



President Janet Jagan (right) is backed by supporters of her late husband, President Cheddi Jagan, pictured (left) in the 1950s with their children



Guyana's grande dame unsullied by political dirty tricks

President Janet Jagan tells **Ira Mathur** in Georgetown there is a high price for popularity

THE mingled smell of molasses and rum drifts through the window of the taxi taking me to Georgetown, where it stops at the gates of the Guyanese president's residence.

There is something almost surreal about interviewing a white Jewish Chicago-born woman as president of a country in the tropics — a country that is racially and politically split between East Indians and Africans.

A lifetime in Guyana has given Janet Jagan, the widow of the late president Cheddi Jagan, a penchant for loud floral prints but had she remained in Chicago, she would have been a *grande dame* of the left, from the old world of *noblesse oblige*.

"I'm not a Jewish white woman. That's superficial and [that is] what the racists used to divide this country," said Mrs Jagan, whose

People's Progressive Party/Civic won the election of December 1997.

"You must remember I came here when I was 23, when I married Dr Jagan. I'm now 78. I have been living and working here for 55 years. I feel Guyanese."

Desmond Hoyte, aged 69, leader of the opposition People's National Congress (PNC), refuses to recognise Mrs Jagan as president and has made allegations of electoral fraud. Earlier this year he led protests at which crowds chanted that they would not accept a white woman as president of Guyana. White Barbie dolls representing Mrs Jagan were burned.

Mr Hoyte's PNC is supported by Africans, but they comprise only 32 per cent of the population. The East Indians, who back the PPP/C, comprise 54 per cent.

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herself and used to travel in economy class until cabinet colleagues told her they felt uncomfortable flying first class while she went more cheaply.

When I ask Mrs Jagan about the election results, the girlish smile fades from her face to reveal a woman who has been on the defensive for too long.

"What did they find? Tell me. What did they find? They found that the election results stated by the election commission were correct," she said.

She said she was happiest working as a journalist and writer, and during a brief stint as ambassador to the United Nations when she was first lady.

She went on: "If you saw what this country was in 1992 when Dr Jagan took over, you would understand we are a success. Our job is the restoration of the country, which was destroyed by Mr Hoyte and Mr Burnham: 80 per cent of the population lived under the poverty line, the infra-



1950s with their children

nese president's residence. There is something almost surreal about interviewing a white Jewish Chicago-born woman as president of a country in the tropics — a country that is racially and politically split between East Indians and Africans. A lifetime in Guyana has given Janet Jagan, the widow of the late president Cheddi Jagan, a penchant for loud floral prints but had she remained in Chicago, she would have been a *grande dame* of the left, from the old world of *noblesse oblige*. "I'm not a Jewish white woman. That's superficial and [that is] what the racists used to divide this country," said Mrs Jagan, whose

now 78. I have been living and working here for 55 years. I feel Guyanese." Desmond Hoyte, aged 69, leader of the opposition People's National Congress (PNC), refuses to recognise Mrs Jagan as president and has made allegations of electoral fraud. Earlier this year he led protests at which crowds chanted that they would not accept a white woman as president of Guyana. White Barbie dolls representing Mrs Jagan were burned. Mr Hoyte's PNC is supported by Africans, but they comprise only 32 per cent of the population. The East Indians, who back the PPP/C, comprise 54 per cent.

"I don't react personally. It didn't bother me. Even when I was stoned it didn't bother me. I've been in jail, I've had a rough life. It's part of the struggle." Mrs Jagan said.

"They didn't think I didn't belong when I took part in the marches, picketed before parliament and the governor's residence for independence, when I was jailed for six months, when I campaigned with Dr Jagan for universal suffrage, free elections, and against [Forbes] Burnham's dictatorship."

Burnham, founder of the PNC, took power after independence in 1966 and ruled until his death in 1986.

Mrs Jagan broke into Guyanese dialect with a mid-western American accent.

"People like me. Everywhere I go I am mobbed. People of all colours and races — black, Indian, Amerindian, Rastas — want to see me, kiss me, take photographs, give me flowers," she said.

