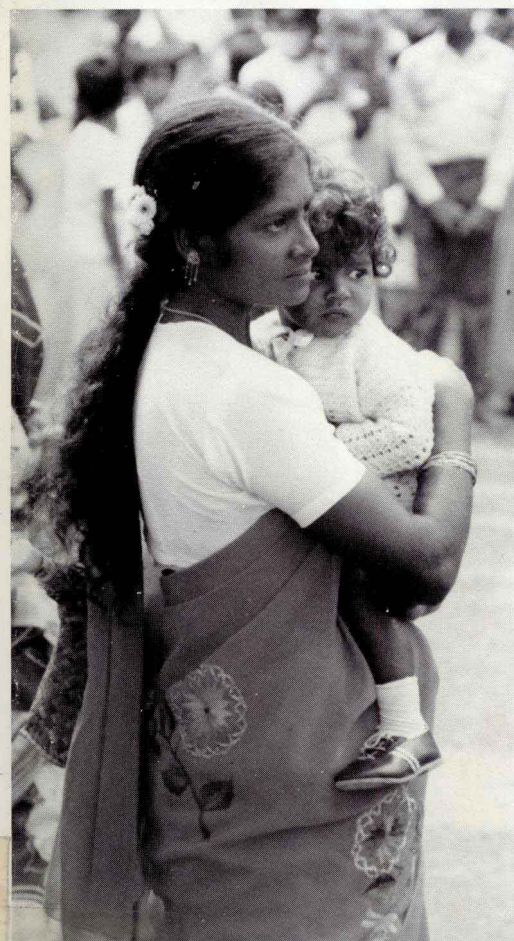


# MAURITIUS

## Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean

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Larry W. Bowman



Profiles / Nations of Contemporary Africa

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## Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean

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Larry W. Bowman

Westview Press

BOULDER AND SAN FRANCISCO

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## *Preface*

I can remember almost the exact moment when I decided to write this book on Mauritius. In October 1982 I was attending a large international conference on the Indian Ocean region hosted by Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This was but the latest in a series of excellent international conferences on the Indian Ocean region that I had been fortunate enough to attend since the early 1970s. As I looked around the room that day in Halifax, it struck me that there were almost no participants from any of the island or littoral states. Moreover, once I examined the program, I realized that the only Indian Ocean island about which there was to be a paper was Diego Garcia! The independent island nations were to be all but ignored. With that realization, the idea of doing a book about an Indian Ocean island country became implanted in my mind.

Why Mauritius? I had long been a casual observer of its politics, particularly when local activities had strategic implications for the superpowers. Diego Garcia was already one of my interests, and, despite the U.S. base, it was still claimed by Mauritius. This was an early hook. But as I read more on Mauritius, I soon realized that there was almost no aspect of the country's history, politics, society and culture, economic development, and international activity that was not both fascinating in itself and little known elsewhere. I have always liked to do broad studies, and for most of the 1980s, Mauritius became the main object of my intellectual attention.

Many people and institutions have played an important role in bringing this book to completion. At the very outset, Dr. Naomi Chazan of the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was instrumental in arranging for me to spend a spring 1984 sabbatical at the Truman Institute in Jerusalem. There, using the excellent library of the institute, I was able to do the early bibliographical research for this book. I am grateful to Naomi for her support and encouragement

throughout this project and to Cecile Panzer and the staff at the Truman Institute library for all their help.

In 1986 I received a Fulbright research award to the University of Mauritius. I am grateful to the School of Administration for being my host and for providing me a warm welcome to Mauritian society. I want to thank Loga Virahsawmy, Raj Virahsawmy, Palma Veerapen, Vidu Nababsing, Satinder Ragobur, Roland Lamusse, and Mohip Joynathsing, all of the School of Administration, for their support. In 1988 and 1990 I was able to return to Mauritius for additional research, and once again the faculty and staff of the School of Administration were most welcoming.

