

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conscripting communalism: surveillance and resistance in contemporary Mauritius

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Abstract

In this article I explore changing state–citizen relationships in Mauritius. To do so, I outline and provide analysis of the system through which this Indian Ocean island has historically managed its diversity – a process that I call *conscripting communalism*. *Conscripting communalism* was formulated at independence in a context of behavioural predictions for the future that the internet era has challenged in powerful ways. To illustrate my argument, I explore three specific moments when ethnic and religious discourses were surpassed by collective concern within a rapidly authoritarianizing state: first, the sinking of the *Wakashio* oil tanker off the coast of Mauritius in 2020, which resulted in national solidarity towards the environment rather than communal violence; second, proposed legislation put forward by the Mauritian Information and Communication Technology Authority (ICTA) in 2021, which attempted to enable state surveillance of social media and which was soundly resisted by both domestic and external parties. And finally, I explore 2022 accusations that the Mauritian government authorized the installation of digital interception technology by representatives of the Indian state on one of the country’s fibre optic cables. The article argues that Mauritius represents an important site of analysis of the tensions between competing global visions of human rights, political autonomy, surveillance, solidarity and expectations for the future and the role of the internet in shaping these competing visions. I explore how new technologies have become the tools of both repression and resistance. The implications ripple far beyond the island.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l’auteur explore l’évolution des rapports État-citoyen à Maurice. Pour cela, il décrit et analyse le système à travers lequel cette île de l’océan Indien a historiquement géré sa diversité ; un processus que l’auteur appelle le *communalisme conscrivant*. Le *communalisme conscrivant* fut formulé à l’indépendance dans un contexte de prédictions comportementales pour l’avenir, que l’ère d’Internet a remises en cause de manière puissante. Pour illustrer son argument, l’auteur explore trois moments spécifiques où l’inquiétude collective a dépassé les discours ethniques et religieux dans un État en voie rapide d’autoritarisme : en premier lieu, le naufrage du pétrolier *Wakashio* au large des côtes mauriciennes en 2020, qui a conduit à une solidarité nationale pour l’environnement plutôt qu’à une violence communale ; ensuite, la

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proposition de loi déposée par l'autorité mauricienne de réglementation des TIC (Information and Communication Technology Authority) en 2021, qui tentait d'autoriser la surveillance des réseaux sociaux et a rencontré une forte opposition dans le pays comme à l'étranger. Et enfin, l'auteur explore les accusations portées contre le gouvernement mauricien en 2022 pour avoir autorisé l'installation d'une technologie d'interception numérique par des représentants de l'État indien sur l'un des câbles à fibre optique du pays. L'article soutient que Maurice représente un terrain d'analyse important des tensions entre visions globales concurrentes des droits humains, de l'autonomie politique, de la surveillance, de la solidarité et des attentes pour l'avenir, ainsi que le rôle de l'Internet dans le façonnage de ces visions concurrentes. L'auteur examine la manière dont les nouvelles technologies sont devenues les outils à la fois de la répression et de la résistance. Les implications se font sentir bien au-delà de l'île.

Resumo

Neste artigo, exploro a evolução das relações entre o Estado e os cidadãos na Maurícia. Para o fazer, descrevo e analiso o sistema através do qual esta ilha do Oceano Índico tem historicamente gerido a sua diversidade – um processo a que chamo comunalismo de recrutamento. O comunalismo de recrutamento foi formulado aquando da independência, num contexto de previsões comportamentais para o futuro que a era da Internet veio pôr em causa de forma poderosa. Para ilustrar o meu argumento, exploro três momentos específicos em que os discursos étnicos e religiosos foram ultrapassados pela preocupação colectiva num Estado que rapidamente se torna cada vez mais autoritário: em primeiro lugar, o naufrágio do petroleiro *Wakashio* ao largo da costa da Maurícia em 2020, que resultou em solidariedade nacional para com o ambiente em vez de violência comunal; em segundo lugar, a proposta de legislação apresentada pela Autoridade Maurícia para as Tecnologias da Informação e da Comunicação em 2021, que tentava permitir a vigilância estatal das redes sociais e que foi solidamente combatida tanto por entidades internas como externas. E, finalmente, exploro acusações em 2022 de que o governo das Maurícias autorizou a instalação de tecnologia de intercepção digital por representantes do Estado indiano num dos cabos de fibra ótica do país. O artigo argumenta que a Maurícia representa um importante local de análise de tensões entre visões globais concorrentes de direitos humanos, da autonomia política, da vigilância, da solidariedade e das expectativas para o futuro, bem como do papel da Internet na formação destas visões concorrentes. Exploro a forma como as novas tecnologias se tornaram instrumentos de repressão e de resistência. As implicações repercutem-se muito para além da ilha.

Introduction: conscripting communalism

Ram¹ and I sat together on benches at old school desks drinking tea. I was in my third year living on the island, conducting formal research on social tensions commissioned by one of the country's public universities. The 2019 national elections were fast approaching. We were in a classroom constructed on the concrete slab of the roof of Ram's mother's house, accessible via a narrow stainless-steel staircase from the surrounding garden. Ram, a French teacher with an afterschool tutoring business, was musing with fury on his familial misfortune.

Ram's sister had just been denied a government position for which – in his view – she was the best qualified of all the applicants, and he was enraged at the injustice.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout. Given the small size of Mauritius, some further details of individuals have been changed so as to prevent identification.

He understood it to have happened because of the government's unofficial blacklisting of his entire extended family due to a distant uncle's vehement political opposition, which the state had witnessed expressed in an outpouring of angry words on Facebook. Ram himself then wrote about the incident online, tagging the caste-based group to which he belonged. Sympathetic and emotive comments quickly followed, compounding a collective feeling of injustice among group members.