She claims her popularity angers Mr Hoyte, but she faces more than his opposition to her as president: her term has been cut short by two years by a peace accord. High unemployment and a faltering economy threaten unrest.

In St Lucia in July Mrs Jagan and Mr Hoyte signed a "peace agreement" intended to end weeks of violent demonstrations staged by the PNC. After the new parliament convened in February Mrs Jagan's car was stoned by PNC supporters.

"We are not on the brink of civil war or racial conflict. Who has to gain? Maybe a few politicians," Mrs Jagan said. "Mr Hoyte has threatened he will not allow Guyana to be governed by the PPP ... because increasingly people don't want to follow him."

She added: "Countries

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emerging from dictatorial rule have fragile democracies. The St Lucia accord brought us away from the brink of disaster. If we had not held back our supporters this country may have returned to the Sixties, when we had racial fighting and villages were bombed and burned."

She said: "National unity is a political goal. We'll achieve it if the racists just stay out of it. Guyanese people don't want violence. They live and work together."

Mrs Jagan, Guyana's longest-serving parliamentarian, does not stand on ceremony or use the jargon favoured by Caribbean politicians. She drives her own car, cooks for

cheaply. When I ask Mrs Jagan about the election results, the girlish smile fades from her face to reveal a woman who has been on the defensive for too long.

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She went on: "If you saw what this country was in 1992 when Dr Jagan took over, you would understand we are a success. Our job is the restoration of the country, which was destroyed by Mr Hoyte and Mr Burnham: 80 per cent of the population lived under the poverty line, the infrastructure had collapsed and a \$2.2 billion [£1.3 billion] foreign debt burden."

In the 1950s and 1960s the Jagans were accused by the British and the Americans of being communists. She said: "At the end of the cold war things changed considerably and we changed, too. We're trying to make Guyana into a

'People of all races want to see me, kiss me, take photographs'

national democratic society: consolidating democracy, focusing on the poorest, reducing the gap between the rich and the poor."

Asked about her late husband, she suddenly looks vulnerable. As Cheddi Jagan's wife she was accepted and respected. Without his support she is an elderly woman in a foreign country, despite having a talent for diplomacy which kept her in power through the civil unrest that followed the elections.

"We were husband and wife, father and mother. He inspired me to do what I am doing now. I wouldn't have done it if it were not for him."

At 23, Janet Rosenberg met Cheddi, a handsome Hindu of humble origins from Guyana, in Chicago in 1943 at the party of a mutual friend. They married eight months later.

Dr Jagan wrote: "Janet's father had threatened to shoot me but was nowhere near to give us bullets or blessings. My parents, too, were unhappy."

For more than 54 years she was happy to play the supporting role as Dr Jagan's wife. They had two children.

"I recognised he was an unusual person so I ran the house. I never allowed him to waste his time on trivial things," Mrs Jagan said.

For more than 50 years they visited sugar workers, contested elections, took part in sugar strikes, co-founded the PPP, took turns in jail, and sat on both sides of the government and opposition benches in parliament.

Mrs Jagan campaigned for women and domestic workers, edited the Mirror newspaper and wrote books while her husband took his place as a charismatic world leader. In 1993, after the first ever free and fair elections in Guyana, the couple entered government as president and first lady.

In the early days the opposition called her the brains behind Cheddi. Now they say she is capitalising on the sympathy vote after his death last year.

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Dec 98.

Dear Madam President,

This is an overdue

note to thank you for your interview which has had a lasting effect on me. I can't help but admire your strength, intelligence, + beauty - a kind of a luminous purity which I have seldom seen in people in a position of power.

It is obvious to me that you are using all your gifts to help the less-fortunate in Guyana.

I have been reading your daughters edition of Dr Jagan's My Fight for Guyana's Freedom + I can't tell you how much I would give just to speak to Dr Jagan. He was an incredible man + I wish I had a chance to tell him so.

Here's wishing you all the happiness, laughter, + full fulfillment in the world for yours,
1991
Ma Mathilde sincerely