

SEYCHELLES

The Republic of Seychelles, located in the western Indian Ocean some thousand miles to the east of Kenya, is an archipelago comprising roughly 115 islands. French colonists with their black slaves began arriving on the previously uninhabited islands in the late eighteenth century, and were joined later by deportees from France. In the early nineteenth century the French and the British battled for control of the strategically sensitive islands, and in 1814 the territory was formally ceded to the British. During the course of the century, settlers arrived from Mauritius and Réunion, joined by smaller numbers of Asians from China, India and Malaya. One result is today's ethnically mixed population.

During the colonial period, a plantation economy took shape, dominated by land-owning descendants of the original French settlers. At the base of the hierarchical social structure were labourers of African origin. Here, a matriarchal society evolved based on loose family structures; with the men usually away working on the outer islands or the plantations, women increasingly assumed responsibility for family and home. Such socio-cultural factors meant that Seychellois women had a degree of access to education and land, and a number of them became socially and economically independent. Today, some 45 per cent of households are headed by women.

In 1903, Seychelles became a British crown colony. The archipelago's first elections were held in 1948, when representation on the newly created Legislative Council was granted to a tiny minority of 2,000 voters. One of the representatives elected was a woman, Dr Hilda Stevenson-Delhomme, who later went on to form her own party in 1964.

By the 1960s, there was growing popular mobilisation around the demand for independence. Two major political parties were founded: the Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP), which favoured maintaining ties with Britain, and the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP), which pressed for complete independence. In 1965, Britain agreed to universal suffrage for Seychelles and to the demand for an enlarged legislative council. General elections were held in 1967 and by 1970 an elected Legislative Assembly and a Council of Ministers were set up. In 1976, a coalition of the SPUP and the SDP led the country to independence.

In 1977, the SPUP, led by France Albert René, staged a coup, ousted SDP leader James Mancham from the national presidency, and introduced socialist one-party rule. Over the next fifteen years, René was voted in three times as President in general elections uncontested by any other party. Multiparty politics were restored in 1991, and a new Constitution, drafted by an elected commission, was approved by a popular referendum in June 1993. This institutionalised multiparty politics and provided for a National Assembly of 33 members, 22 of whom are directly elected, with the balance allocated to parties on a proportional basis.

In general elections held in 1993 under the new constitution, René, now heading the successor to the SPUP, the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF), won a landslide victory with 59.5 per cent of the vote. The runner-up was James Mancham of the Democratic Party, with 36.7 per cent. A similar distribution of votes took place in elections to the national assembly. Here, a new element was the recently formed coalition party, the United Opposition, led by an experienced woman lawyer, Annette Georges (profiled in the book). This won nearly 10 per cent of the vote, thereby acquiring an allocated seat.

Women in Politics

The relative independence of women in the Seychelles is reflected in higher than average representation of women in politics. Under the former one party government, women constituted 41 per cent of parliamentarians in the period 1980-1985. In the 1993 multiparty elections, this figure fell to 27 per cent (9 out of 33) – still high in international terms and the highest figure within the Commonwealth. From 1993 to 1997, women ministers made up 25 per cent (3 out of 12) of President René's Cabinet. However, the death of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Danielle de St Jorre in 1997 reduced, for a short time, the figure to 17 per cent. The new Cabinet, appointed after the General Elections of March 1998, retained a 25 per cent share of Women Ministers through direct appointment by the President. However, the percentage of women in the National Assembly after the March 1998 General Elections declined further to 23.5 per cent – with the SPPF again holding all 8 of the women seats (6 directly elected and 2 nominated for the 6 SPPF proportional seats!) Both the UO and DP were unable to have women representation partly as a result of winning only 4 seats between them.

Since independence, the Seychellois Government has always placed emphasis on primary health care, education and housing security. It consistently allocated more than 20 per cent of annual government expenditure to such sectors which provided a strong basis for women's advancement. The principle of gender mainstreaming has also gained official recognition; in the National Human Resources Development Plan, adopted in 1994-1995, emphasis is placed on the benefits that derive from a just and equal balance between men and women in the nation's development.

In the Seychelles, women were actively involved in the political struggle for independence. Political parties, especially the ruling SPPF, have played a major role in raising awareness and facilitating women's access to positions of decision-making, both within the party and within government structures. In addition, the shortage of skilled management resources in a small population of only 68,000 people meant that women were called upon to fill key decision-making posts at all levels.

With a gender-sensitive constitution, a government committed to gender justice, and the need for educated and skilled management personnel, the social structures of the Seychelles have provided opportunities for women to gain access to positions of power and authority. Quotas and other affirmative action mechanisms have not been found necessary in this situation.

