

CHALLENGE OF BRITISH GUIANA

By Dr. Cheddi Jagan [October 1953]

Overseas British naval and military forces have occupied British Guiana. The constitution, only a few months old, has been suspended. My colleague ministers and myself have been dismissed. The House at Assembly in which my party, the People's Progressive Party held 18 out of the 24 seats after the first election on April 27, based on universal adult suffrage, was prorogued. Meetings have been banned. Not more than five persons can assemble together. Party headquarters and homes of leading party officials have been raided. The Governor is a virtual dictator.

All these extraordinary measures, claims the British Government, have been taken because of a communist plot to cause disorder and overthrow the Government. No clear-cut proof was given of the alleged plot. Instead, a spurious statement, full of misstatements and suppositions, has been put out.

The alleged communist plot is obviously a smokescreen. It is an excuse for destroying the progressive movement and the limited constitution under which we made important political gains. If there is a plot why haven't charges been brought against us? The British definition of treason and sedition is elastic enough. Clearly there has been no plot. Even the most bitter and consistent enemy of the PPP, the editor of the *Daily Argosy*, a wartime security officer, knows "of no organised plan for such a revolt." He said in an editorial on October 11: "What the PPP leaders were aiming at (and all the evidence points that way) was a political and constitutional crisis, in the hope of going back to the country and returning with a renewed mandate that might, with difficulty, be questioned."

Long before the elections we criticised the constitution and pointed out its limitations. The Governor and his official advisers knew that we intended to enact a series of progressive but very controversial measures — universal adult suffrage for village and town councils; land law, bringing about land reform and establishing land authorities with powers to tax, acquire, lease and develop large estates held uncultivated by absentee proprietors; abolition of dual control (government and denominational) of primary schools; bulk purchasing of the Colony's imports; establishment of a State Lottery; compulsory recognition by employers of unions having the support of the majority of workers, as established by the US Wagner Act during the Roosevelt era; etc.

The Governor and officials knew, as we did, that in due course the Governor and the Governor-nominated Upper House — the State Council — would become exposed in the eyes of the people. The reactionary State Council would have blocked most of the measures as it had already done in the case of the Rice Farmers (Security of Tenure) Amendment Bill. This Bill empowered the Government District Commissioner to undertake works (cleaning and digging of drains and canals) which landlords were supposed to do by law but had refused to do. The Governor's veto would have been used soon enough. It is to forestall these exposures that the Government acted with so much haste and with so much brute force.

Communism has been made the issue by the British Government. But this is nothing new. There is no more evidence of communism now than prior to the elections. Long before and during the election anti-communism was the only plank of our opponents. With one voice from the pulpit, press and radio they said that the PPP was a communist party, that communism was bent upon taking away and destroying the rights of the people. The people voted with their eyes wide open. They voted us into 18 out of the 24 seats.

The action of the British Government, therefore, is in effect a challenge to the very right of the exercise of a free vote — the basis of democracy. The PPP is a broad democratic alliance of all classes struggling for the right to self-determination. Must the people be told — yes you can vote, but you have no right to vote for a left-wing party or the left-wing element in a party? This is the fundamental question which all democratic freedom-loving people must ask themselves. Once the right to vote is restricted then the foundation of democracy will always be on shifting ground. Neither communism nor the PPP is on trial today. Democracy itself is on trial. Western democracy will stand or fall to the extent that it faces up to the challenge that it faces up to the challenge that is British Guiana's. All liberal-minded people must accept this challenge and rally to the support of the progressive movement in British Guiana and for the preservation of democracy and civilisation.

[**Editor's note:** This article was written in mid-October 1953.]