

Chapter 3

The Campaign and the Media

The Campaign

When we arrived in Georgetown the campaign was well under way, and although there were relatively few posters in and around the city there could be no doubt that elections were imminent. With nine days to go before the General and Regional Elections there were regular rallies and meetings by the larger political parties and all sections of the Press were full of campaign advertising and news. The number of people attending rallies depended on who was speaking. We attended the launch of the PPP/C manifesto in Georgetown. Several political party activists involved in the elections in 1992 said that the nature of the campaign had changed and that the expanded broadcast media was playing a more significant role.

We attended as many rallies as we could, in the Georgetown area and in many other parts of the country. The general view of the campaign period, from our own observations and as reported to us, was that it was peaceful, notwithstanding the isolated incidents of intimidation and stone throwing that took place. As the election date drew nearer there was an increase in negative campaigning, such as the defacing of billboards and tearing down of posters. There were incidents in which the houses of known political activists living in areas in which other parties had a stranglehold were stoned. Later the presidential candidates of both the PPP/C and the PNC were pelted with stones and eggs during separate rallies.

The security section of the Commission worked closely with the police and army, whose task was to assist the Commission to ensure that conditions existed in which every voter would be able to vote in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Both the police and army Commands attached senior officers to the Commission to keep their respective headquarters informed of developments.

Our teams were deployed in all 10 regions of the country in time to witness the closing stages of the political campaigns. We paid attention to the security presence at the rallies and noted that there were police attending all large meetings and most of the small ones. In several regions the police prevented rallies from taking place within half-a-mile of each other, in order to avert potential clashes between supporters of rival parties. In Linden, for example, the police made the PNC move its final rally to another location nearby in order to avoid potential trouble between their supporters and those of the GGG, which was holding a meeting close by. Similarly, in New Amsterdam a GGG rally was brought to an abrupt end by the police because a PNC meeting was due to start shortly in the same place.

We noted that at many of the rallies there was a strong presence of young people and some families had brought their babies. Reggae bands and other popular local musicians played at the large rallies before the crowds were addressed by the politicians, and this gave the meetings a carnival atmosphere. Large convoys of cars belonging to party supporters gathered at a place nearby; as the motorcades snaked their way to the rallies the vehicles tooted their horns; and as they approached the rally venue the supporters used megaphones to sing the praises of their party. The police presence at the rallies we attended was not intimidatory.

In some areas, such as Region 3, we noted that there was a very fine line between the work done by some people in their role as government officials and their work as party representatives. It was noticed that some of the government offices there had campaign posters of the PPP/C's candidates next to those for voter education. Some leaflets distributed at a PPP/C rally in Region 4 were printed by the Ministry of Information.

The content of the speeches at the rallies varied and as the election date grew closer the number of personal attacks by politicians from all parties on their opponents increased, as did the crowds.



Campaigning ... party vehicles toured the towns urging support for their candidates

Racial undertones were perceived by some to be behind many platform statements by some politicians. There were occasional incidents of threats and intimidation. Despite these, many Guyanese with whom we spoke expressed satisfaction and indeed delight at the quality of the campaign. It was felt that the political parties in general dealt with issues, rather than concentrating on negative propaganda. The quality of the election campaign may have been helped by the publication of party manifestos. In spite of late publication these helped to focus debate on action plans and policies.

The Role of the Media

The media is very active in Guyana and the number of television stations has increased from four to 17 over the last five years. The Elections Commission sought assistance from the media in informing the public during the campaign and this was given. The print and broadcast media were useful channels through which the Commission could relay information about last minute changes to deadlines for collecting Voter Identification Cards and voting procedures. The Chairman of the Elections Commission and his staff gave frequent interviews to the media and the newspapers printed guides to show people the intricacies of the voting process. The Commission also used the media to inform people who had not collected their Voter Identification Cards where they could get them.

