

# A look at the status of press freedom in the past

by Janet Jagan - May 10, 2008

The challenge to colonial rule in the then British Guiana began in earnest with the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1950. At the party's first Congress on April 1, 1951, it adopted its first constitution which contained this preamble: "In the firm belief that the people of British Guiana, like peoples everywhere, are entitled to the full enjoyment of all their human rights and fundamental freedoms often proclaimed as the common standard of achievements for all peoples and nations, we, the members of the organization hereinafter named have resolved to combine our efforts to achieve the national independence of British Guiana, and to secure for all Guianese social progress and increasingly better standards of life."

Last week, we commemorated World Press Freedom Day. Over half a century ago, it was recognized by those who founded the PPP that human rights and fundamental freedoms were all linked to national independence and the welfare of the people. Those who wrote the Party's preamble to its constitution had not only witnessed, but experienced the denial of many freedoms, including freedom of the press.

During the late President Cheddi Jagan's first election to the country's Parliament in 1947, he had cause to point out in the Legislative Council that the colonial government and its big business community fully controlled the press and this included the radio station. The radio station was owned by four of the largest companies – Bookers, W.M Fogarty's, Wieting & Richter and the Argosy C., printers of the Daily Argosy. It enjoyed many privileges, being granted a government subsidy and an exclusive monopoly for five years. Also, the three daily newspapers, the Guiana Graphic, the Daily Argosy and the Daily Chronicle were all owned by big businesses, but more significant, the three newspapers and the radio station had interlocking directorates. The sugar planters and the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce owned the Guiana Graphic. All of these facts exposed by the young Cheddi Jagan in Parliament gave a clear indication of the state of press freedom at that time, under colonial rule.

Later, in the early 50's, two other historical events helped to show the picture of the state of freedom of expression at that time. In 1952, Lionel Luckhoo moved in the Legislative Council what was known as the Luckhoo Subversive Literature Bill, aimed at banning socialist literature from entering the country. In office in 1953, the PPP sought to repeal the legislation. And after the suspension of the constitution in 1953, under the State of Emergency, the Arcade Printery owned by Cyril Shaw was put under 24-hour police guard to ensure that it did not print Thunder, official organ of the PPP. There is a photo in an old PPP booklet showing the two police guards on duty. As an aside, I would mention that I was then the Editor of Thunder, and we managed by "hook or crook" to keep the paper going with the help of the fearless Cyril Shaw, not even a member of the PPP, but angry at the colonial administration's harshness.

The Mirror's newspaper was established in the 60's mainly because of the existing situation, wherein the established newspapers, as always, refused to give any information on the PPP, which by that time had been elected to government three times. Not only did they totally ignore printing anything positive about the PPP, but they were first class at printing lies. During the troubled years of the 60's, the Guiana Chronicle printed wild stories about Cuban ships off the shores of BG ready to invade and the vast armies of Cubans in the country, guns on the ready. At that time there were exactly two Cubans in the country,

both diplomats. All this, to exacerbate the already explosive situation that led to the deaths of so many and the destruction of millions of dollars in buildings and stock.

The PNC government was notorious in its assault on press freedom. It did everything to prevent the Mirror newspaper from continuing its existence, mainly because it was the main source of unadulterated news at that period. Mirror vendors were attacked and beaten off the streets, vicious libel suits were introduced, but the worse was the refusal to allow the importation of newsprint, printing materials and necessary printing machinery to replace the antiquated press.

Ralph Ramkarran, in the most recent issue of Thunder and in an earlier article in Mirror, outlined all the legal efforts of the PNC regime to close down the Mirror, including some unusual “monkey business” in the judiciary. At the Mirror, we eventually came out of the battle, battered and worn, but still surviving.

Another example of what took place during those 28 years of rigged elections and other attacks on freedom of expression was the attack on journalists.

The elections of 1973 were probably the most corrupt of the four rigged elections and the one Referendum under the PNC. Three well-known journalists lost their jobs for telling the truth about the elections. Ricky Singh and Ric Mentis of the Guiana Graphic and Father Wong, editor of the Catholic Standard were sacked. Father Wong made the grave error of describing the 1973 rigged elections as “Fairy Tale Elections” and paid the penalty. It was only some good time later that the Catholic Standard changed its tune.

Cheddi Jagan in the West on Trial had this to say about the whole concept of press freedom and other freedoms:

“However, behind the ideal of freedom of the press, and indeed all other freedoms, lies the reality of poverty and suffering of tens of millions of human beings. Until the problem of ‘freedom from want’ is tackled, the other freedoms, important as they are, can have little meaning for them. Men, parties, notions, systems and faiths can only be judged by their attitude to this, the fundamental problem of our time. It is only when the system of exploitation ends and poverty is abolished that men will really begin to be free.”