Unofficial blacklisting meant that, of all of his relations, only Ram himself had been able to secure work in the public sector (and only due to a postgraduate qualification from a prestigious international university that could not be denied). He viewed this employment as the birthright of those in his caste and social class – the *vaish* – who have claimed political dominance since independence in 1968 (Claveyrolas 2015; Eisenlohr 2006). His family's excision from public service was the personalized manifestation of a changing social contract in contemporary Mauritius, compounded by the ability of the government to 'spy' on people's private affairs that were articulated on social media. In the run-up to national elections, sentiments relating to caste and religious differences were valuable to politicians. 'Outside of elections it's better if everyone gets along,' said one prospective MP during an interview, 'but before and during elections, we [politicians] need there to be some tension so that people vote according to the traditional pattern.'

This article explores that so-called 'need', and also 'the traditional pattern' referred to above. In particular, it considers the extent to which now ubiquitous digital technologies have changed state–citizen relations on an island that has some of the fastest, cheapest internet in Africa² and where most citizens are able to connect online through multiple devices. The home where Ram lived with his mother and extended family of four adults and two children was not yet structurally complete, for example, but already it had uncapped high-speed internet serving eleven smart devices. Government strategy from the early 2000s has placed digital communication as a core pillar of the island's development strategy (Ministry of Technology 2018). According to a 2023 report (Kemp 2023), there are 878,700 internet users in a population of 1.3 million, with almost as many (875,000) active on social media. With 1.95 million mobile phone connections (more than 150 per cent of the population), most Mauritians have plugged into the digital sphere. This has coincided with a shift in Mauritian governance from democratic darling (Carroll and Carroll 1999; Eriksen and Ramtohol 2018) to widely expressed concerns of growing authoritarianism (V-Dem Institute 2021; Kasenally 2021; Bunwaree 2023). Engaging a wealth of literature on authoritarian regimes and media control in Africa (e.g. Bernal 2014; Wang 2022; Turner 2023), this article describes a widely accepted social contract and the extent to which new technologies have been interwoven with independence-era mechanisms of surveillance and population control.

The best loser system and conscripting communalism

The unique parliamentary system at play in Mauritius has long relied on the abilities of politicians to predict voter behaviour. Described in the Mauritian constitution and

² 'Average price for 1GB of mobile data in Africa as of 2022, by country', Statista, 2022 <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180939/average-price-for-mobile-data-in-africa/>> (accessed 30 June 2023).

colloquially referred to as the ‘best loser system’ (BLS), an extensive literature exists on the subject that explores both what it is (Seegobin 2009; Fessha and Nam 2015; Kerevel *et al.* 2019) and the potential need for reform (Couacaud *et al.* 2022; Munohur 2020). Ramola Ramtohum writes that the main purpose of the BLS is:

to correct any imbalance in the representation of the various communities which may result from the direct election. Besides the 60 elected seats, the Best Loser System provides for eight additional seats to be allocated to ‘best losers’ or defeated candidates in order to ensure representation from all the country’s ethnic groups [and to be allocated on] the basis of their ethno-religious affiliation. (Ramtohum 2015: 36)

The ‘balance’ that Ramtohum names resonates with the politicians’ articulation of need between ethno-religious ‘communities’. Long before Sushana Zuboff coined the term ‘behavioural futures markets’ (Zuboff 2019: 14), Mauritian politicians were making bets on the national future based on a set of strategic collective practices premised on voters responding at the polls along ethno-religious lines.

Given the tiny size of the island and the constitution of electoral districts that mirror ethno-religious divisions (Couacaud *et al.* 2022), as long as Mauritians vote ‘according to the traditional pattern’ (quoting once again the young politician), political parties have historically been able to predict voting outcomes based on the biographies of the candidates they run in different constituencies combined with strategic manipulation of the eight BLS seats. The ‘traditional pattern’ was that voting would mirror ethnic and religious membership. For this to happen, divisions needed to remain crystal clear and not be subsumed in a collective ‘Mauritian’ national identity – a process that I describe as conscripting communalism.

Both ‘conscripting’ and ‘communalism’ require explanation. Conscripting, of course, comes from military structures, and I use it here because the allocation of ethnic identity is not voluntary. Candidates who have refused to state their ethno-religious identity have had it forcibly reinscribed by the courts (Lalit 2005), and in the run-up to national elections inter-ethnic tensions are widely seen to be ‘stirred’ by the political classes so that individuals will vote endogenously (Bunwaree 2023). Communalism is a term widely used in the study of South Asia (Jalal 1998; Heath and Mathur 2011) and refers to the division of societies along ethno-religious lines. Having no indigenous population, Mauritius was explored by the Arabs and settled by the Dutch, the French and the English, and while global powers squabbled over control of maritime resources, the island was largely populated by African slaves (Boswell 2006) and later by South Asian indentured labour (Eisenlohr 2006; 2018).

Given the structural violence of slavery and the very small size of the European-descent population (Salverda 2015), ‘communalism’ is the term largely used in Mauritius to describe a citizen’s in-group allegiances pertaining to caste, class, language and social status.³ Conscripting communalism is therefore the process

³ Intergroup marriage does occur in Mauritius, although even in the twenty-first century it is relatively rare – particularly between existing ethno-religious groups such as ‘Chinese’ and ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’. Much more common are marriages between Mauritians and foreigners; these couples do sometimes return to the island, although, given traditional gender expectations, it is

through which ethno-religious identities are maintained at the expense of national identity. As Bunwaree (2023) has suggested, this increasingly goes against the desires of the largely well-educated and cosmopolitan population, and often explicitly against the wishes of younger Mauritians who increasingly desire to marry out of the group or who build horizontal identities (Solomon 2012) based on experiences of online connection and physical travel.

