DEMOCRACY AND ETHNICITY IN BELIZE

A Paper By

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This paper examines distinctive characteristics of Belize with regard to its historic and current economic, social, and political conditions. Demographic patterns, ethnicity, and democratization have national as well as international implications for Belize. Recent decades of civil and political strife in Central America have greatly impacted Belize, and the influx of refugees and immigrants has profoundly altered its ethnic composition. As large numbers of immigrants have come from historically non-democratic, authoritarian political cultures, their understanding of the democratic process and their commitment to democratic values are important to the future of Belizean democracy. The paper examines efforts being undertaken to socialize for and promote conditions receptive to liberal democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Belize is a small country about twice the size of Jamaica located south of Mexico and east and north of Guatemala along the western shore of the Caribbean Sea. It is unique among its Central American neighbors for its British heritage, its democratic culture, and its stable and responsive governmental institutions.

Demographically and culturally, Belize is a country of diversity, made up of Creoles (29.8%) and Garifuna (6.6%), Mestizos (43.7%), Mayan Indians (11.1%), German Mennonites (3.1%), East Indians (3.5%), and others (2.2%) including Middle Easterners, Chinese, North Americans, and Europeans. While English dominates, along with an English-based creole, Spanish is spoken throughout the country, and the Garifuna and Mayans have their own languages. The county is young with a little less than half of the population below the age of fifteen. Thirty percent of the population live in Belize City (GOB). The 1997 estimate of the population of the country was 224,663 with 94,173 registered voters (Elections around the World).

Like most former colonies, Belize faces the problem of defining itself as a nation and locating itself in the scheme of things. Belize has something of an identity crisis. Is it Central American or is it
Caribbean? Who are the true Belizeans, those whose roots go back to colonial days or recent immigrants? What impact is current immigration having on democratic traditions in Belize? Are new and recent, Spanish-speaking immigrants being socialized to the parliamentary tradition, or are the seeds of an authoritarian backlash being sown? Can Belize retain and nurture a distinct culture in the face of the penetration by the United States through trade, family connections, communications, and US television? How does a small developing nation develop and nurture its own sense of nationhood in the face of these outside pressures? What part of the British heritage will Belize keep? (Barry 1992, xvii-xviii).

STRUCTURE OF THE GOVERNMENT

One aspect of the British heritage Belize has kept is the parliamentary system and its commitment to liberal democracy. Following the Westminster model, Belize is a constitutional monarchy within the British Commonwealth. Queen Elizabeth II is the titular and ceremonial head of state. She is represented by a Governor General, whom she appoints after consultation with the Government and the Opposition (Bany 1992, 3-4). Belize has a bicameral parliament, called the National Assembly, composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House consists of 29 members elected directly from geographical districts for five year terms unless elections are called sooner. The Senate consists of eight members appointed by the Governor-General also for five year terms. Five of these are appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister, two on the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, and one on the advice of the Belize Advisory Council. The Advisory Council is a constitutionally ordained body of seven members who are appointed by the Governor General for ten year terms (Barry 1992, 4). The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House may be chosen from the membership or from outside the houses, the latter being the current case (GOB).

The leader of the majority party in the House of Representatives is appointed Prime Minister by the Governor-General, and, in turn, the Prime Minister appoints the cabinet ministers from either House after party consultation. With five Senators recommended by the Prime Minister, the PM gains effective control of the Senate as well as the House. Often, party members defeated in the general election are named to the Senate, making them eligible to serve in the Cabinet (Barry 1992, 4).
The observation has often been made that the parliamentary system does not work perfectly in Belize. Because of the small size of the country, with only 29 total members in the House of Representatives, most of the majority are appointed to cabinet posts, leaving few members to establish any degree of legislative independence. Adding to this the strict observance of party loyalty, the principle of accountability is undermined, and the government becomes something of an insiders’ club. Under the parliamentary system the power of the Prime Minister is counterbalanced by the existence of elected members of the majority party who can oust their leader and select another. But this has not happened in Belize, nor is it likely to happen. Thus, while theoretically it is a cabinet government, the dominance of the Prime Minister caused Barry to describe the system as “prime ministerial” (Barry 1992, 5).

