

## Chapter 4

# The Election Campaign

### Campaign Calendar

Guyana's ninth parliament was dissolved on 22 September, 2011 and the election date was announced by the President on 9 October, 2011. Thursday 27 October, 2011 was nomination day in Guyana; the contesting parties and presidential candidates are referred to in Chapter 2.

### Campaign Environment

The elections were highly competitive, and the campaign was conducted with passion and enthusiasm. The democratic principles of participation and representation, as well as the basic freedoms of association, assembly, expression and movement, were observed.

The campaign was generally peaceful, although there were some reported incidents involving the disruption of political meetings by opposing party supporters, resulting in scuffles and arrests. In all instances, the police were quick to intervene, preventing the situations from escalating. These were isolated events limited to Georgetown, and although regrettable, did not undermine the overall campaign environment.

The four parties contesting the national elections held rallies across the country, generally campaigning on platforms of racial inclusivity. There was some concentration on traditional ethnic and geographical pockets of support for some parties, but also clear evidence that all parties did make an effort to campaign in non-traditional areas, courting a multi-ethnic voter base. In the later stages of the campaign, the PPP/C and APNU parties both accused the other of inciting racial discord through media advertisements and public statements, while maintaining their own support for national unity.

Political parties and candidates used door-to-door canvassing of voters, posters, leaflets, the print and electronic media (radio and television), and town hall-style meetings. For the first time, social media such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, online news services and email lists, played a role in shaping the nature of opinion and informing the electorate, courting a youthful, more technologically savvy electorate both locally and among the international diaspora.

The ruling PPP/C party had a dominant presence in the election campaign. More posters and **billboards were displayed around the capital and country, and the party's TV, radio, print and online advertisements were prominent.**

Each party published a manifesto setting out its policy positions and key promises. However, issues of policy generally appeared to be secondary in what was essentially a presidential campaign.

**Attempts for the first time to arrange public debates between the parties' presidential candidates were a welcome development, although they yielded mixed results.** Question and

answer sessions were held with each candidate (separately) under the auspices of the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The opposition parties declined to participate in a debate proposed by state broadcaster NCN, after failure to agree on certain conditions for the process.

**The University of Guyana hosted a “Presidential Candidates’ Forum” on 10 November 2011**, which included all four presidential candidates and was widely broadcast. However, PPP/C was dissatisfied following disruption and heckling of its candidate by opposition supporters at that debate, and declined to participate in a subsequent debate arranged by a non-government organisation on 16 November, which became a bilateral event between the AFC and APNU candidates. We were informed that NCN opted not to broadcast this second debate, citing the participation of only two of the four candidates, but the footage was later broadcast on smaller stations.

### **Adherence to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties**

The signing of the “Code of Conduct for Political Parties Contesting the 2011 General and Regional Elections” by all five competing parties, as noted in Chapter 3, was a welcome development. The parties committed in the Code to, *inter alia*: denounce violence, intimidation, threats or disruption; respect the law and human rights; adhere to “strict standards of financial probity, accountability and transparency”; reject any disrespect for or intimidation of the media; refrain from abusive or defamatory attacks on opposing candidates; avoid promoting racial or ethnic tension; and respect the integrity of the election process.

However, several of those who spoke with the Group said that breaches of the code were frequent. In addition to the claims of racist campaigning noted above, parties cited personal attacks on the character of candidates and the airing of political advertising denigrating other parties. It was reported that President Jagdeo, during campaign rallies, attacked press personnel by name in an intimidating manner, to the point where the Guyana Press Association claimed that some journalists were fearful for their safety and hesitant to report on PPP/C political events.

All Opposition parties also alleged serious abuses of incumbency, such as controlling access to media, and the misuse of state finances, which are outlined further in the following sections.

### **Advantage and Abuse of Incumbency**

The opposition parties and media claimed to have documented, through photographs and video, the abuse of incumbency through the use of state funds and resources for campaigning purposes. Examples cited included the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) vehicles allegedly being used to transport PPP/C supporters to rallies.

On 4 November 2011, President Jagdeo approved across-the-board increases in salaries for all government employees<sup>2</sup> retroactive to January 2011, and payable a few days before the election. The government also approved an additional increase of three percent to be paid to employees of GuySuCo, who were previously paid a five percent increase for 2011.

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<sup>2</sup> A release from the Guyana Information Agency stated that the increases were payable to all public servants and members of the disciplined services.

Opposition parties accused the government of expedient timing and the misuse of public funds by handing out GUY\$20,000 each to hundreds of Lethem residents from the PPP/C's Region 9 headquarters, as well as undertaking repairs to infrastructure in the area, in November 2011. These were designated as government flood relief funds, but were distributed many months after the flood damage was incurred, and in conjunction with PPP/C election campaigning.

The abuse of the power of incumbency appeared especially problematic in the context of the media, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

## **Media Background**

Most media outlets in Guyana have historically supported partisan political and even racial interests. It is usually easy to discern which political party a particular medium supports as the tenets for objective reporting tend not always to be upheld.

