

Re-democratization in Guyana and Suriname: Critical Comparisons

Chaitram Singh

Guyana and Suriname, two neighbouring countries on the northeast coast of South America, both re-assumed the path to democracy in the early 1990s. Guyana had from 1968 to 1992 experienced an authoritarian regime with the People's National Congress (PNC), led by Forbes Burnham, maintaining power by rigged elections and the support of the security forces. In Suriname, the elected government of Prime Minister Henck Arron was overthrown by a military coup in 1980, only five years after independence. The military in this case chose not to govern by placing officers into the positions of president and prime minister but reserved for itself active veto powers over a predominantly civilian-staffed government until 1991.

However, maintaining an authoritarian regime proved costly in both cases, and economic decline set in. The need for external aid rendered both regimes susceptible to foreign pressure for a return to open party competition and free and fair elections, already the subject of considerable and sustained domestic clamour in both cases. In the particular case of Suriname, an active insurgency by the country's Maroons, while compounding the factors pushing Suriname down the economic slide and inviting international opprobrium over military excesses, convinced the military leaders that they did not have the political and social wherewithal to govern effectively and that some accommodation with the established political parties was necessary. In both cases, too, the end of the Cold War and the stated goal of the United States to have a zone of democracy in this hemisphere had delegitimized military rule. The 1991 military ouster of an elected government in Haiti and international efforts to return it to power further conditioned the hemispheric atmosphere against the military in both Guyana and Suriname and facilitated the accession of governments based on openly contested elections.

The ethnic basis of politics in Guyana and Suriname

Guyana and Suriname were colonies of Britain and the Netherlands respectively, Guyana attaining its independence in 1966 and Suriname in 1975. The populations of both countries are mainly constituted of descendants of transplanted peoples brought to these colonies for plantation agriculture. As Table 1 shows, both countries manifest similar ethnic profiles except for the presence in Suriname of sizable minorities of Indonesians and Maroons, the latter more commonly called Bush-Negroes in Suriname. East Indians in Suriname are called Hindustanis, and Blacks and mixed-Blacks living on the Surinamese coast are called Creoles, in contradistinction to the Maroons, who are the descendants of escaped slaves emanating from

historical tribal enclaves. Mixed-Africans are classified as a separate category in Guyana.

Political parties in Guyana and Suriname tend to draw their support from specific ethnic groups. Prior to and after independence in Guyana, the People's National Congress (PNC), led by Forbes Burnham, was predominantly supported by the Blacks and mixed-Blacks while the People's Progressive Party (PPP), led by Cheddi Jagan, drew its support primarily from the East Indians. In Suriname, the three principal parties – the Suriname National Party (NPS), led by Henck Arron, Jaggernath Lachmon's Progressive Reform Party (VHP), and the Party of National Unity and Solidarity (KTPI) – were also race-based parties and represented respectively the Creoles, the Hindustanis, and the Indonesians.

Prior to independence, the PPP in Guyana was able to govern because of the support of the East Indian majority, but ethnic polarization between the Indians and the Blacks, reflecting political differences between the two main political parties, manifested itself in racial violence between 1962 and 1964 (Spinner 1984, 105-110). In Suriname, on the other hand, considerable cooperation existed between the NPS and the VHP, which had served together in coalition governments between 1958 and 1966. Also, because no ethnic group in Suriname has had an overwhelming numerical majority, a tradition of coalition-building developed (Dew 1994, 2-11).

While a racial arithmetic determined the composition of government in both countries, ideological differences were a greater feature in the politics of Guyana than in Suriname. In Suriname, the major parties accepted a capitalist economy and haggled over the way the social and economic goods were distributed, each party concerned about servicing its respective ethnic constituency in order to retain its electoral support. In Guyana, on the other hand, the ruling People's Progressive Party was a socialist party which maintained good relations with the USSR and Cuba at a time when Cold War confrontation was intense. Alarmed at the prospect of another independent socialist country in this hemisphere, the Kennedy administration persuaded the British government to change the electoral system in Guyana from single-member constituencies to proportional representation, forecasting that, with its Indian base, the PPP could win only a plurality and would be unable

Table 1. Ethnic groups in Guyana and Suriname

Ethnic Groups	Guyana (1970 Census)	Per cent of Total	Suriname (1971 Census)	Per cent of Total
East Indians /				
Hindustanis	362,735	51.83	142,917	37.65
Blacks/Creoles	218,400	31.21	119,009	31.35
Mixed	72,316	10.33	0	0.00
Maroons	0	0.00	35,838	9.44
Indonesians	0	0.00	57,688	15.20
Amerindians	34,302	4.90	8,050	2.12
Chinese	3,402	0.49	6,029	1.59
Europeans	7,849	1.12	3,999	1.05
Others	844	0.12	6,077	1.60
Total	699,848	100.00	379,607	100.00

Source: *The Europa Yearbook 1982: A World Survey, Volume II* (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1982), pp. 440, 1492.

to form a government by itself. In the December elections, the PPP was unseated by a coalition government headed by Burnham's PNC (Singh 1988, 33-34). Under the Burnham-led government, the colony acquired its independence in 1966.

