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FREEDOM FOR BRITISH GUIANA

By Janet Jagan

The big question facing British Guiana this year is – will we be independent in 1962? For twelve years, the People's Progressive Party has carried on a steady struggle for the national independence of the country. That it has the people behind this struggle is apparent from the election results during these years. The People's Progressive Party has headed the polls in the three elections held under universal adult suffrage in 1953, in 1957 and in 1961.

The results of the 1953 elections will always remain as a black mark against British rule in British Guiana. After elections held under British colonial administration, at which the PPP won a convincing majority, British gunboats overthrew the elected Government and introduced an undemocratic dictatorial regime until 1957. This has forced us to the belief that while Britain talks of democracy at home, it does not believe in its practice in its colonies.

The PPP formed the Government in 1957 and its five elected Ministers under the leadership of Dr. Cheddi Jagan worked within the framework of a colonial constitution. The four-year term of office produced more results than the British could claim in their many years of colonial administration in the country. More positive results were achieved in the fields of health, agricultural development, trade, labour legislation, etc., than ever before.

In one year alone, 1959 to 1960, production went up 15 percent. Over 90,000 acres of land were opened for landless farmers to earn a living. We were successful in bringing in aid and technical assistance from the United Nations to solve some of our many and neglected problems. In 1961, we increased our primary school accommodation by 15,000 new places.

Our export trade increased by 1960 to 120 million dollars (BWI). The savings in our commercial banks increased from 17½ million dollars in 1957 to 22½ million dollars in 1960 and in the Post Office Savings Bank from 19 million dollars in 1957 to 22 million dollars in 1960.

We built a network of health centres and cottage hospitals in the countryside and greatly increased the number of clinics for infant and maternal care, thereby reducing our mortality figures.

We introduced the first major steps for the Guianisation of the civil service and during our term of office many Guianese became heads of departments formerly directed by overseas officers.

We ran a clean, effective Government – as effective as it can be when all the power was not in the hands of the elected majority. So, by their own terms, we have proved that we are ready for independence.

It is interesting to note that independence has been granted to African territories not as politically advanced as British Guiana.

A brief look at Sierra Leone and comparing it to developments in British Guiana gives a good example of the double standard of the Colonial Office. Have the Prime Minister of Sierra Leone and his party won a majority at its two elections during 1951 and 1957? I am not even certain if the Prime Minister has a constituency. Yet, the Premier of British Guiana won more votes in his own constituency in 1957 than did all the five opposition legislators. In the 1961 elections he won his seat by a landslide victory.

In December last, Dr. Jagan met the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Maudling, and asked for a date to be fixed for independence discussions. But Mr. Maudling was unable to fix a date at that time. (Now it is understood that May 15 is to be the start of these talks – Editor.)

On November 3 the Legislative Assembly passed the following resolution moved by the Government Party: “Resolved that this Assembly requests Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Colonies to fix a date during 1962 when this country should become fully independent within the Commonwealth of Nations. This resolution was also supported by Mr. Burnham’s opposition party.

The only group not supporting the call for independence was Mr. D’Aguiar’s right wing party which won four of the 35 seats in the 1961 elections.

The march of the people for their rights and privileges cannot be held back. Pressures must be put on the Colonial Office by Members of Parliament, leaders of the trade unions and co-operatives and women’s movements to see that the countries still held under colonial rule be allowed to become independent.

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