SYLVETTE FRICHOT

Minister of Local Government, Youth and Sports

Former Minister of Information, Culture and Sports

Chairperson of the Women's League of the Seychelles People's

Progressive Front (SPPF)

Secretary for Mobilisation on the Central Executive Committee of the SPPF

As the fifth child in a family of eleven children, Sylvette Frichot was entrusted by her parents with many responsibilities, especially in times of difficulty or crisis. That experience, combined with her subsequent career as a teacher, helped prepare her for a life in politics that would see her assume ever larger and more challenging responsibilities. Today, she is one of three women in the Cabinet of the Seychelles and a major force within the ruling party. She is known for the energy with which she tackles problems confronting women and for her determination to see women take advantage of the better opportunities being offered them.

Early Life

Sylvette Frichot was born in June 1945. Her father, a businessman and a politically active lobbyist for taxpayers, encouraged her to take an interest in his work. She completed five years of primary schooling and spent two years, from 1958 to 1960, at secondary school. Like other girls of her day, she was not encouraged to pursue higher education. After leaving school, she became a teacher.

As a teacher, she discovered that she was being paid much less than male colleagues and was angered by the injustice of this. She was also made aware of other social inequalities, in particular the restriction of grammar school education to children whose parents could afford to pay the fees.

Entry into Politics

Frichot grew up in a context of growing political fervour in the Seychelles. Demands for the eradication of poverty and for a better life for the people of the Seychelles became linked with the struggle for political independence. In 1966, Frichot joined the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP), led by Albert René, and the Workers' Union. Not long after

joining, she began working for the party as a clerical officer. She showed herself to be an active party worker, and was promoted to the post of Principal Coordinator of the SPUP.

Rise to the Top

In 1968, Frichot was one of the founder members of the SPUP's Women's League. She was elected Chairperson two years later and remained in the post until 1977. During this time she also held for ten years the chair of the Seychelles Women's Association Committee.

When the SPUP came to power in 1977, she became Principal Secretary of the newly formed Ministry of Political Organisation. A year later, she was appointed Secretary for Information and Culture on the party's Central Executive Committee, a post she held for the next seven years. Since 1985, she has been the Central Executive Committee's Secretary for Mobilisation, a major post within the party.

In 1989, Frichot joined the Cabinet as Minister of Information, Culture and Sports. Two years later, she moved to the post of Minister of Local Government, Culture and Sports. The same year, 1991, saw her return to the Chair of the party's Women's League, a reflection of her grass roots support among women. After the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1993 and the return to power of the party, now renamed the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF), she was again given the portfolio of Local Government, Youth and Sports. Following the General Elections of March 1998, she was re-appointed by the President to the Ministerial post responsible for the Local Government and Sports portfolios. It is a key post for mobilisation of support among the young people.

As the country's long-serving Sports Minister, Frichot has participated in a number of major international gatherings in the field of sport. She was elected President of the Sports Committee for the Indian Ocean region from 1989 to 1992. She also presided over the Conference of Ministers for Youth and Sports of Francophone Countries (CONFES) in 1993-1994.

Enabling Factors

Frichot identifies the political movement to which she belongs as the basic enabling factor behind her political success. "The party's strong commitment to recognising the contribution of women," she says, "greatly facilitated the progress of women politicians like me." That commitment included, firstly, recognising the strong role of women as educators and trainers at the level of the family, the community and the nation. Secondly, it meant including capable women in policy-making and decision-making. A third aspect was recognising the important net-

working role played by women in times of hardship and poverty. And, fourthly, the party, says Frichot, has made it a point to place capable women in ministerial posts not limited to “women’s issues” or the social services sector.

Frichot, who is married with two sons, stresses the value of her family support network but also pays tribute to facilities such as day care that have been provided by the government.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Women, suggests Frichot, can only hope to advance politically if they are part of a larger movement with a genuine commitment to gender equality. At the same time, women can maximise their political potential by building on their own individual experiences and talents. In her own case, she says, she was able to tap her experience as a teacher, which helped make her a good communicator at all levels. Her years as a teacher also gave her useful insights into human psychology.

Despite her limited formal education, Frichot was able to advance on the basis of an active programme of self-education. She developed and pursued an intense personal training plan which was supplemented by party training programmes. These included on-the-job experience for women; access to civic and political education; and sensitisation to human rights issues, including women’s rights.

The qualities she identifies as important for women hoping to pursue a life in politics include commitment and dedication to larger objectives and the determination to develop to the maximum their organisational, management and leadership skills. “Women in politics,” she says, “must have inner strength and must be ready to make personal sacrifices.”

