

Neo-Liberalism in Guyana: *The Struggle of Post-Colonialism in a Eurocentric World*

As the only English-speaking country in South America, Guyana has much experience in being an outlier. The country's unique historical and geographic nature allows for its dual identity as both a South American and Caribbean country. However, Guyana's divergence extends way past these features, to its rich and complicated political history. To many avid historians, the description of any country as a 'Post-Colonial' state is a sure indicator of a national history of political turmoil. Guyana's pathway to Independence from British rule was met by several political and social roadblocks. Even after Guyana's ascension as an Independent nation, decades of instability and corruption plagued the country's politics, economy and society. The inexplicably unique existence of several 'socialist' political parties within its first two decades of Independence, coupled by external political intervention from Britain and the USA has marred the country's post-colonial movement by accepting Neo-Liberal norms which has restrained the nation from ascending to the level of national prosperity that its abundance of natural resources presupposes.

One of the most influential figures in Guyana's movement towards Independence is Cheddi Jagan. A former dentist in the USA, he returned to Guyana and became a popular political activist. Jagan was one of the forerunners on Britain's implementation of universal suffrage in Guyana and was the head of the People's Political Party (PPP) that became the country's first ever democratically elected party in 1953. As the country was still under British colonial rule, Jagan was named Premier. He was a self-proclaimed Socialist who regularly criticised capitalism, imperialism and colonialism, so it was no surprise that he was not favoured by the British who still owned and ruled the country. He was labelled by the British Government as 'disruptive' as he encouraged discourse on worker's rights and decolonisation (Press, 2011). The British Government acted swiftly on their disenchantment with the PPP's government, and only 6 months after their election, the British staged a coup in the country (Palmer, 2010). Hundreds of troops were sent by air and sea, the Guyanese Constitution (which had only recently allowed for democratic elections) was suspended, the PPP's government was disbanded and Cheddi Jagan and his wife Janet Jagan were arrested. The official MI-5 Historian Christopher Andrew, while discussing the 1953 coup stated, "In most British colonies, there was a relatively friendly transfer of power to independent governments. British Guiana was a notable exception."

Indeed, Guyana was a notable exception, as following the coup in 1953 the country was directly ruled by British powers for three years with no domestic government. During this time, Forbes Burnham who was a member of the PPP formed a separate political party called the People's National Congress (PNC). Burnham became extremely influential in Guyana in the following years, but gained a level of infamy for his political ruthlessness. Nevertheless, Jagan was still highly favoured within the country, so in 1961 when general elections were once again held, the PPP was reelected back into power. By this time, the PPP did not only pose a threat to Britain, but also to the USA as an outrightly Socialist government on their doorstep during the Cold War Era. Consequently, in true American nature, foreign intervention in Guyana was deemed a necessity. The president at the time, John F. Kennedy was quoted saying, "We must be entirely frank in saying that we simply cannot afford to see another Castro-type regime established in this Hemisphere. It follows that we should set as

our objective an independent British Guiana under some other leader.” (Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi, 2020.)

President Kennedy proved to be successful in his objective. A careful political action plan was engineered that would effectively remove Jeddi Jagan and the PPP from governance. Firstly, acknowledging the PPP’s resounding majority within the last election, the PNC and a lesser known right wing party joined forces and formed a coalition party. More effectively however, was the implementation of the Proportional Representation voting system in the upcoming election rather than the traditional ‘First Past The Post’ method. Guyana became the first and to present day, the only English-Speaking country in the Caribbean to utilise the Proportional Representation system of voting, which is indicative of the extreme level of external intervention that was present in Guyana’s politics. These measures, along with significant funding from America enabled the PNC coalition party to win the general elections in 1964.

Despite the tumultuous nature of the period preceding the 1964 elections, it was the ascension of Forbes Burnham as Premier that solidified an era of political and social darkness within Guyana. The British were seemingly satisfied with a non-PPP government and consequently awarded Guyana with Independence in 1966 and then republic status in 1970. Ironically, in a drastic turn of events, Burnham began identifying his government’s ideology as Marxist-Leninist. He claimed to have initially moderated his political views to ensure that Independence was secured for the country first (Taylor, 2020). The PNC’s proclamation of a Socialist agenda put Guyana in a very unique situation globally, as both its ruling and opposition parties identified as Socialist. Nevertheless, Guyana was far from a Socialist utopia. In fact, many would argue that Guyana was not Socialist at all, as the encouragement of private property was a goal of the government. Instead, the PNC’s government was more well-suited to be described as an authoritarian almost dictatorial body. Extreme levels of corruption were rampant throughout the government. Throughout their tenure, the PNC carried out blatant election fraud, controlled the media and press organisations and favoured their political supporters for government jobs, scholarships and loans (Taylor, 2019.) The Burnham administration influenced the political landscape of Guyana in several unfortunate ways.

