

Democracy at last in Guyana

IF POLITICS makes strange bedfellows, politics can also make strange history. One good, very recent, example is the small — in terms of population — country of Guyana on the northern edge of South America.

Founded as British Guiana during the heyday of the British Empire, it has only 760,000 inhabitants, but covers 215,083 square km., more than five times the size of Switzerland. Sugar is its main natural resource.

On Oct. 5 this year, Guyana had its first fair election in about a quarter century. Since the vote was honest, despite the claims of its losers, it came as no surprise that the People's Progressive Party (PPP) was the clear winner. For the PPP was, so to speak, the founding mother of today's Guyana and it has won every honest election since Guyana got self-government.

Most remarkable, and no doubt surprising to those who remember the headlines of 10 or 20 years ago, its leader and former Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan is still heading the PPP and, after 28 years, he is once again the head of government. In those years, he underwent ordeals that nowadays probably no other head of state can match.

Ironies abound here. The four main players in the Guyana drama of the past 40 years or so were Jagan's PPP, the People's National Congress (PNC), the British Colonial Office and clandestine American operatives. The irony of this somewhat strange constellation was that Jagan, a committed Marxist, was the only one who actually played by the rules of British democracy.

While a crypto-communist in his rhetoric, he was also naive enough to believe that British ideals had to be carried out by the book. Indeed, when in 1964, he lost an election for the first time, his main complaint was that these principles were not applied in his country.

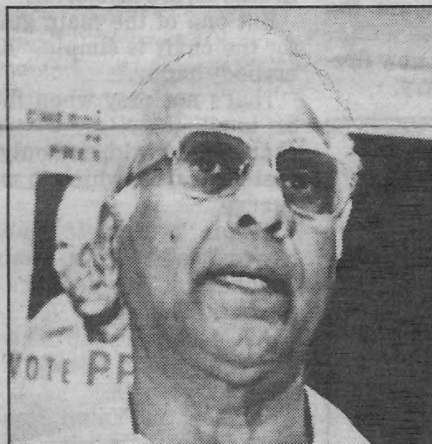
The British government of course saw things differently. It being the height of the Cold War, with communism taking over a neighboring Cuba, London's establishment decided to waive the rules. The resulting turmoil drew the U.S. into the fray.

When a form of self-government was

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ceded to British Guiana, Jagan's party won one election after another, starting in 1953. Its constituents were primarily the East Indian majority and also many blacks, the second-largest ethnic group.

Despite these electoral successes, Jagan at no time tried to turn Guyana into a communist state, by any reasonable definition of this concept. He continued to conduct himself according to British law, and several times boycotted procedures which were not in accord with it.



■ JAGAN: Leader at last

When it became obvious that Jagan would remain in power as long as British laws were observed, the Colonial Office and its cohorts started a campaign of intimidation, strikes, riots and destabilization, which peaked in 1964, when the Constitution was changed to prevent the PPP from getting a majority of seats, even if it got a plurality. Ever since, until October 1992, Jagan and his party were forced to be in opposition.

The following years were among the worst in Guyana's history. Jagan's successor, Forbes Burnham, who once was the deputy leader of the PPP and, unlike Jagan, a black, had defected long ago and created the black-dominated PNC, which was also Marxist and not particularly democratic.

But despite its left-leaning rhetoric, it also made major concessions to British and American investors and thus was acceptable to the West. By 1966, Guyana became an independent "co-operative

republic" within the Commonwealth.

Soon the PNC unleashed a vicious campaign against the official opposition, while the government became increasingly corrupt. Many foreign observers complained about this, but no action was taken by the international community. Rigged elections were a small price to pay for the advantages the PNC government provided its protégés. Strikes, at times organized by the PPP, were often brutally suppressed and led to many casualties. One traumatic event which happened during Burnham's watch was the 1978 Jonestown massacre in which 900 people committed suicide.

When Burnham died in 1985, his successor was Vice-President Desmond Hoyte. Realizing how unpopular his former boss was, Hoyte tried to distance himself as much as he could, without, however, changing substantially the existing system.

Hoyte was more pragmatic than Burnham and things did loosen up somewhat, but this did not mean that elections were honest or that there was social justice. When his mandate ran out in 1990, the electoral lists were still so incorrect, falsified and incomplete, that he bowed to popular pressure to complete and correct electoral lists. No less than 130,000 names were missing out of 340,000 eligible voters.

His government tried successfully to prolong this process as long as it could, until in the summer of 1992, foreign observers and monitors as well as the PPP were satisfied that a fair election was finally possible.

Since he was condemned to opposition in 1964, Jagan has undergone a transformation. He shed the Marxist rhetoric and has come to realize that a mixed economy most likely will get Guyana out of the doldrums its abused people had so long to put up with.

Judging by his deeds over the past 30 years or so, we can expect from his government — provided it is not sabotaged — a social democratic system. He is 73 now, but has withstood the horrible ordeal of past decades amazingly well and, by all accounts, has enough youth and motivation to make a good leader for his long-suffering country.

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