

INDEPENDENCE – How The Struggle Began

By Janet Jagan

We have recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of Guyana's independence. It is a fitting time to see how it began.

Certainly the seeds of seeking an end of colonialism must have been planted in the hard days of slavery and indentureship when life was unbelievably difficult and the reason for the crushing oppression and cruelty was easy to define.

Billions of words have been written about slavery, the middle passage, the unbearable cruelty of the slave masters and the many uprisings against slavery. These were dealt with in ways, which are almost beyond belief. Cheddi Jagan in his book "The West on Trial" writes about the prisoners in the Berbice uprising: "...53 of the defendants were condemned to death. Next day, 15 of them were burnt to death over a slow fire and 16 were broken on the rob rock. The remaining 22 persons were hanged..."

After slavery was abolished, indentured labourers for the many sugar estates were brought to this country. Their conditions were slightly better than the slaves. Dr. Jagan in his book quotes Elizabeth Caesar, a labourer of Pln. Vreed-en-Hoop: "the Coolies were locked up in the sick house and next morning they were flogged with a cat-o'-nine tails; the manager was in the house, and they flogged the people under his house; they were tied to the post of the gallery... I cannot tell how many licks; he gave them enough. I saw blood. When they were flogged at the manager's house they rubbed salt pickle on their backs."

With these experiences and much more, the spirit of resistance against those who caused the sufferings was inlaid and would later be expressed in a desire to be free of such exploitation and oppression.

Guyana's history shows that the very beginning of the recognition of the need to be independent of Britain began with the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1950. The concept of a struggle to free British Guiana of colonialism probably had its origin in Cheddi Jagan's studies, while a student in the USA, of the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. At that time, India was on a course aimed at complete independence from British rule. The struggle inspired many in the British, Dutch, French, Belgium and other colonies in all parts of the world to follow suit.

As early as 1945 Cheddi Jagan, in an article wrote this: - "It therefore behoves the working class people to get control of government through their Constitutional ballots in our forthcoming election, with a view towards complete independence."

In November 1946, the Political Affairs Committee was established, a landmark decision, as its goal was the establishment of a political party that could unite all forces in the anti-colonial struggle. The four founder members, Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase, H. J. M. Hubbard and Janet Jagan were all in the trade union movement and realised the need to have a larger vision of how the problems of the working class could be solved. The larger issue of exploitation- the whole colonial system - had to be dealt with if the task of uplifting the living standards of workers was to be achieved.

And after the PPP was founded, in its first Manifesto, the Party declared: "The People's Progressive Party recognising that the final abolition of exploitation and oppression, of economic crises and unemployment and wars will only be achieved by the socialist reorganisation of society, pledges itself to the task of winning a free and independent Guiana... a society in which security, plenty, peace and freedom shall be the heritage of all."

Thus began the struggle in the then British Guiana for independence. Somewhere in the psyche of the onetime slaves and indentured workers lay the elements of resistance to those who brought about the misery of their forefathers. It took time for most Guyanese to accept the idea that Guyana could be a free and independent nation.

Many scoffed at the advocacy by the PPP of independence from Britain. British Guiana is too small to be independent they said. There was talk of an amalgamation of the three Guianas - British, Dutch and French into one country.

Conservatives and recipients of favoured positions from the British, the business and religious community (Christian) were against such an "outrageous" idea. There was, indeed, a lot of opposition to the concept of independence.

Shortly after the formation of the People's Progressive Party in January 1950, the Party launched a campaign calling for constitutional changes to bring the country to self-determination, as set out in the Atlantic Charter, in favour of the rights of the Guyanese people to form their own constitution by the election of a constituent assembly. It called for universal adult suffrage, a fully elected single chamber parliament and a ministerial system with the Governor as a titular head of state with no veto powers. The PPP agitated for this countrywide, laying before the Governor thousands of signatures on petitions, to be sent to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

As far back as 1948, Theo Lee, who later joined the PPP in 1952 (but resigned 1953) put a motion in the Legislative Council calling for a commission to consider constitutional reform.

The Waddington Commission was later appointed and visited the then British Guiana, taking evidence at Queens College, mainly from the PPP whose delegation included Cheddi Jagan, Forbes Burnham, Janet Jagan, Aubrey Fraser and Clinton Wong. Probably the earliest of the picketing exercises, calling for adult suffrage and other reforms, took place outside the hotel where the Waddington Commission stayed. It was staged by the PPP, which used all means to influence the outcome of the Waddington Commission's investigations.

The results were the introduction of universal adult suffrage, a ministerial system of government but the British retained extensive powers in the hands of the Governor and British Government. The three ex-officio members, the Chief Secretary, Financial Secretary and Attorney General, all British appointees, would hold the key portfolios of foreign affairs, police, law and order, finance and defence.