Likewise, in the area of the civil service, there is some indication that democratic practices have been compromised. At one time it could be said that Belize had a non-partisan civil service which was essentially unaffected by changes in government. Tom Barry wrote in 1992, “The absence of a spoils system in government is another feature distinguishing government in Belize from most of its neighbors” (6,8). Since then, however, he has qualified this in recognition of “gradual increases in forced resignations and partisan replacements when a new party moves into Belmopan” (1995, 7).

This point was made even more strongly by Anne Sutherland in a recent book in which she wrote that regular elections are “reasonably fair and democratic” but

once a party is elected and becomes the government, democracy is highly compromised because the system has no built-in checks and balances and no cultural tradition of a democratic civil society or common law to provide protection from abuse of power....Each change of government has shifted the spoils of governing from some small group of elites to another, so although elections are fair and democratic, the process of governing is viewed by most Belizeans as corrupt and exploitative. When the party in power becomes too blatantly corrupt, Belizeans vote in the opposition party and the cycle begins again.” (Sutherland 62-63).

She calls this “low-intensity” democracy because while being formally democratic, it lacks the informal institutions and cultural accouterments of democracy. This results in people being reluctant to speak freely. According to Sutherland, retaliation against those who do is common. (62)

Belize has had a two-party system since 1961 although it was not until 1979 that the United Democratic Party posed a serious challenge to the People’s United Party. While UDP has generally been
considered to be to the right of the PUP, neither party is particularly ideological. Both have sought support among all sectors and classes of society and both support the capitalist system. Each tends to identify with the working class and the poor when out of office and to be somewhat more conservative when in Government. Their alternation in office has served to underscore their similarity rather than to clarify their differences (Barry 1992, 10-11). In short, politics in Belize have been more a matter of personalities and degrees of emphasis than a contest over ideology. “Both parties seek to avoid class conflicts and to unite all sectors around their often unspecific and ideologically vague platforms,” wrote Tom Barry. “Political allegiances in Belize frequently follow the traditional political loyalties of one’s families and friends or are the result of personal favors (or the possibility of them) distributed by party representatives” (Barry 1992, 11)

Self-government came to Belize in 1964, when Great Britain granted the colony local autonomy, retaining control over only foreign affairs, internal security, and national defense. From the mid-1950s to 1984 George C. Price, a middle-class, US educated, Catholic creole, was the country’s primary politician. As the leader of the People’s United Party (PUP), he became the first Premier when the PUP swept legislative elections in 1964 winning eight of nine seats (Woodward 248). The People’s United Party led the country into independence, which finally came on September 21, 1981. In the new nation’s first election under independence, PUP and Price won handily. However, in 1984, to the surprise of some, Price and PUP were turned out, and United Democratic Party leader Manuel Esquivel became Prime Minister. Five years later, despite a record of economic growth and foreign policy initiatives, PUP narrowly defeated UDP, winning 15 seats to UDP’s 13. After one UDP defector switched to the PUP, this narrow margin sustained Price as Prime Minister until national elections in 1993. That year, despite winning 51.2% of the popular vote, PUP had only 13 seats, resulting in a parliamentary majority of 16 seats for a coalition of UDP and the National Alliance for Belizean Rights (NABR) (Elections Around the World). Manuel Esquivel returned to office for five more years. Then, on August 27, 1998, after a hard-fought and vigorous campaign, Belizeans gave a sweeping victory to the People’s United Party (PUP) and its leader, Said Musa. Now, with PUP’s return to Government, a clear pattern of alternation of parties seems to have been established. Furthermore, since independence in 1981, the Belizian people have
changed governments four times. Four democratic elections and four smooth transfers of power might be expected to guarantee Belize’s place as a democratic model for her Central American neighbors and for developing nations everywhere.

