

**From Minority to Mainstream Politics:
The Case of Mauritian Muslims**

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ABSTRACT The slow development of political consciousness among the Mauritian Muslims who immigrated mostly as indentured labourers and rose to small land-owning class in late 19th Century was articulated upon the socio-religious idioms of “*Jamaats*” and “*Umma*”. Re-islamisation became the cornerstone for a rise on the socio-economic scale as well as for personal and cultural emancipation. It also marked a separate identity for Muslims, distinct from the Hindu “*Jahaji bhaïs*” who had shared with them the legacy of indentured labour on the plantations. Since the 1950s the Muslims realised their minority position in the country (17% of the population), and the political options opened to them: team up with the Hindu majority (50% of the population) or build alliances with other minorities to form a counter power and oppose Hindu “hegemony”. Either choice made it necessary to build a strong ethnic identity so as to negotiate in strength with those who wielded power. In fact, the political system adopted in Mauritius after the second World War is Westminster style majoritarian system mitigated by elements favouring power-sharing democracy. Over the years it exacerbated ethnic, racial and cultural differences among the various groups in the Mauritian population. My observation is that although the local political system has brought political stability it has not necessarily increased democracy in the island-state. Leaning on theories of consensus democracy for multi-ethnic societies developed by Lijphart and discussed by other authors¹ I demonstrate that the power-sharing among elites, in effect, tends to reinforce majoritarian domination by an alliance of a few ethnic groups in the Mauritian context.