

Moderating Ethnic Tensions by Electoral Mediation

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June 1993

The Case of Guyana

1. INTRODUCTION

THE END of the Cold War permitted long-suppressed ethnic tensions that had been frozen in Eastern Europe for 50 years to explode. The challenge for the international community was to find a framework that would permit the peaceful resolution of ethnic conflicts. Elections were one way of mediating disputes between rival ethnic groups, but the bitterness that each group felt toward the other often made it difficult to reach agreement on terms that would permit a free election. International mediators or observers could help. Their absence from the December 1992 election in Yugoslavia was judged by some to be one of the reasons that the election was stolen. ¹ Their presence in the elections in Guyana in October 1992 might have been one of the reasons that the elections were accepted by all sides, despite violence.

Guyana was not in a state of war like Yugoslavia, but it did include two powerful and mutually suspicious ethnic groups. Each was convinced that the other would steal the election and monopolize power and wealth to the exclusion of the other. These suspicions were tinder in an acutely dry political climate; and on election day, 5 October 1992, a spark threatened to engulf the nation in a consuming fire of ethnic conflict. The presence and actions of international election observers served to control and contain the fire.

For the first time in 28 years, all of Guyana's political parties could agree that the election had been free and fair, and a peaceful transfer of power occurred. Dr. Cheddi Jagan of the People's Progressive Party/Civic List (PPP/Civic) was elected president with 53% of the votes, defeating the incumbent, President Desmond Hoyte of the Peoples National Congress (PNC), who finished with 42%. On 7 October, as the election returns indicated an irreversible lead for his opponent, President Hoyte announced that he would accept the results. Two days later, Jagan was sworn in as President in the presence of Hoyte.

Although overlooked by most of the international community and the press, the 1992 elections are of historic importance for Guyana. They also offer a hopeful message for the hemisphere, and some lessons for nations suffering communal or ethnic tensions. Guyana's election makes South America the only developing region in which every nation has had a competitive election. The tensions between the ethnic Indian majority and the large African minority that had controlled the government for nearly three decades are symptomatic of the ethnic, religious, and nationalist tensions that tear at many states.

The electoral process that led to a peaceful transfer of power offers powerful lessons for other countries. International observers were invited by all parties to play a vital role in constructing an acceptable political framework, and the steps undertaken to secure a peaceful election offer a guidebook of preventive diplomacy to the international community.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE 1992 GUYANESE ELECTIONS

An English-speaking country situated on the northern rim of South America, Guyana was colonized by the Dutch in the early 1600s, but became a British colony in the early 1800s. Sugar cultivation was the main economic activity, and slave laborers were imported from Africa to work the fields. After slavery was abolished in 1833, indentured servants were used - mostly from India, but also a number of Portuguese and Chinese. While some eventually returned home, most remained in British Guiana.

In the 1950s and 60s, while still under British rule, the local government was led by Dr. Cheddi Jagan, an avowed Marxist. Although Jagan and the PPP won fair elections in 1953, he was removed from office after only 133 days when the British suspended the constitution in order to block his Communist policies. A change in the constitution, however, failed to prevent him from winning fair elections in 1957 and again in 1961. On both occasions, the voting was divided along racial lines, with Indo-Guyanese supporting Jagan and Afro-Guyanese supporting Forbes Burnham, a former PPP leader who had split with Jagan in the mid-1950s.

After the 1961 elections, Burnham and the PNC demanded a new constitution. Pressured by the USA and Great Britain, Jagan allowed the British Colonial Secretary to decide, and he chose a proportional representation system. In Guyana's racially-based political system, this change made it possible for a coalition between Burnham's PNC and a smaller third party to defeat the PPP in the 1964 elections.

Once in power, Burnham consolidated his party's rule and control over the electoral machinery. The PNC-controlled legislature passed laws transferring much of the authority of the Elections Commission to the Commissioner of National Registration, a political appointee subject to the authority of a

government ministry. These and other changes, along with the government's control over the transportation and counting of ballots on election day, figured prominently in PNC election victories in 1968, 1973, and 1980. In each instance, the opposition challenged the results and charged fraud. The June 1980 assassination of Dr. Walter Rodney, a popular leader of the Working People's Alliance, provoked increased opposition to the government and escalated demands for electoral reform, but there was no possibility of progress until Burnham died in August 1985.

Burnham was succeeded by Desmond Hoyte, the First Vice President and Prime Minister. After instituting some minor electoral reforms, Hoyte and the PNC won elections in December 1985. However, the opposition charged fraud again. In the wake of the 1985 electoral defeat, five of the six main opposition parties, including the PPP, agreed to form the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) to press for reforms in time for the next elections, due by May 1991. The major reforms that they demanded were the creation of a totally independent Elections Commission with authority over all aspects of the electoral process, the counting of ballots at polling places, restricting the military to barracks on election day, and the presence of international observers.