Cold War considerations not only determined the outcome of the 1964 election in Guyana, they also made the United States more tolerant of authoritarianism in Guyana than it would be of authoritarianism in Suriname in the 1980s. This was due in large part because within Guyana the PNC was seen as more ideologically moderate than the PPP and because what the PNC ushered in was a creeping form of authoritarianism. In contrast, the military in Suriname seized power in 1980 from an elected pro-Western government, and elements within the military itself began to talk of socialist revolution and to cultivate relations with the radical regimes within the region.

Authoritarian rule in Guyana: putting the army on a leash

The establishment of an authoritarian regime in Guyana proceeded on several overlapping tracks, the first of which was the manipulation of national elections. This began in 1968 when Forbes Burnham rigged the voting to neutralize an emerging Indian majority in favour of the PPP. After 1968, the PNC presented an illusion of democracy by holding elections and rigging the outcome to secure victory as well as in the 1973 general election, the 1978 constitutional referendum, and again in the 1980 and 1985 general elections (Baber and Jeffrey 1986, 82-83, 169-170; Singh 1988, 56-62). What varied from election to election was how many seats in the parliament the PNC would reserve for itself and how many it would concede to the PPP. The rigged voting rendered the PPP's presence in the parliament symbolic since it could not stop legislation but served to legitimize the political process and to mask the evolving authoritarian nature of the government.

Burnham recognized very early that his longevity in power did not rest solely on his manipulation of the elections but much more critically on his control of the army, which he secured by a variety of means. Throughout his reign, he engaged in purges of military officers and in appealing to the predominantly Black military for their support in advancing their common ethnic interests. However, he was acutely aware that in Africa, Black army officers had overthrown Black civilian governments so he employed a variety of coup-proofing techniques to keep the army in check.

The Guyana Defence Force (GDF), as the army is known, began as a constabulary force called the Special Services Unit (SSU) set up in 1964 by the British governor as an adjunct to the police force, but with a clear understanding that the SSU was the country's army in embryo. It was an ethnically balanced force with half of the officers and enlisted ranks drawn from the Indian population. Its commander was a Sandhurst-trained, Indian officer, Major Ramon Sattaur. Following his victory in the 1964 election, Burnham fired Major Sattaur to avoid appointing an Indian officer as head of the new army, and shunted aside considerations of ethnic balance in filling out the ranks that would become the Guyana Defence Force. The new army, whose size was initially set at 600 had a Black commander, Clarence Price, and became predominantly Black in composition (Granger 1976, 17-27; Singh 1993, 218).

In the late 1960s, a rapid military build-up took place in response to a predatory

border threat from neighbouring Venezuela. The new entrants into the army during this build-up were predominantly Black. Simultaneously, there were purges of non-Black officers as well as of other officers who felt that the army's loyalty should be to the government of the day and not simply to the PNC. Thus, by 1970, Black representation in the GDF had swelled to about 90 per cent in the enlisted ranks and about 95 per cent in the officer corps, and the PNC made the same appeals to the army that it was making to Blacks throughout the country, namely that it was the organization best situated to advance their common interests in the country (Singh 1993, 219).

However, it was the 'Black power' army revolt against a Black-led government in neighbouring Trinidad in 1970 that galvanized the PNC to employ measures to constrain the army. In 1971, Burnham created the Education Corps within the army and assigned it the responsibility for the political indoctrination of the officers and enlisted ranks (Singh 1993, 220). He terminated the practice of sending cadets for training overseas and manipulated the entrance requirements to emphasize political loyalty as a criterion for entry. In fact, entrance into the officer corps required the presentation of a PNC membership card, and party loyalty became a key criterion for career advancement since, in addition to being the defence minister, Burnham was also the chairman of the Defence Board which oversaw promotions (Baber and Jeffrey 1986, 169; Enloe 1976, 18; Singh 1993, 218-219). At the first biennial conference of the PNC in 1974, senior GDF officers were required to publicly pledge the allegiance of the Guyana Defence Force to the PNC (Singh 1988, 78).

Recognizing, however, the vulnerability of the regime's dependence on the army, Burnham moved to create paramilitary counterweights to the GDF. The first was the Guyana National Service, established as a mechanism to break into Guyana's vast hinterland and to settle the region claimed by Venezuela. It was launched in 1974 when the GDF was tied down along Guyana's coastline providing security against organized PPP protests over the rigged 1973 election. By 1976, when the domestic situation appeared calmer, the GNS was firmly established, its numerical strength approaching that of the army and its personnel far more politically indoctrinated than the army (Baber and Jeffrey 1986, 156-158; Singh 1993, 221). The GDF had little choice but to accept coexistence not only with this paramilitary force but with the Guyana People's Militia, set up to bolster the security forces in 1976 when a Venezuelan invasion seemed imminent (Singh 1993, 221; Baber and Jeffrey 1985, 170).

Thus, by the late 1970s, the security forces in Guyana had been expanded considerably, amounting to about 7,000 personnel (U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency 1982, 60). The GDF continued to be the most proficient fighting force, but the GNS and the GPM presented it with a formidable challenge and diluted its bargaining power vis-à-vis the PNC regime. Along with the Police Force, all of the security organizations competed with one another for budgetary allocations. That fact, and the mutual surveillance they kept on one another, allowed the Burnham regime to control all of them.

