

# The Reality of Our Democracy

by Janet Jagan

A question that dominates discussions and the views and opinions of many Guyanese is that of democracy. If one keeps an eye on the print and TV media, one can see the subject being frequently raised – is Guyana a democracy, or something else, short of being a democracy.

Guyana has gone through three stages: 1) Colonial rule 2) The Burnham/PNC era of rigged elections and denial of human rights and 3) The 1992 restoration of democracy. As a colony of Great Britain, Guyanese lacked the right to govern their own country. Although fair elections were held, the British held on closely to security, foreign affairs, finance and the civil service, and held, as well, tight control of the media. We all know only too well what happened during the PNC regime, when that party held on to power by means of electoral rigging and tight control of people's rights – like freedom of the press, freedom of movement and freedom of thought.

All of these restrictions on the liberties of people ended when the PPP won the 1992 elections, following activities of those inside and outside of Guyana (Jimmy Carter's help was a major contribution to the restoration of democracy) for the changing of electoral procedures, mainly the counting of ballots at the place of poll.

There is, however, a slice of Guyanese society, that will not accept that Guyana is a democracy. They complain bitterly that their rights are denied, that one party keeps winning elections, which they believe is unfair. They demand participation in the Executive branch of government and consider the use of the majority vote in the National Assembly an affront to democracy. They interpret the government ownership of the radio station, the one-TV station situation at Linden and the restriction of advertisements to Stabroek News some time ago as assaults on democracy and the right to freedom of speech and thought the slap on the wrist of TV Channel 6 for permitting threats to the President, an attack on human rights.

They also complain bitterly about Parliament – that its practices are unfair and the majority vote rules on every bill and matter before that body. The critics fail to understand that this is the way democracies are run. The minority cannot rule, except in dictatorships. As one historian Frederic Austin Ogg: put it in his book "European Governments and Politics" "... The debate ended, the motion is put. If the opposition prevails, the bill perishes; and while most government bills almost always come through (failure to do so, being a government defeat, would quite possibly upset their minority), the mortality of private members' bills at this stage is very great." That is the reality of how parliaments work.

But the critics never mention the tremendous changes that have taken place in our National Assembly. I sat there in the PNC years when questions were never answered and when Opposition Leader Cheddi Jagan was prevented from speaking in parliament for over two years because of the PNC speaker's ruling. I put some 12 questions on Jonestown to the then National Assembly at each session, but they were never placed on the Order paper. Today, questions are answered and not 'ducked.' We now have an advanced committee system known as the Parliamentary Standing Committees that embraces all parliamentarians in the study of bills and reports that go to the National Assembly and is responsible for appointments to commissions and boards. We now have Hansard, important to our history, which the PNC government

did not print. All that is left for historical study during that period are speeches typed on thin paper, now deteriorating.

As to freedom of speech and expression, the critics have to dig deep and deeper to justify their charges. In fact, some of the “free speech” is so noxious and unfair, that the government should be challenged for allowing such nonsense to be printed or said.

Guyana can be proud. We are one of the few countries in the world where the Cabinet Secretary reports weekly to the nation on Cabinet decisions and where the Head of State, the President, holds regular press conferences where any and all questions put by journalists are answered. Guyana’s ministers go out to the “roots” on a regular basis to inform, to enquire, to investigate and to rap with citizens. Several ministers hold “open days” where people can seek help and express their grievances.

Further, in the PPP’s efforts to enhance democracy, the PPP/C has endorsed the UN Declaration of Human Rights and has enacted legislation to ensure that the rights of Guyanese are guaranteed by the Constitution. Also five rights commissions have been established to enhance the rights of women, children, indigenous people and ethnic relations.

We are a full fledged democracy and we can hold up our heads in pride that this is a reality.

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Cheddi Jagan Research Centre