

The Past or the Present? The Impacts of Neo-Colonialism in Suriname and Guyana

The evolution of Independent nations from their colonial identities is an interesting and intricate process. In a mostly eurocentric and neo-liberal modern world, the prospects of these nations truly evolving are minute. The indoctrination of colonial, eurocentric values has proven to be difficult to unlearn and overcome, which has left many nations continuing in colonial paths even after gaining independence. As a result, the exploitation of formerly colonised countries continues and the citizens continue to reap the consequences of colonial systems that were supposed to end after independence. The two neighbouring nations of Guyana and Suriname are prime examples of this. These countries share the qualities of having fertile lands and an abundance of natural resources that have the potential to make them globally wealthy nations. Despite this, they are both relatively poor countries crippled by political and economic instability. Their movements towards Independence and as post-colonial states share many similarities, but also important and distinguishing differences which are indicative of their inability to achieve the success that their natural resources presuppose. The significant impact of colonialism within these independent countries and the lingering neocolonial nature of their politics and economies has impeded their development as post-colonial states and continues to disadvantage the citizens of these countries.

In order to effectively analyse the post-colonial nature of these two countries, the theoretical framework which will be evidenced throughout this piece must first be examined. Former President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah coined the term 'neocolonialism' in the mid-twentieth century, around the time when most imperial colonies were gaining independence. In his book *Neocolonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* Nkrumah explores the many facets of Neocolonialism and its impact on newly independent states. In the book he writes,

"The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside... In an extreme case the troops of the imperial power may garrison the territory of the neo-colonial State and control the government of it. More often, however, neo-colonialist control is exercised through economic or monetary means." (Nkrumah, 1965)

The most significant difference between Guyana and Suriname is that they were colonised by two different imperial powers. The British monarchy colonised Guyana, and up until their independence Suriname was colonised by the Dutch imperialism. In many ways, the nature of a country's movement towards Independence can be indicative of its future as an Independent state. In contrast to Guyana's Independence movement, Suriname had a much more relaxed approach. Suriname's Independence movement actually was entrenched with neo-colonialist ideals, which interestingly enough, may not have been the intent of the Dutch government. A majority of the Surinamese population were actually in opposition to Independence being granted to the country. The pro-Independence movement was mainly supported by the Maroon population that made up around 41% of the total population. The rest of the country lacked confidence in Suriname's ability to operate as an independent state, and feared the instability that would come with this development (Ameringer and Dew, 1996). The neo-colonial element is revealed here, as even at the prospect of gaining independence from the nation that has exploited Suriname for centuries, the Surinamese people were left dependent on their coloniser. However, this argument is more complex than just this, as it is debatable as to whether this dependency was intended by the Dutch government. In general discourse on neo-colonialism, it would be understandable to conclude that the colonial power would intend on keeping formerly-colonised states dependent on them, to continue its exploitation even after having gained independence. However, there are certain intricacies to Suriname's history that may suggest otherwise in their case. During the 1950's Surinamese migration to the Netherlands was relatively

high, coupled by immigration from Eurasian migrants as a result of the Cold War and Indonesia's Independence from Dutch imperialism. Supported by racial discrimination and the dying plantation industry, Suriname's independence was purported by the Dutch government as a way of decreasing their immigration to the Netherlands as well as cutting a no longer profitable colonial tie. Therefore, in 1975, when Suriname was granted Independence, the Dutch government was given a sizable shock when Surinamese immigration to the Netherlands actually significantly increased, as the people were fearful of what an independent Suriname would be like (Van Amersfoort and Surie, 1987) and anticipated future policies that would make Dutch emigration difficult.