Thus, instead of a wholly elected unicameral legislature, there was a lower house of 24 elected members and 3 ex-officio members and an upper house, the State Council, of 9 members with delaying powers.

As Dr Jagan remarked in "West on Trial"-"though unsatisfactory to us, the constitutional instruments were condemned as revolutionary in conservative quarters, for hitherto the planters and their supporters, faced with growing militancy of the working class, had become more and more repressive."

In the 1953 elections, with the use of universal adult suffrage for the first time, the People's Progressive Party won an overwhelming victory of 18 out of 24 seats. There was a large turn out of voters – 74.8%, higher than in elections in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad in that period.

The PPP remained in office for only 133 days, during which time its elected ministers began to fulfil the Party's election promises. These included the ending of dual (church and state) control of schools and the introduction of legislation to allow for workers to have the right to choose, by a poll, the union they wished to represent them. Both of these and others caused resentment in those who had held strong influence under the British Governor – the sugar planters (who opposed the labour legislation) and the churches (who wanted to hold onto control of schools). Their representatives and others who lost at the elections – Lionel Luckhoo for one – went to England to lobby for the removal of the PPP from office. These influences as well as the winds of the Cold War, brought about the suspension of the Constitution and the landing of British marines in British Guiana.

An interim government was established, made up mainly of rejects from the 1953 elections, but this was a failure and the British restored elections in 1957. Again, as through all the years of relatively fair elections (the British in 1957 and 1961 tried their best to defeat the PPP by manipulating the constituency boundaries) the PPP won in 1957 and 1961 and even in 1964 when proportional representation was introduced to defeat the PPP. It received more votes than any other party.

During all this time, the PPP under the leadership of Cheddi Jagan continued its advocacy of independence – at public meetings, in handbills and booklets, in petitions, before the United Nations, at international conferences, in Congress resolutions, in the Legislative Council, in picketings, particularly on the streets near Government House (now State House), and in London, Toronto and New York, and in two massive Freedom Marches, starting from Crabwood Creek, Corentyne at one end and Charity, Essequibo at the other. All of these activities kept alive the goal of independence from Great Britain.

In Parliament on November 3, 1961, the PPP moved the following resolution: “Resolved that this Assembly requests Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Colonies to fix a date during 1962 when this country should become fully independent within the Commonwealth of Nations.” This had the support of the PNC, but not the United Force, although the PNC showed its lack of real support for independence by its slogans “No Independence under Jagan” in the 1961 and 1964 election campaigning.

In an article published in the UK (Tribune, Jan. 19, 1962) I wrote : “The march of the people for their rights and privileges cannot be held back. Pressure must be put on the Colonial Office by Members of Parliament, leaders of the trade unions and co-operatives and women’s movements to see that the countries still under colonial rule be allowed to become independent.”

Guyanese historian Winston Mc Gowan, in an article (Stabroek News, June 3, 2004) wrote this : “At a Constitutional Conference in London in March 1960, the British government had committed itself to the principle of political independence for British Guiana “at any time not later than two years after the 1961 general election.” In short, the country was expected to become independent by 1963 at the latest.”

That was the framework outlined for the country’s independence from Britain. However, that was not to be. As Mr. Mc Gowan noted in his article : “Eventually, however, the British government reneged on this promise and the date of independence was deferred until 1966.”

Those responsible for the abrogation of the promise for independence by 1963 were also the authors of the violence, mayhem and deaths that took place in the sixties. The USA authorities (including the notorious CIA) spent large sums of money to create chaos in British Guiana and destabilise the PPP government. American trade unionists came to our country and money flowed into the coffers of the PNC, the UF and many of the trade unions.

The violence and riots gave the new UK/USA alliance the excuse to delay independence and, ultimately, to introduce a complete change of the electoral system from first-past-the-post to proportional representation, a system that does not exist in the USA, the UK or any of the islands of the Caribbean. It was done specifically to prevent the PPP from gaining office at the 1964 elections, called one year before the end of term of the PPP's election to office in 1961. Even then, the PPP topped the polls, but did not get over 50% of the votes. Although Mr. Burnham as Leader of the PNC had declared publicly that he would never link up with the right wing United Force, the two influential nations, the US and the UK, led him into a coalition with the UF to form the government.

Incidentally, all of the above is well documented in former secret papers of the US and UK, released after the prescribed period of secrecy had ended.

Although the British gave Guyana its independence in 1966, due to the nature of the PNC regime (after 1968 it discarded its coalition partner the UF and continued with its denial of the basic human rights) few benefits came to the people of this country. It was not until 1992, when the notorious electoral rigging of 1968, 1973, 1980 and 1985 came to an end by the consistent struggles of the PPP and the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (which grew out of alliances in the 80's), that free and fair elections were held and democracy restored. With the restoration of democracy came the rapid changes in the welfare of all Guyanese and the reaping of the benefits of freedom from colonialism and tyranny.