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Virtual Army Coup in Guyana

by Cheddi Jagan

At the recently-concluded general election, the People's National Congress (PNC) was given for the 53-member National Assembly 37 seats, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) 14 and the Liberator Party 2.

But this allocation was not a reflection of the will of the people. For what took place on July 16 was not an election, but a "selection". The PNC, with the help of the army, seized and impounded ballot boxes at army head-quarters in Georgetown, the capital, where they were tampered with.

To facilitate the tampering with ballot boxes, the PNC regime changed the electoral procedure. Prior to 1968, ballot boxes were taken to a central counting place in each constituency or electoral district. In 1968, they were transported over long distances to 3 centres only, one in each county. In 1973, ~~the~~ days before polling day, the law was changed, and all ballot boxes were brought to Georgetown, the capital, to Thomas Lands, where ~~the~~ Army and Police Headquarters are located.

In 1968, polling agents and candidates of opposition parties were not permitted either to travel in the same vehicle with the boxes or to follow with other vehicles the vehicle with the boxes. With ~~the~~ electoral machinery completely under the control of the PNC, ballot boxes were tampered with. In one box for the Pomeroon electoral district were found four wads of ballot papers, marked PNC and wrapped with rubber bands.

Because of the extensive fraud of the 1968 general election, the PPP mounted a campaign for electoral reforms including:-

- 1) An impartial Elections Commission
- 2) New voters lists impartially compiled.
- 3) An end to proxy voting
- 4) An end to overseas voting
- 5) A preliminary count of ballots at place of poll.
- 6) Reduction of voting age from 21 to 18.

The PNC regime refused to accept these reforms, except voting at 18. The latter was agreed to only on May 26, 1973, after the regime had corruptly compiled a new register and was assured that it had a majority of those between the ages 18 and 21. Because of this, the PPP was ~~forced to~~ vote against a Constitutional amendment for the lowering of the voting age to 18.

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Padding of Lists

Padding of the voters' lists has become a regular feature of political life under the Burnham regime. In the 1968 election, the lists represented a 19 per cent increase for the 4-year period, 1964-68 as compared with a 22 per cent increase for the 11-year period, 1953-64.

For the July 1973 election, the lists increased by 25 per cent an impossible feat considering a net population increase of about 2.5 per cent per year.

From official figures, ^{the number of} all Guyanese age 21 and above was 314,564 on April 7, 1973. Yet the voters lists as of May 31, 1973, had 384,434 names (not including 34,801 registered overseas voters). In other words, about 70,000 represented dead, underage and non-existent persons. These voted by means of the postal (first introduced in 1973) and proxy system of voting.

For the PNC stronghold, the Linden-Wismar-Christianburg area, the voters lists increased from 18,117 in 1968 to 24,968 in 1973. But the total population of the area in 1973, as estimated for a water survey by the US Company, James S. Montgomery, Consulting Engineers Inc. was 31,637. This means that about 79% of the population was adults over age 21!

and Postal Proxy Voting

Prior to and during the 1961 general election, proxy voting was severely restricted. But in 1969, against the strong opposition of the PPP, there was some relaxation, and proxy votes jumped from about 300 in 1961, to 6,635 in 1964, of which the PPP secured only 9.6 per cent. A critical comment from the Commonwealth Teams of Observers of the 1964 Election was that the "one administrative provision which seemed open to manipulation was the proxy vote...we feel it is our duty to point out that the proxy system is liable to abuse."

And abuse there was. In 1969, because of further relaxation, proxy votes cast were estimated at about 30,000 (the lists of proxy votes were never published as required by law). But the official figure was 19,287, equivalent to about 7 per cent of the votes cast, without which the PNC would not have "won" 51 per cent of votes or a majority of one seat inside Guyana (overseas votes gave it a working majority of 7 seats.) Because of criticisms, of malpractices and other factors, the PNC regime restricted proxy voting in 1973 but permitted all those debarred the facility of postal voting.

Thus, ^{in 1973} there were about 10,000 proxy votes and about 23,000 postal votes almost all of which went to the PNC on account of administrative manipulation and irregularities.