Access by Political Parties

Following advice from the Inter-Party Committee on Electoral Reform formed by the four political parties represented in parliament, the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation allocated free time on state

radio and television according to the number of seats that each party had held in parliament. The six other parties – which were not represented in parliament but which were contesting the elections – were also given some free time on the state broadcasting media, but they were not satisfied with their allocation. The breakdown of time allocated to the political parties on Guyana Television is detailed below:

PPP/C	14 programmes each of 10 minutes
PNC	10 programmes each of 10 minutes
WPA/AFG	1 programme of 10 minutes
TUF	1 programme of 10 minutes

The six other parties were allocated one five-minute programme each. The PPP/C used all the slots that it was allocated, while the PNC used only half of its slots. The WPA/AFG and the six contesting parties which were not represented in parliament did not use the time allocated to them. Guyana Television did not know why the parties did not use all the time they were allocated.

Paid Political Messages

The radio and television stations frequently aired the snappy jingles advertisements paid for by the political parties. The PPP/C and the PNC had far more advertisements than the other parties and had hired experienced external agencies to produce them. These political messages featured fewer personal attacks on opponents than did the speeches at rallies.

The majority of the paid political messages broadcast were about the PPP/C and the PNC, with the PPP/C having bought more time on Guyana Television than any other party. The station did not offer any discounts to any political party.

The Print Media

There are several newspapers in Guyana. The only dailies are the government-owned *Guyana Chronicle* and the private *Stabroek News*. Both of these newspapers have a daily circulation of about 20,000 copies and their Sunday editions have almost twice that. The *Guyana Chronicle* has a slightly higher circulation and also a better distribution system. We noted that the *Guyana Chronicle* and the *Stabroek News* were also being sold in Regions 9 and 10.

Both the *Guyana Chronicle* and the *Stabroek News* increased their print run for the elections and carried numerous full-page advertisements from all parties, featuring their manifestos and rally timetables, although most were from the PPP/C and the PNC. For example, the edition of the *Guyana Chronicle* published three days before the elections had the equivalent of nine pages of party political advertisements and a further three pages of election news in a 40-page newspaper. The shareholders of the *Stabroek News* include among their number supporters of different political parties.

Other newspapers in the country include the *New Nation*, the *Mirror*, *Kaitaur News* and the *Catholic Standard*. The *New Nation* is perceived to support the PNC, while the bi-weekly *Mirror*, which has a circulation of 20,000, was for many years edited by the presidential candidate of the PPP/C, Mrs Janet Jagan. The *Kaitaur News*, which is printed on Fridays, has a circulation of 30,000, while that of the weekly *Catholic Standard* is 3,000.

The print media also carried advertisements from the Elections Commission explaining the voting process. Both the government and the opposition parties alleged that the print media was biased.

Radio and Television

Despite the increase in the number of television stations over the last few years, none of these is broadcast around the entire country. Most of the stations cover Georgetown and its environs, but



Party posters ... especially outside Georgetown every available space was plastered by posters depicting the parties' presidential candidates: here PPP/C posters adorn an earth mover (above), while PNC posters decorate the entrance to a restaurant (opposite)

the state-owned Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) records its 6 p.m. news bulletin and sends it to television stations in Linden and New Amsterdam, where it is rebroadcast the next morning. Most of the programming consists mainly of American entertainment programmes and the television stations do not carry much local news.

There are no private radio stations to compete with the state-owned GBC, which runs two stations. Although it has countrywide reach, due to the difficulties of terrain the remoter regions of the interior receive GBC sporadically and then only at night. The stations owned by the GBC are Radio Roraima on FM 101.1 and the Voice of Guyana on FM 760 and 560 AM, which has a nationwide reach. Although viewers were seen using battery-powered televisions in Region 5 the majority of people receive their news from the radio.

Access to the Media

The Elections Commission published a set of guidelines for the media and contesting political parties. These guidelines called on the media to be 'fair, balanced and as far as it is possible objective whether privately or publicly owned'. The Commission recommended that radio time should be allocated to political parties in parliament proportionate to the number of seats they had held, and that contesting political parties without parliamentary representation should also be given broadcast time. The presidential candidates were offered the opportunity to take part in a radio phone-in programme that offered the public the chance to telephone in and quiz them directly. Several parties took up this offer.

