

A Piece of Guyana's History - 1953-1955

by Janet Jagan

In 1983, I wrote the following article published in Thunder marking the 30th Anniversary of the suspension of the constitution in 1953 and the arrival of British troops which invaded and took control of British Guiana after removing the democratically elected government of the PPP led by Cheddi Jagan.

The year 1953 was one of great historical importance to all Guyanese. It was the year of the first Guyanese people's victory of this century, when, organised and led by the newly-formed People's Progressive Party, a resounding success was obtained at the first elections ever held under universal adult suffrage. Led by the PPP, the people's demands for self government had been partly won with Guyana (then British Guiana) having one of the most advanced constitutions in the British Empire.

For 4 1/2 months, exactly 133 days, the PPP in office fought for and won some significant changes for the people. The subversive literature law (introduced in the previous parliament by Lionel Luckhoo) was repealed; the first steps for the removal of church control of the schools were made; and a battle was waged over the right of workers to be represented by the union of their choice by way of a poll. (Those were the days when MPCA was foisted on the sugar workers who were denied the right to join a trade union of their choice). It was on this issue, as well as others considered by the British to be controversial, that the British government made the decision to remove the PPP from office and suspend the Constitution.

The reasons given for this drastic decision were so ridiculous that the Churchill government had a hard time making convincing charges. The government White Paper on the suspension of the British Guiana Constitution alleged that there was a fire plot hatched by the PPP to burn down the City of Georgetown! But those were the cold war days and even the slightest tint of 'red' sent the Anglo-American imperialists into a frenzy. In the same year, 1953, in June, the Mossadegh government which had nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, was overthrown by the CIA in Iran and one year later, the progressive government of President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala was to suffer the same fate.

British warships landed in Georgetown harbour, despatching marines and other troops on that troubled day in October 1953. This was the beginning of a period of martial law, of curfews, restrictions on the movements of certain leading members of the PPP, the curtailment of most civil liberties, detention, searches and imprisonment.

The PPP decided to vigorously resist the measures and after opposition from the opportunistic faction in the Executive Committee was out-voted, it was agreed that PPP leader Cheddi Jagan would break the restriction orders on him (restricting him to the boundaries of the City of Georgetown). This he did and was arrested, brought back to Georgetown, held at Brickdam Police Station, put on trial and sent to prison. At Brickdam Police Station, a large protest demonstration took place in which a number of leading members of the party was arrested.

From then on there were many acts of defiance of the unjust restrictions placed on the people by the British authorities. The intension of the Colonial Power was to, once and for all, destroy the PPP and terrify and intimidate the awakened people. It must not be forgotten that the Party was formed on the principles of fighting for the full independence of British Guiana and then the building of a socialist society. This would mean, of course, the end of British plunder of the wealth of the territory.

When Cheddi Jagan went to prison in 1954, it heightened the anti-colonial struggle, sparked off the people's resistance and focused world attention on the violations by Britain against our country. It was the first time in Guyana that the jail held a political prisoner since the days of Rev. John Smith, over a century before.

Cheddi Jagan's days in prison were very full ones and reflect on his complete commitment to the cause he represented and his thirst for more and more knowledge and understanding, as well as his unrelenting drive to develop the people's consciousness and lead them into struggle.

In his book *The West On Trial*, he said: "Prison life was for me a new experience, a novel and welcome one in some respects. It gave me opportunity for real leisure and rest. Apart from scrubbing floors, I developed a hobby in carpentry... What I enjoyed most was the luxury of almost limitless time for reading and writing. Novels, which I had never had much time to read, constituted the bulk of my reading. Serious books were rare. And in the political field there was very little, other than Tory propaganda material; the prison authorities had instituted a thorough screening process. My articles for my party paper had to be written on toilet paper and smuggled out because of the system of prison censorship."

The Archives of the PPP contain 233 pages of letters and articles which Cheddi Jagan wrote from prison, all without the knowledge of the prison authorities. There were more, but these were lost.

While in prison, his fight for better conditions for prisoners continued throughout his term, causing him to be taken before the Superintendent of Prisons on more than one occasion, and being charged for organising hunger strikes of protest. He wrote articles on prison conditions, exposed the poor state of meals, led prison protests and prepared questions to be sent to the British Labour Parliamentarian Jennie Lee, who, in fact, tabled such questions in the House of Commons.

He wrote articles on - "British Lion Skinned", "End Wage Slavery", "Surplus Value - Profit, Interest, Rents", "Guatemalan Invasion", "Amerindian Sweat", and a series of definitions on freedom, self determination, the almighty dollar, class struggle - to name a few.

In prison he organised a reading circle for prisoners and arranged for literature (mostly political) to come into the prison clandestinely, so that prisoners could read and learn.

He described an amusing, yet telling, episode in prison. There was in the Georgetown prison at this time every Sunday, an "Uplift Hour." He got the prisoners to request the Superintendent's permission to speak. The latter's answer was: "since when is Jagan a parson?" Jagan told the

prisoners to go back and tell the Superintendent that he would speak on crime: "Thou shall not steal." Permission was granted.