DANIELLE JORRE DE ST JORRE

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Planning and Environment

(from 1992 until her death in February 1997)

Renowned Linguist, Expert on “Kreol”

At international gatherings, it was often Danielle Jorre de St Jorre who, with a combination of skill and charm, represented the Seychelles. As often as not, she was the only female head of a national delegation. As her country’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Planning and Environment, she presided over “hard” portfolios, spoke for her country on the Board of Governors of the World Bank and of the African Development Bank, and served on a range of other international bodies. She was also a scholar of linguistics who championed the cause of Kreol, the indigenous language of the Seychelles and the mother tongue of large numbers of its citizens and people in other regions of the world.

Early Life

Jorre de St Jorre was born in September 1941 on Mahé, the main island of the Seychelles archipelago. Her home environment was French creole and her childhood, she says, was “sheltered and stable”. She began her formal education at the only girls’ grammar school on Mahé, a private institution run by Irish nuns. At school, she won prizes, became a house captain, and involved herself in such extracurricular activities as debating and drama.

Since education beyond the fifth form was not available in the Seychelles at this time, she continued her schooling in the United Kingdom, where she studied for her A-Level examinations at Southend-on-Sea Technical College. She went on to the University of Edinburgh, where she obtained a master’s degree in 1965. A year later, she received a postgraduate certificate in education from the University of London.

As a student, Jorre de St Jorre developed a strong interest in language. In the 1970s, after six years back in the Seychelles, she returned to the UK to read for a B Phil degree in linguistics at the University of York.

Entry into Politics

Jorre de St Jorre first became interested in politics during her student days. One factor which kindled her interest was her experience of living and working in a kibbutz in Israel. In the 1960s and 1970s, she also found herself identifying strongly with the independence movement in the Seychelles. At this stage of her life, however, she was not overtly involved in political activities. She worked her way up through the professional ranks of the civil service, occupying important posts in the ministries of education and tourism.

Although Jorre de St Jorre became a member of the ruling party, she did not hold any major post within the SPPF until her appointment to the cabinet as Minister for Planning and External Relations in 1989. Throughout her professional life, however, she worked closely with the SPPF government to implement its social policies in the fields of education and culture.

After joining the Cabinet, she was appointed a member of the Central Committee of the SPPF. With the addition of the important Environment portfolio in 1992, she became Minister for Foreign Affairs, Planning and Environment, the post she held until her death in February 1997.

Her career in politics saw her actively involved in the cause of the Kreol language. Her strong belief in the central importance of the mother tongue in national development led her to advocate the use of the national Kreol language as the medium of instruction at all state schools. The SPPF used the concept of Kreol as a living language and culture to strengthen its connections with the grass roots.

Jorre de St Jorre published three linguistic studies on the Kreol language of the Seychelles. She was a founder member of the international Kreol network known as Bann Zil, and was also instrumental in instituting the Kreol Festival, a major annual event in the Seychelles. At the time of her death, she was Vice-President of the Comité International des Etudes Créoles (CIEC).

Jorre de St Jorre had wide experience of serving on boards and organisations, both national and international. She served as governor for the Seychelles on the boards of governors of the World Bank and the African Development Bank. She was Vice-President of the Advisory Committee on Protection of the Seas (ACOPS), East Africa region, and was a board member of the International Ocean Institute, based in Malta. She was also a member of the Council of the Earth Summit Action Programme for Health and Environment, under the auspices of the World Health Organisation.

At home, her responsibilities included chairing the Seychelles Development Bank and the Environment Trust Fund and serving as Vice-Chairperson of the Natural Resources Inter-Ministerial Committee.

Enabling Factors

In an interview conducted not long before her death, Jorre de St Jorre identified as key supportive elements in her life her professor at the University of York, whose perspective on language greatly influenced her work, and the President of the Seychelles, Albert René. Of the latter she said, “I owe a special debt to his vision of development and the need for change in the country.” She also cited the “strong commitment” of the SPPF to the advancement of women as an important factor in her own political career.

Perspective on Women in Politics

This popular woman leader believed that professionalism and dedication were the traits that women seeking a life in politics need to foster. “Women also need to be flexible and to be able to adapt to circumstances,” she told her interviewer. In her own case, she said, she had been able to build on her general interest in young people and her formal training in psychology and education to improve her interactive skills at all levels.

It is vital for women in politics, she insisted, to bring good organisation and planning to the task of balancing their many roles – as professional, mother and politician. As a divorced woman, she emphasised the need for a strong support network at home, including the cooperation of the children – although in her case, she candidly admitted, “this was not always easy.”

