



Guyana's Racial Politics: Causes, Issues, and its Welcoming of Western Neocolonialism

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Brittney Bahadoor is in her fourth and final year of her undergraduate degree, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts with a Specialist in History and Minor in Caribbean Studies at the University of Toronto. Her Indo-Caribbean heritage has spurred her love for Caribbean history and instilled a desire to shed lights on the histories of the West Indies that are so often overlooked, specifically Guyana and Trinidad post-emancipation. All of those interests culminated in her Senior Thesis for the Department of History in which she researches the history of racial relations between Afro and Indo Caribbeanans in their migration to Toronto. She has continuously been involved with the Caribbean community on campus and is the incumbent President of the West Indian Students' Association (WISA).

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the history of ethnopoltics in Guyana and how the racial divide between the two largest ethnic groups in the country—the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese—not only fractured society but allowed for Western superpowers to exert neocolonial influence. It explores the historical origins of race relations between the Indians and Africans in Guyana from British colonization to the modern political era of the 1960s. It looks at how politics was utilized both as a unifying and dividing factor—dependent on the goals the political leaders sought. This article breaks down the ever-complicated political parties and their general history and discusses the causes of this political divide, both due to internal pressures and external forces. It also aims to show how the racial politics in Guyana were orchestrated by both the United States and Great Britain as it occurred during the ushering in of the neocolonial era. It is built around the argument that the racial divide caused by the Guyanese politics of the 1960s became the basis for the complicated modern-day race relations and the various causes. The goal is to essentially tell part of Guyana's racial and political history in a way accessible to everyone. Guyana is a country with such a deep history which is frequently obscured; this article aims to dissect just a portion of it, especially a part that has affected and continues to affect the population and diaspora even today.

Guyana is one of the most fascinating countries in the Caribbean. It has been singled out in its unique culture and politics compared to other Caribbean nations due to its

ethnic population being highly different from the rest of the region. While the Caribbean has been dubbed a cultural melting pot, some will inevitably clash with all these

different groups coming together. That was precisely the case between the Indo and Afro-Guyanese in Guyana. That racial clash caused the country to destabilize and created tensions still visible in modern-day life. Guyanese politics in the 1960s created an environment where the tensions between the Indo and Afro-Guyanese stretched to an all-time high and eventually collided. That era of ethno-politics also shows how Guyana became a product of Western neocolonialism due to tampering by the United States of America and Britain. This paper seeks to show just how those ethno-politics affected society, the neocolonial impact of Western global superpowers on Guyana, and the aftermath left on Guyanese society moving forward.

As stated previously, Guyana is an anomaly of a country. It is the only English-speaking country located in South America. However, it is tied to the Caribbean due to the closeness of history and culture it shares with the other islands, mainly Trinidad. It is a country that has so many natural resources, diverse peoples, and plenty of lands, yet it falls relatively low on many international indicators of civil and political freedoms.¹ How did a country with so much potential fall apart so quickly? The history of Guyana is very complex, especially when it comes to race relations between both the Indians and Africans. However, it needs to be discussed to understand how the tensions were built and why they were utilized within the political sphere.

Formerly known as British Guiana, the country² switched hands between all the major metropolises of the colonial era before being formally ceded to Britain in 1831. Under British rule, Guyana saw the growth of the plantation and the institution of slavery. Due to the immense amount of fertile land, Guyana became one of the most prosperous sugar colonies, which meant it received an influx of enslaved Africans. The system of slavery that developed within Guyana was very similar to the system used within the United

States of America.³ That system ensured that the enslaved were viewed as less than people, meaning they could not marry, hold familial relations, or do anything while under their master. This contrasts with the rest of the South American colonies under Spanish and Portuguese rules in which the enslaved could have some autonomy.⁴

When Britain outlawed slavery in 1834, the plantocracy wanted to ensure the sugar industry remained profitable. This, without surprise, did not work, as it was still equated to slavery and caused many issues with the formerly enslaved—many complained it was worse than slavery,⁵ and was ended after four years. Apprenticeship caused much backlash, yet the British still needed to find a way to continue the sugar industry once again. Thus came the implementation of Indentured Servitude in the British Caribbean colonies. In May 1838, the first ship from India carrying indentured labourers arrived in Guyana. Indentured Servitude is contracted labour under a person or group for a certain period. Often it was a contract of five to ten years, with a meagre payment in return—25-45 cents per day, depending on the type of work.⁶ When the contract was made, the Indians were offered the choice of returning to India or staying in Guyana, where they would be given some land in return for starting their lives there. Many of the Indian indentured workers stayed after their contracts were finished.