Here I draw on three years spent in Mauritius – one in formal research⁴ and two as a lay observer – as well as multiple trips to the island from 2016 to 2023 in which I met with research collaborators, presented emerging findings and conducted follow-up interviews. I also draw on careful analysis of media reports in English, French and Creole (the latter including television and radio extracts largely circulated via WhatsApp) to consider *scripting communalism* in both the historical and present context of Mauritian legal, social and political realities. I explore three specific moments where scripting communalism has recently failed to deploy: first, the sinking of the *Wakashio* oil tanker off the coast of Mauritius in 2020, which resulted in widespread articulation of care of the environment rather than communal violence (Boswell 2022; Naggea and Miller 2023); second, proposed legislation put forward by the Mauritian Information and Communication Technology Authority (ICTA) in 2021, which attempted to enable state surveillance of social media and which was soundly resisted by both domestic and external parties. Finally, I consider the 2022 accusations that the Mauritian government authorized the installation of digital interception technology by representatives of the Indian state on one of the country's fibre optic cables.

These three examples can all be read in the context of changing digital environments, both in Mauritius and around the globe. As Mauritius hovers between democracy and autocracy, it is worth placing this research in dialogue with powerful literatures on authoritarian regimes and media control (Pype 2021a; 2021b; Turner and Berkmoes 2020; Ekdale and Tully 2020) and digital publics (Srinivasan *et al.* 2019), with literature expressing the potential for internet access to contribute to robust institutions and democracy (Bernal 2014; 2020; Nyabola 2018; 2021), and, of course, at times all of the above (De Bruijn 2019).

If literature on 'digital Africa' shows us anything, it is that the digital is complex, politicized, diffuse and driven by contested agencies of actors as diverse as the continent itself. 'Making sense of social and political change in Africa in the digital age is a crucial and confounding task for African studies,' Sharath Srinivasan *et al.* observe (2019: 3). It is crucial because it acknowledges how the digital has permeated and pixelated almost every aspect of African lives (De Bruijn 2019; Pype 2021b; Roberts and Bosch 2023). It is confounding because in each place the internet manifests slightly differently and is used in often different ways, depending not just on the physical infrastructures of the internet (Blum 2013; Starosielski 2015) but on the

noticeable that far fewer Mauritian women return with foreign husbands than men with foreign wives (non-heteronormative relationships are as yet almost entirely unacknowledged). Societal pressures against intergroup marriage are yet another example of scripting communalism in action.

⁴ In 2016 and 2017, I worked at the start-up 'university', the African Leadership College. After that institution changed strategic direction and abandoned what it saw as the traditional university project, I was employed as a visiting researcher at the Open University of Mauritius. It was in 2018, while at the Open University of Mauritius, that the majority of ethnographic data was collected.

multitude of ways in which that infrastructure is governed both locally and globally (Nyabola 2019), taxed (Bergère 2019), and deployed on a spectrum with liberatory and controlling ends (Nyabola 2018; Karekwaivanane 2019; Bender *et al.* 2021).

Part of what makes Mauritius so interesting as a case in the broader African context is that the country has such excellent digital connectivity, layered on dense social connectivity created in part simply by its island geography.⁵ In his thought-provoking early explanation of the internet's physicality, Andrew Blum (2013: 80) notes that the 'internet is built on connections between networks agreed on with a handshake and consummated with the plugging in of a yellow fiber optic cable'. This is true, but neither the handshakes nor the cables arrive without careful planning (especially to an island!). Since the country's independence, Mauritian politicians have recognized the value of investing in technology and also of building relationships with the human beings who provide it – from all directions of the Indian Ocean in which the island is located. Now, as geopolitical tensions around digital infrastructures simmer,⁶ what Achille Mbembe has famously referred to as the 'plasticity of digital forms' (2016; 2019: 250) becomes increasingly important both for making sense of the present and for predicting the future.

This article argues that Mauritius represents an important site of analysis of the tensions between competing global visions of human rights, political autonomy, surveillance, solidarity and expectations of the future and the role of the internet in shaping these competing visions. By demonstrating that much of Mauritian politics has long been based on analogue abilities in relation to the prediction of behavioural futures, I explore how new technologies have become tools of both repression and resistance and have layered over existing systems of communication, surveillance and resistance. The implications ripple far beyond the island.

Everyone's place

Returning to Ram's classroom, over tea and *gateau piment*,⁷ he described the social contract that accompanied conscripting communalism, consciously establishing structures of patronage that were conducive to ethno-religious identities. He explained it as follows:

Everyone in Mauritius has a place! We [the Hindus] have government, and we used to have agriculture but don't really want it anymore. A lot of us are now in education. The Muslims have business. The Chinese do finance and small trade. The Franco-Mauritians own all the land and profit off that, and the Creoles have fishing. As long as everyone stays in their place, it's no problem.

In the period of growth and prosperity from the 1970s to the early 2010s, Mauritians had largely benefited from a benevolent state that was genuinely committed to the

⁵ It takes less than two hours to drive end to end across the island, and then only because of the often gridlocked traffic and a national proclivity towards massive roundabouts.

⁶ 'In Asia data flows are part of a new great game: geopolitical tension and digital protectionism threaten to undermine a more connected region', *The Economist*, 10 July 2023 <<https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/07/10/in-asia-data-flows-are-part-of-a-new-great-game>>.

⁷ Literally 'chilli cake' – a traditional snack of deep-fried lentil balls with chilli.

improvement of people's material lives and offered a wide range of programmes to achieve this (Bunwaree 2023). Significant out-migration had occurred at independence, stoked partly by fears of inter-ethnic conflict that did not materialize (Harmon and Karghoo 2015). Those who remained, however, experienced free and high-quality schooling, free healthcare, and the expansion and diversification of the economy (Bunwaree 2001). This opening and diversification was driven largely by a political class that favoured Hindu Mauritians over those from other groups, so while new opportunities were theoretically available to everybody, this group of the population arguably experienced greater ease in accessing such resources than many others (Auerbach *et al.* 2020). Ram's family was a good example of this. He himself embodied the transition from agriculturalist (his grandparents) to working in education or clerkship of some kind (his father) that had become widely available to the point of being an expectation for those of his (Hindu) background. 'Having government' was largely unquestioned.

In her highly impactful book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Sushana Zuboff (2019) describes the profit that can be made by predicting the future. Focused on technological platforms that collect the data trails that users leave behind them while using the web, she uses the term 'behavioural futures markets' to describe the bets made on future action that large technology companies have been able to profit from and in some cases even radically shape. Knowing an individual's taste in consumer goods, ideology and services can be extremely profitable to a great many people; the term 'surveillance capitalism' is used to describe a market based on observing in minute detail so as to successfully predict future purchases. Up close, it appears very similar to the logic underpinning the Mauritian electoral system, although the latter is about control of voters (i.e. power) rather than the market. In an interview, a woman named Lakshmi, aged in her fifties, described the social system as follows:

Everybody is connected in Mauritius, like the sweet-potato vine – we all grow towards one another, we overlap, we are connected. Something happens in one leaf and we all feel it quickly, the messages have always travelled. But it is changing a bit now. Today, even in the villages, everyone wants a home with walls, high walls, even electric fences which people used to believe was actually illegal here in Mauritius. In my childhood, there were no walls at all! But now there are, and inside the walls, there is an amassment of things. And the things and the people are controlled by the manipulation of fear, which happens a lot from the government, and also through social media.

Lakshmi was very aware of the multiple ways in which Mauritians have been kept apart historically. Extensive scholarship exists on communalism in Mauritius, and the segregation that has reified cultural differences. Tijo Salverda has written of the power of elite Franco-Mauritians (French descendants, racially read as white) and the extent to which this group has historically remained separate from the rest of the population (Salverda 2015). Patrick Eisenlohr has described in beautiful detail how Hinduism (2006) and Islam (2018) have been constituted as all-embracing and distinctly separate identities. While outsiders may not be able to tell at first glance the difference between a Muslim and a Hindu Mauritian, for insiders the signs are obvious and revealed in their jewellery, clothing and comportment, as well as their family name. Rose Boswell (*née*

Laville) and Megan Vaughan have written extensively about the structural subjugation of the Creole population (Boswell 2006; Laville 2000; Vaughan 2005). Ramola Ramtohul has focused much of her scholarship on the structural experiences of Mauritian women (Ramtohul 2008; 2015; 2016), and other scholarship exists on the complex intersectional realities of many Mauritians (Eriksen 1992; 1998; Auerbach *et al.* 2020).

Yet despite all this, in hundreds of conversations and more than sixty formal interviews, almost everybody agreed with the sentiment that Mauritians were tightly connected. Franco-Mauritians were generally deemed to be significantly less connected than others for reasons that Salverda has explored (2015), but other groups were considered to know one another very well and to mix in the public domain. This was particularly the case in the public schooling system, where children were streamed according to geography in the early years of education, and later streamed according to academic grades achieved in a national exam. As a result, at least until the second decade of the twenty-first century, when private schooling started to become ubiquitous and gated condominiums began to sprout across the island, it was very reasonable to assume that people in Mauritius would 'overlap [and] be connected'. Although apparently untrue, numerous interlocutors assured me that electric fencing had been illegal in Mauritius until recently. This pointed less to the reality of the country than to its perception: in living memory, most Mauritians were poor, there was little to steal, and social relationships were very dense.

Dangerous histories

Interlocutors also agreed that things were changing. Indeed, as a visiting anthropologist at a public university on the island, I was explicitly hired to do a study on intergroup connections and the possibility of intergroup violence. What is referred to as the 'manipulation of fear' in the quote above was at times quite palpable across the island, partly because of two events in Mauritian history that are widely understood to taint the image the country prides itself on as a peaceable nation. The first took place in 1968, shortly before independence – a time that the older generation remembers very clearly. The second occurred in 1999, also in the living memory of many Mauritians now in their prime. Both continue to be spoken about with genuine fear, and are used as proof that Mauritius has ignited before and could do so again, with deadly consequences.

The first occurred just before independence in 1968, when two rival gangs in the capital city, Port Louis, had an altercation. Identifying as Christian⁸ and Muslim respectively, the gang conflict spread into the public domain, and individuals and property were violently attacked. The independence process was nearly derailed, and many now elderly Mauritians remember it as a time when trust between families who had known each other for generations was suddenly broken. The result was a shift in the geographic landscape in parts of the country. Out of fear, many people moved into

⁸ Slaves taken to Mauritius were almost entirely black Africans and were forced under the Napoleonic code to convert to Christianity. As a population group, they are known as Creoles and, as stated, they occupy the most socio-economically marginalized spaces of the structural hierarchy. Franco-Mauritian slave owners were also Christian (as are their descendants) but in Mauritius to call a poor person Christian is to invoke blackness, and likewise to refer to a Creole is to suggest the Christian faith, unless the context of whiteness and privilege is explicitly stated.

religiously defined neighbourhoods and zones. Today, gated communities defined by economic status pose further threats to the close imbrication of citizens that used to characterize Mauritius.

The second occurred in 1999, when the Creole⁹ singer known by his stage name Kaya was arrested on charges of smoking marijuana in public, and shortly afterwards was found dead in his jail cell (Boudet 2000).¹⁰ The country erupted, with neighbourhoods being barricaded, roadblocks created in multiple places, and threats to life being made between members of different ethno-religious affiliations. Mauritians alive at that time speak of it as a period of tremendous fear, because, given the size and social density of the island, flight was not an option; had fighting occurred, it would have been between people who knew each other intimately through everyday life (Eisenlohr 2006).

The two events described here were by no means the only moments when intergroup conflict was either threatened or took place, but they were the events with the greatest number of participants. They are also etched into both formal and informal historical narratives, and frequently referenced as a warning when emotions begin to run high ('Careful what you say, we don't want another Kaya,' for example). Mauritius has long been proud of its free press, which historically has enabled frequent expositions of structural violence, racism and inequality.¹¹ Small-scale in-person protests have taken place across the island for decades, but beyond the two events described above, until 2020 they never resulted in large-scale social action or protest. Indeed, cultivating a 'peaceful' image has been a critical component of Mauritius's tourism strategy (Seebaluck *et al.* 2015) and interviews conducted with politicians confirmed that significant national resources are invested in curating this public image to draw tourists to visit the island.

Since independence, Mauritian politicians have therefore struck a delicate balance. On one side, a context needed to be created in which the population did not protest in ways that might tarnish the country's international brand. On the other, the population needs to be sufficiently divided so as to vote along ethno-religious lines, with all groups believing that 'their' politicians (i.e. from the same group) will serve their interests. National and sub-national identities have therefore been cultivated through the processes of conscripting communalism, with the proviso, to quote Ram once more, that 'everyone in Mauritius has a place'. Until very recently, the assumption has been that those places, even if structurally marginal, will be accepted in the interests of either national stability and/or a lack of alternatives, but two significant systemic changes have now taken place.

Miracle reconsidered

First, the investments in free education, healthcare and economic reform that Mauritius made post-independence have dramatically changed the profile of the island as a whole. From the sugar-based agrarian economy of the 1960s with high

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ See also 'Qu'avons-nous fait de Kaya?', *Le Mauricien*, 18 February 2019 <<https://www.lemauricien.com/article/quavons-nous-fait-de-kaya/>>.

¹¹ 'Mauritius', Reporters Without Borders <<https://rsf.org/en/country/mauritius>> (accessed 10 January 2023).

levels of manual labour, low literacy and low life expectancy, Mauritius has transformed (Eriksen 1998). In the space of only fifty years, it has come to host a highly educated, largely healthy population within a diversified economy. Alok, aged forty-two, was similarly positioned to Ram in terms of family migration history, ethno-religious identity and age. He described the story of his family in the quote below.

My great-grandparents were indentured labourers, Bhojpuri speakers. On both sides they came from Bihar in India. Their children were born here in Mauritius and worked the fields. My grandparents learned to read but didn't have formal schooling, but their children (my parents) went to school and my father even went to high school. He then got a job as a government clerk – low level, but it was enough to build a house on what used to be a small plot of family-owned sugarcane. By the time I was born the government gave free schooling all the way to high school. They gave uniforms, school meals, everything. I competed in the national exam at age ten and won a place at a top high school, which was also free. That then allowed me to study abroad for university. I returned to the island in my mid-thirties and married. I now have two children – their school fees cost a fortune in the private school! Both I and my wife benefited from public education but we're not sure the government schools are still the best option.

Alok's socio-economic mobility was enabled largely by success as a ten-year-old. Able to access excellent schooling, he and tens of thousands like him were able to dramatically change the outlook and expectations of their family units. From agricultural labourers they had become skilled professionals with global experience and incomes to match. Alok worked as an IT professional for a major international firm and, like many others with similar life stories, drove a flashy sports car, frequented the many shopping malls that are now strung across the island, and spoke to his children in English rather than either French or Creole.

With class mobility had come new tastes, new commitments, new things (and, as Lakshmi indicated, walls to protect them), and, of course, a sense of belonging in a global community (Grimson *et al.* 2022) that was radically facilitated by the arrival of digital tools. Ram, by contrast, had not benefited from economic mobility in the same ways. Living only a short distance away from Alok, he had witnessed the two families' lives diverge at almost every level. Even as a teacher, there was no way that Ram could afford to send his niece to the school that Alok's children attended, nor could he eat at the same restaurants or be a member of the same athletic club. Both men shared much of their lives on social media, and in addition to watching one another, they could also say things online that would be considered provocative or taboo were they to be voiced in person.

While 'conscription' comes straight from military structures, 'solidarity' is a term that has historically been used to refer to political loyalty. In Mauritius, it is no accident that the term is typically applied when discussing those of similar ethnic and religious origin (despite the efforts of longstanding political party Lalit, which has worked on class-based consciousness raising for decades). Many Mauritians would have assumed solidarity between Ram and Alok given their faith and shared cultural heritage, but that

solidarity had fractured. As Mauritius became wealthier, socio-economic distinction shifted from being a largely distant reality between elites and ‘everyone else’ to something that could be seen over a neighbourhood wall. Where Joseph Stiglitz famously spoke of the ‘Mauritian miracle’ to describe the country’s economic growth (Stiglitz 2011), more recent work by Ramola Ramtohol and Thomas Hylland Eriksen have described it as more of a paradox (Ramtohol and Hylland Eriksen 2018). The country’s success, the latter argue, also serves to imperil it.