On Sunday, June 6, 1954 Prisoner Cheddi Jagan was the Speaker. He first dealt with petty thievery, the laws and punishment from the early days when persons were drawn and quartered for stealing things like sheep and goats. He then pointed out the nature of capitalist robbery of the working class and told the prison audience that the biggest thieves, who generally made the laws and were quick to apply the 'cals' were outside the jails.

Two days later Cheddi Jagan was ushered before the prison authorities and told that in future he could not take part in the "Uplift Hour." In protest of this, the prisoners on the next Sunday, June 13, 1954, quietly lined up and marched back to their cells.

From the books available to him, in the prison library and smuggled into prison, he made many extracts for quotations to be printed in Thunder. Thunder was at that time a weekly paper, edited by various members in and out of jail including Rory Westmaas, Janet Jagan and Eric Huntley. Dr Jagan, in one of his prison letters, highly praised the printer of Thunder for his courage in the face of many threats. Eventually, a permanent police guard was stationed at the printery. At that time, the vicious editor of the Daily Argosy, Seal Coon, was calling for the banning of Thunder and the deportation of the Jagans.

One of the beautiful quotations he picked out was from the writing of the late American Communist Joseph North (who visited Guyana in the '60s, and addressed a Party Congress): "The people are indestructible. You can beat them down, chain them, gag them, toll the bell for them, but they rise again, not mysteriously - inevitably! And stronger each time! And those who speak their aspirations will never be silenced."

Another quotation he made from Faiz Ahmad Faiz, then in a Pakistan jail, a poem entitled A few days more -

"Few are the moments left to oppression's sharp tooth

Patience, injustice has only a brief moment to reign!

In this parched desert of earth, this lingering sand.

We must endure for today - not for ever more." stay!

Nameless affliction, the weight of the foreigners' hand

We must endure for today - not for ever more."

In an article on Freedom of Movement, he chastised Barbados Premier Grantley Adams, who, while restricting freedom of movement of PPP members, was criticising Trinidad for not agreeing to this principle in framing the Federation's Constitution. Jagan and Burnham had been

denied entry to Barbados when returning from London in early 1954 and Ashton Chase was refused entry on his way to Caracas to attend a Conference.

And included in the prison letters was a poem Cheddi wrote, perhaps the only one he ever had time to write:

DEATH OF IMPERIALISM

Today we strive to end our humanity's pains

To extract your oppression's painful tooth,

To cut your vicious circle of our lives -

- No work, no land, crime punishment, crime

But you tread with savage fascist steps

With quislings, and hired mercenaries

Willing and unwilling slaves and shares of your loot.

You keep your bayonets at our throats and shout

Law and Order must prevail!

Don't read that!

Don't say that!

Don't do that!

Don't go there!

Our beautiful country a vast prison you have made

And fences built to wrench us from our beloved -

our homes

our children

our brothers

our comrades

You beat us on our heads in the name of peace

While in cleric robes you call for peace

For you, peace is our grave and life hereafter

For us, peace is joy and life and laughter

For this we march tomorrow!

(Note: reference to "Savage" had a double meaning as the British Governor's name was Alfred Savage).

The experiences of the early 1950s were of tremendous value in the future development of the PPP. The Party gained experience of a popular mass party winning limited power through elections and then to have the gains suddenly ripped away. The people experienced gun-boat rule, the compliance of quislings who formed a puppet Interim government, the manipulations and promises leading up to the split in the Party in 1955 and the continued efforts to break the spirit of the left-wing of the PPP (for from the time of the split until after the 1957 elections there were 2 parties calling themselves PPP, one led by Cheddi Jagan and the other by LFS Burnham) and to smash the Party.

That the British failed was made clear in 1957 when the people responded to all the threats, calumny and slander by again giving the PPP a resounding victory at the polls. It proved the validity of Joseph North's words that the people always rise again, despite all that is done to keep them down. And that, we can say, applies to our situation in the '80s!

Explanatory Notes:

British Lion Skinned - deals with Britain's decline "it's roar a faint whisper," rising influences and power of USA, displacing Britain as a world power... contradictions in the struggle for loot and markets.

Surplus Value - Profits, interest, rents: the ruling class makes the laws, extracts the profits; explaining in simple language, using examples, the ways in which capitalism makes profits.

End Wage Slavery: A continuation of above article, showing how workers are exploited, switching from time to piece work, speeding up production - all to make profits from workers' labour.

Guatemalan Invasion: The 1954 rape of Guatemala, the anti-communist campaign the US "upholding the rights of Guatemalan citizens" as its excuse.

Amerindian Sweat: Exploitation of Amerindians by the Rupununi Development Corporation, Analysis of its annual report, the Peberdy Report on Amerindian Welfare and the fact that they were a landless and exploited people.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre