

Chapter 2

Political Background

Early History

Before the arrival of Europeans, the land which is now Guyana was inhabited by semi-nomadic Amerindian (Carib and Arawak) tribes, who named it Guiana, which means "land of many waters".

The Dutch settled in Guyana in the late 16th century, but their control ended when the British became the de facto rulers in 1796. In 1815, the colonies of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice were officially ceded to Great Britain at the Congress of Vienna, and in 1831, were consolidated as British Guiana.

Following slave revolts in the 18th century and the eventual abolition of slavery in 1834, thousands of indentured labourers were brought to Guyana, primarily from India but also from Portugal and China, to replace the slaves on the sugarcane plantations. The practice ceased in 1917. Many of the Afro-Guyanese former slaves moved to the towns and became the majority urban population, whereas the Indo-Guyanese remained predominantly rural. The Amerindian population remained living mostly in the country's interior.

In 1928 an appointed legislative council was established, with some extension of the franchise to elected members in 1943 and 1945.

The Transition to Independence

The first modern political party in Guyana was the People's Progressive Party (PPP), established on 1 January 1950, with Forbes Burnham, a British-educated Afro-Guyanese, as chairman; Dr. Cheddi Jagan, a U.S.-educated Indo-Guyanese, as second vice chairman; and Dr. Jagan's American-born wife, Janet Jagan, as secretary general. The PPP won the first fully popular elections permitted by the colonial government in 1953, and Dr. Jagan became leader of the national assembly. Five months later, on October 9, 1953, the British suspended the constitution and returned control to a mostly-nominated administration. These events led to a split in the PPP/C, in which Burnham broke away and founded what eventually became the People's National Congress (PNC).

Elections to the assembly were restored in 1957, and, following a 1960 Constitutional Conference introducing self-government, held again in 1961. Jagan's PPP won on both occasions.

Constitutional conferences were held in 1962-63 to finalise the terms for independence, but Guyana's political parties were unable to achieve consensus, against a background of politically inspired racial disturbances between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese communities. At the request of the parties, the UK settled the matter by introducing a form of proportional representation aimed at preventing domination by any single ethnic group. In the December 1964 elections held under the new system, the PPP secured 46%, the PNC 41%, and new party The United Force (TUF), 12%. TUF placed its support behind the PNC, and Forbes Burnham became prime minister.

Following a further constitutional conference (boycotted by the PPP), Guyana achieved independence in May 1966, and became a republic on 23 February 1970.

The Burnham Years

From December 1964 until his death in August 1985, Forbes Burnham ruled Guyana, first as prime minister, then after the adoption of a new constitution in 1980, as executive president. In the 1970s, the PNC followed a strong socialist line and 80% of the economy was nationalised. These were years of considerable unrest and economic difficulty. Elections held during the period were claimed by many in Guyana and abroad to be fraudulent, and human rights and civil liberties were suppressed.

Post-Burnham: Political Change

Following Burnham's death in 1985, Prime Minister Hugh Desmond Hoyte acceded to the presidency and was elected to that office in December. **Hoyte gradually reversed Burnham's** policies, moving from state socialism and one-party control to a market economy and greater freedom of the press and assembly. The electoral process and election machinery were also reformed toward more independence and integrity.

On 5 October 1992, a new National Assembly and regional councils were elected in the first Guyanese polls since 1964 to be internationally recognised as free and fair. The PPP-Civic (PPP/C) coalition won the election and Jagan became president again on 9 October 1992. A minority of the electorate did not accept the result and some demonstrations followed the election.

When President Jagan died in March 1997, Prime Minister Samuel Hinds replaced him in **accordance with constitutional provisions. President Jagan's widow, Janet Jagan,** was elected president in national elections held in December 1997. However, the opposition PNC refused to accept the declared results, claiming electoral malpractice. Increasingly violent demonstrations followed. These only ceased when, in mid-January 1998, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) brokered an agreement between the PPP/C and PNC, the Herdmanston Accord. The Accord provided that CARICOM would undertake an audit of the election results, a broad-based Constitutional Reform Commission would be established to report to the National Assembly within 18 months, and there would be new elections after presentation of the report.

The CARICOM team reported that, although the management of the count left much to be desired, the results of its audit varied only marginally from the final results declared by the Chief Elections Officer. The PNC remained dissatisfied, however, and violent demonstrations broke out again. A settlement was finally reached in July 1998, under which the PNC agreed to take its seats in the National Assembly.

