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Jamaicans Head to the Polls Today

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From left to right: Dr. Peter Phillips and Andrew Holness

KINGSTON, Jamaica, CMC – Nearly two million Jamaicans are eligible to cast ballots for a new government on Thursday with the two major political parties – the ruling Jamaica labour Party (JLP) and the main opposition People’s National Party (PNP) – equally confident of winning, even though opinion polls support a victory for Prime Minister Andrew Holness’s JLP.

“As Prime Minister of Jamaica and leader of the stronger team, I have never taken for granted the trust and confidence invested in us by Jamaica,” Holness, 48, has said on the eve of the polls, adding “after four years, while there is more to be done, we are proud to report that we have been moving Jamaica in the right direction”.

But Dr. Peter Phillips, 70, the former finance minister, who is leading the PNP into the election for the first time, is confident that the party will reverse the 2016 election results when it lost by a slender one seat in the 63-member seat Parliament.

“After an unfulfilled promise of 5 in 4 by the JLP administration, today, we are back in economic turmoil and we are suffering from high crime rates, lack of jobs, lack of opportunities, rampant cronyism and the theft of your resources that could enable a better life for you and your family,” Phillips said in a message to Jamaicans on the eve of the polls.

“With the right leadership, we can turn things around. We have done it before and we will do it again! We have the will and care to advance the People’s Agenda. Tomorrow, September 3, 2020, Vote for Leadership You Can Trust. Put your X beside the head,” he added.

Professor of Political and Social Psychology at The University of the West Indies, Mona. Christopher Charles, writing in the Jamaica Observer newspaper, noted that Jamaicans are concerned about several important factors in the country that tend to influence how they vote in general elections. Two of these factors are the state of the economy and the level of security in the country.

He said data such as the exchange rate, the unemployment rate and the interest rate, among other economic indicators, are used to determine the perceived state of the economy. The homicide rate is used to determine the perceived level of security in the country.

However the PNP leader believes that any solution to crime fighting must be comprehensive and multi-faceted.

“The solutions must not only address policing problems, SOEs and deficiencies in structure, conduct and rules guiding security forces but must take into account the deep seated social dysfunctions. The interventions have to be as diverse as the drivers of the crime and violence.

“We want and encourage a partnership to solve crime and violence in Jamaica as a safer Jamaica is every Jamaican’s business. We are committed to making Jamaica safe for our families.”

Charles argued that general elections are largely won across the electoral cycle of four-five years and not just in the three-six weeks campaign period.

“For this general election, what is more important is how the registered voters who are rational think the Government and Opposition performed over the 4.5 years, and less so what happens during the campaign.

“Therefore, election ads, motorcades, mass meetings in the pre-COVID-19 period, political debates, online campaigning, party manifestos, dubplates and the use of other election songs and so on in the campaign are largely political theatre with limited impact on voting behaviour.

“The majority of voters tend to make up their minds at least one year before the election. The JLP seems to have understood this, unlike the PNP, because it has not stopped campaigning since it won the 2016 general election,” he wrote.

A total of 139 candidates have been nominated to contest the elections that Holness called six months ahead of the five-year anniversary of the 17th general election in the country’s history on February 25, 2016.

The Electoral Office of Jamaica (EOJ) said that both the JLP and the PNP will contest all 63 constituencies, with 13 candidates independently contesting seats in several other constituencies.

The Voters' List, which was published on July 31, shows a total of 1,913,410 registered electors. An additional 30,293 persons are now on the official list of electors, relative to the November 30, 2019.

Director of Elections, Glasspole Brown, says the EOJ has been having discussions about the use of technology that could allow Jamaicans to vote from any polling station in any parish across the island.

"We are already seeking, as best as possible, to use much more technology in what we do. We have a significant database that has a large amount of biometric data and if we are able to use that biometric data in whichever activity we do, then that would be good. Our vision is geared towards greater use of technology in all our activities," Brown told the Jamaica Information Service (JIS) News.

He said the Electronic Voter Identification System, formerly the Electronic Voter Identification and Ballot Issuing System, is computer-based and requires voters to place a specific finger on a fingerprint scanner. "Once the voter's identity has been confirmed, then a ballot will be issued for voting," Brown said.

