

Grenada's Revolution at 40

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Forty years ago a socialist revolution in the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada threatened to upturn the world economic order.

When Maurice Bishop, the revolutionary Grenadian leader, appeared at Hunter College in Brooklyn, New York in August 1983, the Reagan administration was worried. Four years earlier, in 1979, a socialist revolution had installed Bishop's New Jewel Movement (NJM) in power in the Caribbean microstate of less than 100,000 people. A state department report from the time summarised the Americans' concerns. The revolution in Grenada, it said, was in some ways even worse than the Cuban Revolution that had rocked the region a quarter of a century earlier: the vast majority of Grenadians were black, and therefore their struggle could resonate with thirty million black Americans; and the Grenadian revolutionary leaders spoke English, and so could communicate their message with ease to an American audience.

As it turned out, they were right to be concerned. Bishop's speech in Hunter College was one of the great revolutionary orations of that century. In it, he defended the Grenadian Revolution with sweeping historical reference — in the context of the American Revolution of 1776, of Lincoln's Emancipation, of the continued economic subservience of the developing world, of the overthrow of Salvador Allende's government in Chile, and the brutal Contra interventions against the Sandinistas; in the context of the hypocrisy of Western nations in supporting Apartheid in South Africa, dispossession in Palestine, and dictatorship in South Korea.

But Bishop's intervention was perhaps at its height when discussing its Caribbean roots. In the decades before 1979, Caribbean socialism had developed into a major force. Its forms were various — a fact best evidenced by the concurrent victories in the 1950s of Fidel Castro's revolutionaries in Cuba and Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party in elections in Guyana (the latter of which prompted British military intervention). In the years before NJM's rise in Grenada, Trinidad had seen a Black Power uprising in 1970 and Jamaica had twice elected socialist Premier Michael Manley and his People's National Party in 1972 and '76 (events which, once again, prompted support for violent reaction from Western governments).

Bishop, who had, like Manley, been educated in Britain and shaped by its anti-colonial, anti-war, and socialist movements, was clear that he saw Grenada as part of a Caribbean context. 'We are one people from one Caribbean,' he told Hunter College, 'with one struggle and one destiny.' In reference to America's Monroe Doctrine and its claim to a right to intervene in the region, he was unequivocal, 'they like to talk a lot about backyard and frontyard and lake — well, Grenada ain't nobody's backyard, and ain't part of nobody's lake!' The rapturous response from a largely black American audience gives an insight into how this message was received.

And yet, only two months after that speech, Maurice Bishop was dead — executed by members of his own party after a catastrophic split in the revolution. Reagan's America, which had maintained a hostile stance towards the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) throughout, used the opportunity to invade. The Grenadian Revolution was dead. Academic Brian Meeks, who participated in both Jamaica and Grenada's experiments in socialism, would later write that these events marked

the end of radical politics in the Caribbean 'for a generation or more.' With commentary on the revolution's fortieth anniversary this year almost non-existent in Britain, despite the Windrush scandal prompting renewed scrutiny of the country's relationship to the Caribbean, it is past time for an excavation.

The Rise

One of the most impressive texts examining the revolution, its context, achievements, and legacy, is 2015's *The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and Lessons* edited by Wendy C. Grenade. Speaking to *Tribune*, Dr. Grenade described the background to the NJM's ascent to power:

Similar to other post-colonial societies, Grenada's political development evolved through waves of struggle in the search for freedom. In 1951 Eric Gairy led a social revolution against the plantocracy. Referred to generally as 'Sky Red', the 1951 uprising was intended to open spaces for working people to break the shackles that lingered since Emancipation. Gairy resisted the authoritarian, racist colonial [British] state and provided some measure of hope for the majority poor, black, and marginalised Grenadian masses.

However, once he gained state power, with time, Gairy became repressive. This repression was heightened in the 1973-74 period as the newly-formed NJM resisted Gairy's rule. The cycle of authoritarianism, resistance, and state-sanctioned violence mirrored the 1951 period and indeed earlier periods, such as Fédon's Rebellion of 1795-96.

Against that background, Grenada gained independence from Britain on 7 February 1974 in a whirlwind of political chaos. Grenada was bitterly divided in a Gairy/anti-Gairy struggle. While the majority working-class Grenadians remained loyal to Gairy, particularly the elderly, the emerging intellectual elite and the children of those who benefited from Gairy's 1951 social revolution challenged a meaningless 'in-dependence' that was not intended to bring about a just society. The sons and daughters of plantation workers, influenced by Black Power, the US Civil Rights movement, and other liberation struggles, marched throughout Grenada echoing a chant, reminiscent of Gairy's earlier defiance against the colonial establishment. This time it was 'Go, go, Gairy must go.'

