

Revolutionary Politics in Grenada – A Retrospective

Written by Peter Clegg

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PETER CLEGG, JUL 2 2013

Almost 30 years ago – on 25 October 1983 – the United States supported by several countries in the Caribbean invaded Grenada. The invasion was precipitated by the killing of the Grenadan Prime Minister Maurice Bishop by former supporters and ended a period of left-wing revolutionary government in the country. Indeed, the invasion halted an unprecedented period of reformist politics in the Caribbean, which had also included Jamaica and Guyana.

The so-called People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) gained power on 13 March 1979 in the first and only coup to have taken place in the Commonwealth Caribbean. The following paragraphs remember the period of PRG rule and consider its key successes and failures.

The background to the coup which brought Bishop, his close associate Bernard Coard and their followers to power in 1979 was the long dominance of Grenadan politics by Eric Gairy, from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Gairy (who was not particularly liked by the British government, which at one point got rid of him, but who survived in part because the opposition was so ineffective – including when in government) was, by the late 1970s (following eventual independence from Britain in 1974) increasingly authoritarian. Opposition to him focused increasingly around the left-leaning and Marxist-inspired New Jewel Movement. This fought the 1976 elections in an alliance with two other opposition groups, the Grenada National Party and the United People's Party, but the elections were widely believed to be fraudulent, and by the late 1970s the NJM's leaders lived in increasing fear that Gairy would arrest them. They decided to take a chance while Gairy was attending a session of the United Nations (to argue for a committee to look into UFOs, one of his pet subjects) and launched the coup on 13 March 1979, which met very little resistance.

The early actions of the Bishop government betokened a degree of flexibility. The Queen was kept as head of state and the Governor-General (then Sir Paul Scoon), although initially placed under house arrest, was soon released and retained as her representative. There was a policy of non-victimisation against Gairy's supporters in the civil service and the police. There was also a promise of early elections, but these never materialised. In the early months of the regime the lack of elections was perhaps understandable: there were fears, fuelled by the occasional bomb attack, that Gairy would stage a counter-coup, or that the US would use the CIA to destabilise the regime. By the end of 1980 the situation was calmer, however, and all the indications suggest that had the PRG held elections then, they would have won. Instead, the regime showed an increasingly authoritarian side. Thousands were taken in for questioning, and some were tortured. In September 1981 twenty-six people were arrested in conjunction with the suppression of the independent newspaper *The Grenadan Voice*. Several of the utterances of the regime's leaders also sounded increasingly paranoid. The leadership justified the lack of elections by claiming that they were engaged in building a true, participatory democracy. In reality, power flowed down, not up.

On a regional level, the immediate response to the coup which brought Bishop and the PRG to power was surprise and caution, and it was welcomed only by Guyana, under Forbes Burnham, and Jamaica, under Michael Manley. Elsewhere there was concern about the constitutionality of the New Jewel's assumption of power. As one observer noted at the time, a central concern was "the fear of being taken to accept the legality of the Grenada revolution which would then serve to legitimise revolutionary activity in their own countries". Nevertheless the signs of political instability in the Commonwealth Caribbean were short-lived, and within a year Grenada was largely isolated in the region, Manley having been defeated in Jamaica, relations with Guyana having soured after the Grenadan leadership accused Guyana of complicity in the murder of Walter Rodney, and conservative governments having come to power

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in a number of other island states. The nadir of Grenada's relations with the rest of the region was in late 1980 and early 1981. But there were soon signs that the region was learning to live with the PRG, as in 1981 when the US government's attempt to insist that aid to the Caribbean Development Bank should not find its way to Grenada backfired and was viewed as an unwarranted interference in the region. Bishop helped his case by strongly supporting regional integration. By July 1983 the issue of Grenada's place in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was dead, and, with the exception of Edward Seaga's Jamaica and Tom Adams's Barbados, Caribbean governments were largely reconciled to dealing with the PRG. In particular, Bishop was now a fully legitimate and highly respected participant in the CARICOM family.

In social and economic terms, the PRG government could claim some successes, but as with its attitude to parliamentary elections, it allowed dogma to get in the way of sensible decision-making. There were well-funded literacy and healthcare initiatives, and some other social and economic achievements. But the economy failed to deliver the growth that was needed to underpin the government's ambitions. The agricultural sector deteriorated, partly as a result of natural disasters, market shortages and declining prices; tourist numbers fell significantly, largely as a result of negative coverage of the government's political views, while the promised diversification of tourism to include the eastern bloc and the 'third world' failed to materialise; large amounts of government revenues and aid were diverted to the building of a new international airport at Point Salines (which the US viewed as provocative, given the belief that it could act as an important bridgehead for Cuban and Soviet influence in supplying revolutionary movements in Latin America and the Caribbean); and manufacturing, in which great hopes were placed, grew only sluggishly, in large part because of continuous tussles between the PRG and the private sector. While some of the constraints were beyond its control, the PRG failed to deliver the economic benefits which would have strengthened its support within the populace.

Ultimately political dogma undercut the regime, leading to internal dissent in the PRG and ultimately the murder of Bishop. The reality of living in America's backyard had been brought home to the region as early as 1953, when the reformist Cheddi Jagan had been removed as chief minister of (then) British Guiana, following pressure from the US. In turn the Grenadan episode marked the end of an important era of reformist and quasi-revolutionary politics in the Commonwealth Caribbean. As in other countries, the PRG might well have fallen anyway, without US intervention, given that it allowed an imported and unloved political model based on Marxism-Leninism to take precedence over economic and social progress.

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