

Straight Talk by Dr. Cheddi Jagan.

AN ELECTORAL FARCE (3)

"We can, we must, we will." This was the slogan with which the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) took 79% of the votes, in what were purported to be elections on December 9.

Like Hitler's National Socialist Party which started out its murderous career as a minority party, the PNC polled 41 per cent of the votes in the 1964 elections. Since then, through massive fraud, at what are now called selections, the ruling party has taken a greater percentage of votes at each successive election -- 56% in 1968; 70% in 1973; 78% in 1980.

With a severe economic and social crisis, declining living standards, deteriorating social services, shortages of basic essentials of life like flour, soap, edible oil, salt, etc., and exorbitant blackmarket prices, the ruling party could not have got in 1985 even the 21% of the votes it gave the opposition parties. Its real support is around half the amount allocated to the opposition.

TURNOUT

The low turnout of voters in the capital Georgetown, one of its former strongholds, is an indication of PNC weakness. Over the years, there has been a steady and precipitous decline -- 90-95% in 1964; 60-65% in 1973; 12-15% in 1978.

In the 1978 referendum, there was a united boycott by all opposition parties and other civic groups. A monitoring of polling stations showed a voter turnout of only about 15%.

Since then, the quality of life has deteriorated further. This deterioration was reflected in the loss of PNC control of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 1984, and the TUC non-endorsement of the PNC in 1985, the first time in 21 years.

This low turnout in former PNC strongholds, and in contrast high turnout in traditional PNC strongholds, caused the PNC to *PPP adopt an electoral strategy embracing:

1. no international observers;
2. total control of the electoral machinery;
3. ejection of polling agents and the stuffing of ballot boxes;
4. military seizure of, and tampering with, ballot boxes.

OBSERVERS

A Commonwealth Team had observed the 1964 elections. ^{an} And/opportunity was provided in the 1964 electoral regulations for the Team to visit polling stations.

After the fraudulent 1968 elections, an attempt was made in 1973 by the Civil Liberties Action Committee to get an United Nations observer team. The government was strongly opposed, with Prime Minister Burnham retorting: the United Nations had no vote in Guyana!

In 1980, an Observer Team, headed by British liberal peer, Lord Avebury, was permitted entry. But serious obstacles were put in its way. Its unanimous view on the conduct of the election was summarised as follows:

- "1. We found a relatively high turnout of voters in some areas such as Corentyne, Cummings, Lodge, Better Hope and Enmore, and a relatively low turnout in others such as Georgetown, New Amsterdam and Linden.

2. We collected considerable evidence that voters in many instances were intimidated and physically prevented from voting for opposition parties.
3. The staff of the whole polling process appeared to be supporters of the PNC.
4. We have massive evidence that large numbers of eligible voters were denied their right to vote...
These abuses were primarily directed against supporters of the opposition parties.
5. Evidence was supplied to us of double registration.
6. Ballot boxes arrived late at many stations...
7. In some areas there were many polling stations adjacent to, or very near, PNC offices. Some polling stations were in the private residences of PNC activists and candidates. Some were in police stations, one at least with an armed guard at a locked gate.
8. The military presence in some areas was intimidating. The boxes were collected by military personnel who prevented accredited officials of the opposition, sometimes by force or the threat of force, from accompanying or following the boxes. Military personnel refused accredited representatives of opposition parties access to the count at gunpoint in some cases.
9. The forcible expulsion of the opposition's agents from all the places where ballot boxes were held, and the delay of at least fifteen hours in the announcing of first returns of the count undermines the credibility of this process."

FRAUD

The Avebury team's concluded that the 1980 election had been "rigged massively and flagrantly", and was "an example of the way an individual's determination to cling to power at all costs can poison the springs of democracy".

The ruling PNC did not want a repetition of the 1980 verdict by independent observers. It wanted to perpetuate its hoary contention that the opposition parties were poor losers. As its campaign manager Robert Corbin put it: "Jagan's action is all part of the PPP's campaign to find excuses for losing".

Consequently, permission to enter Guyana was denied to a team composed of the International Commission of Jurists, the Americas Watch and the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group: it wanted to review the electoral laws and regulations and thus to identify those which had eroded the powers of the Elections Commission.

The International Association of Democratic Lawyers was prepared to send a team through its North American affiliates, the National Lawyers Guild and the National Conference of Black Lawyers of the United States. But visas were refused.

The Caribbean Council of Churches, was also shut out. Its Secretary General was vilified. And it was stigmatised under the broad category as "foreign meddlers".

ABSURDITY

The PNC's excuse for the exclusion of foreign observers was "non-interference in domestic affairs". The real reason was the morbid fear of an expose by independent observers of its hypocritical pronouncements and fraudulent electoral practices.

The "overwhelming victory" of 228,718 votes out of a total of 291,175 votes cast at the election, deemed by President Hoyte as "free, fair and above board" was a statistical absurdity.