The elections are taking place in an era of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that had severely curtailed the traditional campaign of motorcades, rallies and adherence to the social distancing protocols that limited gatherings to very small or as some would argue insignificant numbers.

Browne is also urging elderly voters to avoid the traditional early morning rush by voters to cast their ballots early for fear of contracting the virus that as of Wednesday had killed 24 and 2,683 since the first case was detected in mid-March.

He is urging them to visit the polling stations after 11.00 am (local time) even as the authorities are hoping that COVID-19-positive persons would be allowed to vote between the hours 4.00 pm to 5.00 pm. on Thursday.

The Jamaica Umbrella Groups of Churches (JUGC) has also made representation on behalf of elderly saying it believes that time lags associated with COVID-19 health protocols for each elector would cause undue delays.

"We would like the voting time extended by one hour, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and not the 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. as scheduled," the Reverend Dr Peter Garth, chairman of the group, said in a press statement.

"We believe very firmly that this is one of the pivotal moments when every one of us, as citizens of Jamaica, needs to follow the prescribed protocols set out by the Ministry of Health & Wellness," the statement said, adding "we ask that voters, in exercising their right, do so in a responsible way and follow the strict guidelines of the Ministry of Health & Wellness".

The Ministry of Labour and Social Security said it has become aware of employers informing workers contracted to serve as election day workers to self-quarantine for a minimum of 14 days prior to resuming their normal employment.

The Ministry said also that it also understands that these workers are being instructed to utilise their vacation and sick leave entitlements to offset the period of quarantine.

“The ministry is making it abundantly clear that there is no such requirement under the labour laws or any other law. Employers are encouraged to be guided by the Holidays with Pay Act and Gazette notices that are published under the Disaster Risk Management Act.

“While we are quite cognizant of the dangers of the COVID-19 and the increased number of cases islandwide, we must nevertheless be protective of our country’s labour force and ensure the fair application of labour legislations in order to prevent breaches that may be intentional or out of ignorance,” it added.

The EOJ is also cautioning employers that their workers have the right to time off to vote on Thursday, noting that it has received information that several employees have indicated to staff that they will not be allowed the time off on election day or will only be allowed two hours.

“This is a breach of the law. Employees who intend to vote in the general election are entitled to three hours’ time off from work to vote. This is in addition to the usual lunch hour,” the EOJ warned.

Earlier this week, the EOJ said there had been a 56 per cent voter turnout among special services personnel, who cast ballots at 377 polling stations across the island on Monday. The EOJ said that of the 46,777 special services personnel, 26,276 voted, a figure that was lower than in 2016 when 63 per cent voted.

Two public opinion polls published this week have given the JLP a commanding lead even as they both acknowledged that the PNP had made some progress in closing the gap.

Pollster Bill Johnson said it would take something “catastrophic” for the PNP party to win the elections on Thursday.

But Phillips is not deterred, saying the real poll will come on Thursday and is even predicting that the party would win as many as 40 seats in the election.

“In the Caribbean pollsters have gotten it dreadfully wrong in the last few months. In St. Kitts-Nevis, In Guyana....the polls that count are the polls on the ground,” said, Phillips, disputing also concerns about his health.

“Amid the pandemic and with the errors of policymakers that have unleashed tremendous trials on Jamaican lives and livelihood, the nation has the opportunity to reflect on the fact that we are indeed nothing without our creator, who has sustained and protected us,” he said, encouraging church leaders and their congregations to keep the nation in prayer for an incident-free and safe passage through the polls.

“We have been assured by the electoral office about the safety of the process, but we must never forget the power of prayer as taught to us by our mothers and fathers,” he said, reiterating the need for discipline in observing the various provisions put in place by the electoral office for the smooth and safe conduct of voting.

“Turn out and exercise your democratic right and do justice to this important privilege for which so many have fought and died. I am confident that discipline and strict adherence to all the protocols will ensure a peaceful and safe election,” Phillips said.

Holness, who has told Jamaicans that he is “humbly” seeking their support to serve them again, said “we are committed to continuing our partnership to build our nation back stronger.

“AS we go to the polls this Thursday, September 3, I ask once again for your support so that we can accomplish even more things.

‘We have better plans for you, especially as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic,” he added.

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