The socialist state

The cement holding together the authoritarian edifice Burnham had created and also providing justification for many of his actions was cooperative socialism, which he publicly embraced following the 1968 election. He used it to justify the spate of nationalizations he carried out, including the two major industries in Guyana, bauxite and sugar, and the drug distribution system. The regime also took over *The Graphic*, a major privately-owned newspaper, the remaining private radio station, and brought church schools under state control. In 1976, the regime claimed it had brought 80 per cent of the economy under state control (Burnham 1977, 15).

As the scale of nationalization expanded, so did Burnham's socialist rhetoric and his efforts to re-structure state power in the country. In 1974, he claimed for the PNC the hegemonic role that socialist parties enjoyed in the Eastern bloc and in Cuba. In his 'Declaration of Sophia', he asserted that 'the party should assume unapologetically its paramountcy over the government which is merely one of its executive arms (*Constitution, People's National Congress of Guyana* 1974, 44). Article 21 of the party constitution adopted at this special congress gave the party leader absolute control over the party and hence over all state institutions, and all of this was institutionalized in the country's new 'Socialist Constitution', which was 'approved' in a rigged referendum in 1978 and promulgated in 1980 (*Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana* 1980, 37-38, 86-87, 92-93).

In the battle of duelling socialisms at home, the PNC had clearly outflanked its rival, the PPP. By carrying out the nationalizations the PPP had long advocated, the PNC has gutted the PPP's platform and enhanced its own socialist credentials at home and abroad. Within the Non-Aligned Movement, many of whose members had embraced some form of socialist development, Burnham enjoyed tremendous prestige, which insulated him from charges that he was rigging elections and violating the human rights of opposition elements. Even the PPP, while splitting doctrinal hairs with the PNC, abandoned its policy of non-cooperation with the PNC government and adopted a policy of 'critical support', by which it declared itself willing to work with the PNC to build socialism in Guyana (Jagan 1976, 38).

Control over the economy greatly enhanced the ability of the PNC to dispense patronage to its supporters and to penalize opposition elements. Many prominent Indians were induced or pressured into joining the PNC, as the PPP looked on helplessly. The only area where the PPP could flex its muscle was through action in the labour movement where it controlled the sugar union, by far the largest in the country, and strikes by this union occurred with regularity.

Relations between the Burnham regime and the United States were strained after the 1974 nationalization of Reynolds Bauxite Company, a subsidiary of Reynolds Metals Company based in the United States. They worsened after the Burnham allowed Cuban aircraft en route to Angola in 1976 to refuel in Guyana. Nevertheless, the U.S. appeared not to be interested in a regime change in Guyana since it was only too aware that the principal beneficiary of any such move would be the more doctrinaire Marxist PPP. Burnham died in 1985 and was replaced by Desmond Hoyte, but the basic authoritarian structure remained in place until 1992.

The return to freely elected government

Internationally supervised elections were held in Guyana on 5 October 1992. The PNC lost and was replaced in office by the PPP. The Cold War had ended; the United States was no longer concerned about the PPP's ideological position, which, in any case had undergone a transformation since the party had embraced Russian reformer, Boris Yeltsin, and the free market. Also, the Western hemisphere was not as tolerant of authoritarian regimes; most countries in the region having opted for elected civilian governments. Nevertheless, it had been clear for over a decade that the burdens of a superordinate state in Guyana had been eroding the bases for its continuation.

It became a common observation among Burnham's critics especially after 1976 that the regime was better at rigging elections than it was at managing the economy. What Table 2 shows is a steady decline in economic output from 1976, the year of the last major nationalization. For the period 1976-1991, the gross domestic product fell by over 28 per cent in real terms. Every sector of the economy showed evidence of decline, and every segment of the population felt the impact.

Under Burnham, Guyana incurred balance of payments deficits every year from 1976, and the government borrowed extensively, mostly from the International Monetary Fund. By 1985, the country was unable to make its debt payments and was classified as 'not creditworthy for non-concessional financing' (The World Bank 1985, ii). Retrenchment in the public sector, long a bastion of support for the regime, led to union revolt and protests. Shortage of foreign currency severely curtailed the government's ability to import inputs for production as well as consumption goods, including basic food items such as wheat flour. Without spare parts for industrial plants and equipment, production levels in state-run industries fell. Food

Table 2. Gross Domestic Product, Guyana and Suriname, 1975-1991

Year	Guyana		Suriname	
	GDP (Millions of 1987 Guyana Dollars)	Per cent growth rate	GDP (Millions of 2987 Suriname guilders)	Per cent growth rate
1975	4,418.3	--	2,549.5	--
1976	4,489.5	1.6	2,603.5	2.1
1977	4,368.3	-2.7	2,815.6	8.1
1978	4,285.1	-1.9	3,035.9	7.8
1979	4,207.6	-1.8	2,806.8	-7.5
1980	4,278.8	1.7	2,620.8	-6.6
1981	4,326.5	1.1	2,798.7	6.7
1982	3,789.1	-12.4	2,663.0	-5.9
1983	3,513.5	-7.3	2,525.7	-4.1
1984	3,517.8	1.2	2,428.8	-3.8
1985	3,525.8	0.2	2,403.1	-1.1
1986	3,609.0	2.4	2,327.5	-3.1
1987	3,475.0	-3.7	1,973.8	-15.2
1988	3,302.8	-5.0	2,165.3	9.7
1989	3,136.5	-5.0	2,217.3	2.4
1990	3,031.1	-3.4	2,193.3	-1.1
1991	3,224.4	6.4	2,131.7	-2.8

Source: The World Bank, *World Tables 1994* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 320-321; pp. 620-621.

shortages, electrical blackouts, water shortages, and sewage problems became commonplace; diseases such as beriberi and malaria re-emerged; crime skyrocketed, and outmigration increased. Strikes and demonstrations occurred with great frequency. Amidst all of this, the calls by the PPP and other opposition groups for free and fair elections acquired greater stridency.

Economic desperation drove Burnham's successor, Desmond Hoyte, to seek assistance overseas. Donor countries, especially the United States, Britain, and Canada, insisted on free and fair elections as a condition for their aid. The pressure on the Hoyte government was especially intense given the changed hemispheric atmosphere inimical to authoritarian regimes, and it caved in by agreeing to elections on 5 October 1992 under the supervision of the Carter Center.

Suriname's Praetorian state

Authoritarianism made its appearance in Suriname by gunfire in the early morning hours of 25 February 1980, when sixteen non-commissioned officers (NCOs), led by Sergeant-Major Desi Bouterse, began a coup against the elected government of Henck Arron. Within a matter of hours, the commandos had secured the surrender of the main army base, the police, and the government.

Unlike Forbes Burnham in Guyana, Henck Arron had become comfortable with the political rules of the game in Suriname, which had repeatedly returned him to power in coalition governments. There were no major ideological differences between the NPS, which he headed, and Lachmon's VHP or Soemita's KTPI (Sedoc-Dahlberg 1986, 94). A believer in constitutional democracy, Arron did not see a need to subvert the system of elections or to politicize the military. Indeed, neither he nor the other major politicians showed any real interest in the army, which they considered an insignificant and politically neutral institution (Meel 1993, 129). On the other hand, personnel within the army took a much keener interest in the way Suriname's politics were being conducted and were appalled at its ineptness and corruption.

Between 1958 and 1966, the NPS and the VHP had together governed Suriname in *verbroedering* (brotherhood) coalitions. Each party, however, used its presence in government to dispense patronage to its supporters in the form of civil service jobs. Partly owing to job security and partly to low wage rates, many of these civil servants moonlighted precisely during the time they were obligated to be in government service (Dew 1994, 2-6). In this way, ethnic politics, especially in the Surinamese consociational form, bred clientelism and a form of corruption encapsulated in the local *sranan tongo* expression, '*Winti waai, lanti sa pai*' ('The wind blows, the government pays out'). In the mid-1960s after the Dutch government objected to further expansion of the governmental bureaucracy, the *verbroedering* coalition ended and both the NPS and the VHP began seeking out smaller coalition partners presumably because the patronage costs would be smaller. Considerable strains developed between the two parties over the questions of independence for Suriname, which Lachmon initially opposed. He eventually changed his position when it became clear that the Dutch government was not sympathetic to his objections and after he had secured a promise from Arron for new elections within eight months after independence (Dew 1994, 7-10).

With independence came a Dutch golden handshake of about 1.96 billion U.S. dollars in aid (Meel 1993, 128), unquestionably the largest single aid grant by a mother country to one of its former colonies. The method of spending this aid money and the date for new elections became the major issues of contention between the NPS and the VHP. After considerable stalling, Arron arranged for elections in November 1977, as a result of which he was returned to power at the head of another coalition government. Then the bickering resumed over the spending of Dutch aid funds. Parliamentary sessions became rancorous as insults were traded across the aisle, and Speaker Wijntuin, a member of the NPS, took to expelling members of the opposition, including Lachmon, from the Staten (parliament). The situation worsened from May 1979 when the government swore in a replacement for a deceased NPS member of the Staten without following the procedural rule. The VHP became more intransigent, refusing to participate in voting. Lachmon accused the government of fascism and dictatorship, and members of his coalition engaged in disruptive behaviour, including tearing up the Rules of Procedure and throwing the pieces of paper around the hall like confetti. *De Ware Tijd*, one of Suriname's leading newspapers, commented on what it saw as a new low in parliamentary rowdyism and, to most Surinamers, the Staten had become a do-nothing parliament, which they nicknamed 'circus stupido' (Dew 1994, 27-32; Meel 1993, 129).

It was against this backdrop of parliamentary paralysis that the military coup occurred. The issues of concern to the non-commissioned officers (sergeant-majors, sergeants, corporals) were known to Henck Arron. However, his conduct in the matter reflected a view of the Staten as the critical arena of power in Suriname and of the army as a subordinate institution in an early stage of development and still under the tutelage of a Dutch military mission (Meel 1993, 128-129; Sedoc-Dahlberg 1986, 96). Arron failed to recognize the army as a potential power contender in his own country, displaying a level of naivete difficult to fathom, given the accumulated and rather abundant record of military coups in the Third World, including the 1970 coup attempt against the government of Eric Williams in neighboring Trinidad. Hugo Fernandes Mendes (1989, 664) offers inexperience as an explanation for Arron's mishandling of the army, noting that 'the army was the sole organ of state with which political leaders had had no experience before independence in 1975'. This statement in fact describes the situation in almost all postcolonial societies where leaders of newly independent countries took over from the departing colonial power without having had any significant prior experience in dealing with the military they inherited. Yet there have been no coups in neighbouring Jamaica, Barbados, or Guyana. The Guyana comparison is most apt because, other than the Netherlands, Guyana is probably the country most followed by Surinamese politicians.

In Guyana, Forbes Burnham took office as prime minister in December 1964, about a year and a half before the country acquired independence. He added the portfolio of defence minister to his duties, quickly interposing himself in the selection of the army chief-of-staff, and otherwise took a very keen interest in the growth and development of the Guyana Defense Force. Henck Arron, on the other hand, served as the elected head of government of Suriname from 1973 to 1980. He was not overthrown the year after independence, but four years later. In addition to what was happening in Guyana, he had observed the evolution of the joint

Dutch-Suriname colonial battalion, the *Troepenmacht in Suriname* (Armed Forces in Suriname) into the *Surinamse Krijgsmacht* (Suriname Army) at independence (Brana-Shute 1996, 470-472). In 1969, Surinamese troops, which had been inserted in the so-called New River Triangle as a way of asserting Suriname's claim over this disputed area between Suriname and Guyana, had been forcibly evicted by the Guyana Defence Force (Singh 1988, 131). Suriname, therefore, had an external security problem, an issue which would have obligated a responsible head of state to be attentive to the development of his army.

At the simplest level, Arron faced a management problem and he and his government appeared tone deaf to the grievances of the non-commissioned officers, who outnumbered the commissioned officers by a ratio of 15:1 and who were much more directly in command of the ordinary soldiers. That this coup could have been averted and that the NCOs may not have intended to take over Suriname can be inferred from the pronouncement they made following the coup: 'Never, ever would things have gone so far if [...] some hearing was given to the countless proposals for discussing a solution to the problems' (Dew 1994, 45).

The immediate causes of the coup centred on the NCOs' dissatisfaction with pay, extended postings, their demand for unionization of the enlisted ranks, and the humiliating treatment they received from the Arron government in January 1980 (Dew 1994, 40-44; Brana-Shute 1996, 473; Singh 2007, 75-79). Not only did there exist serious disparities in pay between the NCOs and the commissioned officers, but also within the ranks of the NCOs because those trained in the Netherlands received greater pay. Members of the army were also subject to extended postings of between eight and nine months away from home for what appeared to them to be 'no good reason' (Mendes 1989, 665). On the unionization question, the Arron government remained adamantly opposed even though unionization was permitted among the enlisted ranks in the Netherlands, where several of the NCOs had previously served. When the NCOs continued their organizing efforts within the army in January 1980, the Arron government used the civilian police and the military police to evict them at gunpoint from the barracks. Three of their leaders were arrested and court-martial proceedings instituted against them. On 25 February, five days after their trial began, the Arron government was overthrown, and Arron placed under house arrest.

There were, however, two other major issues that concerned the NCOs. First, the NCOs favoured a more active role for the army in national development and were therefore opposed to the Arron government's intended use of the army for border patrolling, as an adjunct to the police in internal security, and otherwise as a parade force. Second, the NCOs were opposed to the ethnic nature of politics in Suriname, and to the corruption and the paralysis in policymaking which it had produced. Not surprisingly, they declared after the coup that they would end racial politics and the political patronage it inspired.

The degree of popularity of the military in the period following the coup is a matter of some controversy. Suriname's *De Ware Tijd* reported at the time that the majority of Surinamers reacted 'passively' toward the coup (Dew 1994, 46). On the other hand, Peter Meel has asserted that the coup d'état was 'welcomed enthusiastically in Suriname' (1993, 130). It is true that the coup provided Surinamers with a welcome respite from the policy paralysis with which the Arron government

had been seized following the 1977 elections, but several developments quickly dissipated the goodwill Surinamers may have initially extended towards *'de jongens'*, as the sixteen NCOs were called. It is worth noting that in an ethnically segmented society, where party affiliations seemed tattooed to the umbilical cords of Surinamers, it did not take long for Creoles to recognize that it was a Creole-dominated government which had been replaced and that it was their leader, Henck Arron, who had been imprisoned. Secondly, Surinamers, accustomed to the type of laidback lifestyle typical of the Caribbean, soon tired of living under a state of emergency, with curfews and ever-present soldiers bearing Uzis, a situation Meel refers to as the *Uzinization* of Surinamese society (1993, 140). People also resented the military's arrogation of the right to play national disciplinarian as in the *'zeven-even'* inspections in which the military checked government offices to catch late-comers and absentees (Dew, 48). Hans Ramsoedh (2001, 101-102) states that the popularity of the armed forces began to wane as the country drifted towards a repressive state, and he notes that this was taking place during 1980 as top echelons of the army were engaged in institutionalizing their political position. Thus on the popularity issue, Betty Sedoc-Dahlberg's more circumspect description of the period from February 1980 to the March 1982 counter-coup attempt as 'two years of an uneasy calm' (1986, 90) might be closer to the mark.

Consolidating political power

'The only constant in Surinamese politics since 1980', Peter Meel has observed, was 'Bouterse's anxiety to maintain power' (1993, 140). Bouterse's consolidation of power in Suriname followed three tracks that overlapped in time. First, he moved to establish his predominance in the military. This was done by purging the entire officer corps and promoting himself and his associates into the senior ranks of the military. He became a major and, subsequently, a colonel, but for most of his tenure was referred to as Commander Bouterse.

