

Jamaica's 'Mama' Has Hands Full

Portia Simpson-Miller, who today will become prime minister, faces high expectations amid corruption, poverty, lawlessness and debt.

By CAROL J. WILLIAMS
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KINGSTON, Jamaica — She bested three formidable male rivals to lead her party with the campaign slogan "Come to Mama."

On the streets of her poor district she's known as Sister P.

Portia Simpson-Miller played the gender card to gain the prime minister's office she will occupy beginning today and it has gone over well with voters tired of the corrupt, old-boy political circles that have ruled as this Caribbean nation slides deeper into poverty.

Expectations are high that Simpson-Miller will offer a fresh start for troubled Jamaica because she enjoys cross-party popularity in a country long divided into two hostile camps: the ruling People's National Party, which assured her the prime minister's post by electing her its leader last month, and the opposition Jamaica Labor Party.

But political analysts have been quick to point out that the first woman to govern Jamaica is a product of the entrenched party hierarchy that probably will prove difficult to reform.

"She's a naturally compassionate person. That's her strength," political science professor Brian Meeks of the University of the West Indies said of the 60-year-old politician who will succeed Prime Minister P.J. Patterson. "But her weakness is that nothing has changed in Jamaica. There are powerful expectations of her, and there will be intense frustration if Mama, as she has come to be known, doesn't deliver."

Jamaica is afflicted with violent crime, strangling public

debt, a brain drain that has seen 85% of university graduates emigrate and declining living standards despite revenue from tourism and from mining and refining bauxite, which is used to make aluminum. None of those negatives can be improved in the short term, Meeks observed.

Although she is wildly popular in the gritty slums around Kingston, the capital, Simpson-Miller comes into the leadership with political baggage.

As the Cabinet member responsible for local government since 2002, she oversaw a network of social services that has largely been supplanted in some urban communities by criminal gangs that control patronage, providing jobs and other benefits. And coming from one of the poorest and most violence-prone areas, the squalid Southwest St. Andrews suburb, she rode into office with the backing of what one senior diplomat, who requested anonymity, described as "some very scary people."

Politics has often been blood sport in Jamaica, where hundreds die in politically driven gang clashes before each election. Analysts insist that reform of the political system is a necessary first step to any improvement in public safety, which could lead to more private investment and relief from 16% unemployment and an increasing poverty rate.

"There will be things she wants to do that she will find it difficult to do from within that institution," radio talk show host Wilmot Perkins, referring to the political system, has repeatedly told callers. They have been flooding his program with euphoric praise of Simpson-Miller and predictions that jobs and investment will follow once she is in office.

Jamaica enjoyed impressive advances in education and healthcare in the first years after independence from Britain in 1962, but the trend slowed during the 1990s, and in recent years the nation has declined in these areas. The annual U.N. Human De-



'NATURALLY COMPASSIONATE': Portia Simpson-Miller, addressing supporters last month, is the first woman to govern Jamaica. She is wildly popular in the slums around Kingston, the capital.

COLLIN REID Associated Press

velopment Index, which ranks social progress according to life expectancy, education, income and other factors, put Jamaica 63rd among United Nations members in 2002. It dropped to 98th place last year and is one of the few countries in the Western Hemisphere experiencing development setbacks.

Supporters see Simpson-Miller's victory over three better-educated rivals from the political elite as a reflection of the desire of poor Jamaicans to be led by someone who has walked in their shoes. People from across the political spectrum also have hailed the rise of a female leader as part of a diversifying trend in the hemisphere.

"It was time for a change," said Kenneth Brown, marketing director for an air ambulance service here. "Women are better able to resolve problems and are less prone to violence."

Businesspeople such as Wayne White, who runs a touring service, complain that crime and corruption take such huge bites out of legitimate income that young Jamaicans no longer aspire to legal occupations, choosing instead to work for gang leaders, known as dons, or emigrate to greener pastures in North America.

Simpson-Miller has said little about how she plans to clean up a government reputedly at the head of shakedown schemes that demand bribes for registrations, licensing, access to social services and even the most menial jobs. She also has given few clues about whom she will tap for her Cabinet, though she has hinted that her choices might include her defeated challengers for the PNP leadership as a move toward reconciliation.

"I am sure they have much to contribute and will continue to make their valuable contribution to the People's National Party," Simpson-Miller said of her rivals. "Now it's time for unity, and if there are wounds to be healed, it's time for healing."

The Jamaican Constitution requires that the largely ceremonial governor general, Kenneth Hall, nominate a prime minister whenever a serving government chief decides to step down. But the choice is actually made by the ruling party, in this case the PNP, whose Feb. 25 election of Simpson-Miller as its chief constituted her nomination.

Patterson announced last year that he would retire at the end of the current legislative session, which wound down Tuesday. Simpson-Miller is sched-

uled to be sworn in today.

Simpson-Miller will be only the second woman to lead a Caribbean country, following tiny Dominica's indomitable Eugenia Charles, who served 15 years as prime minister after her Freedom Party led the island to independence in 1978. Charles, who died last year at 86, was best known for her support for the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada to oust a Cuban-allied regime.

Simpson-Miller's rise to power in Jamaica has been hailed by leaders of the island's huge diaspora — as many Jamaicans live outside the country as the 2.7 million who populate it — as well as women in positions of power around the world.

"She has proven herself to be a likable and strong-willed woman," said Diane Abbott, the first black female member of Britain's Parliament. "I am sure she will prove herself very worthy of this place in history and will serve as an inspiration for women the world over."

A graduate of the Union Institute of Miami with a degree in public administration, Simpson-Miller has been married since 1998 to a local telecommunications executive. Despite her campaign nickname, she has no children.