During my trips to Mauritius, I conducted over fifty interviews with leading figures in the country. Some interviews were no more than an hour or so, but many individuals spent hours and even days with me. I really never met anyone who was not willing to help me learn about their remarkable country. Without the assistance of a great number of Mauritians, this book could not have been written. Of the many individuals who helped me, I particularly want to thank J. Jacques Koenig, C.B.E., Dev and Loga Virahsawmy, Dan Callikan, Raj Virahsawmy, Arlette Bazire, and Peter and Charlie White. They fed me, taught me, and opened many doors for me. Their many kindnesses both helped my research and made my stays in Mauritius enjoyable.

The openness of Mauritian society makes it a particular pleasure to do research there. I have benefited enormously from the opportunity to interview many individuals who have played central roles in Mauritian political and economic life over the past generation. These include, among others, Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, Paul Béranger, Sir D. Burrenchobay, Ivan Collendavello, Pierre Dinan, Sir Gaëtan Duval, Jean-Claude de L'Estrac, A. S. Kasenally, Bashir Khodabux, Jean-Claude Montocchio, Prem Nababsing, Maurice Paturau, Sir Veerasamy Ringadoo, and Sir Harold Walter. Within the current government, several ministers took time from their busy schedules to see me and provide me with documents. I am grateful to The Honorable Sir Aneerood Jugnauth, prime minister; The Honorable Madun Dooloo, minister of agriculture; The Honorable J. Michael Glover, minister of youth, sports, and tourism; The Honorable Armoogum Parsuraman, minister of education, arts, and culture; and The Honorable Dineshwar Ramjuttun, minister of social security.

As the book began to take shape, I was supported wonderfully by different individuals and facilities of the University of Connecticut. The history chapter could never have been written without the services of the interlibrary loan staff headed by Robert Vrecenak. Bill Breadheft of Photographic Services took many of my color negatives and turned them into the black and white photographs used herein. Ray Blanchette of the University Publications staff prepared all the maps and figures. The

Research Foundation of the university supported my research in Mauritius and the preparation of the manuscript. And I can say with confidence that not a word of this book would ever have been written if I had not been provided with a carrel in Babbidge Library where, from 1986 onward, I have been hiding away whenever possible.

I have been fortunate to live near the Equator Bank, a commercial bank based in Hartford, Connecticut, that works only on Africa. Through first Ben Hardy and then Michael Fairbanks, I have been able to use the Equator library at my convenience. Access to their materials on the Mauritian economy has been invaluable.

I have often thought that writing at its best is a collaborative effort. As my chapters have emerged, I have benefited much from the critical comments of several friends. Richard Allen, a historian of Mauritius; J. Jacques Koenig, former general secretary of the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, a social anthropologist at the University of Oslo; and John Rourke, a colleague in my department, have all read the entire manuscript. Collectively they have saved me from many interpretive errors and grammatical shortcomings. Others, including George Cole and Kay Moseley from the University of Connecticut; Nalini Burn, Roland Lamusse, Kishore Mundil, Vidu Nababsing, and Dev Virahsawmy from Mauritius; and Don Sparks from The Citadel have offered valued comments on portions of the manuscript. I am grateful for their interest and help; the shortcomings that remain are mine alone.

It has been my personal and professional good fortune to have been the general editor of the Nations of Contemporary Africa series for Westview Press since the inception of the series. This book is the nineteenth volume published in the series. The editors I have worked with—Lynne Rienner, Deborah Lynes, Dean Birkenkamp, Sally Ferguson, and Barbara Ellington—have all contributed much to the growth of the series, and I appreciate the commitment Westview has made to the entire Africanist community through its support of the series. In one way or another all previous authors and editors have had a hand in helping me conceptualize and write this book.

I believe that the format of these books is enhanced by the use of photographs. I am grateful to the Mauritian ambassador in Washington, D.C., His Excellency Chitmansing Jesseramsing, for providing me with a wide selection of photographs obtained from the Ministry of Information. A few additional photographs were made available to me by Vidu Nababsing and J. Jacques Koenig.