President Janet Jagan resigned after suffering a mild heart attack in August 1999 and was succeeded by Finance Minister Bharrat Jagdeo as President.

The Constitutional Reform Commission's proposals were enacted in 2000 and 2001. These included reforms to the electoral system to provide for a fully elected national assembly, through a combination of geographic representation and national seats, as well as mandatory inclusion of women candidates. The reforms also established a permanent election commission, and introduced new national identity cards.

An early general election was held in March 2001 and won by the ruling PPP/C, allowing Jagdeo to retain the presidency. Voter turnout was nearly 90%. Although the election result was assessed by international observers to reflect the will of the people, in the weeks following the elections opposition supporters mounted violent demonstrations disputing the accuracy of the poll. In response to the ongoing unrest, in April 2001 President Jagdeo and opposition leader Hoyte initiated a dialogue among parliamentarians and civil society on further constitutional and electoral reform. However, this dialogue broke down in March 2002 over differences between PPP/C and the renamed PNC–Reform (PNC-R), about the implementation of what had been agreed.

The deadlock continued until late August 2002 when, at the government’s request, the Commonwealth Secretary-General appointed a special envoy, former Governor-General of New Zealand Sir Paul Reeves, to facilitate resumption of dialogue between the opposing parties. During 2003 constructive dialogue proceeded between Jagdeo and the new opposition leader, Robert Corbin. Political tension eased, and opposition members returned to parliament. However, during 2004, the dialogue process wavered and the opposition’s parliamentary boycott was resumed for some time, before it returned to attending parliament on a selective basis.

The 2006 Elections

Ten parties contested the national and regional elections held in August 2006. President **Jagdeo’s PPP/C was returned to power, with 36 seats and 54.6% of the votes, while PNC-R** became the main opposition with 22 seats and 34% of the votes. The newly constituted Alliance for Change (AFC) won five seats, Guyana Action Party/Rise Organize and Rebuild (GAP/ROAR) one, and TUF one.

The Commonwealth Observer Group and other international observers reported that the results reflected the wishes of the people, and lauded the absence of election-related violence for the first time in more than 20 years, as well as improvements to the integrity of the electoral process. **The Commonwealth Observer Group’s report offered a number of recommendations for further strengthening the electoral process, highlighting in particular the need to de-politicise the composition of GECOM, and to produce a new voters’ register.**

Political Contestants for the 2011 Elections

Having completed the two terms constitutionally permitted to a president, President Jagdeo was ineligible for re-election. In the lead-up to the 2011 elections, PPP/C General Secretary **Donald Ramotar was nominated as the party’s presidential candidate.**

Following talks over some months about a possible merger between the opposition parties, the PNC-R formed a coalition in mid-2011 with four other parties including GAP/ROAR and **WPA, under the name “A Partnership for National Unity” (APNU).** APNU chose former army officer Mr David Granger of PNC-R as its presidential candidate. Five further parties joined the Partnership in the lead-up to the election, resulting in an eventual coalition of ten groups.

The Alliance for Change (AFC) declined to join the APNU coalition, declaring long-standing leader Khemraj Ramjattan as its presidential nominee. The United Force (TUF) also chose to contest the elections in its own right – following a court dispute over leadership of the party, Peter Persaud was ultimately nominated as its candidate for President.

One new party, the East Berbice Development Association (EBDA), registered to contest for seats in one regional council, but did not field candidates in the national poll.

Local Government Elections

Local elections have not been held in Guyana since 1994, due to political disagreement and ensuing parliamentary stalemate over elements of local government reform including revised electoral boundaries, funding provisions, and mandates for local councils. The Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) has stated that it is ready for local polls, but this will depend on the ability of the new parliament to pass the necessary legal provisions for local elections.

Guyana and the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth has a history of engagement with Guyana, particularly with regard to the conduct and management of elections. As noted above, the Commonwealth supported political dialogue and reform in Guyana under the auspices of the late Sir Paul Reeves, and also provided technical support for the drafting of the media code of conduct that was widely credited as instrumental in maintaining the peace during the 2006 election. **The Commonwealth has previously observed Guyana's national elections in 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2006.**

The Commonwealth provided technical support to GECOM during the preparations for the 2011 election including the training of staff and the deployment of technical experts. GECOM is an active participant in the Commonwealth Election Network.

Guyana hosts the Caribbean Regional Centre of the Commonwealth Youth Programme, and the Commonwealth supports the development of Guyana in a range of sectors through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Assistance.