

Guyana Focus

Many firsts for hard-working Mrs. Jagan

From all indications, Mrs. Janet Jagan, presently Prime Minister of Guyana, is set to become the world's first female President. Guyana's general elections are scheduled to be held on December 15.

Mrs. Jagan was appointed Prime Minister of Guyana following the death of her husband, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, then President of Guyana, last March 6.

When she became Guyana's first woman Prime Minister on March 17, 1997, she joined the ranks of a select group of women who rose to the height of power in modern day politics.

Among them are Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi of India, Golda Meir of Israel, Margaret Thatcher of Britain, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Kim Campbell of Canada and Eugenia Charles of Dominica.

Although Mrs. Jagan's political career started more than 50 years ago, when she became a founding member of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) in 1946, together with the late Dr. Jagan, Ashton Chase and Jocelyn Hubbard, she remained largely in the shadow of her husband, preferring to focus on organisational and administrative tasks.

In the words of her late husband, "she would much sooner be left alone to make her contributions in the background," while he enjoyed the limelight.

However, Mrs. Jagan's background role was none the less important than that of Dr. Jagan, as she stayed by his side throughout his struggles with the People's Progressive Party for the Guyanese people.

In accepting her appointment as Prime Minister, she said, "my greatest regret at his death, aside from the loss of my companion of over half a century... is that he was not given the time to complete his plans to fulfill his dreams."

She added: "I saw that there was a need at this particular time to carry the torch. All of us will carry the torch he lit so many years ago."

Her choice to take the reins of leadership was based on what her supporters asked her to do, she said. "I have always listened to the voice of the people, and this was one consideration in arriving at the decision to accept the position."

Mrs. Jagan was born on October 20, 1920 in Chicago, Illinois.

She married Dr. Jagan on August 5, 1943 in the US. They have two children, Cheddi Jr. (Joey) and Nadira.

As a member of the PAC, which was the forerunner of the PPP, she edited the PAC *Bulletin* which was transformed into the *Thunder* in 1950.

She was the first editor of the *Thunder*, which is still in existence today.

The Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO) was also formed in the same year that the PAC was established, with Mrs. Jagan being a founding member and general secretary. This organisation is today known as the Women's Progressive Organization and Mrs. Jagan is its President.

At age of 27, she was persuaded to run as an independent in 1947 general elections, based on her influence in Georgetown and her work as organising secretary of the British Guiana Clerks Union.

Although she did not win a seat then, mainly because of conditionalities attached to the eligibility of voters, she was not dissuaded, and was successful in becoming the first woman to be elected to the Georgetown City Council in 1950.

Three years later in 1953, Mrs. Jagan was one of three

women to enter the House of Assembly, elected as a representative of the Essequibo constituency.

She also became the first female Deputy Speaker of Guyana in the same year.

After the constitution was suspended in 1953 and the PPP was removed from office as a result of machinations of the British colonials, Mrs. Jagan was imprisoned for six months in 1955 for her political activities.

When she was released from prison, her movements were confined to Georgetown and she was required to report to the police each week.

The 1957 general elections resulted in another victory for the PPP, with Mrs. Jagan being re-elected to the legislature by the Essequibo constituency. She became Minister of Labour, Health and Housing. She was not offered a ministerial position when the PPP won the 1961 elections, but was appointed Minister of Home Affairs in 1963 on the death of Minister Claude Christian. She resigned this post in 1964.

During the 1964-1992 period when the PPP was in the opposition as a result of consistently rigged elections, Mrs. Jagan remained active in politics and continuously served as an opposition Member of Parliament.

In 1967 she was a member of the Elections Commission, just prior to the first rigged Guyanese elections engineered by the late despot, Forbes Burnham.

When the PPP/Civic obtained power in 1992, following Guyana's first fair elections in 28 years, Mrs. Jagan was re-elected a Member of Parliament and was designated First Lady.

She was also the PPP's General Secretary for 20 years, from 1950-1970. She became editor of the *Mirror* newspaper in 1973, and held that position until recently.

She is presently a member of the PPP Central Committee and Executive Committee and has also served as International Secretary and Executive Secretary.

She has also been President of the Union of Guyanese Journalist since 1970.

In 1993, Mrs. Jagan performed the role of Guyana's Ambassador to the United Nations for a three-month period, filling in for Rudy Insanally, who was serving a term as President of the United Nation's General Assembly.

Mrs. Jagan is a prolific writer, and has authored many articles, pamphlets, and other publications. Her children's book, *When Grandpa Cheddi Was A Boy* has been quite popular.

Recently, Mrs. Jagan was Chairperson of the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, and is also Head of the Management Committee of Castellani House, Guyana's main art gallery.

Her outstanding service to Guyana spans more than five decades. Few Guyanese can match her contribution to the Guyanese people. For that she has received the country's highest honour, the Order of Excellence.

Last August, she added another achievement to her long list, when she was presented with the UNESCO Gandhi Gold Medal for Peace, Democracy and the Promotion of Women's Rights. She became the first woman and Caribbean citizen to receive this prestigious award.

Mrs. Jagan has had a lot of firsts in her lifetime. As Guyana heads into general elections on December 15, it is evident that she is well on the way to notching up what could yet be another first — the world's first female President.



Dwarka Lakhan



Janet Jagan