Behavioural futures

The twin changes of socio-economic mobility alongside increasing inequality combined with an excellent, affordable digital network with some of the lowest data costs in Africa. This has enabled almost everybody to be online. Yet, as scholars have now emphasized (Nemer 2022; Benjamin 2019; Nyabola 2018), the digital world does not exist in a vacuum and instead almost always mirrors the society in which it is located. In the case of Mauritius, conscripting communalism and the desire to predict behavioural futures simply went online. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic forced an acceleration of the shift towards the digital, the Mauritian government had begun to pay close attention to the views, allegiances and identities that its citizens expressed in the digital world.

As Lakshmi described it, in the Mauritius of 2019, ‘the things and the people are controlled by the manipulation of fear, which happens a lot from the government, and also through social media’. Conscripting communalism gave government tools with which to instil fear in the analogue world by working at the micro-local level to ensure that individuals felt that they could trust only those who were ‘like them’. Now digital, the potential audience and emotional reactivity of the fissures of Mauritians’ everyday frustration felt ripe for exploitation, and in 2018 and 2019 I and everyone around me heard rumours across the island that ‘another Kaya moment is coming’.

Three times when everything and nothing happened

Having completed my research in December 2019, I left Mauritius convinced that the most serious threat to the nation state was not intergroup violence, but rising inequality combined with the government’s tight embrace of the tools of surveillance capitalism and its often pre-emptive silencing of those the state perceived to be a threat. I had personal experience of this when writing a commentary for *African Arguments* on the 2019 elections. I sent a draft of my article to a trusted adviser before emailing it out to the press. It was based on verifiable data and was critical of the election process. My friend wrote back immediately and with great concern, stating that should the article be published, I would almost certainly be promptly deported from the island. ‘Think of your family,’ he implored me. ‘This could have implications for them.’ I softened the article significantly as a result (Auerbach 2019), not at all eager to test the limits at the same time as another case – of the spouse of a Mauritian citizen who lost his passport after falling foul of the government – was already receiving widespread coverage (Prayag 2019). Whether real or imagined, the threat worked – a perfect example of control through socially articulated fear directed often not at the individual but at the individual’s loved ones.

At the end of 2019, I was concerned that conscripting communalism provided the country's leadership with the tools to obscure the effects of rising inequality, and that complaint (Ahmed 2021) would be misinterpreted as intergroup malice. I was proven wrong when, amidst the manifold challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, three events took place in which attempts at conscripting communalism fell flat and the Mauritian population's actions revealed the extent to which citizen-state relationships were starting to change. Despite serious concerns over future stability due to rising costs of living, national debt and increasing corruption (Bunwaree 2023), these three brief examples demonstrate the commitment of ordinary citizens to a national imagination not only in which conscripting communalism is long outdated, but also in which digital surveillance is increasingly a reality that few feel equipped to resist. I suggest that Mauritius makes visible dynamics that are currently playing out across Africa and beyond pertaining to the design and control of digital futures and their very analogue real-world effects (Nyabola 2018).

The sinking of the *Wakashio*

It was in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic that the long-dreaded mass Mauritian protest did occur, but its manifestation was not an outbreak of intergroup communal violence. Rather, following a small protest directed at pandemic-related corruption in July, a demonstration took place on 29 August 2020 and involved the largest number of Mauritians in the country's history. They marched in unified, face-masked solidarity against the government's handling of the sinking of the Japanese-flagged MV (merchant vessel) *Wakashio* in July 2020. The oil tanker in question ran aground in Mauritius's fragile coral reef ecosystem on 25 July, ultimately breaking up on 15 August after disgorging more than 1,000 metric tonnes of low-grade sulphur fuel oil into the surrounding oceanic national park.

When the MV *Wakashio* struck the reef and it became clear that the Mauritian government had bungled the response, journalists and analysts were concerned about the uneven social consequences that might emerge (cf. Boswell 2020; Moolna 2020; Saramandi 2021a). The sea, they reasoned, in line with Ram's articulation of the national 'contract', was the terrain of Creole fisher-people who had the most to lose in terms of lives and livelihoods. Very quickly in the media and public response, however, it became clear that the tragedy was being experienced as one that was national, and as one that surpassed Mauritians' social and ethnic cleavages. At the protest, ethnicity and religion were noticeably absent from both international¹² and national commentary.¹³ Civilians pulled together and tens of thousands of people participated in response to the ecological disaster; ethnicity and religion receded in significance in light of the work that needed to be done. Volunteers rescued animals

¹² For example, 'Protests in Mauritius after oil spill', *Al Jazeera*, 29 August 2020 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/29/protest-in-mauritius-over-oil-spill-dozens-of-dead-dolphins>>; 'Thousands protest in Mauritius over dolphin deaths after oil spill', *Guardian*, 29 August 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/thousands-protest-mauritius-dolphin-deaths-oil-spill>>.

¹³ The events were widely covered in the Mauritian press, and it is difficult to choose particular articles to cite. For example, as of January 2023, local platform DefiMedia yielded more than 100 results for the *Wakashio* oil spill (<<https://defimedia.info/recherche-articles?combine=wakashio%20&page=88>>). National newspaper *L'Express* gave 30,000 (<<https://lexpress.mu/>>)!

and plants, created booms with sugarcane and human hair to contain the spread of oil, and took to the streets and to social media to express their fury that the government had become so removed from the realities of Mauritian lives that it had sat by observing instead of acting with urgency to prevent a national disaster (Dominguez-Péry *et al.* 2021).