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN BELIZE

This conventional view of democracy in Belize that presents recent Belizian political history as a remarkable record of stable and responsive democracy relies on a long-time and deep-rooted tradition planted by the colonial power, which set the nation on a path to liberal democracy. This is viewed in stark contrast to other developing and new nations which are just entering the “democratization process.” For example, Nigel Bolland was explicit in declaring that “what has emerged in almost 40 years of party politics in Belize is a stable two-party democratic system based on the Westminster model.” Peaceful changes of government, he continued, show that “Belizeans are committed to democratic and orderly procedures” (Bolland 1991, 104)

However, the picture may not be quite so rosy. Anne Sutherland has described a different Belize—one with “a government that makes decisions without any system of consultation, that has no checks and balances, that hands out the spoils of power to itself, that operates in secret, that tightly controls all information going to the media, and that is felt by many to be involved in blatant corruption” (Sutherland 66-67). Indeed, she goes so far as to give credence to the allegation that Belize is an “elected party dictatorship and police state” (63) where “there is no freedom of the press” (180).

If this is true, the democratic character of Belize can be questioned. Liberal democracy requires commitment to certain ideological principles: that there are “rules of the game” which must be followed, including the presence of free and frequent elections among meaningful alternatives, free speech and debate, a free press, toleration of a loyal opposition, respect for human rights and civil liberties, and a commitment to constitutional limits on government. Resolving this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper, but it is apparent that the question is important as we turn to an analysis of the democratization process.
The whole concept of democratization has become of increasing concern to scholars in comparative politics in recent years, particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the former communist bloc states in Eastern Europe. Much of the literature on democratization focuses on post-authoritarian regimes (see Basch). Likewise, the replacement of authoritarian states with democracies in Latin America has raised the interest level in "democratization" (see Hoskin 1997). Democratization is generally defined as the transition of politically developing countries from nondemocratic to democratic political systems. The question is where does Belize fit into this paradigm?

One of the prominent analysts in this area is Samuel Huntington, who suspected this process might be the most important global political development of the late Twentieth Century (xiii). In his book, *The Third Wave*, Huntington asserted that the period from 1974 to 1990 witnessed a "third wave" of democratization in modern world history. Since Belize achieved independence in 1981, it is a third wave country. [There had been two previous waves of democratization (1828-1926 and 1943-1962) each of which was followed by a "reverse wave" (1922-1942 and 1958-1975 respectively (16).] "A wave of democratization," wrote Huntington, "is a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time" (15).

Huntington presented a typology of five patterns of democratization of which the fifth is the "decolonization" pattern, which fits the Belizean case. This pattern describes a democratic country (such as Great Britain) which imposes democratic institutions on its colony and educates its inhabitants in democratic values. The colony becomes independent and is able to maintain the democratic institutions bequeathed. In Huntington's analysis this pattern relates mainly to Great Britain and to the second wave. Those British colonies left to the third wave, Huntington considered "small and insular", and thus were summarily excluded from the analysis of third wave countries in his book (43). So much for Belize!

Yet, there is a problem with applying the concept of democratization to Belize in the way it has been applied to so many transitional countries in Eastern Europe and Latin American. This is that Belize has always, in some measure at least, had democratic institutions and ideals. Democratization in Belize
means continuing and nurturing a democratic tradition planted long ago rather than a transition from a really dictatorial regime. This raises the impact of ethnicity on democracy in Belize.

ETHNICITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

The political and social heritage of Belize is unique in Central America. Ethnicity in Belize is a difficult factor to manage. The multi-ethnic composition of Belize is such that no one group constitutes a majority; nor does one group have a clearly exclusive claim to being native. The government has officially stressed unity, tolerance, and, simultaneously, the value of multicultural diversity. It is a balancing act that has survived the large influx of immigrants from Central American political turmoil.

Throughout Belize there is awareness of the fluid racial/ethnic composition of the population. It impacts on national identity in a fundamental way: Is Belize a Caribbean or a Latin American country? In the past, pre-independence and pre-1980’s civil turmoil in some other Central American countries, the ethnic mix was complex enough to retard polarization. Mayans from three different origins (Yucatan, Peten, and southern Guatemala) had no real pan-Mayan identity. This has changed due to: increased numbers of immigrant Mayans; the influence of outsiders’ (and tourism-related) global Mayan perceptions; political expedience (organization enhances power); and more contact between various groups.