The indentureship scheme lasted until 1917 when the British also outlawed it. In those 79 years, about 240,000 East Indians came to Guyana.⁷ The island's population increased to about 150,000 by 1920, and the freed African population went from 10,000 in 1833 to 95,000 by 1940.⁸ When the institution of slavery and indentureship had both been outlawed, there were now two dominant ethnic groups within Guyana—Indians and Africans. Approximately half the population was Indian, a third or so African,

¹ Lisa Ann Vasciannie, "Electoral Politics in Guyana," *International Election Observation in the Commonwealth Caribbean*, 2017, pp. 129-154, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59069-1_5, 129.

² Guyana was formerly three separate colonies: Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo but Britain combined them into British Guyana when the land was ceded.

³ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cheddi Jagan, "Indo-Caribbean Political Leadership," in *Indenture & Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience*, ed. Frank Birbalsingh (Toronto, ON: TSAR, 1989), pp. 14-25, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Ann Marie Bissessar, "Race and Politics in Guyana," in *Ethnic Conflict in Developing Societies Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, and Suriname* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 43-71, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

and the rest were the others.⁹ The issue then arose about racial tensions, with the two dominant groups being people of colour and the European plantocracy. To avoid any rebellions and uprisings by the two groups, the European plantocracy pit both groups against each other.

This was done in two ways: unintentionally and intentionally. Cultural retention was the first vital difference that caused resentment between the two groups. When brought over as enslaved, Africans were stripped of their culture and forced to create something new. The East Indians were allowed to bring religious customs, food, and practices from India into Guyana. This began to stir resentment from the formerly enslaved Africans as the British plantocracy encouraged the Indians to uphold their culture as much as possible.¹⁰ The differential treatment and unequal burdens that the plantocracy demonstrated between both groups caused a heavy ethnic divide and tensions to stretch.¹¹

All of this background is important in the narrative that frames the political discourse of Guyana's 1960s. There is an inextricable link between race and politics in Guyana, and become the source of many electoral issues in years to come.¹² Indentureship and slavery were still a recent memory to many Afro and Indo-Guyanese, and many blamed the British government. Due to the environment that colonialization built, the alienation of both groups and the overall social consequences provided the background for a cohesive mass-based national movement for independence.¹³ This was the creation of the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP). The party emerged in 1950 under the leadership of Cheddi Jagan, an Indo-Guyanese politician who was a socialist and multiethnic party. He brought Forbes Burnham, an Afro-Guyanese politician, as his second in command to raise African support for the party.¹⁴ With the leadership being two members of the two major ethnic groups in Guyana, it looked like the masses were

going for a change.

The creation of this political party can be seen as a form of colonial resistance on all fronts. Universal suffrage was gained in Guyana in 1951, allowing the masses to participate in an election without the direct control of the colonial government. The PPP was the first organized political party in Guyana and presented a goal of self-government, economic and social development, and the development of a socialist state.¹⁵ However, this went against everything that Britain wanted for the country. Guyana was still a crown colony in 1950, only gaining independence in 1970. Thus, it became a slap in the face to Britain as Guyana now had a mixed party with very anti-colonial goals.

The party won the 1953 election, winning 18 of 24 seats in the new electoral system that had just been introduced after constitutional reforms. Jagan, the new Prime Minister, introduced many policies intending to turn Guyana into a socialist state—that stance it held made Britain extremely uneasy, causing the metropole to intervene shortly after. Britain suspended the Guyanese constitution, removed all the PPP elects in the house, and sent in military troops to ensure no backlash.¹⁶ This effort by Britain caused the PPP to split into two factions—the Jaganites under Cheddi Jagan and the Burnhamites under Forbes Burnham. This eventually turned into Jagan keeping his faction known as the PPP and Burnham creating his party known as the Peoples National Congress (PNC) at the time of the 1957 election. As stated previously, both Jagan and Burnham were founding members of the PPP, meaning both were still socialist parties. The difference was that the PPP was heavy Marxists, and the PNC was more of a moderate socialist party.¹⁷

However, the main difference between the PPP and the PNC was race. The split was not race-based—Jagan and

⁹ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), Ph.D. Thesis, Yale University, pp. 1-424, 299.

¹⁰ Andra P. Thakur (National Library of Canada, 1973), MA Thesis, University of Alberta, pp. 1-144, 47.

¹¹ Cheddi Jagan. "Indo-Caribbean Political Leadership," 16.

¹² Vasciannie, "Electoral Politics in Guyana," 130.

¹³ Ralph C Gomez, "Race, Class, and Politics in Guyana: The Role of the Power Elites," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 1979, pp. 1-9, 3.

¹⁴ Stacey-Ann Wilson, "Guyana The Uncooperative Republic," in *Politics of Identity in Small Plural Societies: Guyana, the Fiji Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 75-97, 79.

¹⁵ Andra P. Thakur (National Library of Canada, 1973), pp. 1-144, 65.