By coincidence, the sinking of the *Wakashio* took place just after a taboo-breaking reflexive essay was published in *Granta* by Mauritian writer Ariel Saramandi (2020), which drew international attention to race in Mauritius. Titled 'An education', the essay is a powerful call-out against the structures of white supremacy that have shaped the socio-economic landscape on the island, leading Ram to allocate to dark-skinned Mauritians 'the sea', and the widespread acceptance of norms of everyday discrimination that in other countries would likely lead to court proceedings. The piece provoked a flurry of online commentary just as the ocean itself was threatened by government negligence.

In an essay the following year, Saramandi described in beautiful detail the processes through which Mauritians came together in responding to the *Wakashio* disaster. She writes of a man forced to remove a sign that said 'I love my country. I'm ashamed of my government' and how this phrase became a national slogan that bought the population together (Saramandi 2021a). Describing the protest of 29 August 2020, Saramandi wrote: 'The prime minister says the march showed that "democracy was alive and working", but the government's Facebook page mocks protesters in a series of memes. On the night before the second major protest of 12 September, social media accounts of activist groups and journalists are hacked' (*ibid.*). Both essays captured in powerful prose the manifest violence of the Mauritian state, and they focused international attention on structural discrimination as well as on ecological fragility on the island. Digitally speaking, however, the conversation was just beginning.

Front-door state surveillance

Not long after the MV *Wakashio* sank, Ariel Saramandi was again trending on Mauritian social media, this time for an essay in *Rest of World* pertaining to newly proposed internet regulation. ICTA opened new legislation for comment which proposed to divert all social media traffic to a local server where it could be subject to state-led 'analysis' – purportedly in the interests of public safety. 'Authoritarianism,' wrote Saramandi, 'doesn't always arrive in grand, sweeping, military-style gestures' (2021b). In the six weeks during which the proposed legislation was open for public comment, the proposal received powerful pushback both locally and from international players as heavy-hitting as Facebook (now Meta), the Internet Freedom Foundation and Mozilla (Gongxeka-Seopa 2021). Since then, the legislation has quietly disappeared.

An argument can and must be made for digital sovereignty, although that is beyond the scope of this article (Hummel *et al.* 2021). Questions of who owns national and personal data traces that are left on the internet are of critical importance (Bratton 2016; Nyabola 2021; O'Neil 2016; Zuboff 2019).¹⁴ It is nonetheless 'paradoxical' (Ramtohl and Hylland Eriksen 2018) that in a country whose political system has

¹⁴ See also the 2020 docudrama *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski.

long relied on voter predictions based on behavioural futures, attempts to gain control of social media and internet behaviour crossed a line the population could not and would not accept, and the digital conscripting of communalism largely failed.

Given the size of Mauritius, most citizens, prior to 2021, had already experienced some of the implications of government surveillance of social media. Ram's family blacklisting was not uncommon and almost every interlocutor stressed the interconnectedness of the population – the 'sweet-potato vine' described by Lakshmi earlier in the article. However, freedom of speech was and remains an important component of Mauritian social life, and the many levels of action around the *Wakashio* oil spill renewed and reinvigorated civil society such that, when the government tried to formalize state surveillance through ICTA in 2021, it was swiftly shut down.

Backdoor state surveillance

The story of Mauritian state surveillance does not end in 2021. After failing to secure the right to legally monitor citizens' online behaviour, the government purportedly resorted to tactics that appear Orwellian. On 30 June 2022, Sherry Singh resigned. At the time, he was CEO of Mauritius Telecom (the national digital provider initially responsible for establishing the Mauritian digital ecosystem), but in a radio interview given in Creole to a local station,¹⁵ he informed the public that he could no longer perform his job in good conscience. This was because, he alleged, the prime minister had requested that he authorize the installation of equipment that intercepted internet traffic – a process known colloquially and evocatively as 'sniffing' data. It is alleged that the government of India installed data extraction equipment on a fibre optic cable managed at least to some extent by the Chinese company Huawei, an incident that speaks directly to contemporary global geopolitics of digital control (NATO 2023; Kavanagh 2023).

Roukaya Kasenally, in an article entitled 'Is digitalization endangering democracy in Mauritius?' (2022: 12), describes 'how the country's burgeoning digital ecosystem is offering both domestic and foreign actors alarming new powers through control over data'. Kasenally describes what she calls the 'quiet spread of offline surveillance' (*ibid.*: 13), which has involved the installation of surveillance systems and cameras around the country shaped by confidentiality clauses at a contractual level that prevent media investigation into either profit or data accountability. Kasenally poses several questions that are worth quoting at length:

Who is digitalization really benefitting? Will Mauritius's democratic institutions have control over the country's digital trajectory, or will that trajectory instead be shaped by opaque deals, growing concentrations of power, and unaccountable foreign actors? Mauritius sits amid a geopolitical battleground, the Indian Ocean, where key contenders – the US, the UK, France, and India – have already secured a strategic foothold and where Beijing is desperately trying to mark its presence. It seems that data could be the most sought after resource. (Kasenally 2022: 17)

¹⁵ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q54yq-4R13M>>.

Who exactly was ‘sniffing’ Mauritian data remains unclear to date. Was it the Mauritian government simply trying to maintain its hold on power in the face of the failure of conscripting communalism, or was it something even more nefarious, as Kasenally suggests? Covered extensively in the domestic Mauritian press and on social media, the story gained little traction outside the country. Perhaps due to the technical complexity of the processes of data interception, contested narratives of the source of the instruction, or the difficulty of the burden of proof, far fewer alarm bells appear to have rung in the global digital space. That technicians affiliated with the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi were granted access to a highly secure site and that they likely installed some kind of interception device has emerged as almost certain from the public record (cf. Jasodanand 2022; Varadarajan 2022),¹⁶ yet *why* and on whose orders remains unclear.

What data, exactly, was intercepted? Does this process have something to do with the complex and militarized bilateral relationships between India and Mauritius (Das 2019; Ritzén 2021)? Alternatively, as Mauritius grapples with the cost of updating technological systems, does this have anything to do with the country’s increasing relationships with the providers of Chinese digital technologies, which are usually much cheaper than those of other operators but which – as the tapping of the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa between 2012 and 2017 (Hillman 2021; Kadiri and Tilouine 2018) made clear – may come with certain strings attached? If even the government recognizes that conscripting communalism no longer provides it with the means to hold on to power, is backdoor digital surveillance simply doing through prime ministerial decree what ICTA could not achieve in the public domain? Is this a way of doing what the ICTA amendment intended through backdoor means?

All three examples speak to highly charged moments in recent Mauritian socio-political life, yet in none of them has ethnic and religious identity been a critical factor. This article has shown how new technologies layer into a context that has historically placed great value on the close monitoring of citizens, and on predictions of their future behaviours. In the past it was possible that conscripting communalism would have been successfully deployed by the Mauritian state to ethnicize an ecological disaster, but in the twenty-first century new forms of communication have allowed for rapid counternarratives and powerful forms of solidarity to emerge. At the same time, those forms of communication have been mobilized by the Mauritian government as mechanisms of surveillance and control linked to political power. *Because* the island has such a small population and that population is largely well educated and articulate on digital media, debates around freedom, surveillance and control that are currently taking place on the island have implications far beyond the country’s coastal borders. What *Wakashio*, ICTA and the ‘sniffing incident’ bring to the fore are the many ways in which the digital is now imbricated in existing structures of power, resistance, agency and the future(s) of global governance.

¹⁶ See also ‘The sniffing maelstrom’, *Mauritius Times*, 9 July 2022 <<http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/the-sniffing-maelstrom/>> (accessed 4 July 2023).

Conclusion: wider implications

In this article, I have argued that the Mauritian political system, since independence, has relied on the ability to make bets on behavioural futures markets not unlike those gathered through big data extraction. In the ‘little data’ that comprised the system, however, lay hidden tens of thousands of personal relationships, traded favours, micro-kindnesses and acts of individual and collective aggression. These behavioural futures were extracted through a socio-political process I describe as *conscripting communalism* – a mechanism of reifying ethnic differences according to a widely accepted social contract that relied on in-group voting. This article has explored how conscripting communalism has not been able to adjust to the digital age, because to digitize its practice would enable a degree of surveillance that, thus far, Mauritians have fiercely resisted – although, as of 2023, the ruling government appears to be doggedly pursuing.

The article has described one tiny African country that has moved astonishingly quickly from being one of Africa’s most lauded democracies to a space increasingly known for political repression and authoritarianism. It is home to an educated, highly connected population who largely affirm both ethno-religious identity and national pride – although the latter lessens in the face of socio-economic marginality. This is in part because of tight social networks and the power of emergent technologies to layer upon existing systems of analogue surveillance. Conscripting communalism, I have argued, is no longer fit for purpose and the Mauritian government, alongside its citizens, will have to negotiate new social contracts if it hopes to maintain trust, social stability and effective governance.

The implications go far beyond Mauritius and speak to the complicated decisions that African countries must now make about how to digitally connect (in terms of hardware and software) and how to manage the complex flows of data that are generated from their populations, as well as the intersections of this data with human relationships and everyday life. They also speak to the necessity of engaging digital complexity across Africa and its islands. Mauritians experience an internet structure built on fast, cheap connectivity that is structurally different from that in many other African spaces (Pype 2021a; Omanga 2019; Srinivasan and Diepeveen 2018) but that makes visible geopolitical and interpersonal dynamics that elsewhere might be more difficult to see. If scholars are to attend to digital complexity in Africa (Mbembe 2016; Nyabola 2018; Srinivasan *et al.* 2019), the ability to focus on the micro, the macro, the ‘sweet-potato vine’ and the pixellated current that binds them is of critical importance.

With the memory of the *Wakashio*’s sinking and the threat presented by ICTA of silencing through surveillance still very fresh, Mauritians are pushing back against outdated political discourses and demanding new forms of governance and accountability (Kasensally 2022; Bunwaree 2023). This article has shown how the system of conscripting communalism that has been used since independence to manage Mauritian diversity is no longer fit for purpose in a digital age. Today’s citizens are both physically more isolated from and digitally more connected to transnational members of their own identity groups. They are also largely aware of the workings of a system meant to control them through fear, and increasingly resistant to the government’s attempts at distraction and manipulation.

Until the next election, it is difficult to predict how successful the process of resisting conscripting communalism will be, but it raises important questions

pertaining to diversity and identity in an era of surveillance capitalism. In this article, I have used conscripting communalism on the island of Mauritius to show how some twentieth-century tools of governance have reached their limit in the twenty-first century. Surveillance capitalism – whether in the interests of markets or of power – and the tools of technology now at our disposal do change the ways in which populations are known and controlled, but not always as established patterns would have predicted.

What are the trade-offs that populations will accept when it comes to surveillance and safety? Who will decide the limits of ‘diversity’ and determine and police diversity’s boundaries? In an era of hypervisible globalization increasingly grounded in local realities, what are the stakes of standing with or against one’s neighbours? Finally, will the best loser system, which supported peace and prosperity in Mauritius’s postcolonial moment through the practice of conscripting communalism, find itself unfit for purpose in a digitally mediated world? If so, and if long called-for electoral reforms are finally enacted, what lessons are there for other African states no longer defined by their postcolonial identities but instead by the increasing roar of connected digital publics?

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