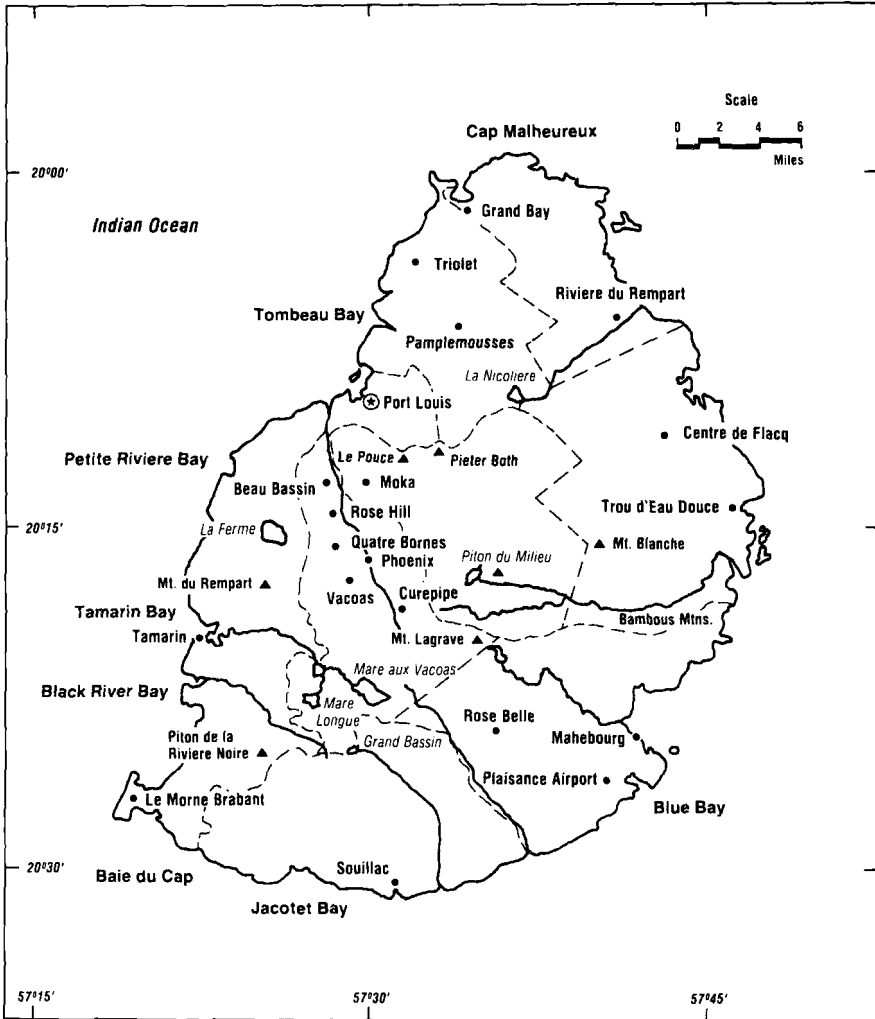
My typist, Deb Crary, has provided invaluable assistance throughout the entire preparation of this book. She has worked closely with me through all the various drafts, and together we have mastered the

mysteries of electronic manuscript preparation. I appreciate the speed, accuracy, and good cheer with which she has handled this entire project.

Finally a word of thanks to my friends and family. My close friends, Garry Clifford, Rich Hiskes, and Stephen Seidel, know that with the completion of this book I will have one less excuse for failing to win the Truro Invitational. My wife, Peggy, and my three sons, Cassidy, Gabriel, and Samuel, have remained my pals throughout my various trips and occasional obsessive bouts of work. I can assure them that there will soon be more time for bridge, golf, basketball, hanging out at the Bull Pen, and catching the big blues on Longnook Beach.