¹⁶ Stacey-Ann Wilson, "Guyana The Uncooperative Republic," 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Burnham were the two prominent men leading the party, so it was natural that the split happened that way. However, a census taken during the 1957 election showed that over 90% of registered Indo-Guyanese voters voted for Cheddi Jagan's PPP, and over 90% of Afro-Guyanese voters voted for Forbes Burnham's PNC.¹⁸ This became the ongoing pattern for any electoral politics in the years following. Both parties lost the support of the other races in the years following. While the split was not forcefully race-based, the result of the Indian versus African Guyanese factions became the primary issue. The brief moment of unity that both groups shared was now replaced with the same negative perceptions each group held from colonial times.¹⁹

The fact that the PNC was almost exclusively African and the PPP almost exclusively Indian became a significant aspect of Burnham and Jagan's politics. This was the birth of Guyana's infamous politics, in which race determines whom you vote for over any other factor. The first election after the split, 1961, was fought mainly on racial lines instead of a political ideology.²⁰ Jagan's PPP won 42% of the popular vote and 20 of the 35 seats. The PNC won 41% percent of the popular vote and 11 seats. Both parties won all their seats in areas that were majority Indian or African. It became clear that the population voted for the party led by their ethnicity. This is ironic, to a degree, because both Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan once worked together to unite the masses. However, the 1961 Election created the opposite problem. Following that election, the PNC began utilizing racial tensions as their primary campaign strategy under the direction of Forbes Burnham.

The 1964 election was deemed one of the messiest elections in Guyanese history, as this was the first election in which both the PPP and PNC told the people to 'vote for their own.'²¹ The PPP used the strategy of telling all the Indian voters to vote for "Apan Jhatt" or their own kind.²²

The PNC favoured a campaign which compared the Indo-Guyanese and their values to white supremacy, intending to wipe out Afro-Guyanese culture.²³ While these are only two examples of racial polarization, they caused hostile feelings, including riots that destroyed businesses and villages and harassment of both groups in Guyana. This strategy now became the set basis for all Guyanese elections moving forwards. Additionally, the significance of the split vote in racial blocs bled over into society. While Jagan's PPP won the most votes, Forbes Burnham's PNC joined up with some smaller parties, including the United Democrat Party, to form a majority coalition and had control over the government. Eventually, by 1967, the PNC and Forbes Burnham had won enough votes to become the majority government.

It was under Forbes Burnham and his time as leader of the PNC that many ulterior motives for Guyanese politics seemed to come into play. As mentioned, his party escalated the ongoing tensions between Indians and Africans and used that to his advantage. When Burnham rose to power, he made several changes to how the government ran, which was highly authoritative and almost dictatorial. In particular, he passed legislation that allowed Guyanese living abroad to vote in elections.²⁴ This became a controversial action because the majority of Guyanese who were living abroad were African.²⁵ By passing this law, Burnham continually tipped the results of his election in his favour. He also manipulated trade unions, introduced the patronage system for labour, and rigged referendums to create a new constitution. All of these aspects favoured Afro-Guyanese over the Indo-Guyanese. The overseas vote caused immense controversy and garnered attention internationally, including that of the United States.²⁶

While he did much more, as will be explained later on, there is another aspect to the racialized elections and

¹⁸ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 2.

¹⁹ Stacey-Ann Wilson, "Guyana The Uncooperative Republic," 78.

²⁰ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 171.

²¹ Stacey-Ann Wilson, "Guyana The Uncooperative Republic," 81.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 88.

²⁴ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Nigel Westmaas, "1968 And the Social and Political Foundations and Impact of the 'New Politics' in Guyana," *Caribbean Studies* 37, no. 2 (2010): pp. 105-132, <https://doi.org/10.1353/crb.2010.0003>, 111.

tensions in Guyana that is often overlooked—the role of foreign governments. As stated previously, Guyana was a country that had enormous wealth within it. To the British, the sugar industry. To the United States of America, offshore oil and minerals. Thus, Guyana was a country that attracted international attention. However, the rise of socialist politics in Guyana in the 1900s coincided with the Cold War Era, in which both the United States and Britain were thoroughly opposed to socialism or communism. Cuba was already an issue enough, and the idea that Guyana may become a communist country in South America posed an issue to Western alliances and values.

