

WORLD BUZZ / It's a long way from Chicago for presidential candidate.

Epic tale of American in Guyana

BY PAUL KNOX
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AT 77, Janet Jagan can look back on an extraordinary life. Born in Chicago, she was in nursing school when she met Cheddi Jagan, a dentist from what was then British Guiana. They married in 1943, moved to the remote South American colony, set up house and began a career — in dentistry and in politics.

The Jagans fought for better treatment of the colony's sugar-plantation workers and, eventually, for its independence. They were committed Marxists, served jail terms and endured U.S.-inspired harassment. The colony became the independent nation of Guyana in 1966, but it was not until 1992 that an undisputed election was held. That was when Dr. Jagan became president, and he ruled until he died in March.

It's an epic story — and it isn't over. Mrs. Jagan is a candidate in the presidential election set for Dec. 15, and, according to opinion polls and other reports from Guyana, she is favoured to win. If she does, a white American will hold the top job in a small, impoverished country with a population of 750,000, 50 per cent of whom are descended from Asia and 40 per cent from Africa.

An anomaly? Not really, the former Janet Rosenberg says, sitting in her daughter's living room in Milton, Ont., on a bright fall day recently. "I speak to people overseas . . . and they all have this feeling that being white and American-born would be a big issue. . . . But I've been around so long that I'm sort of like some of the woodwork."

At first, she was her husband's dental assistant. But in 1947, he pushed her onto a stage and told her to make a speech, and she has been in politics since. A member of parliament for years, she became Prime Minister after her husband died. You can picture this trim, grey-haired woman running Guyana like a schoolroom, or a medium-sized business, or the local branch of the cancer society, with an eye to what works best and a minimum of philosophy.

"My husband never saw just Guyana," she said. "He saw the whole world." Dr. Jagan was a Third World champion and a beacon to socialists in the Caribbean region and elsewhere. He was also a demon to U.S. and British Cold Warriors, who may have been the source of the story that Mrs. Jagan was related to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed by the U.S. as spies in 1953 — a tale she says is pure fiction.

At any rate, she said: "When the Cold War ended and the socialist countries collapsed, we just adjusted to the changes and continued what we were trying to do to address Guyana's problems. And we're continuing along those lines."

In the old days, the problems were relatively simple: miserable conditions for sugar workers, a lack of housing for everyone and overt British-administered racism that kept a tiny elite in control of the colony.

Now they are much more complex. The 28-year rule of Dr. Jagan's opponents, Forbes Burnham and Desmond Hoyte, left the country with sagging infrastructure and a staggering debt. The population declined during the 1980s as Guyanese sought their fortunes elsewhere. "The place was in a colossal mess," Mrs. Jagan said.

A few key industries — bauxite, gold, sugar and timber — produce most of Guyana's foreign exchange. Who will control them, and under what terms?

The country was "ripped off," Mrs. Jagan said, by an unscrupulous quarry operator who left the country dependent on expensive Canadian stone imports for its road-building program. Then there was the spill of toxic waste in 1995 from the Canadian-owned Omai gold mine, which cost the treasury dearly when the mine had to be temporarily closed.

She says she wouldn't sell off Guysuco, the state-owned sugar firm and a major provider of jobs. Guyana turned down a \$14-million (U.S.) loan after the World Bank insisted the company be privatized.

There are lots of reasons to be bitter — the legacy of colonialism, the role her husband might have played had the playing field been level and the people who line up to take advantage of a small nation that lies far outside the mainstream of world affairs.

None of that for Janet Jagan. "I don't think you look back in anger," she said. "You just go ahead."

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