PORT-OF-SPAIN - Trinidad and Tobago has just witnessed one of its most significant general elections. It was historic in that the nation saw a record 1 040 127 registered voters, with 722 322, just over 70 percent, voting on May 24 - another record.

The election also saw the five-party People's Partnership coalition arrangement capturing 29 of the 41 seats, paving the way for its leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to be sworn in as the country's first-ever woman Prime Minister.

All this was possible because we are a democratic society. Our Constitution and our Westminster system of politics allow for free and fair elections in which more than one party is involved and the voting public chooses the one they believe is best suited for governance.

The big question is: If representative democracies, like what exists in Trinidad and Tobago, work reasonably well, why are there still numerous expressions of discontent by the electorate?

Firstly, representative democracies are deficient in many aspects, all of which fundamentally stem from the limited role they allow citizens in governance. If the decisions and policies framed by elected representatives ultimately affect the lives of the citizens, then why should they not have a say in the policy-making decisions?

Representatives are elected by the people in order to ensure that the will of the people is satisfied. In reality, however, most decisions are imposed on those affected without consulting them.

Citizens are left with little power to directly influence how their representatives think, act, govern and administrate. Power is literally transferred from the people to the elected representatives.

If democracy finds its main justification in its unique sensitivity to public opinion through open debate and voting - in short, popular participation - then more participation means more democracy. If we think democracy in general is a good thing, then we cannot object to having more of it.

Therefore, the referendum - a direct democracy tool - has a valid place in our system of governance.

A referendum is an instrument through which citizens may be consulted or vote directly on issues, policies, or matters of public interest. It plays an integral role in nullifying the deficiencies experienced in representative democracies as voting is primarily done in favour of or against a piece of legislation, a matter of public interest or contentious issue, in contrast to supporting a "party" or political candidate at a national election.
Nirad Tewarie, politician and political scientist, says the referendum is "a useful tool in democracy once it is structured properly. It gives the people the sense that they are continuously a part of the process of governance. The People's Partnership has put forward several proposals on constitutional reform and it would be a grave error not to enact meaningful reform after proper consultation."

In the quest for good governance, the reality is representative democracy alone will not lead us down that path. Participatory or involved democracy has a significant role to play.

With the previous government's vision of realising First-World status by the year 2020, and with the current regime left with the task of ensuring such, referendum is a must.

With a First-World vision should come a First-World thinking.

(Stories from the Trinidad Express)