A major contributing factor to the negative response to Independence in Suriname was the nature of their neighbour Guyana (Ameringer and Dew, 1996). Upon gaining Independence, Guyana was crippled by political and racial violence, corruption and instability (Smith, 1995). As a result, the Surinamese people were fearful of this becoming a reality for their country. However, the likeliness of the post-independence chaos in Guyana being imitated in Suriname was curtailed by one important aspect. The British government was keen on still being influential in Guyana's politics and intentionally planted neo-colonial ideals within the country, through interfering with general elections and inciting racial division (Palmer, 2010). Whereas the Dutch government seemed to endure the bitter taste of the same ideals that they planted within Suriname. The British government's role in Guyanese politics after their independence directly contributed to the corruption and violence that existed within the country, in comparison to the Dutch government which would have benefited from cutting ties with Suriname altogether.

Suriname's experience as an independent state seems significantly different from Guyana's as a result of the contrast between the Dutch and British government's approach to decolonisation. In Guyana, the British government still held significant influence within the country despite not contributing to its development as a post-colonial state. The neo-colonial traits are magnified in Britain's relationship with Guyana as they still aimed to benefit from trade links and business within Guyana while indirectly prohibiting true development through the encouragement of corruption in their politics and economy. Meanwhile, the Dutch government had an ironically more egalitarian approach, at least on face value. In congruence with granting Suriname's independence, the Dutch government also enacted a Dutch Aid Commitment to Suriname in the sum of 2.2 billion Suriname guilders which was to aid with a 10 year development plan that was drawn up by the Dutch government and Surinamese government before their Independence (Mhango, 1989). Upon first glance, this seems to be a generous gesture that paints Dutch imperialism as a kind and sympathetic coloniser. However, there are several issues entangled with this approach. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that as the Dutch imperialist powers exploited the natural resources of Suriname and its people for decades to amass their own wealth, the aid commitment should not be seen as a hearty gift, but as a small price paid to what the Surinamese people are owed. While drawing comparisons to other Colonial empires like British imperialism in Guyana, the Dutch approach should not be glamourised as a result of the British government's unwillingness to follow suit, but used as a device to bring awareness to the necessity of similar behaviour by the British and other imperial powers. Nevertheless, the level of imitation that the Dutch government deserves is limited, as there were serious flaws in their approach to 'decolonise' Suriname with the Dutch Aid Commitment. The most significant of these flaws being the neo-liberal construction of the 10 year development plan that the aid was supposed to fund. The plan was described to be poorly constructed, prioritising the Bauxite industry which was at the time dwindling on the world market and giving no importance to diversifying Suriname's industries.

As alluded to previously, the Dutch government seemed to contrast the British government's treatment of Guyana as they appeared to be less interested in neo-colonialist values. This comparison is diminished here as the construction of such an incompetent plan for Suriname, can be viewed

directly as a means of continuing the structures of colonialism and keeping Suriname dependent on them. A Surinamese economist named Baija Mhango described the development plan as a tool for the Dutch government to influence the country's economy and the intentional lack of diversification mimicked the approach used during the colonial era which would effectively prevent Suriname from becoming a truly successful independent nation (Mhango, 1989). The Dutch government's neo-colonial motives are apparent here, which provides an unfortunate similarity to the British government's motives in Guyana as well.

The parallels between Suriname and Guyana continue in their post-independence eras. Upon Suriname gaining independence and republicanism in 1975, Johan Ferrier became the first President of the country. He was accompanied in his role by Prime Minister Henck Arron. Following their election, there was severe economic decline as a result of instability in the bauxite market and the government was accused of corruption. In response to these accusations and disenchantment with the government from the general public, in 1980 a group of 18 officers carried out a successful coup d'état in the country (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1983). The leader of this coup was Desi Bouterse, who grew to achieve a level of infamy similar to Forbes Burnham in Guyana. Bouterse claimed that the coup was necessary to eliminate government corruption and improve the standard of living for Surinamese, but these plans proved to be fictional as he settled into power becoming the de-facto leader of a military controlled Suriname. Under the Bouterse regime, the government became increasingly dictatorial, mirroring much of what occurred under the Forbes Regime in Guyana during the same time. Two years after gaining power, an unforgettable event solidified Bouterse's infamy- The December Murders. In this event, 15 political opponents of Bouterse were executed by the military, the victims included labour leaders, journalists and academics who were in opposition to Bouterse's dictatorial rule (Singh, 2008).

