

# Chapter 1

## Political Background

### Background

Guyana has a rich and colourful political history dominated from the period before independence by two of its equally colourful political leaders, Dr Cheddi Jagan and Mr Forbes Burnham, both former Presidents and both now deceased. The first major popular political organisations in Guyana, of which both former Presidents were founding fathers, were established in 1946 but combined in 1950 to form the People's Progressive Party (PPP) under the leadership of Dr Jagan, to press for independence from Britain.

In 1955, a serious split in the PPP led to the formation of the People's National Congress (PNC) under the leadership of Mr Burnham. However, the PPP dominated most of the politics of the era prior to independence in 1966. With the emergence of other political parties the PPP lost its pre-eminence. This occurred, first, because the PNC was able to form a coalition with The United Force (TUF) to oust the PPP from power and to form a government under Mr Burnham (who subsequently led the country to independence) and, second, because the PNC under the leadership of Mr Burnham was able to consolidate itself in power.

Prior to the December 1997 elections there had been five elections since independence. The first four had been won by the PNC, while the 1992 elections saw the PPP, which now included a civic element (hence the name PPP/Civic), returned to power with Dr Jagan as President. The Commonwealth Observer Group, as well as observers from the Carter Center (the other major international observer group to observe the 1992 elections), declared itself satisfied that the voters had had the opportunity to freely vote for the political party of their choice and that the results reflected the genuine will of the Guyanese people. Following his death in March 1997, Dr Jagan was succeeded as President by the then Prime Minister, Samuel Hinds.

Before the December 1997 elections, we met and had intense and wide-ranging discussions with seven of the political parties contesting the elections. We gained the general impression from our discussions that the campaign was being conducted in an atmosphere of relative calm, but not lacking in the competitive spirit that is usually characteristic of any truly democratic state. A question that was regularly raised in public discussions was how the political atmosphere and temperature at these elections compared with those that prevailed at the time of the 1992 elections. Fears that there would be violence were unfortunately realised after polling day.

One matter that dominated the political debate in the period immediately leading up to the elections was the issue of the Voter Identification Cards which, by law, were the only means of identification for voters wishing to exercise their franchise. Most political parties expressed concern about several aspects of the issue. These included the slow rate of the production and distribution of the cards and, in some cases, there were allegations that this was either deliberate or selective in order to disadvantage certain political parties.

There was even the suggestion that the introduction of the Voter Identification Card was an unnecessary and expensive exercise, especially as it would only be used to identify voters at the polling station. There was particular concern that voters who had not received their Voter Identification Cards before polling day would be disenfranchised. And there were fears about the likely consequences if significant numbers of voters who had not received their cards before election day turned up at a polling station and demanded to vote.

We were therefore impressed by the constructive role played by political leaders and others who made public statements up to the eve of the elections urging their supporters to cast their votes peacefully and to remain calm.

During our discussions with the political parties, we were impressed, not surprisingly, by their confidence and determination to win the elections and to form the next government, aided by the prevailing system of proportional representation which determines the political composition of the National Assembly. Under this system, there are no single-member constituencies but instead the whole of the country forms one constituency. Voters cast their votes throughout the country in favour of any one of the lists of candidates submitted by the political parties wishing to contest the elections and accepted by the Elections Commission. Each voter can cast two votes – one vote in respect of the General List and one in respect of the Regional List. Seats in the National Assembly are then allocated among the political parties in proportion to the number of votes cast in favour of their list.

Although it was not possible for us to observe the nomination process, we ascertained on our arrival in Georgetown that at the close of nominations on 5 November 1997 the lists of candidates of only 10 of the political parties, out of the 12 submitted to the Chief Election Officer, were approved and accepted by the Elections Commission as having fulfilled the requirements of the electoral law, and that the process was completed entirely without any controversy.

### The Political Parties

While it did not form part of our mandate to assess the electoral prospects of each of the political parties which contested the elections, we believe it would be appropriate and useful to include in our Report a brief profile of the parties and highlights of their manifestos, in the belief that this will illustrate the range of the differing visions offered to the voters. In spite of the fears that voting would be along racial lines, the formal appeals to the electorate by many of the parties were based on issues rather than on personalities.

**Alliance For Guyana (AFG)** *Presidential candidate: Dr Rupert Roopnaraine (party symbol – the bell; party motto – ‘Guyana for Guyanese’)*. The Alliance is a coalition of three separate groups – the Working People’s Alliance (WPA), which held one seat in the last parliament, the Guyana Labour Party (GLP) and independent citizens. It stated in its manifesto that its mission in these elections would be to seek the formal permission of the electorate as a whole to represent it at the governmental level. It proposed legislation to make the manifesto legally binding on the government and highlighted, among other things: reconstruction and human resource development; education; youth opportunity; addressing the causes of crime; and open government. The Alliance contested all 10 regions for both the national and regional seats.

**A Good and Green Guyana (GGG)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Hamilton Green (party symbol – front-end loader; party motto – ‘Moral & Spiritual Revival’)*. Mr Green was Prime Minister at the time of the 1992 elections, soon after which he left the PNC and formed the GGG. In the 1994 local elections the GGG secured the highest number of votes in Region 4 and Mr Green became the Mayor of Georgetown. Among other things, the party highlighted: protection of the environment; free and quality education and health services for all; housing for the poor; development of financial and human resources; encouragement of local business and industries; reducing the gap between the rich and the poor; and increased pensions for senior citizens. It contested all 10 regions for both the national and regional seats.