Demographic patterns are distinctive in different parts of the country. The northern population is predominantly Mestizo and Yucatan Maya, with some East Indian. The central coastal region around Belize City is dominated by Creoles. The southern coastal region is where most of the Garifuna and some East Indians live. The scattered villages along the coast are predominately Garifuna (Garinagu is sometimes used for the group collectively). The Garifuna were formerly known as Black Carib, a term now considered offensive. The southern and western interior is largely inhabited by two groups of Maya: Mopan Maya (to the west) who moved in from the Peten of eastern Guatemala, and Kekchi Maya (more in the south) from the area of Guatemala bordering Belize on the west and south. The western Cayo region of Belize is more mixed, including Creoles, Mestizos, Maya, Mennonites, Lebanese and others.

The three Mayan groups are often counted together yet are distinctive and have historically not had the pan-Mayan self-identification that outsiders tend to impose and assume. However, for common
benefit, there is an effort to forge a linked identity and cooperative unity. This is particularly illustrated by the Toledo Maya Cultural Council, which grew from the 1978 Toledo Indian Movement.

It is not that the populations are segregated from one another, but that for historic reasons various groups settled originally in different parts of the country and the patterns have persisted. The spatial separation and resulting occupational specialization patterns are changing somewhat but are still important. Decreased separation of various groups and increased intergroup contact, as transportation has become easier within the country, results in the need to develop functional, adaptive, interactive patterns/skills. That parallels greater access to national (and international) media, so there is more information available to all groups about one another.

Belize has developed counter to the general pattern for developing/emerging nations in several ways: population has increased more rapidly in rural rather than urban areas, and the ethnic populations have remained relatively regionally segregated. As a village-based society, Belize was not a mobile society--but rather was non-urban, and non-industrial--unlike the pattern of many developing countries. Even in 1980 when the majority of the population lived in Belize City, it was never the employment hub (in fact, Belize City had a very high unemployment rate, but attracted rural youth more to the perceived than real opportunities for jobs). In 1991 Belize had more rural than urban population (due to immigrants settling in rural areas).

The ethnic groups have no tradition of conflict with one another, which has contributed greatly to the current ability of such a diverse population to coexist in relative harmony. Despite their particular histories, traditions, and practices, the groups share the experience of various forms of domination--slavery, colonialism, religious intolerance, military dictatorship. However, mutual distrust and negative ethnic stereotyping originating during the colonial period, persist. This is particularly evident in interethnic, agroindustry work settings, such as the banana and citrus industries, retarding worker unionization and serving to depress wages. These tensions are examined by Palacio (1990), Moberg (1996) and Bolland (1986).

Large numbers of Mestizo immigrants (primarily from Guatemala and El Salvador) and Mayas have immigrated into Belize during the 1980s and 1990s. Push factors have been civil war, political
violence, and persecution. Pull factors include economics (wages and work conditions are generally better in Belize), land, and lower population density. Fourteen percent of the population consisted of immigrants in 1995. (PAHO, Vol. II, 77)

Immigrants from civil-war torn countries have considerable experience with violence as a problem-solving mechanism. Their experiences resulted in a particular perspective: lack of trust in government and those outside one's own personal circle and a lack of experience and faith in cooperative endeavors outside their own group. Their worldview, reflecting their experience, is more village- than national-oriented. In the agrarian economic background, a functional timeframe is much shorter than that required by the democratic, national, and global political reality. The long-term processes of democratic government can be slow as well as frustrating to newcomers. Then there is the difference between the Spanish colonial, feudal tradition and the British class and merit-based system. It takes time for adjustments to the new system.

Recent immigrants from non-democratic countries are inexperienced with democratic processes and values and many are illiterate and lack education in democracy. Those immigrant Spanish-speaking mestizos and Maya who practice milpa agriculture and settle in small village or in a scattered single-homesite living pattern are then consigned to low economic status. They are also resistant to wage labor mobility. Politically they are more given to defending their position and interests than in proactive planning and system-development (important in a democratic system).