In the days that followed these murders there were protests throughout the country. Students, teachers and union members took to the streets to protest the government and ask the international community for help. It was documented in a report of the events that some of the protesters, who were members of a women's organisation, requested Dutch government's intervention at its embassy stating, "A return to colonialism is the only option" (Wentzel, 2006.) The dependency of the Surinamese people on the Dutch imperial powers lingers in this situation. Despite this request, there was no such outcome as in response to the December Murders the Dutch government formally halted economic aid to Suriname.

The ascension of dictatorial political figures, in both Suriname and Guyana during the same period is a strikingly unlikely feature that links both countries. This similarity too, can be emblematic of the lingering effects of colonialism. Political instability in newly independent states is often looked upon as an effect of losing strong governance from their former colonial power. However, this conclusion disregards the influence that colonial norms and ideals have in an independent state. Instead, it can be said that the past colonial governance is what indirectly contributes to the political instability that was evident in post-independence Suriname and Guyana. During the colonial era, the oppressive nature of policies were normalised within these countries' political spheres coupled by ideological installations of prejudice and unequal power (Marker, 2003). This was cemented by the inexperience and unfamiliarity of the Guyanese and Surinamese people to democracy and true representation in leadership, as a result of colonial rule.

The effects of colonial rule on Surinamese and Guyanese politics still linger with the countries today. Guyana's governments and political elections continuously suffer as a result of severe corruption, causing a sense of distrust within the Guyanese public (World Bank, 2022) and a global view of instability within the country. Quite similarly, Suriname's politics has not significantly changed from its direct post-independence era. This is evident in Desi Bouterse's return to active politics almost 15 years after being overthrown by a more moderate and democratic new government

in the 1980s. Despite being sentenced to an 11 year jail time in The Netherlands for drug smuggling (Associated Press, 2020) and being convicted of murder by the Surinamese High Court for the December murders (BBC News, 2019), Bouterse was elected as President consecutively in 2010 and 2015. The key contributor to Bouterse's popularity among the Surinamese people despite the atrocious crimes he has committed lies within his ability to manipulate his voters, participating in a form of pseudo-socialism similar to that of Guyana's Forbes Burnham, by which Bouterse has heralded populist socialist propaganda to amass poor and uneducated voters, without actually following through on his promises (Kurmanaev, 2020).

Fortunately, Suriname's current state of affairs places the country in an optimistic position for the future. Through the election of a democratic and progressive new government led by President Chan Santokhi several policy programs have been implemented to encourage economic growth and stability with an expected 3% growth in their economy from 2022 to 2024 (World Bank, 2021). In addition, similar to its neighbour Guyana, oil reserves have been discovered in Suriname which can lead to significant wealth within the country (Krauss, 2021). Despite this, Suriname still struggles to rectify the colonial ailments that plague the country, as according to a United Nations report, "Inadequate economic diversification, poverty in interior areas, vulnerability of rural livelihoods, exploitation of natural resources, and loss of income through environmental hazards" still affect the nation (United Nations Development Programme, 2017.)

The evaluations of Suriname's and Guyana's post-independence movements have solidified the notion that postcolonialism is a process. Despite the cultural differences of the imperial Dutch and British rule on these two distinct countries, the colonial impacts that they had were resoundingly similar, as they share a history of exploitation, oppression and injustice. Even after gaining independence, neocolonialism has allowed for these nations to continuously bear the burdens of their colonial masters much to the benefit of the latter. It is clear that the detrimental impacts of colonialism are long lasting, and should not be erased or minimised as the era of 'postcolonialism' has emerged. In order to truly realise the potential of postcolonial countries like Suriname and Guyana, critical evaluations of neocolonialism must be in place in order to unroot the proverbial rot of colonialism and allow these nations that have been exploited for centuries, to finally flourish as they deserve.

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