One presidential candidate, Mr C N Sharma, owned a television station, Channel 12, on which he offered his rivals the chance to have an interview broadcast. Channel 12 claimed that it had offered every political party 10 minutes per week of free airtime. The station broadcast nine interviews supplied to it by the PPP/C, but despite this it claimed that relations between it and this party were frayed. The editors of Channel 12 did not deny that they gave Mr Sharma a lot of airtime, but said that this was because he could not afford to buy time on other stations and therefore all his advertising was concentrated on this station. In order to encourage other parties



to advertise on their station Channel 12 reduced its advertising rates for political parties by almost 30 per cent during the election period.

The PPP/C alleged that the private media was very partial to the opposition, which in turn maintained that the state media favoured the PPP/C. Journalists from the state-owned broadcast and print media said that they were under pressure to highlight stories that portrayed the Government in a favourable light and to ignore opposition activities. One broadcast journalist recalled being called by the Minister of Information and questioned as to why a positive story about the opposition had been run. The allegations of bias by both government and opposition media were supported by a report made by the independent Electoral Assistance Bureau.

Adherence to Media Guidelines

The Elections Commission guidelines on paid political messages stipulated that all parties should have equal access to the broadcast time slots and schedule for broadcast media and that there should be similar equitable access, space and location for the print media. On the whole, these guidelines for paid political messages were followed; however the broadcast media did not always specify that some of the messages were paid political messages. Some parties had more funding than others and were therefore able to buy more space in the media. This led to further allegations from the smaller parties that the media was biased. However, Guyana Television (GTV) denied that it was partisan and stated that it adhered to the media guidelines.

GTV broadcast a disclaimer at the end of the longer political broadcasts stating that they were party political broadcasts. However, the station admitted that this disclaimer was not transmitted after every party political broadcast.

The Debates

The radio phone-in programmes, in which the public could question politicians directly, were very popular and attracted many listeners. Some of the political parties listened-in to what their rivals

were saying on these programmes and were quick to highlight what they thought were political errors and to rebut allegations. Many of the television channels broadcast interviews with the presidential candidates. The state-owned GTV turned over its regular weekly programme, *One on One*, to interviews with the presidential candidates of the parties contesting the elections. The PPP/C, PNC, GGG, AFG, GDP, JFAP and NIP candidates were interviewed on this programme.

Plans to televise a debate between the main presidential candidates fell through a couple of days before it was scheduled to be broadcast. There were numerous reasons cited by different parties as to why this eagerly anticipated debate was dropped. According to GTV, which was supposed to broadcast this debate, the Caribbean Broadcasting Union which was preparing the programme, was not able to produce it. The original programme was supposed to feature the PPP/C and PNC presidential candidates and a presidential candidate from one of the other eight political parties. However, the eight parties could not agree on which one of them would put forward a candidate to take part in the debate. Other reports in the Press alleged that one political party thought that the proposed moderator of the debate favoured one of the political parties scheduled to take part.

Intimidation and Violence

There were two separate incidents during which the leaders of the PPP/C and the PNC were stoned. Other minor scuffles were reported but the police were deployed at each rally and no major incidents of violence or intimidation were reported during the campaign.

The Electoral Assistance Bureau

The Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB) is a Guyanese NGO set up in 1991 with the main objective of 'assisting in the establishment, maintenance and preservation of democracy, in particular the establishment and maintenance of democratic elections.' The EAB is sponsored by 11 local organisations and associations. These are the Guyana Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Central Islamic Organisation of Guyana, the Guyana Central Arya Samaj, the Consumer Advisory Bureau, the Guyana Consumers Association, the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union, the Private Sector Commission, the Guyana Bar Association and the Guyana Medical Association. The EAB is funded and assisted by various national and international donors including United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the National Democratic Institute.

The EAB had been monitoring the media in Guyana, had conducted surveys and produced reports. The surveys stated, in summary, that the government media favours the government while some private media is partisan towards the opposition.