Five years of struggle followed in which the NJM — previously an alliance of the Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education, and Liberation (JEWEL), the Organisation for Revolutionary Education and Liberation (OREL), and the Movement for Assemblies of the People (MAP) — consolidated into a party. Its leading figures were Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard, the latter of whom had developed as a Marxist under the tutelage of Trevor Munroe of the Workers' Party of Jamaica (WPJ). Although nominally Marxist-Leninist, the NJM which emerged was in reality more ideologically fluid. According to Grenade, it 'existed at the intersection of Marxist-Leninism, the international anti-colonial struggle, the Black Power movement and the Caribbean left tradition . . . shaped by a confluence of overlapping national, regional, and international forces.'

Facing an increasingly-authoritarian Gairy regime, the NJM set about pursuing a revolutionary insurrection and established the National Liberation Army (NLA). Trained in Guyana and Trinidad, it seized power in March 1979, after which Maurice Bishop was declared prime minister. The most radical experiment yet in Caribbean socialism was underway.

The Revolution

At the time of the revolution, Grenada had an official unemployment rate of 20% (the PRG would later argue that the real number was 49%), one of the lowest rates of GDP per capita in the region and widespread poverty. The island's economy, though improved somewhat under Gairy, remained almost entirely reliant on agricultural exports — first, in the form of sugar, and then as the 1970s progressed, on cocoa, nutmeg, banana, and mace. Promised diversification had failed to materialise, with Grenada's small and ineffective airport (by 1979 it lacked even lights for night-time landings) meaning that most tourists had to arrive via neighbouring islands.

After the revolution, in many ways, the political structure established by the PRG was classically Marxist-Leninist. Although there was considerable participation in grassroots groups like the National Women's Organisation, rival political parties were banned, the constitution was suspended, rule was carried out by decree of the party's Political Bureau and elections, contrary to repeated pledges, were never held.

Despite this, socialist Grenada's economic programme differed substantially from that of neighbouring Cuba, its closest ally in the region. In his 1982 speech 'Line of March', Bishop was clear that Grenada had rejected the model of state monopoly on ownership, pursuing instead a 'mixed economy' with the state sector 'dominant' and in charge of planning. This was, he argued, an attempt to develop Grenada's 'productive forces' such that might allow the conditions for socialism: namely, industrialisation, a significant working class, and popular education. It was, Bishop said, the Caribbean's equivalent to Lenin's 1921 'New Economic Policy,' in which the market existed but was subject to state direction.

According to Minister of Finance Bernard Coard, 'for years in our country there was no serious planning, our people had experienced corrupt and inefficient leaders making haphazard decisions which left our country and its people underdeveloped and poor.' In response, the PRG put in place ambitious plans to combat poverty, educate the population, and develop skills, improve the nation's infrastructure, diversify the economy, build a manufacturing base, and, crucially, boost tourism.

Economist Kari Grenade records its achievements in *The Grenada Revolution*:

Income tax was abolished for 30 per cent of the lowest-paid workers. Grenadian citizens also benefitted from a 'social wage' . . . benefits for which they did not have to pay, for example, medical (dental, optical, and general) and education services. University scholarships were offered in areas that were consistent with the country's economic development thrust, school uniforms and books were free, and a literacy programme and teacher in-service programme were introduced.

Further, the Housing Repair and Construction Programme led to improved housing quality and access. Still further, no interest was paid on loans for house repairs . . . Prices of several items were controlled by the state. The social system, like the economic system, was ordered and geared toward the benefit of all Grenadians. According to Payne, Sutton and Thorndike (1984), GDP per capita (the most common proxy for economic well-being) almost doubled to US\$870 in 1983 from US\$450 in 1978.

Wendy C. Grenade expands on this further, highlighting the National Transportation Service, the Marketing and National Importing Board, a national insurance scheme, and a fisheries processing plant. Public spending increased dramatically: total government expenditure grew from 38.7% of GDP to 52.7% in just four years.

Beyond these reforms, and reflecting the influence of post-1960s liberation politics on the NJM,

considerable gains were made by Grenadian women. Sexual exploitation of women in exchange for work was outlawed, equal pay for equal work was introduced — modelled on Britain's own 1970 Equal Pay Act — and mothers were guaranteed three months' maternity leave, two of which were paid, as well as a return to the same job they had left. Unsurprisingly, as the revolution progressed, women provided a sizeable portion of the NJM's base.

