

NEW CONSTITUTION ENTRENCHES BURNHAM'S PERSONAL DICTATORSHIP

by Cheddi Jagan

The Burnham regime steam-rollered through the National Assembly a new Guyana Constitution which will be promulgated by the President not later than October 6, 1980.

During the debate on the draft of the new Constitution, it was made clear that Parliament was being asked to approve a "bogus document" which was the handiwork of political confidence tricksters.

Once again, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) has proved to be correct. What it said in 1978 during the rigged referendum came to pass. Then, it had warned that the Referendum and Constitution gimmicks were -

- (a) a ruse to postpone fresh elections which were due since October 1978, and have not yet been held;
- (b) a means to give more power to the ruling People's National Congress (PNC); and
- (c) a device not to confer, but to take away rights enjoyed by the people. About 85-90% of the voters had demonstrated how they felt on this issue by boycotting the Referendum.

The proposed new Constitution is worse than the former 1966 Independence Constitution. In the past, the PNC violated the letter and spirit of the Constitution by bureaucratic-administrative and police-military methods. Now, it has given those same methods constitutional and legal validity.

In keeping with the known opportunism and demagogy of the PNC leadership, the new document has been described as "socialist". Article I states that Guyana is a state in transition from capitalism to socialism. This is absurd! "Transition from capitalism to socialism" implies a "dictatorship of the proletariat". What exists in Guyana is a virtual dictatorship of the reactionary petty-bourgeoisie. Actually, even the pre-conditions -- economic, social, cultural, technological, ideological and political -- to the transition have not been firmly laid.

New restrictions have been placed on the right to form and belong to political parties which in future, must respect the "principles of national sovereignty and of democracy". This is ominous as the PNC regime is preparing for further assaults on fundamental rights; it has been claiming that opposition parties are irresponsible and "counter-revolutionary". The PNC will be doubly armed against its political opponents with the Law and the Club (armed thugs of the House of Israel and the PNC who smash up opposition public meetings, and hired assassins among whose victims are, so far, two political activists and a Jesuit priest-photographer).

The new Constitution provides that a law may be made for ensuring "fairness and balance in the dissemination of information" to the public. This is obviously a prescription for banning publications which attack the ruling party or government, or at least to prevent the publication of views hostile to the PNC. The denial by government of newsprint

supplies since August last year has ensured the cessation of publication on a daily basis of the *Mirror* newspaper which reflects the views of the PPP. The *Mirror* has been reduced from a 4-page daily and 16-page Sunday paper to a once weekly 4-page edition, printed on expensive bond paper with drastically reduced circulation. It was the only non-governmental daily newspaper.

Laws may also be made to provide for the making of compulsory contributions by workers to trade unions, even if they are not members. This is highly offensive in the context of lack of trade union democracy and fraud in union elections.

Parliamentary democracy, already gravely restricted by the PNC regime, has been further eroded by provisions of the new Constitution relating to the Chief Executive, to be styled the President. He will be the Head of State, the Supreme Executive Authority, and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The President will assume more powers than the existing Prime Minister, and even more powers than the US President. Now, laws are made by the Cabinet and the Parliament; in future, the President can veto any Bill passed in Parliament by a majority. This means the emasculation of the parliament.

On the promulgation of the Constitution, Prime Minister L.F.S. Burnham will assume the post of President as if he "had been elected thereto", pending fresh elections. The President can do no wrong, as no court action can be taken against him for any civil or criminal acts either during his term or thereafter. Under the new Constitution, if the Guyana President is faced with impeachment, he needs not resign as President Richard Nixon was forced to do; under the new Guyana Constitution, the President can dissolve the Parliament. This is a prescription for personal dictatorship.

To make easier its return to power (this is fully guaranteed by rigged elections), the PNC has changed the composition of Parliament. It will now comprise not only 53 elected members, but also 12 nominated members from the local government system. Ten of the twelve will come from "gerrymandered" (manipulated) regions and two from a PNC-controlled body. This is a virtual return to the colonial days when the British Governor nominated members.

The PPP has mounted a campaign in opposition to the new Constitution which holds no solution for the problems of the Guyanese people. Free and fair elections are the main demand. The nation faces a creeping dictatorship. What Guyana needs is a political solution which will unite the people and inspire them in the task of nation building.

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