

October 5, 1992 Ushered in the New Day

by Janet Jagan

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October 5, 1992 marked the beginning of a new era in Guyana. This was the day which practically all Guyanese had been waiting for -- the end of tyranny and hopelessness and the beginning of freedom and democracy.

It was not a fluke nor an accident that October 5, 1992 became the day of Guyana's liberation. It was sought and fought for since the dark days of 1964 when the two countries -- the USA and the UK -- intervened in Guyana's internal affairs and manipulated, in numerous ways, the eviction of the Peoples' Progressive Party from office and literally installed the PNC-UF deadly coalition that led to the 28 years of ruthless dictatorship.

The United Force removed itself from the dirty coalition -- but only after being involved in the first electoral rigging of 1968. Burnham's rigging was not only aimed at defeating the PPP, but in getting rid of the United Force -- one of those ironies of fate.

Life was not easy for Guyanese during this disgraceful period of history from 1964-1992. Whatever gains workers and farmers had won in the previous PPP administrations (even under British rule) were lost and poverty began rising as never before. Many rights formerly enjoyed by Guyanese were removed or restricted. No longer did Guyanese have the right to elect a government of their choice through free and fair elections; no longer was there free speech and free movement of people. The Burnham regime craftily restricted press freedom by refusing the importation of newsprint, ink and printing machinery, besides other methods. When some journalists wrote that the 1973 elections were grossly rigged Rickey Singh and Rick Mentus of the Guyana Graphic were fired, and Father Wong of the Catholic Standard was removed from his post of Editor.

Parliament was reduced to a farce. I give one example of my own experiences which can be checked at the Parliament Office. As an MP, after the scandalous and horrific Jonestown massacre, I tabled a series of questions which would have been hard to answer: who gave permission for Jonestown to have weapons, US currency, poisons, sophisticated communications equipment and a whole host of penetrating questions. Despite frequent enquiries these never hit the Order Paper. When the next Parliament was convened, I put the question again, and again and again. There was never any intention to answer them. And that was much the pattern of the National Assembly, whose Speaker eventually prevented Opposition Leader Cheddi Jagan from speaking in Parliament for over two years!

The years 1964-1992 were the worst in the nation's history in modern times and probably as painful and detrimental to the population as the earliest years of colonial rule.

The PPP under the leadership of the courageous and resourceful Cheddi Jagan led the resistance to the PNC dictatorship, never giving up, never reducing the pressure. I can say with absolute certainty, that had it not been for the perseverance of the PPP, the 28 years of tyrannical rule might not have ended on October 5, 1992. There are many who put in their claims for helping to bring down the dictatorship -- but

no one but the PPP had the guts to oppose the PNC for many, many years. It was only later, when civic groups and the WPA emerged to finally form the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) along with the PPP, that the movement to restore democracy was strengthened and broadened. Before that, fear was a decisive factor, and that can be easily understood, as the PNC regime was utterly ruthless.

So emerged a unified opposition to the PNC's undemocratic rule and the engagement of overseas support – largely due to the influence and perseverance of Cheddi Jagan that brought in former US President Jimmy Carter to help the process.

We know how his efforts were greatly responsible for removing some of the worst elements of electoral rigging – like the removal of ballot boxes with votes being counted secretly away from the place of poll. This was corrected and when elections were finally held on October 5, 1992, we know the results.

The man who led the struggle for Independence and the restoration of democracy, Cheddi Jagan, became the first democratically elected President of Guyana. Today, with democracy a part of daily life in Guyana, and with progress leading to better standards of living and life far better than that dark period, we can be grateful to all those who gave their lives, their time and their energy to make Guyana a land of the free!

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