However, despite these significant achievements, Grenada's revolutionaries were conscious of the need to build a self-sufficiency that would insulate the island's socialist project, to a degree, from the turbulence of the global economy and the predation of the international markets. On these grounds, they came up short. The manufacturing sector, a key focus of Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard, failed to get off the ground. Agriculture was insufficiently diversified, leading to heightened exposure to both natural disasters and market fluctuations. The tourism sector, which had previously been reliant on Americans, declined as the US government pushed propaganda through travel agents that Grenada's beaches were covered in barbed wire. State industries continued to be heavily reliant on subsidy and exports failed to grow.

Kari Grenade, in summing up the experience, argued that the ambitions laid out by the PRG were correct from a development perspective but flawed in execution. 'Policies were well defined, but institutional and human capabilities were inadequate to effectively implement [them].' One area where this wasn't the case was the construction of Grenada's first proper international airport. This was well underway by 1983 with the assistance, as in most of the PRG's infrastructural projects, of Cuban construction workers. A project which Maurice Bishop described as a 'dream' of Grenadians for generations, it today bears his name and is the basis of the country's tourism industry. Unfortunately, he was never to live to see its completion.

The Fall

The decision to build an international airport in Grenada was met with enormous hostility by the new Reagan administration in Washington, which had assumed power in 1981 and immediately rejected attempts by Bishop and his government to normalise relations. As Assistant Undersecretary of Defense Dov Zakheim would write years later, 'it mattered little whether the airport would be used primarily as a tourist facility . . . it was the potential that the airport offered to the Soviets that worried American analysts.'

Contrary to the bombastic arguments of the Reagan administration at the time, the Grenadian Revolution was an indigenous phenomenon and not a Soviet plant in the region. In fact, despite the theft of a litany of documents relating to the revolution by the American invasion forces in 1983, no evidence has ever emerged that the Soviet Union had developed plans for using Grenada's airport to launch a military attack on the United States.

But Maurice Bishop and the PRG did pursue closer relations with the Communist world — for better and worse. It is unlikely that the revolution could have achieved as much in terms of economic transformation without the assistance of Cuba. And America probably would have invaded earlier were it not for Castro's military assistance. Trade with the Soviet Union also propped up weaker sections of Grenada's economy. But supporting the latter's invasion of Afghanistan at the UN damaged the country's relationship with non-aligned states and opened the door to accusations in Washington that it was becoming a puppet state.

Domestic factors also weighed heavily on the revolution in its final years. The international recession of the early 1980s impacted Grenada, as did the stuttering economies of its allies in the Communist world. By 1983 the party internally accepted that its revolution was no longer as popular as it had been four years earlier. But this was not, in the first place, down to the economy.

Brian Meeks, who came to Grenada after the defeat of the Manley government in Jamaica and worked for the PRG, has written extensively about the revolution's demise. In his analysis, the 'clandestine vanguard structure' which was essential to the NJM's military success in 1979 later hindered its abilities as a government. The result was 'a somewhat schizophrenic organisation,' with a small cadre 'reading Marx and seeking to build a "real" Marxist-Leninist party' while 'the popular base remained largely ignorant of all this, supporting the party mainly because of its history of standing for popular causes.'

In this dynamic, the NJM became increasingly divorced from the population, responding to each difficulty by doubling down on its determination to build a minoritarian organisation. The exception to this was Maurice Bishop, the hugely-popular prime minister. 'It was Bishop and not the NJM who the crowds saw as the embodiment of the Revo,' according to Meeks, 'he was the person with the common touch, the ability to convert the PRG's policies into words that everyone could grasp, and the timing to use them appropriately.'

A keen student of Caribbean socialists like CLR James as well as African liberation leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Bishop was an extraordinary public speaker. But these abilities contributed to his alienation from the party — while Bishop electrified crowds at home and abroad from the podium, he was widely considered in the NJM to be an inferior organiser to Bernard Coard, who built his position in the party at Bishop's expense.

This divide became apparent with Coard's resignation from the Central Committee in 1982. By 1983, it had thoroughly undermined the NJM. Coard and his supporters felt, with some justification, that the party was the spine that propped up the government but was being neglected in its development. They pushed a strategy of joint leadership, aiming to bring Coard's abilities for organisation to the fore alongside Bishop's talents for communication.

Bishop initially accepted this — and the process by which he came to go back on his word is shrouded in mystery. Certainly, he departed for a state visit to Hungary with the party believing he was prepared to share power with Coard. But he was joined on that trip by leading NJM figures who opposed the agreement and then made an unscheduled stop in Cuba on the way home. Here, conspiracy theories abound. Coard and his supporters allege that Fidel Castro cautioned Bishop against joint leadership and even suggested Cuban support for military action (Cuba had 800 militia-trained construction workers on the island). Castro and his government argued that Coard was engaged in an 'ultra-left' conspiracy of his own, stacking party votes and organising to depose or even kill Bishop.