Likewise, the low status of women in immigrant groups and anti-black attitudes of "Spanish" immigrants are factors not conducive to building democratic institutions. Mayan culture traditionally is more communal than democratic in orientation. Even the health needs of many immigrants, such as poor maternal-child health, a high infant mortality, and nutritional problems, create a need for expensive services which places strains on the egalitarian principles of the host population whose democratic institutions have to respond.

Traditionally for the Maya, the village/family/community has been more important than pan-Maya identification, which transcends different languages and origins. But there has been a developing compression of the ethnic attachments/perceptions: from three groups of Maya to one. Further pan-
Spanish-speaking compression is also occurring which links Mayan and Mestizo. If there is any second language for a traditional Mayan it is most likely to be Spanish, and most Mayans are more familiar with the Hispanic, Central American cultural context than the English-linked cultural and social heritage of much of the Caribbean and the Caribbean coast of Belize.

This raises a question as to whether the diverse ethnic population of Belize is a liability in terms of the continued development and maintenance of the democratic political system. Some observers take the view that there is excessive emphasis on the culturally diverse (i.e. ethnic councils) and that the divisive impact is a significant threat to national identity. Bolland celebrates diversity, even worrying that with English as the official language in public education, ethnic distinctiveness may be sacrificed in pursuit of national unity (1986, 49).

In the current scene, some of the economic specialization can be functional by providing various groups with their own economic and social niche. In terms of dysfunction, that same separation makes organization and coordinated action toward common advantage more difficult to achieve. Even recognizing common interests becomes difficult.

With no one group a numerical majority, cooperation and shifting coalitions present polarization that has created deep rifts in other Central American countries--where rich/poor Ladino/Indian, urban/rural has polarized the population with resulting revolutionary tension. In Belize there are cross-cutting cleavages that make the picture much less "tidy" and predictable, but much more stable and allows for ventilation rather than explosion over major issues. Localized interests balance class issues. Ethnic concentrations are not "ghettoized". There is no fixed territory to provide a clear base for defensive positions.

In terms of religion, again there are factors that mitigate against polarization. Religious Catholic observance is strongly mingled with ethnic tradition i.e. therefore Mayan Catholicism is different from Garifuna Catholicism, from Creole Catholicism, from Ladino Catholicism. Protestant Mennonites are very distinctive from Protestant Anglicans and 7th Day Adventists, Baptists, etc.

The multi-ethnic image of Belize officially promoted by the government in the 1980's emphasized the simultaneous importance of both ethnic pride and national pride. How can a balance be struck between
the two notions/attachments/allegiances? Or are they incompatible? Does the ethnic provide balance for other potentially divisive cleavages such as class or region?

The challenge to the parties in Belize is to avoid the combustible consequences of hardened polarization between two aggregates: (a) Spanish-speaking, brown, rural, unskilled labor, inland, Maya/Mestizo, ascribed status orientation (family/village/age/sex), Central American-oriented, versus (b) English-speaking, black, urban/town, coastal, Creole/Garifuna, achieved status orientation (education/merit), Caribbean-oriented with by cultural, residence/kin, and economic ties to the U.S. In numerical terms, the former group is becoming progressively larger, currently more than half of the total population. Counter-acting that to some extent is the fact that both Maya and Garifuna have in common an indigenous element in their self-identification.

The other groups (whites, Mennonites, Middle Eastern, East Indian, and Chinese) have the potential either to serve as a mediating swing component, or, if faced with a polarized choice, to align with the Anglophone pole because of multiple factors (including pre-independence ties, European/U.S. orientation/origins/history, education, and ties to urban/business interests).

On the one hand, the economic specializations and geographic concentrations contributing to differences characterizing the two broad groupings decreases job competition and other kinds of contact that could result in instability. On the other hand, that same gulf could lead to diminishing of the sense of commonality essential to nation-building and democracy: shared destiny through mutual efforts and interests.