There is a history of lawsuits against newspapers, columnists and television stations, and temporary bans on offending media are implemented through the Ministry of Information, which is a cabinet portfolio of the President. Further, the government has cited a lack of relevant broadcast legislation to justify a freeze on the issuing of new broadcast licences.

## **Media and the Campaign**

The news media were active players in the 2011 electoral process, presenting news, views, and in some cases, propaganda, as well as offering campaign platforms for political candidates, party faithful and supporters.

As in the 2006 General and Regional Elections, some media outlets provided selective or incomplete coverage of factual information on election campaigns and party rallies. This has been most obvious in the case of state-owned media, but some commercial media also failed to balance news coverage in line with the self-regulative Code of Conduct for the Media.

## **Media Code of Conduct and the Media Monitoring Unit**

Inflammatory and partisan media reporting had been long identified as a significant factor in previous election-related unrest in Guyana. To address this, a Media Code of Conduct and Media Monitoring Unit (MMU), established in advance of the 2006 election with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Commonwealth Secretariat, proved to be a valuable tool in the peaceful conduct of that election.

The MMU remained in place after 2006, but in 2010 it was closed down by the Government. President Jagdeo later agreed that the MMU be reopened in advance of the 2011 poll, and this occurred in August 2011, with UNDP funding support.

Media organisations in Guyana signed a revised Media Code of Conduct in March 2010, which committed them to provide fair, balanced and accurate information to educate the public. **The Media Code of Conduct also outlined the importance of providing "an equitable share of election coverage to all registered parties".**

Media organisations were also obliged to provide equal access to all political parties, without discrimination, to purchase on equal terms, space in newspapers and time on radio and television stations.

The MMU produced three monthly reports in the run up to the elections, providing data on election-related media coverage. The reports for 29 August 2011 to 30 September 2011, **and 1 to 31 October were made available on GECOM's website and delivered to media houses.** A third report, for 1 to 28 November 2011, provided by the MMU to this Observer Group while still in preparation, was to be published in the same way.

In 2006, by contrast, the MMU reported weekly on the result of the monitoring via GECOM-funded inserts in the Sunday paper. The reports were also widely circulated to the other parties, allowing the role of the media to become the subject of substantial public discussion.

**The Guyana Press Association expressed little confidence in the MMU's ability to ensure a fair and independent media environment, expressing particular concern about President Jagdeo's attacks on the media, as noted above.**

### **State Media**

The Guyana Information Agency (GINA), the state news agency, is reported to have published over twenty articles in September and October that supported the interests of the PPP/C.

**Guyana's state-owned National Communications Network (NCN) operates a nationwide free-to-air TV station and the country's sole radio network, which operates two channels – the Voice of Guyana (AM 560) and Hot FM (98.1).**

NCN offered five minutes a week for radio and television access to all political parties. Opposition parties vociferously rejected the offer of time, denouncing it as inadequate and demanding more free time. The time allotted was later increased to ten minutes but allegations remained that the ruling party was not paying for the airtime it used. Opposition parties also complained that their submissions for the free-time broadcasts were unfairly rejected.

NCN carried extensive party political broadcasts of the PPP/C featuring President Jagdeo and the presidential candidate, Donald Ramotar, throughout the campaign period. These party political broadcasts included election advertisements that were featured during breaks in programming on its TV network. Other political parties had aired political advertisements on **a modest scale to capitalise on NCN's nationwide reach.**

From the MMU report on coverage in the month of November 2011, it can be seen that the state-owned radio and television gave preference in their election-related broadcasting to PPP/C over all opposition parties on a scale of at least 8–1 (not including a large amount of government news of direct benefit to the ruling party).

The state-owned *Guyana Chronicle* featured numerous advertisements by the PPP/C, including full-page advertisements outlining its manifesto and highlighting the successes of the ruling party in promoting socio-economic development in Guyana. Opposition parties complained they had to purchase inserts in the Chronicle to have their manifestos adequately covered.

**According to the MMU's report for November 2011, the *Guyana Chronicle's* election coverage supported PPP/C with a 9-1 advantage.**

## Commercial Media

The main private television stations are Channels 6, 7 (including Capital News), 9 (including Prime News), 28 (including Evening News), 65 (including News Update) and 69. In the report for the last four weeks before polling day, channels 7, 9 and 28 delivered a limited level of news balance comparable in amount to that provided by the state broadcasters. Outside news, the weight of talk shows, commentaries and other election-based general programmes swamped any attempt at providing any real measure of overall balance. Channels 65 and 69 provided overall election broadcast coverage in favour of the ruling party of 99% and 100% respectively during that four week period. The most balanced channel overall was Channel 6 which shared its election output in the proportion PPP/C - 30%, APNU - 40%, and AFC - 30%.

Channel 6 fell foul of the ruling party in May 2011 following the broadcast of one opinionated programme that included an alleged slander against President Jagdeo. The President imposed a four-month broadcast ban on the channel, which would have been effective between October 2011 and February 2012. Under pressure from political parties and civil society, he later deferred the suspension until after the elections (to take effect on 1 December) to avoid any accusations of muzzling the station. However, the suspension was temporarily lifted following a legal action taken by the owners of Channel 6, and a court decision is pending.