Brian Meeks' analysis is less sympathetic to conspiracies, arguing instead that the die for this confrontation was cast as the leader, backed by the people, and the party, backed by the military, grew apart. Whatever the circumstances, the outcome was disastrous. Bishop, after rejecting joint leadership on his return, was put under house arrest. Days later, on 19 October, crowds freed him. On his way to a mass rally in Market Square, Bishop and the crowd turned to confront soldiers in Fort Rupert.

'With a united party and behind them a united army facing the largely unarmed and now hostile population,' Meeks writes in *The Grenada Revolution*, 'the door opened for dangerous and deadly solutions.' The crowds intimidated the soldiers, threatening their lives. The soldiers in turn called for and received reinforcements. They dispersed the crowd and, in retribution, executed Bishop and his remaining allies. Within days the American military invaded. Grenada's revolutionary experiment was over. Meeks' conclusion is that 'the story of what happened . . . is still to be fully told.'

Legacy

Meeks draws numerous lessons from the experience. In the first place, he cites the failure of the revolutionaries to overcome the authoritarian state apparatus inherited from British colonialism and Gairy's government. The decision not to hold an early election, which the NJM would 'undoubtedly' have won, is also advanced as a cause of the defeat, not least as it 'would have blunted the effectiveness of the US and regional conservative opposition.' Yet, as Maurice Bishop himself pointed out, neither Chile nor Nicaragua's elections provided much protection to their governments — indeed, of all the Caribbean socialist experiments, only Cuba, which remains a one-party state, has endured against the hostility of its American neighbour.

It is hard, however, to dispute Meeks' argument that the combination of the narrow base of the NJM, which tried to govern almost as a revolutionary conspiracy, and the failure to hold elections led to the erosion of popular rule. It's a common failure among Marxists to understand the role of the individual in history. In this case, a failure to grasp the particular abilities of Bishop to act as conductor for the energies of the revolution proved fatal.

But the legacy of the Grenadian Revolution endures. Its four and a half years constitute a heroic achievement in the region, in terms not only of social progress but of the struggle for self-determination. Images of garish corporate advertising being torn down from hoardings and replaced with revolutionary slogans will remain to represent the tiny island's spirit of resistance: 'Forward Ever! Backward Never!'

In 2009 Bernard Coard and his allies, imprisoned after the US invasion for their alleged involvement in the killing of Bishop, were released. Forty years after the revolution, Grenada is only beginning to come to terms with what happened. According to the World Bank, one third of its population remains in poverty.

But Wendy C. Grenade argues that these numbers don't tell the full story:

On the question of 'development', how do you define it? The World Bank's indices often do not measure the spirit of a people and the collective resilience that sustains them . . . Development for many of us goes beyond high-rise buildings and fog-infested subways. What many of us value is time with family, time on the beach [and] just being at one with nature. What many of us value is our patrimony — that connection to our land and our cultural heritage. Development for many of us transcends the material to a spiritual connection. Development for us is linked to our imagination and creativity . . .

This does not deny the fact that as small island states we do face severe challenges. In fact, uneven trade, unequal exchange, and the systemic forces of the world capitalist economy continue to bedevil small states. Natural and man-made disasters continue to undermine growth and human well-being. Any discussion about development and 'under-development' must begin with a discussion of what it means to be human. It must begin with a conversation about our equal humanity. It must centre questions about justice. The NJM in its 1973 manifesto proclaimed the need for not just a society but a just society. Perhaps moreso today we need a just global society.

Much of Maurice Bishop's address to Hunter College in 1983 could be repeated today. The capitalist world economy continues to disadvantage post-colonial states, casting them in the role of dependencies. This is not an accident, but the result of the very same debt cycles and rigged trade agreements which Bishop railed against. When leaders have emerged to challenge these conditions, they have often ended up on a list with Bishop himself: either overthrown, as Nkrumah, or dead, as Lumumba, Sankara, and Cabral.

The internal divisions in Grenada's revolution make clear that not all failures of attempts to overcome this international injustice can be placed at imperialism's door. But the tiny island's achievements in just four years of resistance should clarify for socialists in Britain and elsewhere in the West our immense responsibility: to ensure that our governments, and all-too-often the parties of which we are members, are not the ones placing a boot on the revolution's neck.

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