ANNETTE MARY SOLANGE GEORGES

*Treasurer and Former Leader of the United Opposition Party
[(now re-named the Seychelles National Party (SNP))]*

A lawyer by profession, Annette Georges is a relative newcomer to politics. It was while working in the office of the Attorney General of the Seychelles in the 1980s that she became increasingly aware of the conflict between the state, the ruling party and the judiciary in the period of one-party rule. After leaving her government job to practise with her husband, a fellow lawyer, she took up the cases of a number of political dissidents. Following the introduction of multiparty politics, she helped form a new coalition party, the United Opposition (UO), and served as leader of the party for the critical phase of the transition from one party rule to multi-party democracy. Later she was elected Treasurer of the UO now renamed the Seychelles National Party (SNP) at its 1998 convention when she was again re-elected as Treasurer.

Early Life

Annette Georges was born in 1957 into a family with a tradition of political involvement. Her father was an active member of the Seychelles Democratic Party; he won a seat in the National Assembly and later became a Minister in the SDP-SPUP coalition government that led the country into independence.

After completing her schooling, Annette travelled to the United Kingdom, where she read law. She was called to the Bar in 1980. On her return to the Seychelles, she joined the chamber of the Attorney General. She worked for eight years as State Counsel and was later promoted to Senior State Counsel and Assistant Official Notary. She deputised for the Registrar-General and in 1985 was appointed a temporary Magistrate, a post she still holds.

Entry into Politics

Georges' family background, as well as her training in law and professional experience, gave her a broad exposure to political issues. During her years at the Attorney General's office, she became increasingly critical of what she saw as the flaws and lack of transparency of the one party system. In 1988, she resigned from her job and joined her husband's law firm, but found herself confronting the same conflicting issues and lack of transparency.

She reduced the volume of her legal work and opened a candle making venture, a project that allowed her to work with her hands and also gave her time more time for politics. She did not join either of the two main parties, instead joining forces with a smaller opposition party which articulated the views of young people and others critical of

society. She developed independent views which she aired with growing outspokenness.

Among the cases her law firm took up was that of Jean-Francois Ferrari, the son of a former Minister of the SPPF. Her client, who had broken away from the ruling party some years earlier, was a daring and sometimes reckless critic of one-party rule. Georges was impressed by his defiance and his support for free speech and democracy.

Rise to the Top

When the government announced in December 1991 a switch to multi-party politics, the first opposition party to register its existence was the Parti Seselwa. Georges was a founder member, though she did not sit on the executive committee. Subsequently, the Parti Seselwa merged with two other opposition parties to form a new force, the United Opposition, to contest the presidential and national assembly elections.

The election laws stipulated that a party leader must not hold a position on the executive committee of another party. In a context where the opposition was still weak and very few people were prepared openly to declare their political affiliation, Georges was approached by the UO to become party leader. Aged just 36, she found herself heading a new opposition force in a time of political transition.

In the general elections of June 1993, the UO obtained 9.7 per cent of the vote in the National Assembly elections, thereby winning a seat in the new Assembly. Georges remained as party leader till 1995 when, at the UO's annual convention, she was confirmed as party Treasurer and the Reverend Ramkalawan was elected party Leader. Georges was the Vice-President candidate for UO in the general elections March 1998, where the UO won only 1 seat (directly elected) but received over 26% of the total votes qualifying it for 2 proportional seats in the Assembly. The March 1998 General Elections were the turning point for UO as it effectively became the major Opposition Party in the Assembly, ousting the Democratic Party (DP). Georges sees her future as a politician as even "more challenging" now!

Enabling Factors

Georges identifies her mother as a longstanding source of support and as someone central to her success in both law and politics. Georges says she has also drawn strength from a network of colleagues, friends and political supporters who share her vision.

She and her husband have no children, a fact she believes has facilitated her legal and political careers. As she puts it, "I would have found it very difficult – physically, morally and psychologically – to take political risks if I'd had children to think about."

Perspective on Women in Politics

Georges is clear that she would not have been able to survive in politics without financial independence. The fact that she and her husband run a law firm has given her the latitude to be involved in politics without having to worry about money.

She believes that a professional training in the law is particularly useful for women hoping to enter politics. "My legal background," she says, "gave me a wider and more mature understanding of the socio-political situation of my country. And since lawyers are figures of authority and role models in the Seychelles, my status as a lawyer helped me obtain people's respect and trust."

She identifies will power, perseverance, self-confidence and moral strength as among the personal qualities women contemplating a life in politics need to cultivate. "You also need to develop a strong sense of justice and fairness," she says. "And you must combine the ability to build a good team with the determination to hold on to your independent personality."