The PNC’s identification as a Socialist party further contributed to Guyana’s political nuance. It has retrospectively brought forth academic discourse on the existence of Pseudo-Socialism during that period in Guyana (Taylor, 2020). In this context, Pseudo-Socialism denotes the adoption of populist phraseology (at that time Socialism) to advance an agenda that opposes its original theory- Capitalism. Given the global political landscape during that time, it’s not unfathomable why Pseudo-Socialism may manifest in a country like Guyana. In fact, it is often interpreted as a ‘natural’ path for relatively new Independent countries as it, “promises the achievements and benefits of capitalism and industrialization, but without the exploitation that is attributed to the capitalist class” (Taylor, 2020.) The actions of PNC were directly reflective of this theory. The PNC’s prolonged affiliation with Socialism was contradictory on many accounts. In a 1972 address to the nation Burnham was quoted saying, “It is for us to realise that we must rely on ourselves, our own people, our own efforts, our own sincerity... Do away with the cultural backwardness caused by the after-effects of imperialist colonial rule and build a new national culture” (Taylor,

2022.) The irony of this statement is not lost, as Burnham not only relied on, but also supported external intervention from Britain and the USA to advance his political agenda. Even more ironic is the notion of anti-colonialism that Burnham attempted to portray, while he directly built his government through a neo-colonialist approach. This acknowledgement plays a greater role in establishing the nature of Guyana's Post-Colonial movement.

The many challenges of Post-Colonialism are highlighted in Sankaran Krishna's book *Globalisation and Postcolonialism*. The book discusses the many intricacies of navigating the politics and economies of countries that have gained Independence, and makes a striking distinction on the requirements of what can be defined as 'Post-Colonial'. In popular discourse, 'Post-Colonialism' has grown to become a buzzword that denotes the period following Western Colonisation. However Sankaran argues that the theoretical framework of Post-Colonialism should be the antithesis of colonialism and its inadvertent qualities. In the book he explores this saying, "Postcolonialism, in its widest sense then, can be seen as a discursive or theoretical standpoint that opposes Eurocentrism in all its forms, not just when deployed by a geographically demarcated West upon a non-West." Despite their self-proclaimed pro-black and post-colonial agenda, the Burnham administration failed to truly kickstart a 'Post-Colonial' Guyana, as their work in office was shrouded by Eurocentric norms and affiliations.

Burnham served as President until his death in 1985. He was able to retain his position of power through several years of blatant and ruthless election rigging. His methods of ballot manipulation varied from injecting fake overseas ballots to shamelessly having ballot boxes seized and tampered with at polling stations (Ishmael, 2009.) The undisguised disregard and disrespect for democratic elections at such a pivotal time in Guyana as a newly independent state has proven to have detrimental effects on Guyana's current state of affairs. In 2020, Guyana became subject to international headlines as the PNC led government was accused of rigging elections once again. The results of which took 5 months to be released instead of a few days, as external recounts had to be conducted by fellow CARICOM countries to increase validity. Subsequently, a new PPP government was sworn in with Dr. Irfaan Ali as President. On the issue of the 2020 elections Greg Quinn, the British High Commissioner in Guyana stated, "It has been 116 days since the election. No population should have to wait that long. We need an election result ... Many issues around the election reflect ethnic polarisation and a winner takes all system that is no longer fit for purpose" (Wintour, 2020.) It is obvious that the period of the Burnham Administration has left lingering effects on Guyana's political development and to this day, provides obstacles in Guyana's movement towards the future.

Moreover, more unfortunate effects follow the post-independence period. A key factor in creating tension between the PNC and PPP within the 1960's was the instigation of racial prejudice and discrimination. Cheddi Jagan was Indian Guyanese while Forbes Burnham was Afro-Guyanese, and the racial lines of their parties followed suit. There was significant tension between these two ethnic groups that made up a majority of Guyana's population. This tension did not exist incidentally, but was engineered and encouraged by the British and American forces that were interfering in Guyana's politics at the time. Britain's method of 'divide and conquer' is well-known and nefariously effective, and Guyana surely proves this to be true. Political propaganda was fed by the CIA into Guyana creating paranoia within Black and Indian communities, pitting them against one another and encouraging racial

violence (Smith, 1995.) However, Burnham's firm grasp on Afro-Guyanese voters began diminishing during the 1970's as a result of a new revolutionary leader emerging within Guyana's political sphere.