Currently the UDP and PUP are more inclusive and don't have such rigidly defined, polarized constituencies. The danger (to the nation) is there, of UDP becoming seen as Anglophone, and PUP as Spanish, not just reflecting but coming to symbolize and, therefore in a self-fulfilling prophesy, exacerbate the polarity. Some observers see this as happening to a degree that causes concern. In the 1980s UDP was accused of exploiting and inflaming anti-immigration bias. In 1986 Bolland warned: "the processes of political and cultural decolonization and of economic development are fraught with pitfalls that can provoke cultural dissension as well as with opportunities to promote national unity. Much will depend on
the impact of external influences and on the leadership of Belizean politicians and educators..." (53) To that must be added the important role of a responsible media.

How to mitigate that prospect? Universality (i.e. constitutional principles and practices and institutions) overriding particularism, achievement overriding ascription, affective neutrality overriding affectivity, individual orientation overriding collective orientation (not individual isolated from others, but the individual with multiple social attachments providing broad and inclusive rather than narrow, exclusive perception of commonality/interaction).

Common education should be strengthened--reliance on parochial schools diminishes the commonality provided by a nationally uniform common education system. (However, as the religious institutions sponsoring the parochial schools are "external" rather than ethnic, the polarizing impact is somewhat minimized.)

Care must be taken not to avoid the dangers of ethnocentrism only to encounter the dangers inherent in excessive nationalism. To succeed in establishing reflexive non-democratic nationalism in Belize would be counter-productive. Indeed, with the boundary dispute with Guatemala no longer providing an external threat and the pre/post independence energy dissipated, excessive nationalism isn't a realistic prospect. So, how to achieve a stable balance between the multiple attachments of ethnicity, community, nationality, and democracy? How can a functional collective identity be forged?

Psychologically, the local, regional, national and international dimensions are important and, therefore, cannot be ignored. Belize has a particularly multi-dimensional transnational orientation--what with so many citizens and residents having strong international ties: as recent immigrants (generally from other Central American countries) or emigrants (generally to the U.S.) The large numbers of Belize-Americans (mostly Creole and Garifuna) traveling back and forth have become an institutionalized phenomenon. Will they retain an emotional self-identification that is primarily national or ethnic? The changing ethnic composition of Belize could lead to this mobile (and influential) group to diminish national attachment in favor or an ethnic/family emotional focus.

A continued emphasis on the principles and values fundamental to democracy will allow for a flexible situation, adaptable to economic and social change. Rather than competing attachments, a
concentric framework of progressively inclusive emotional, utilitarian, and institutional allegiances can be maintained. Simultaneous emotional commitments to family, ethnicity, community, nation, and geographic region can be compatible rather than competing.

Inclusion needs to be emphasized, particularly in political and educational arenas. The national dimension that has been emphasized is still important—out of many [groups], one [nation]. Commonality must be continually addressed—partly because it is shifting—the diverse elements constituting Belize are dynamic. Neither homogeneity nor implosion into ethnic divisions is a desirable alternative.

The southern political district, Toledo, provides an illustration of how the different cultures, livelihoods and settlement areas, the Garifuna and Maya have co-existed comfortably. They have utilized different ecological niches, so they have not been actually competing. It remains to be seen how this relationship will fare in response to the logging controversy and increased tourism. Toledo has thus far been off-the-beaten path for tourists, without convenient access, and lacking in any but budget tourist accommodations, except for a few small up-scale lodges in the interior. This will no doubt change in the future and tourists are likely to be more drawn to Maya-controlled sites.

It has been said that the consensus-building emphasis in Mayan and Garifuna villages was damaged by the development of party politics associated with independence. This is, however, not unique to Belize—it is associated with modernization and nation building. The "big man" political style of leadership gives way to the party because the party provides more inclusiveness potential and more division of labor/delegation of responsibilities throughout the country—avoiding the pitfalls of one village/person/group in complete control. There is also enhanced continuity with the party than with the individual. So, nostalgic, longing looks back to the past alcalde system ignore the necessity for national institutions such as parties.

Many Garifuna have pursued careers in civil service and teaching, a pattern that has fostered transferable skills (literacy, English, skills in working with other cultural groups—general adaptability and mobility). That has facilitated the considerable out-migration of Garifuna, not only to other areas of Belize outside the coastal south, but also to the United States in pursuit of economic opportunity. The percent of Garifuna in relationship to the total population is much less as a result.
The southern Maya, on the other hand, with less education and less proficiency in English language skills have fewer practical options. Men may work temporarily as day laborers outside the community, but for the most part village life is the central feature of most Mayan lives. Thus mobility is functionally relatively limited to the southern interior. Yucatan Maya, with long-term residence in Belize, are much more similar to the general population.