In the immediate months following the coup, Bouterse did not want to alarm foreign governments, especially the Netherlands and the United States, with radical talk. Thus he saw the persistence of revolutionary utterances and organization by some of his colleagues as a challenge to his leadership. He responded in September 1980 by arresting the more 'revolutionary' of his comrades but released them the following March when they had accepted his leadership (Dew 1994, 53-57). There is no question, however, that Bouterse's preeminent leadership position in the military was assured by his success in putting down several counter-coup attempts, the most serious of which was the attempt in March 1982 by Lieutenant Soerendre Rambocus to restore civilian rule. Rambocus was captured, tried, and sentenced to twelve years in prison (Dew 1994, 75-80).

The second track Bouterse followed was to restructure the government and to subordinate it to military oversight, elevating himself to supreme power in Suriname. Bouterse initially established the National Military Council, which he headed, to oversee a reconstituted civilian government, announcing that national elections would be held in two years. However, in July 1980, he suspended the 1975 constitution, dissolved parliament, and proceeded to reconfigure the government. Reflecting perhaps the advice of his socialist advisors, the new governing

bodies bore great similarity to the Soviet system. The locus of policy-making would be the Policy Centre (*Beleidscentrum*), a six-man politburo headed by Bouterse himself. The implementation of these policies would be left to the Council of Ministers, led by a prime minister, whom Bouterse appointed (Meel 1990, 40-44). The titular presidency was retained and was to be occupied by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This structure of government would remain in place until the 1987 elections.

The third track in Bouterse's consolidation of power involved finding a rationale to prolong his stay in power. He thought the answer lay in the revolutionary path advocated by Badrissen Sital and others, choosing the term '*revolutie*' to describe the political enterprise in which he was engaged. The notion of a revolution appealed to Bouterse because of the stature it conferred on him and the new international associates who welcomed him. He established relations with other revolutionaries such as Maurice Bishop in Grenada, Fidel Castro, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and, in an imitation of the Cuban experience, he established the 25th of February Movement and *Volkscornites* (People's Committees) to mobilize people (Meel 1990, 83; Dew 1994, 53-57). However, he never professed a socialist ideology nor did he engage in any radical restructuring of the economy. The notion of a revolution also appealed to Bouterse because it freed him from electoral accountability.

The 'revolutionary' stratagems did not work to build mass support for him or his movement; quite the reverse occurred. No date more pronouncedly marks the decline in the popularity of the Bouterse regime than 8 December 1982, when 15 political opponents – academicians, journalists, lawyers, former military officers, and labour leaders – were executed while in military custody at Fort Zeelandia, some of the bodies riddled with bullets. Among those executed were Lieutenant Soerendre Ramboucus and Cyriel Daal, leader of Suriname's largest labour union, the *Moederbond*, which during 1982 had become the spearhead of protest against the Bouterse regime. This orgy of violence shocked the Surinamese population, already weary of states of emergency and curfews, and forced the major ethnic parties into closer collaboration. Isolated from the population, Bouterse opened back-track discussions with the leaders of these parties, acknowledging thereby his own political weakness and further enhancing the prestige of those leaders among their followers.

Pressures for disengagement

As was the case in Guyana, the most powerful pressure for a return to elected civilian government in Suriname was economic. The Surinamese economy was heavily subsidized by Dutch aid, which accounted for about 20 per cent of the annual budget of the Surinamese government. At independence in 1975, the Dutch government provided an aid package of about 1.96 billion U.S. dollars, of which 1.5 billion was an outright grant to be spent over a fifteen-year period. By the summer of 1980, only about \$280,000 had been spent (Meel 1990, 79-80). The Bouterse regime lost access to the remainder when the Dutch government cut off all aid to the regime on 10 December 1982, two days after the Fort Zeelandia executions. The aid cut-off, along with the disruptions in various sectors of the economy result-

ing from strikes, demonstrations, and massive out-migration from the country, pushed the economy into steady decline. Not only did the regime face declining revenues from the bauxite industry but, by November 1985, about 2000 bauxite workers had lost their jobs (Brana-Shute 1986, 109). As Table 2 shows, between 1982 and 1987 when elections were held, the gross national product in real terms fell by about 26 per cent.

To compensate for the loss of Dutch aid, the Bouterse regime in January 1984 overhauled the income tax system and increased taxes on imported goods up to 100 per cent. These proposals provoked a wave of labour strikes, beginning at Suriname's largest bauxite company SURALCO, and spreading to other sectors. The strikes, which brought the economy to a virtual standstill, generated demands not only for the abolition of the taxes but also for the abolition of curfews, an end to military rule, and a return to constitutional government (Organization of American States 1985, 9-12). Bouterse struggled with the Dutch government over the restoration of aid, but the Dutch conditioned aid resumption on the restoration of elected civilian rule, thereby backing the calls from the major parties for free and fair elections. The major parties declined Bouterse's invitation for them to join him in interim governing arrangements until they could be assured of a restoration of parliamentary rule based on free and fair elections. In April 1985, Bouterse acceded to this demand and a constitutional commission was appointed with a mandate to produce a new constitution by March 1987. However, before the constitutional commission had completed its work, a Maroon insurgency, led by Ronnie Brunswijk, began in eastern Suriname.

