this lesson well. It should, however, be remembered that both parties have thousands

of supporters and party workers who are committed to their organization and who are not the beneficiaries of state contracts or state offices and it is here that hope lies. The growth of civic consciousness and civil society organizations must also be welcomed but these are spheres that impact on politics but are not at the core of politics.

### **Truth Before Reconciliation**

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A major demand of civil society is for Truth and Reconciliation. So far no politician has been taken in for questioning although there are a number who are said to be 'persons of interest' and rumours abound concerning US visa restrictions. There is clearly a need for truth in politics. Truth comes before reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and its work during the period 1996-1998 was part of a transition mechanism in the transfer of power from a white minority rule to democratic rule based on the right to vote of all its citizens. Nelson Mandela sought reconciliation because the new government needed to exercise its power in a context where it would not be sabotaged by elements in the military in particular and white extremists who wanted to create a separate white state. Mandela recognized that his Presidency had to have the legitimacy based not only on the black majority but all South Africa. For the TRC to work there had to be

concessions and amnesty was one such concession which allowed those who had acted on the basis of orders of the apartheid state and had committed gross human rights violations to publicly admit those violations and seek amnesty and possibly pardon and forgiveness. The corollary was that those who had fought in the liberation movement and had killed civilians or killed recalcitrant members within the ANC had to be held accountable. The focus of the TRC was on the victims those who had suffered violations, their families and their right to knowledge of the truth as to the circumstances under which their loved ones were killed, where they were buried and of course compensation. On the latter issue of reparations the TRC did not live up to the promise of adequate reparations. But the TRC was part of a broader process of the transfer of power in which memory of the past particularly the years 1960-1994 would not be lost to amnesia but would be part of the way the new state constituted its memory of its recent past. This process of transition stemmed from negotiations between the political parties primarily the National Party of F.W. de Klerk and the African National Congress (ANC), led by Nelson Mandela. Most importantly there was a strong national and international political momentum for change from apartheid. Jermaine McCalpin's analysis of the failed Truth Commissions in Grenada and Haiti would be the likely outcome for Jamaica. Jamaica's truth commission will have to be handled by investigative journalism and

the monitoring by civil society of the conduct of political parties.

What kind of transition are we contemplating in Jamaica that would make a truth commission meaningful? While Jamaica is not now experiencing a transition, it is worthwhile thinking about the reorganization of political life at the level of how political parties function in the sixty political constituencies. Our political parties need to break with the gangs and with organized crime. Understanding the role of Christopher Coke in Tivoli and in party conferences and key party decisions about constituency representation, party leadership decisions and access to state contracts will assist us in understanding the depths of the problems. Similarly work needs to be done with area leaders and dons on the PNP side who also wield power within that institution and over party leaders. My feeling is that parties have become compromised to such a large extent that they lack the capability for internal regulation or party cleansing. Therefore, far more exposure of the political aspects of organized crime and politics needs to take place and in this regard the role of media and civil society is critical.

### **Practical Suggestions**

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Practical suggestions have to be put within some context and framework of experiential and visionary politics. In this regard my basic premise about

political reform is that this best comes about when there is a social movement focused on an agenda for change in which people put trust in their own capabilities and not those of special leaders although these may appear and embody our best aspirations or worst fears. The risk here is that you could get something worse replacing the old or you could get something better.

How do parties rebuild and on the basis of what social forces? The answer is that the party must have some objective, some project for change or conservation to which it hinges its organizational wagon. Parties respond to what is happening on the ground and party re-examination and overhaul is not on the agenda. There is of course the broader question of party and social structure and the most significant development since the 1970s has been the attachment of lumpen urban forces to the political machinery of both parties.

Jamaican politics has been characterized by a political duopoly where two parties alternate in power. A duopoly is a specific type of oligopoly where there are only two players in the electoral marketplace. Jamaica deserves a multiparty system at the local and national levels and this discussion needs to take place alongside the proposals by civil society:

“to implement recommendations with respect to political party financing and other crucial legislative provisions to ensure parties operate with transparency,

accountability and no taint of connection to criminal elements or undue influence by special-interest groups; establish a national framework for integrity testing of political candidates; implement the recommendations of the contractor general aimed at ensuring the exclusion of tainted persons from the award of Government contracts."

[Civil Society groups push for political accountability" Gleaner, June 10, 2010:A7]

The freedom to organize politically in Jamaica requires a strong security cover because gangs are armed and the majority of party supporters and non-party people who vote are not armed. But it also requires a determination on the part of party supporters and leaders that this is in the best long term interest of the country. This agenda can draw on the recommendations of the "Stone Committee appointed to advise the Jamaican Government on the performance, accountability and responsibilities of Elected Parliamentarians" which met in 1990-1991. But that work would have to be updated to account for the strong influence of gangs and organized crime in political parties.

Research work on political parties needs to be undertaken and how they function at the level of

constituencies is important. A study of the West Kingston constituency needs to be done.

One of the consequences of the West Kingston crisis is that it has disempowered one of the major garrisons. However, a de-garrisoned constituency, whatever that means, cannot be rebuilt without the freedom for democratic politics and political competition within and between parties and the ability of its citizens to participate fully in political life.

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