

From Cheddi's cell-Janet in jail

Frankly Speaking...By A. A. Fenty

[Stabroek News](#)

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Yes, it is partly because I wish to avoid the contentious today. There are so many contentions around. Luckily (?) there are numerous commentators too. So having just delved into Cheddi Jagan's 'West On Trial', I've decided to quote from it to illustrate one aspect of Cheddi's life-long contribution to this country. It should be good for the new generation.

First however, I can't resist the temptation of this comment: The hardened criminals, their fellow bandits and their civilian associates, here or abroad, have won a temporary "victory". However that policeman was killed and by whom, here is hoping that no other on the hit-list perishes.

Soon after Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham returned from India where they went to muster support against the suspension of the British Guiana Constitution and their government's removal from office in October of 1953, Jagan was arrested and charged for violating an order restricting his movements only to the City of Georgetown. This was in April 1954. He deliberately travelled along the East Coast of Demerara to Mahaicony. That act of defiant civil disobedience earned him a harsh six months imprisonment with hard labour.

Magistrate Guy Sharples and his colonial court were probably additionally upset by Cheddi's refusal to put up a defence and his declaration that it was the British government and the Governor who should have been in the dock. Additionally, the fiery doctor had concluded his address to the Court by saying: "Today Guiana is a vast prison. Whether I am outside or inside matters little. Prison holds no terror for me. I expect no justice from this or any other court. Justice has been dead since the British troops landed. I am looking to the day when there will be a greater justice in Guiana".

Dangerous defiance in those days, with foreign troops in the colony, and with a magistrate anxious to please London. Now I expect the above and an account of Cheddi's activities in jail, can both inspire certain present-day miscreants and malcontents, who can easily manipulate these reminiscences of an anti-colonial freedom-fighter to suit their own current agenda of anti-establishment opposition. But Jagan was justified. His was a different time with a far different noble purpose.

Cheddi reports that his prison life started at the Camp Street, Georgetown jail. His tuberculosis got him into the prison hospital. He had more time to read and meet more fellow-inmates. And his natural instinct to lead, to mobilise and educate found good, fertile ground. A religious-based, "moral-training" session for prisoners every Sunday angered him and caused the prisoners to agitate for Cheddi to speak to them instead. The prison authorities were reluctant to allow him to speak on the topic, "Thou shalt not steal". However, after a prisoner boycott, they relented.

Naturally Cheddi told the prisoners and their warders that "the biggest thieves were outside of the jail". He explained that "under imperialism and capitalism, the foreigners and local capitalists, landlords,

bankers and middle-men extracted surplus value - profits, rents, interest and commission - from the working people; that so long as the system ... prevailed, there would always be prisoners" and the jails would become more occupied.

One can imagine the responses from the incarcerated - both the poor and the professional crooks. The authorities would have none of this positive propaganda. He was removed back to his original cell next to capital offence and condemned convicts. No more lectures for or by him. Quickly, he organised protests against prison food and conditions. Even though they enjoyed salted-fish and meat in those days he staged hunger strikes for improved diets, which they got.

Inevitably perhaps, he launched a small study group on the theory and practice of Socialism. The prison administration felt they could not tolerate Cheddi's presence amongst the prisoners, period. Soon he was removed to the more distant but scenic Mazaruni Prison Complex. This hinterland Penal Settlement provided ample time for study and reflection. Whereas in Georgetown he had to make fibre mattresses from coconut husks, at Mazaruni he had to scrub the prison floors repeatedly. He felt that his "hard labour" could have been made more productive, at agriculture especially; since he didn't quite make it at carpentry which he also tried. There and then he formed ideas for the utilisation of prisoners' time while in jail. Not to be outdone, both in Georgetown and Mazaruni Cheddi wrote articles and letters and smuggled them on toilet paper to the outside. His only poem known, "Death to Imperialism" was written from his cell.

Janet in jail

I needle some of my erstwhile younger PNC friends by telling them that Janet Jagan has been living here much longer than, probably, three-quarters of the population now around. The lady has been domiciled here for some fifty-nine years! How old are you?

And did you know that she too was tossed in jail in September '54 just days before her husband was released from Mazaruni. They accused her of having a (prohibited) Police Riot Manual and of holding a public meeting. The manual was reportedly planted in her home and the alleged "meeting" was really a Hindu Bhagwat - a religious gathering. The colonial establishment hit her with two sentences of three months each with hard labour - and to run consecutively!

This was colonial government "malice" at its best/worst. The lady was placed among roughnecks after isolation. She could not stomach the diet of vegetables and fish. In the end she survived five months virtually on bread alone until she was released in January 1955.

These two political prisoners were to become Presidents some forty years later. Forbes Burnham, who avoided any jail, also became President of Guyana - a Presidency he created in 1980. I trust that our younger generation will now delve more deeply into the lives of these contributors. Even before those youths migrate.

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