The principal demands of the Jungle Commandos, as they were called, were for the redress of Maroon grievances and for the restoration of democracy, adding a greater sense of urgency to the constitutional deliberations already underway. However, the brutality of the army in putting down the rebellion brought international condemnation against the Bouterse regime. The U.S. State Department's 1987 Human Rights Report stated: 'The army's efforts to crush the insurgency resulted in the indiscriminate killing of many Bush Negro noncombatants, including women and children, and the detention without trial of scores of suspected Brunswijk sympathizers' (*Country Human Rights Practices for 1987*, 608). It also resulted in a humanitarian crisis because thousands of refugees, consisting mostly of Maroons, had fled next door to French Guiana.

With the insurgency still underway, a new constitution was approved by a national referendum on 30 September 1987. Elections based on this constitution were held on 25 November 1987, and a new government consisting of a coalition of three main ethnic parties was sworn in on 25 January 1988. But this was clearly a government on a leash. The 1987 constitution had two provisions which afforded the military veto power over this government. It created a new body, the Military Command, and conferred on it the guardianship role of 'guaranteeing the conditions under which the Suriname people can bring about and consolidate a peaceful transition to a democratic and socially just society' (*Constitution of Suriname, 1987*, Art. 178-2). The constitution also created a State Council with the power to set aside decisions of the cabinet and lower bodies. With Bouterse serving in the State Council and, with the Military Command in a guardianship role, it was clear that the civilian government served at the pleasure of the military. This became

evident when on Christmas Eve, 1990, the military removed the elected government by the simple mechanism of telephoning the president and the ministers to tell them their services were no longer required. Bouterse claimed that the Surinamese government had failed to protest an insult to him when the Dutch government denied him access to the Dutch media while he was in transit at the Amsterdam Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands (Brana-Shute 1996, 480; interview with former President Ramsewak Shankar, 13 May 2003, Paramaribo, Suriname).

Criticism of the 1990 coup was swift and sharp. The consensus resolution by the OAS resolved 'to categorically repudiate the military coup in Suriname, which thwarts the fundamental right of the people of that country to live in a system of freedom and democracy' (Enaudi 1991, 10). Under pressure from the United States, the Netherlands, Venezuela, and Brazil, the Bouterse regime held elections again on 25 May 1991. Again a coalition of the three ethnic parties came to power as the New Front. This time, the coalition government with the support of the Netherlands and the United States – which did not rule out the possibility of direct military intervention – confronted the military (Ramsøedh, 105; Sedoc-Dahlberg 1994, 141). The New Front government amended the constitution to strip the military of any role in government beyond national defence. It drastically reduced the size of the military and pensioned off several of the senior officers who were key allies of Bouterse. In carrying out these actions, the coalition government's hand was considerably strengthened by the presence of military contingents of powerful friendly forces in the area. U.S. Marines and French troops were engaged in exercises next door in French Guiana. Also, the United States and the Netherlands had a visible naval presence in the Caribbean conducting narcotics interdiction exercises (*The Europa World Yearbook 2002*, 3746-3747).

The Guyana and Suriname cases contrasted

Authoritarianism lasted in Guyana from 1968 to 1992 and in Suriname from 1980 to 1991, with a militarily supervised civilian interregnum in Suriname from 1988 to 1990. Authoritarianism in Guyana emerged because the civilian rulers successfully managed their relations with the military to keep the latter in check through appeals to ethnic congruence but, more importantly, through coup-proofing techniques including the creation of paramilitary counterweights. Authoritarianism emerged in Suriname because, notwithstanding the accumulated experience of military overthrows in the Third World by 1980, the elected civilian government mismanaged its relations with a critical component within the military and was overthrown in a coup d'état.

Both the Burnham and Bouterse regimes were personalistic, and both men wanted to ensure their longevity in office. The Burnham regime was far more successful, success being measured in years. Burnham ruled with a mass-based political party, was much more ideological, and translated that ideology into programmes. Bouterse's so-called revolution was more rhetorical and empty and attracted few adherents. Attempts at mass mobilization imitative of the Cuban experience failed, and the Bouterse regime became isolated from civil society. Bouterse had to acknowledge the old political leaders that he had until then tried to marginalize.

In both settings, authoritarianism proved to be costly. By definition, authoritar-

ian regimes are exclusionary, based on varying degrees of repression. The insecurity of the rulers is assuaged by reliance on a preponderance of force. The size of the armed forces under Bouterse increased four times over what it had been at independence, and over eleven times in the case of Guyana. These forces became a costly drain on their poor economies. Rigged elections in Guyana led to strikes and demonstrations; lack of elections in Suriname had the same result, except that, in Suriname, Bouterse had to contend with a Maroon insurgency as well. Both regimes were criticized for human rights violations, but the Bouterse regime inflicted greater loss of life especially on the Maroon community, a fact that caused greater international condemnation. Out-migration accelerated under both regimes, depriving various sectors of skilled personnel.

In the final analysis, however, it was the economy that proved to be the Achilles heel of the two regimes, with output declining over the greater part of each regime's existence. In the case of Guyana, declining output, balance of payments deficits, and debt compelled this socialist regime to seek foreign assistance, a fact which made the regime susceptible to international pressure for free and fair elections. In Suriname, Bouterse put forward no programmatic effort to transform the fundamental structure of the economy; his regime merely taxed and spent. The problem, however, was that this economy had become highly dependent on massive infusions of Dutch aid. Cessation of that aid compounded local disruptions to the economy and forced Bouterse to find accommodation with the older political parties and with the Dutch government, both of which wanted the restoration of elected civilian rule.