*Larry W. Bowman*  
Storrs, Connecticut

# MAURITIUS





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# 1

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## *The Geographic and Physical Setting*

Mauritius, one of three small islands collectively called the Mascarene Islands, is located in the southwestern Indian Ocean. It lies on longitude 57° (57°18'–57°49') east of the Greenwich meridian and its latitude ranges from 19°58' to 20°32' in the Southern Hemisphere, roughly on a parallel with Harare, Zimbabwe and just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. As can be seen in Figure 1.1, Mauritius is rather isolated. Aside from its neighboring Mascarene Islands, the closest landmass is Madagascar, more than 500 miles to the west. Farther away are Johannesburg and Nairobi (1,460 miles) on the African continent, Bombay (2,875 miles) in India, and Perth (3,625 miles) in Australia.

The other two islands of the Mascarene group are Réunion, which lies 100 miles to the southwest of Mauritius, and Rodrigues, which lies 360 miles to the east. The islands are not large: Réunion is 970 square miles (2,512 square kilometers), and Rodrigues is 40 square miles (104 square kilometers). Mauritius, at 720 square miles (1,865 square kilometers), is approximately the size of the Isle of Wight or the state of Rhode Island in the United States. Pear- or oyster-shaped, Mauritius runs about 39 miles from north to south and 28 miles from east to west at its longest and widest points, respectively.

The nation of Mauritius includes the island of Mauritius; its smaller neighbor, Rodrigues; the Cargados Carajos Shoals (or St. Brandon Islands), a group of twenty-two islets, reefs, and shoals lying 240 miles north-northeast of Mauritius (16°S, 59°E); and Agalega, two tiny islands connected by a sand bank lying 580 miles to the north (10°S, 56°E).<sup>1</sup> (Réunion, the third island of the Mascarene group, is an overseas department of France.) In addition, about twenty uninhabited islands lie in the reefs and lagoons off the Mauritian coastline. Mauritius also claims sovereignty over Tromelin, small islands lying 300 miles north-northwest, which France claims also. Mauritius further seeks to regain

## THE SOUTHWESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

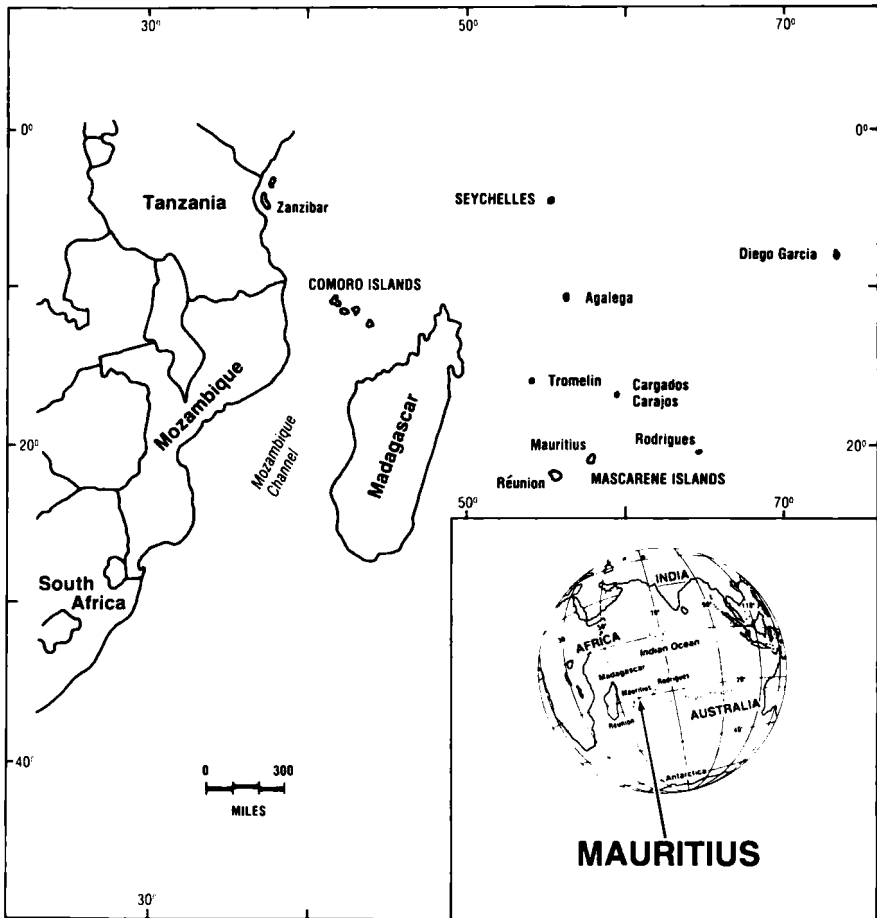


Figure 1.1

sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, including the coral atoll of Diego Garcia, lying some 1,200 miles to the northeast, which it once administered but lost control of shortly before Mauritian independence in 1968.

Mauritius, like the other Mascarene Islands and the Comoro Islands, is volcanic in origin.<sup>2</sup> It was formed during three periods of eruption from the early Tertiary to the mid-Pleistocene.<sup>3</sup> The earliest period built up a great cone, but erosion and subsequent intrusion from later periods of vulcanism have reduced the original cone to fragments. Unlike Réunion,

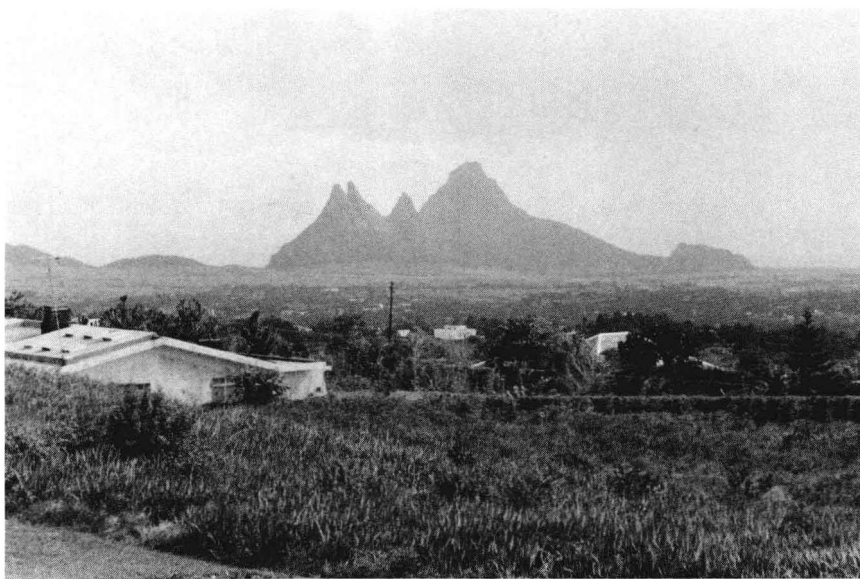


The Mauritian landscape looking west from the Ile aux Cerfs (photo by Larry W. Bowman)

which still has a main cone of 10,000 feet and an active volcano, there has been no volcanic activity on Mauritius for over 100,000 years.

The legacy of vulcanism gives distinctive features to the Mauritian landscape. Jagged, toothlike mountains are all that remain of the original caldera. Across the upland plateau the remains of twenty well-preserved craters, aligned from northeast to southwest, form the main watershed at about 2,000 feet. The lava from these various craters flowed in all directions and has weathered to the fertile soil now used for sugar cultivation. Other reminders of vulcanism are the great lava stones and boulders that litter the Mauritian landscape; they must be moved and cleared before agricultural development can easily proceed.

The topography of the island consists of a plain dotted by abrupt volcanic peaks and gorges. The highest point on the island, the Piton de la Rivière Noire (Black River Peak) in the southwest, is only 2,711 feet. Two other distinctive peaks are Pieter Both (2,690 feet) and Le Pouce (The Thumb) at 2,661 feet. Modest mountain ranges (the remains of old volcanoes) can be found in the east near Grand Port, in the Moka district of the northwest, and in the southwestern district of Black River. Aside from these occasional peaks, however, the landscape is generally flat. There are a number of man-made reservoirs, small lakes, and water-filled craters on the plateau, including Mare aux Vacoas and Grand Bassin. Taken together they are important sources of water for domestic



The Trois Mamelles, volcanic remnants, looking west from the Trou aux Cerfs in Curepipe (photo by Larry W. Bowman)

consumption, generation of electricity, and irrigation. Beaches ring the island, and a coral reef, separated from the shore by a shallow lagoon, surrounds most of the island. There are several excellent harbors; the most important are at Port Louis and Mahebourg. When Charles Darwin visited Mauritius from April 29 to May 9, 1836, near the end of his five-year trip around the world, he described the island as "adorned with an air of perfect elegance . . . the scenery, if I may use such an expression, appeared . . . harmonious."<sup>4</sup> This observation still remains accurate.

The climate of Mauritius is subtropical and generally quite humid. There are two seasons: a warm winter from May to October and a hot summer from November to April. There are distinct temperature differences depending upon the season and the location. The temperature in Port Louis, on the coast, averages about 82°F (27.5°C) during the warm summer months and about 73°F (23°C) during the cooler winter months. At Curepipe, in the highlands, the temperature averages about 70°F (22°C) in summer and about 62°F (16.5°C) in winter. Thus Mauritius is seldom very cold, and temperatures below 50°F (10°C) are rare. Sunshine can be expected nearly any time of year, especially on the coast, and the sea is warm enough to swim in all year.



For such a small island, Mauritius exhibits surprisingly distinct climatic patterns, depending upon relief and levels of rainfall. Annual coastal rainfall varies from 35 inches on the west coast to 60 inches in the southeast. As the island slopes upward to the central plateau, "there is an almost perfectly regular increase of 8 inches in average annual rainfall for each 100 feet of height."<sup>5</sup> The parts of the central plateau over 1,800 feet may get 200 inches of rain a year. A rough fourfold division of the island's climate can be identified:

There is a dry western coastland, with a long dry season and rather uncertain wet season rainfall. This merges into a subhumid northern plain, characterized by a shorter but still well marked dry season. The southern and southeastern coastlands are humid with little dry season, and the center of the island is superhumid with no real breaks in a continuously moist climate. By virtue of its cloud cover as much as its altitude, the central upland is much cooler than the coast.<sup>6</sup>

For most of the year, Mauritius lies under the southeast trade winds, but during the summer months these winds give way to inter-tropical convergences and cyclones may occur. These cyclones, which occur during the hot, rainy period from December to March, can be devastating, and the history of the island has been much affected by the destruction wrought by these storms from the northeast. Moreover, the persistence of sugar cultivation in Mauritius, to the exclusion of other crops, is in no small measure due to the ability of the cane to withstand the fierce cyclonic winds. Summing up the Mauritian climate, Auguste Toussaint, the leading Mauritian historian, has remarked, "It is not exactly unhealthy . . . nor is it altogether depressing, though it is certainly weakening and enervating . . . this island climate does not encourage sustained effort."<sup>7</sup>

The existence of many endemic flora and fauna and the absence of amphibians and mammals (except for bats) point to the isolation of Mauritius from main continental masses for a very long time. The island was uninhabited until the late sixteenth century; since then its natural ecosystem has been severely damaged.<sup>8</sup> The first settlers on the island found thick ebony forests and *latania* palm. This native vegetation has largely been destroyed; from 1753 to 1880, forest acreage declined from 406,157 acres to 16,000 acres.

Contemporary studies of Mauritian flora mostly speak in dire terms; Mauritius "is considered to have one of the most endangered floras in the world." Ten reserves were declared in 1944 to protect representative ecosystems and their endemics; calls are being made to protect Ile aux Aigrettes in Mahebourg Bay, which has one of the "last vestiges of