Any discourse on Guyanese politics which omits the presence of Walter Rodney is one with significant deficiency. Walter Rodney was an internationally known Guyanese historian, activist and politician. He returned to Guyana during the 1970s and began working in grass-root political organisations within the country. Immediately, he was deemed a threat by the PNC's government. He was denied a job by the government at the University of Guyana despite his overwhelming level of qualification. So instead, in collaboration with other political activists, he started the Working People's Alliance (WPA) which served as a pressure group fighting for changes in Burnham's dictatorial administration which later became a political party. Rodney was openly critical of the government, and as an academic, provided nuanced takes on the government's activities. Rodney was one of the first commentators on Pseudo-Socialism in Guyana. It was his view that the PNC government had adopted a Socialist identification as it produced greater economic prospects like increasing trade with the Soviet Union and China. Furthermore, Rodney attributed the PNC's Pseudo-Socialism to the capitalist benefit of nationalisation. During the PNC's tenure the government nationalised foreign owned industries such as Sugar and Bauxite. Rodney highlighted that through this process, the petit bourgeois of Guyana who were largely statist due to the minute nature of Guyana's Capitalism at the time, had more potential to enrich themselves through this avenue (Taylor, 2020.)

Rodney's work on Post-Colonialism and Development were what solidified him as an internationally renowned academic. In his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* he provided many critiques of European colonisation in Africa that can be paralleled to his native country. In the book, he is quoted writing, "Under colonialism, the ownership was complete and backed by military domination. Today, in many African countries the foreign ownership is still present, although the armies and flags of foreign powers have been removed." The similarities are notable in Guyana, as the then newly independent nation was still indirectly ruled by its colonial power. However, Rodney was aware that the surface level involvement of Britain in independent Guyana was only a small part of the problem. The greater issue stood in the indoctrination of eurocentric ideologies and economic frameworks as the only way forward as a Post-colonial state, which in many ways diminishes the purpose of the movement altogether.

In an unfortunate turn of events, after amassing great popularity and support amongst the Guyanese people, Rodney was assassinated in 1980- just a few months before the upcoming general elections that year. Rodney's death served as a tragic symbol of Guyana's impending future. He served as a rare avenue for Guyana to truly achieve a Post-Colonial future in par with Sankaran's framework, but seemingly as he died, so did this prospect. In the years that followed this tragedy, Guyana's 'post-colonial' movement increasingly grew in the Neo-liberal nature introduced in the Burnham era.

Guyana's current state of affairs is truly indicative of this. The country depends mainly on its agriculture industry and its natural Oil. It is known internationally for its abundance of natural resources like oil, gold, bauxite and fertile lands. Yet the country is amongst the poorest in South America (World Bank, 2022). Guyana's economic downturn can be

attributed to its continued compliance with Neo-liberal policies and norms. Professor Dennis Canterbury describes this connection in an article in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* stating,

“Agricultural policies continue to reproduce the conditions in the rural sector that they purport to remedy... The peasant structures that emerged during colonial times persist, and would continue to do so given the high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality in the country brought on by economic liberalisation policies.”

While Guyana's discovery of oil has given the country optimism for its economic future, the nature of agreements on its oil reserves has proven problematic. It has signed an American natural gas company Exxon Mobil as its main contractor, despite their agreements being seen to pose major threats for Guyana's environment and financial sector. The contract has been described as 'one-sided' and not fairly compensated to Guyana (Sanzillo, 2022). It is predicted that corruption and inequality will rise with Oil revenue if Guyana continues in the same way it has in the past. In 2011, it was found that Guyana had double the average percentage of foreign owned firms than any other Latin American country, and with the emergence of Oil in the country, other nations are scrambling to make relations with the country now (Enterprise Country Bulletin- Guyana, 2011). This brings to question just how much the citizens of Guyana will benefit from this Oil boom, in comparison to powerful foreign investors.

The socio-political history of Guyana epitomises the notion that post-colonialism is not solely achieved through gaining Independence, but through a meticulous process of decolonising the deep rooted structures and norms that influence a country's politics and society. The many setbacks that Guyana has faced in its journey towards post-colonialism are not exclusive, as the challenges of Eurocentrism and Neoliberalism exist globally, continuing cycles of oppression and inequality under a new guise of modernity. As Guyana looks towards the future, its prosperity as a nation relies not on its ability to navigate the current political and economic frameworks that it exists within, but to break this mould and cultivate a framework that truly suits the country and its needs, in true post-colonial fashion.

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