A final question needs to be addressed: Why did the military, which had supported the outgoing regimes, refrain from intervening against the new rulers in Suriname and in Guyana? The military in 1990 had, in fact, intervened against the elected government in Suriname. The international condemnation, however, was sharp and quick. When the coalition government settled back in after its victory in 1991, the hemisphere had to deal with the overthrow of the Aristide government in Haiti. Foreign military intervention in Haiti against that military junta seemed imminent, a fact Commander Bouterse could not fail to notice. Even more menacing was the active presence of foreign forces friendly to the newly elected coalition government in the vicinity of Suriname. These factors also influenced the Guyana Defense Force after the opposition election victory in 1992, even though the military leaders there felt they would enjoy greater autonomy under the new government in contrast to what one senior officer described as a 'suffocating hug' by the Burnham regime (interview with Colonel Godwin McPherson, Acting Chief of Staff, Guyana Defence Force, Georgetown, Guyana, 21 July 1995).

* * *

Chaitram Singh is the Gund Professor of Government and International Studies at Berry College in Georgia. A graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, he holds a PhD in political science from the University of Florida. His most recent publications are the article, 'Reining in the Military: Redemocratization in Suriname', *Journal of Third World Studies* (Spring 2007), and the novel *The Flour Convoy*. <csingh@berry.edu>

Bibliography

- Baber, Colin, and Henry B. Jeffrey (1986) *Guyana: Politics, Economics and Society*. London: Francis Pinter.
- Brana-Shute, Gary (1986) 'Back to the Barracks? Five Years "Revo" in Suriname', *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1.
- (1996) 'Suriname: A Military and its Auxiliaries', *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 3.
- Burnham, L. F. S. (1974) *The Declaration of Sophia*. Georgetown, Guyana: Guyana Printers Ltd.
- (1977) *Economic Liberation Through Socialism*. Georgetown, Guyana: Guyana Printers Ltd.
- Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana* (1980) Georgetown, Guyana: Guyana National Lithographic Co. Ltd.
- Constitution, People's National Congress of Guyana, approved by the Special Congress of the PNC at Sophia on December 14th-15th, 1974 (1974) Georgetown, Guyana: Guyana Printers Ltd.
- Constitution of Suriname, 1987*, online retrieval <http://www.constitution.org/cons/suriname.htm> (accessed 28 September 2004).
- Country Human Rights Practices for 1987: Report Submitted to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives and the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate by the Department of State (1988) Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Dew, Edward M. (1994) *The Trouble in Suriname 1975-1993*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Einaudi, Luigi R. (1991) 'Hemisphere United Against Suriname Coup', *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, No. 2.
- Enloe, C. H. (1976) 'Civilian Control of the Military: Implications in the Plural Societies of Guyana and Suriname'. In: C. E. Welch, Jr. (ed.) *Civilian Control of the Military*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Granger, David A. (1976) *A New Road: A Brief History of the Guyana Defense Force, 1966-1976*. Georgetown, Guyana: The Guyana Defense Force.
- Jagan, Cheddi (1976) 'Report of the Central Committee to the 19th Congress of the PPP', *Documents of the 19th Congress, People's Progressive Party*. Georgetown, Guyana: New Guyana Company Ltd.
- Meel, Peter (1990) 'Money Talks, Morals Vex: The Netherlands and the Decolonization of Suriname, 1975-1990', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 48., pp. 75-98.
- (1993) 'The March of Militarization in Suriname'. In: Anthony Payne and Paul Sutton (eds) *Modern Caribbean Politics*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Mendes, Hugo Fernandes (1989) 'Suriname: military threat and the restoration of democracy', *Internationale Spectator*, xliii-11.
- Organization of American States (1985) *Second Report on the Human Rights Situation in Suriname*. Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat, Organization of American States.
- (1991) *Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1990-1991: Suriname*. Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat, Organization of American States.
- Ramsgoedh, Hans (2001) 'Playing Politics: Ethnicity, Clientelism and the Struggle for Power'. In: Rosemarijn Hoeft and Peter Meel (eds) *20th Century Suriname: Continuities and Discontinuities in a New World Society*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers.
- Sedoc-Dahlberg, Betty. (1986) 'Interest Groups and the Military Regime in Suriname'. In: Alma H. Young and Dion E. Phillips (eds) *Militarization in the Non-Hispanic Caribbean*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- (1994) 'Suriname: The Politics of Transition from Authoritarianism to Democracy, 1988-1992'. In: Carlene J. Edie (ed.) *Democracy in the Caribbean: Myths and Realities*. Westport: Praeger.
- Singh, Chaitram (1988) *Guyana: Politics in a Plantation Society*. New York: Praeger.
- (1993) 'Ethnic Guardians: The Role of the Military in Guyana's Politics', *The Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. IX.
- (2007) 'Reining in the Military: Re-democratization in Suriname', *Journal of Third World Studies*. Vol. XXIV, No. 1.
- The World Bank (1985) *Guyana: A Framework for Recovery*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.