The urban Creole-dominated press tends toward anti-Spanish immigrant rhetoric. Recent elections have involved some efforts to promote ethnic tension. One incident (denounced in the Belize press as use of "racial slurs") occurred prior to the 1998 national election. The following statement was made on August 19 on the local television station, Channel 5, by Hubert Elrington, the UDP Housing Minister:

My pet issue is that I don't think we should allow our system to be taken over by the Espats and the Musas. We have enough people of our own to do our own ruling of our people. You know, the fact that a small group of Belizian Arabs can even believe that they can take over our country and take over a major political party like the PUP is very presumptive, in my view. And I think we need to say to them that that is not going to work. (Hubert's)

Said Musa is descended from a Palestinian immigrant and brothers Jorge and Mark Espat have a similar Middle Eastern heritage. This reference was soundly criticized by the Amandala newspaper as unprecedented in the history of party politics in Belize and as "a malevolent attempt to rend the delicate ethnic fabric of our young nation." (Hubert's) Such national attention to inter-ethnic tensions can serve to highlight local intergroup relationships as well.

The current world economic crisis is having a negative impact on Belize. The global movement to free trade, including NAFTA, has made Belize less competitive. With the end of the cold war and improved civil order in Central America, U.S. economic aid to Belize has drastically decreased as U.S. focus moves to the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe). In 1996 USAID closed its Belize office.

Peace Corps has decreased numbers of volunteers in Belize.

Devaluation of the Mexican peso has increased the appeal to Belizeans of shopping in Chetumal, Mexico—there are even bus trips for such shopping excursions organized from Punta Gorda. Conversely, there is a labor influx from neighboring countries because wages in Belize are so much higher. That is seen by Belizian workers as depressing local wages as well as creating an outflow of currency when immigrant
workers are supporting families in the country of origin. Economic competition between Afro-Belizeans and Hispanic immigrants over jobs in the banana industry has been described by Moberg (1996).

However, the working class is not a homogeneous, unified entity. Racial-ethnic and national distinctions create fault lines. In spite of a 20 percent unemployment rate in Belize, immigrant labor from neighboring Central American countries has been widely used, exacerbating tensions between Belizeans and immigrants and among competing racial-ethnic groups. Most immigrant laborers employed in Belize are classified into the "Spanish" racial-ethnic category. Their presence exacerbates tensions between Spanish-Belizeans and Afro-Belizean Creoles and Garifuna. Pressure to lower wages further could lead to increasing employment of immigrant workers, which would likely further increase ethnic and national tensions. These tensions are addressed more fully in Medina (1997a; 1997b).

To some extent the post-independence period has resulted in a temptation to look for scapegoats to replace the colonial power. Prior to independence, problems could be blamed on the colonial situation. The further away from independence, the less persuasive that has become. In a multi-cultural environment, the immigrant suffices for "them" in an us/them dichotomy.

Belize has not industrialized, but rather has developed an agro-industry based on exports. This depresses wages and encourages illiterate/semi-literate immigrants seeking employment. In the workplace, resentment over wages or working conditions can be displaced onto fellow workers from another ethnic background. It is more difficult to focus on the more abstract, broader economic patterns that are regional or global (such as NAFTA, the U.S.-European banana dispute, international economic crisis, etc.). In reality it is a multiethnic in-group and a multi-ethnic outgroup, but spillover occurs as a result of generalizing to look-alike members of ingroup and outgroup.

In Belize, to balance the potential for divisiveness along ethnic/polar lines, attachments to shared symbols are useful. Ethnically neutral national symbols are important in promoting national consciousness and identity. National symbols can serve to unify most effectively when they are inclusive, not particularly associated with nor derived from one particular ethnic component of the population. The Belize zoo and the national environmental movement/consciousness serves that function. Reef, wildlife, and rainforest belong to all, to be "saved" by all cooperatively. The collective perception of the environment is as a
shared resource: rainforest, reef, ocean, and wildlife constitute communal property. The Belize zoo, for example, promotes the toucan as an icon of national identity, as a symbol of common interest and future. It is effective because it is ethnic-neutral and generates national pride.