For instance, in South Georgetown, a certificate in the postal ballot box showed that 846 postal ballots were issued and 546 were cast. Yet when the ballots were counted, there were 680 votes, and despite protests, the 134 extra ballots were recorded for the PNC.

Overseas Votes

As regards the overseas voting, first introduced in 1968, the PNC secured in the recent elections 98 per cent of the votes cast as compared with 95 per cent in 1968.

Commenting on the 1968 electoral fraud, Mr. Humphrey Taylor, Director of Opinion Research Centre, in the Granada T.V. expose, "The Making of a Prime Minister", said:

"Obviously I don't know what happened in Guyana, but as far as Britain is concerned, the compilation of the register was a totally dishonest and corrupt operation. And, as we have clearly established, the great majority of the people listed, do not exist. This I would think is unprecedented for a Commonwealth country, as far as I know; and it's you know, a pretty awful and disgraceful episode."

Granada's Research Editor, Gus Macdonald in the same film said:

"It is my firm conclusion that the election inside Guyana was neither free nor fair."

Now, in another film, Granada T.V. has again exposed the extensive electoral fraud which helped the PNC to remain in power.

Ballot Box Tampering

But the greatest fraud took place through the tampering with the ballot boxes. All the boxes, except those for Georgetown, were stored in the Lecture Room at Army Headquarters for long hours, even days, before they were taken to the 3 counting centres.

Here, keys could not fit locks; many boxes had to be broken into. Seals in the majority of boxes had been damaged.

The numbers of ballots cast did not tally with the numbers found in several boxes. In four boxes for the North-West electoral district were found 2 wads of ballot papers wrapped with elastic bands or held together with paper clips!

For the Mazaruni-Potaro district, parcels of ballots were found folded together not twice as required by law, but once.

Objection had been raised and recorded about the wrong official stamping a Canals Polder polling division of each ballot paper on the inside. When the box was opened, all the ballots were stamped on the outside, as required by law, and marked for the PNC!

Nothing but fraud and tampering with ballot boxes could explain the massive voter turnout of 93.4 and 98.6 per cent respectively for the Northwest and the Mazaruni-Potaro districts. These are sparsely-populated but extensive areas with long distances between polling stations.

By contrast, in the compact 8 districts in Georgetown, the voter turnout averaged about 70 per cent. And in 4 of these districts, the PNC votes dropped absolutely. But in the Northwest district, PNC votes increased from 6,789 in 1968 to 13,090 in 1973, and in Mazaruni-Potaro from 9,701 to 15,974!

The PNC claims that its "victory" of 37 seats was the result of serious inroads into PPP strongholds. This is mere propaganda. My personal estimate is that the PPP true strength is about 60 per cent of the electorate. That is why the PNC regime vigorously opposed the post-election proposal of the PPP to conduct at its own expense impartially-supervised polls in one or more of the several electoral districts claimed to have been won by the PNC.

New Stage

A new stage has now been reached in the struggle for national liberation and socialism in Guyana. The people, through their own bitter experience, have come to realize that they cannot win political power so long as the PNC is in complete control of the electoral machinery, the police and army.

In 1964, the PNC with only 40 per cent of the votes came to power in coalition with the United Force (UF) through the support of Anglo-American imperialism and ^{a change} from the first-past-the-post, constituency voting system to proportional representation.

In 1968, the PNC "won" power without the UF through electoral fraud and overseas voting. In 1973, fraud alone could not suffice; the army actively intervened and even shot and teargassed the electorate to ensure a PNC victory.

The PF has refused to take the 14 seats assigned to it on the grounds that the National Assembly does not reflect the will of the people, and has been reduced to a farce as a mere rubber stamp for the regime's edicts. Instead, it has embarked on a campaign of civil resistance and non-cooperation.

In the coming months, mass struggles on all fronts will be intensified against the minority, racist, neo-fascist regime as it draws closer to imperialism, and accentuates its policy of corruption and bribery for the benefit of the ruling elite.