Guyana gained independence in 1970 after Burnham and the PNC rose to power. It was an implicit idea that the government which brought forth independence would continuously stay in power,²⁷ and both the United States and Britain knew this. The PPP was a unique party as it was the only socialist party in the Caribbean and South America at the time. Cheddi Jagan's politics were more left-leaning, which, when he gained power, allowed him to make many decisions for Guyana that aimed to benefit the country and people over anything else—he wanted to create a socialist state. An example would be the revival of the Labour Relations Bill in 1963, which garnered significant attention from Britain and the United States of America. The passing of this law was the beginning of Britain's acknowledgement that Guyana was straying from their intended idea of self-government and becoming too independent of their ideas.²⁸

When the split occurred in 1957, both the PNC and PPP were socialist at the core, but one side was less left-leaning than the other—Burnham's the more moderate while Jagan was more Marxist. The United States of America was aware of this and began subtly interfering with Guyanese politics. In 1961, Cheddi Jagan made a trip to the United

States to meet with President Kennedy, as Guyana—at this point—was seen as a possible new valuable ally. However, during this trip, Jagan made no effort to say anything critical about the Soviet Union or communism, causing Kennedy to question Jagan's leadership qualifications.²⁹ Kennedy stated that “if we gave aid, there would be a 50 percent chance of his [Jagan and his party] going communist, that, if we didn't there would be a 90 percent chance, and that we would all catch hell whatever we did.”³⁰ However, in 1962 when Forbes Burnham visited Washington, he was met with favourable reactions from the United States government as he presented himself as very anti-communist.³¹ Forbes Burnham and the PNC were the favourable options for the support of the United States.

In 1964, the year of the 'messy' election, the racial tension reached a point where riots began. While I had already spoken on this earlier within this paper and how the split caused it, the riots were also caused by America's CIA. According to a report by the Financial Times, the CIA helped aid the race riots of 1964 to prevent Jagan's PPP from winning the election in December of that year. The United States also sent aid to Forbes and the PNC to help aid their campaigning and other strategies.³² All this was because the United States was nervous about Guyana becoming a communist stronghold in South America once it gained independence.

The British were not exempt from this either—they also met with Burnham and several political opponents of Jagan to work on unseating him at the next election.³³ Because Guyana was not an independent country at the time of the election of 1964, the United States and Britain still held power to intervene. The United States was able to because both Jagan and Burnham came to Washington and met with the Kennedy Administration to discuss the future of Guyana. Britain still held power because it was still the

²⁷ Stacey-Ann Wilson, “Guyana The Uncooperative Republic,” 86.

²⁸ Andra P. Thakur (National Library of Canada, 1973), pp. 1-144, 65.

²⁹ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 206.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Joseph B. Landis (University Microfilms, 0AD), pp. 1-424, 208.

³² “CIA Meddling Led to Race-Based Politics in

Guyana.” *FT.Com* (Jun 10, 2015). <http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Ftrade-journals%2Fcia-meddling-led-race-based-politics-guyana%2Fdocview%2F1695302165%2Fse-2%3Fac-countid%3D14771>.

³³ Perry Mars, “Ethnic Politics, Mediation, and Conflict Resolution: The Guyana Experience,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 3 (2001): pp. 353-372, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038003005>, 358.

metropole. Due to this fact, Guyana relied heavily on foreign governments to maintain some form of balance, which allowed both countries to directly interfere with the racial tensions in Guyanese society and utilize them to change who the leader and party in power were.³⁴

As Britain had monopolized racial tensions during the colonial era, it was not a surprise that they did it again in Guyana pre-independence by instigating the split of the original PPP party in the 1950s into an Indian party and an African party. However, the United States of America and its tampering with the elections and race riots demonstrate the rise of western neocolonialism within the Caribbean. Since Guyana held socialist values and was leaning into them and the potential under Cheddi Jagan and the PPP, it was unsurprising that the United States decided to play dirty politics in Guyana. However, the United States ensured Guyana would no longer achieve any of its potential by choosing to support Forbes Burnham to unseat Jagan and the decision to fund race riots and Burnham's authoritarian platform. This ensured U.S. dependence and ensured that the 'communist' values of the PPP would not return. History shows that the next twenty years that Burnham and the PNC were in power were some of the most challenging years in Guyanese history, especially for Indians. It was the primary reason for the mass migration elsewhere.³⁵

How race has been utilized in Guyana from colonial to modern politics has not changed. It continues to be a significant aspect of who gets to advance based on your skin colour and what that entails. The political environment of the 1960s with Cheddi Jagan's Peoples Progressive Party and Forbes Burnham's Peoples National Congress heightened racial tensions to the point where both the Indians and the Africans viewed the other as wrong. It also allowed the United States of America to utilize the racial tensions in a neocolonial way to ensure that Guyana did not fall into communist hands. However, this all traces back to Britain's hand-splitting of the original PPP. Guyana was a country that had enormous potential with its natural resources and people. However, due to messy politics and foreign interference, it remains one of the poorest countries in the

Caribbean, with some of the highest migration rates today. The impacts of racial politics are also heavily evident today in how Afro and Indo-Guyanese view each other, even if they migrated out.

³⁴ Andra P. Thakur (National Library of Canada, 1973), pp. 1-144, 108.

³⁵ Vasciannie, "Electoral Politics in Guyana," 134.

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