Internalized values supportive of democracy foster two goals: maximum participation in the political system, and the intergroup cooperation that is vital to stability of the system itself. Health services and education are two vehicles particularly well-suited for fostering such values. Health and education ideally involve multi-ethnic service providers serving a multi-ethnic population.

While health services are currently disproportionately concentrated in urban and town locations, more rural outreach is being developed. Overall, Belize has managed to maintain and improve health and education services despite the pressures related to the rapid influx of refugees and immigrants, making "absolute progress in basic indicators of health and well-being" (PAHO 1998, Vol. II, 78).

Training of health providers from all ethnic groups should remain an emphasis for two reasons: to provide effective services and to model multiethnic cooperation and problem-solving. Education and health benefits tend to be trans-ethnic. The commonality experienced in those arenas provide fertile ground for cooperation and consensus in even more complicated areas and can translate into greater tolerance for other areas of difference.

CONCLUSION

A century ago Jane Adams referred to "immigrant gifts" to emphasize the positive impact that diversity makes possible. In essence it is a matter of emphasis whether to concentrate attention on similarities, unity and integration or whether to focus on intergroup differences. It is a perennial question as to whether ethnic diversity and ethnic identification serve to fragment or to unify. Ethnic and other diversity provide for multiple "games" held in multiple arenas, providing many opportunities for more to "play" and to experience winning. There are more opportunities for recognition. Therefore, more "win/win" situations occur. A liability of homogeneity is that it tends to result in fewer "games", fewer arenas, and fewer opportunities for distinction.
Political and social stability is enhanced when government meets the needs of the population. Of course this is true whether the government is democratic or authoritarian. But the status quo in Belize is democracy and the challenge is to protect and nurture that system. Needs that are unmet would be expected not only to create dissatisfaction but to create dissention between groups perceiving themselves to be competing for scarce resources and services. One problem in this regard which mitigates against a firm sense of national identity, generates unrealistic expectations, and creates a sense of relative deprivation is the foreign media, i.e. U.S. and Mexican satellite and cable TV, plus ubiquitous imported goods which dominate the marketplace.

Belize is unlikely in the foreseeable future to achieve the material resources of North America or western Europe. Relative deprivation experienced by the Belizean population, given the pervasive presence of U.S. media, particularly television, is of real concern. As Bolland indicated, "Aspirations for better health, housing, and education and for wider participation in the country's political, economic, and cultural activities can be more easily met than the unrealistic desires for a consumer lifestyle modeled on that of the U.S. middle classes. That particular Golden Fleece is likely to remain elusive, and the search for it would be a bitter and frustrating experience for Belizeans." (1986, 68)

That can be minimized if national standards, goals, and collective expectations focus on achievable objectives, such as universal education, accessible public health services, and reliable public services like water, electricity and communication. Other non-material national measures of progress and quality of life can be emphasized by public recognition of community, regional or national service, educational excellence, craft/profession accomplishment and the like. In other words, quality rather than quantity can be promoted as a national emphasis and source of pride. This is consistent with the growing global awareness of the convergence of decreasing physical resources, increasing population, and increasing consumer expectations. Sustainable development requires living within available resources.

Belize is a healthy, "messy", dynamic mix with a promising future. Without fixed orthodoxy, there is a high degree of skepticism, pragmatism, irreverence, and anti-authoritarian bias in the public culture. Immigrants are being actively socialized into society by political parties and various interest groups. Women's issues are very much in the forefront of social action--led by a strong cadre of female
activists. Ethnic leaders form ethnic councils but participate in national party politics as well. There is not
a mutually-exclusive conceptualization nor practice in terms of loyalties/identification. There are
simultaneous and compatible attachments to ethnic, kinship, political, community, and national
distinctions. These cross-cutting cleavages make for a dynamic, non-static, adaptive society.
REFERENCES


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