**God Bless Guyana (GBG)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Hardat Persaud (party symbol – dove; party motto – ‘Exalt Righteousness and Honesty’)*. The party leader and presidential candidate revealed that it was the voice of God that drove him into politics. His central message had an underlying evangelical slant: by being President he would drive out the “nest of demons” in Parliament. Nevertheless, he promised, among other things: full development of gold, timber, agricultural and the other resources of the country; free education and health facilities; and better housing and electricity. The GBG did not contest any of the regional seats.

**Guyana Democratic Party (GDP)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Asgar Ally (party symbol – house; party motto – ‘Organisation and Management’)*. The party was formed in 1997. Its leader and presidential candidate was Finance Minister in the 1992-97 PPP government. In launching the party manifesto he said it was his party’s contract with the people. His was a capitalist party which would give entrepreneurs the confidence to invest in Guyana. The party planned to make education its top priority but also said that central to its vision for Guyana would be infrastructure development to encourage investment flows into, among other things, manufacturing, natural resources, tourism and agriculture. The GDP did not contest the regional seats in Region 8.

**Justice For All Party (JFAP)** *Presidential candidate: Mr C N Sharma (party symbol – scale; party motto – ‘Vote For a Change Not For Race’)*. The leader and presidential candidate claimed to speak for the disinherited poor and was the owner of a television channel which he used to highlight the plight of the poor and to campaign against injustice. He promised, among other things: lowering the cost of living; free trade with Guyana’s Latin American neighbours and CARICOM; land rights to Amerindians; protection and care for the disadvantaged such as pensioners, street children and women; and the resolution of the ethnic problem. The only region in which the JFAP contested for the regional seats was Region 4.

**National Democratic Front (NDF)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Joseph Bacchus (party symbol – factory; party motto – ‘A Better Way of Life’)*. The party has had a long history under the same leader without much recent electoral support. Among other things, it promised a free enterprise market system; free education from kindergarten to high school and better pay for teachers; priority for low-cost housing for low-income earners; the creation of a welfare state and fostering racial unity. The NDF participated in the contest for regional seats only in Region 10.

**National Independent Party (NIP)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Saphier Husain (party symbol – jagged concentric circles; party motto – ‘Illumination, Modernisation, Unity’)*. The leader and presidential candidate was a lawyer who had been active on various constitutional issues and in his party’s manifesto promised, among other things, a new constitution; amnesty to squatters and title to land; and greater involvement for young people in his administration. The NIP did not contest any of the regional seats.

**People’s National Congress (PNC)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Hugh Desmond Hoyte (party symbol – palm tree; party motto – ‘Making A Difference’)*. With the exception of the five years of the last parliament the PNC had been the ruling party since independence, losing the elections of 1992 to its main rival, the PPP. In launching its manifesto on 8 December 1997 the PNC sought to emphasise its commitment to confronting and combating corruption; challenging drug trafficking, money laundering and violent crime; and improvement of the justice system. It also highlighted a number of priorities, among these: development of the education system; improvement of the standard of living; social justice to protect the poor and disadvantaged; the encouragement of private initiative; and honest, decent, competent and efficient government. The PNC contested both the national and regional seats in all 10 regions.

**People’s Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C)** *Presidential candidate: Mrs Janet Jagan (party symbol – cup; party motto – ‘Continued Progress in the 21st Century’)*. The PPP was the dominant political force in Guyana and held the reins of government from the introduction of universal suffrage in 1953 until it lost power in 1964 to the combined forces of the PNC and The United Force. It remained out of office for the next 28 years until it regained power at the 1992 elections under the leadership of its co-founder, the late Dr Cheddi Jagan. At the 1992 elections the PPP introduced a civic element in its slate in order to broaden its electoral appeal, a practice that it has maintained. Throughout the campaign and in launching its manifesto the PPP/C sought to underline its achievement in office. It emphasised a balanced economic and social development; social stability

and harmonious inter-ethnic relations; a heightened democratic involvement at all levels; and the eradication of poverty. The PPP/C contested both the national and regional seats in all 10 regions.

**The United Force (TUF)** *Presidential candidate: Mr Manzoor Nadir (party symbol – sun; party motto – ‘Meaningful Change’)*. TUF was founded in 1961 and played a critical role in the early political development of Guyana. In the 1964 elections it won seven seats, which led it into government in a coalition partnership with the PNC. Its political fortunes declined in the subsequent years, but it won one seat at the 1992 elections. In its manifesto it highlighted, among other things: strengthening community ties and people investment; creation and implementation of innovative solutions to unemployment and crime; sound financial management; better health care and basic services. TUF contested both national and regional seats in all 10 regions.

### **Inter-Party Relationships**

During the period immediately prior to the elections, contact between the political parties, while not openly hostile, was not as accommodating as it might have been. Although we understood that the existence of an Inter-Party Committee on Electoral Reform had helped, to an extent, to take some heat out of the situation, a number of the opposition political parties had complained that they had been denied fair media treatment and access to vital information relating to the elections. Since membership of the committee had been restricted to the four political parties that were represented in the last parliament it appeared to have generated a feeling of exclusion among the other parties. That also seemed to have been the case with regard to the work of the Elections Commission, in which only the four parties that had won seats in the last parliament were represented. However, the Commission was generally acknowledged by most political parties to have done a commendable job in the run-up to the elections, a view that we share.