**Following the elections, the TV stations carried news on GECOM's preliminary results, with some allocating longer airtime than others.**

## Print Media

The *Stabroek News*, *Kaieteur News* and *Guyana Times* are the main privately owned newspapers in the country.

The daily *Stabroek News*, in general, provided fair coverage of the election campaign, with attempts to feature a wide range of voices in its reportage. According to the MMU, the reportage and other election-related elements in the *Stabroek News*, (editorial, letters, columns etc.) reflected in equal amount, the interests of the three largest parties.

*Kaieteur News*, another daily tabloid, also provided a good measure of positive coverage for all three main parties. We noted that a front-page article branding the state-run NCN as **acting like a "criminal" could be considered inflammatory; an APNU candidate took the label** from a reference to NCN.

*Guyana Times*, a relatively new broadsheet publication, provided less coverage of opposition parties. The MMU, in its November 2011 report, noted positive election coverage as having been 2-1 in favour of the ruling party.

All three private newspapers featured advertising by the major political parties.

## **New Media**

Several online-only news outlets have joined Guyana's **media landscape, including *Demerara Waves*, *Guyana Press***, and others. This added a new avenue for internet-savvy voters, apart from access to newspaper websites – [www.stabroeknews.com](http://www.stabroeknews.com), [www.kaieteurnewsonline.com](http://www.kaieteurnewsonline.com), [www.guyanatimesgy.com](http://www.guyanatimesgy.com) and [www.guyanachronicle.com](http://www.guyanachronicle.com) – which were updated regularly outside the normal publication times of the newspapers. These media outlets were not monitored by MMU.

The PPP/C, APNU, AFC AND TUF also used electronic means to spread their campaign messages, with PPP/C and APNU most actively engaging their audiences through Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, email alerts and Blackberry Messenger.

In the days after the election, news and rumours flew rapidly via social media, including privately operated blogs. Facebook pages, including those operated by the parties, offered opportunity for party faithful to air suspicions about the counting process, some inflammatory and racist. Twitter users also spread information on the elections, counting process, and some incidents purported to be related to misconduct at the polls.

## **Election Day**

**In the Media Code of Conduct, media organisations agreed that “no coverage of any activity by the political parties shall take place for a period to begin 24 hours prior to the opening of polling stations on the day of polling. This ban will continue to the close of polling stations.”**

The PPP/C, APNU and AFC held their final political rallies in Georgetown on 26 November 2011. The PPP/C event, **billed as a ‘Unity Concert and Rally’**, was replayed several times on NCN TV on 27 November. Throughout the day and night, NCN TV news bulletins continued to feature **excerpts of the PPP/C rally and leaders’ speeches**. Other TV networks also showed excerpts of the political rallies by the three parties as part of their news bulletins during the day, although these broadcasts were not available in outlying regions.

On Election Day media outlets reported on party officials casting their ballots and, in some cases, their complaints about the voting process. The MMU recorded no ethical breaches of the Media Code of Conduct on Election Day.

## **Voter Education**

GECOM stepped up its voter education programme through the media in daily advertisements in the lead-up to polling day. The advertisements urged the electorate to ensure that they had obtained their new identification card and to identify their polling **stations in GECOM’s published List of Electors. Information on how to cast a ballot and the procedures involved** was also advertised. GECOM officials said they were more than satisfied with the performance of all media, both print and broadcast, in relaying voter-education material.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Steps should be taken to strengthen and enforce rules on the use of public resources, especially during election campaigns, to facilitate a more level playing field for all parties, and reduce the abuse of state resources through the power of incumbency.
- The political parties are urged to strengthen their adherence to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and respect for election laws before, during and after the election period.
- The media are urged to strengthen their adherence to the Code of Conduct for Media, governing the behaviour of media organisations and practitioners before, during and after the election period to ensure fairness, balance, accuracy and integrity in reportage. In particular we recommend that state-owned media provide equitable coverage of all parties, as by their nature state-owned enterprises should be duty-bound to serve the public interest generally rather than one party.
- Appropriate measures should be expedited to allow multiple nationwide radio and television operators. The people of Guyana should have access to a choice of media outlets for their information. Media diversity facilitates information from different sources and perspectives and promotes dialogue and debate on issues, so that the voices of many rather than a few can be heard. Media diversity encourages healthy competition for quality, timeliness, reliability and talent.
- We recommend that monitoring and reporting on media fairness continue, and be expanded to online sources. Media monitoring reports should be frequently and **widely circulated to provide maximum information to the electorate on media houses'** reliability and adherence to the media Code of Conduct.
- The establishment of an independent media authority to regulate media conduct would strengthen efforts toward media balance in election campaigns. An independent media authority provides recourse to justice in the event of unfair reporting. This could take the form of an authority similar to the media councils that exist in some other Commonwealth countries. Such councils are independent self-regulatory bodies that deal with complaints about the editorial content of print, broadcast and online media. They can also work pro-actively to provide pre-publication advice to journalists, and offer advice to the public on privacy issues to prevent harassment and media intrusion.