Facing increased domestic and international pressure to institute reforms, Hoyte agreed to an amendment transferring some authority back to the Elections Commission and, in July 1990, he invited the Commonwealth Secretariat to send a delegation to observe the forthcoming elections. The opposition parties were uncertain about the impartiality of a mission from the Commonwealth, as the government was one of its members, and it insisted that a group from the Carter Center be invited as well.

3. THE COUNCIL AS INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER

The Council of Freely-Elected Heads of Government is an informal nongovernmental group composed of 21 leaders from throughout the Western Hemisphere, chaired by former US President Jimmy Carter and based at the Carter Center of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Since its formation in 1986, the Council has monitored elections in Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti and sent representatives to witness elections in Suriname and in Mexico.

Dr. Jagan visited Dr. Robert Pastor, Executive Secretary of the Council, at the Carter Center in July 1990 to request that the Council send observers. Dr. Pastor informed him that the Council would consider doing so only if invited by all major parties. Dr. Jagan then visited Washington DC and other governments, and persisted in his efforts to persuade the Guyanese government to accept observers. On 27 September 1990, President Hoyte did indeed invite the Council, and the opposition parties sent similar letters of invitation. Carter consulted with several Council members and led a small delegation to Guyana in

October 1990 to assess electoral conditions and determine whether to recommend to the other members that they observe the electoral process.

Two of the most important issues were the need for a new registration list, and the need to change the method of tallying votes so as to permit counting at each polling site. After intensive discussions, all sides reached agreement on both issues. A new house-to-house registration would be implemented to replace the existing voters' list, and President Hoyte agreed to a preliminary counting of ballots at the polling places. On the basis of these agreements, Carter recommended that the Council observe the elections, and they agreed.

The principal unresolved issue was the impartiality of the Elections Commission. A second Council mission, led by Prime Minister George Price of Belize and Dr. Robert Pastor of the Council, visited Guyana in March and April 1991 to observe the registration process and to address this issue. The Council delegation was able to forge a compromise solution. The Elections Commission was expanded, with PNC and the opposition each naming two additional members, and with a new Chairman selected by President Hoyte from a list proposed by the opposition. Rudy Collins, a CARICOM official and former Ambassador to Venezuela, was chosen as the new Elections Commission Chairman.

The delegation was also assured by the Commissioner of National Registration, Ronald Jacobs, that a preliminary voters' list would be completed and distributed by 1 July so that all could review the list; that party polling agents would have complete access to polling places; and that a list of all Presiding Officers would be presented for review to the Elections Commission.

With the election expected by December 1991, the Council decided to open an office in Georgetown in August 1991 to establish an on-the-ground presence. With the main issues largely resolved, Guyana could concentrate on producing an acceptable voters' list. Although the registration of voters was completed in May 1991, the process of turning this information into a viable voters' list was plagued with a host of computer and administrative problems. It was not until 28 September 1991 - just two days before the deadline to dissolve Parliament - that the Elections Commission announced that the preliminary voters' list was completed. This allowed President Hoyte to dissolve Parliament, mandating elections within 90 days, or by 28 December 1991.

4. FLAWS IN THE REGISTRATION LIST

Serious doubts were raised about the quality of the preliminary list. In late October, the Council sent a delegation to Guyana, led by former Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo and Dr. Robert Pastor, to assess the list and to decide whether conditions would allow for a free and fair election in December. The delegation conducted a thorough review of the list and of the analyses others had

completed, including one done by a civic group known as the Electoral Assistance Bureau, which had indicated a very high rate of errors.

There was general agreement that the list was seriously flawed. The critical questions were whether it could be corrected; and if so, how much time would be required. The opposition coalition PCD rejected the list as flawed beyond repair, charging that Commissioner Jacobs and his subordinates had rigged it in favor of the PNC. Chairman Collins, who was under pressure to hold elections by the end of the year, acknowledged some errors in the list, but insisted that they could be corrected during a 28-day period of public review. President Hoyte agreed that the list was flawed, but said he would defer to Collins' judgement.

The Council delegation concluded that while the list was not irreparably flawed, it could not be corrected by the Commission *in time for a December election*. Specifically, the Council delegation was concerned that if a 'corrected' final list were published on the eve of the election without the opposition parties having had time to review it, the result could be violence on election day. Carter wrote to Chairman Collins, stating that the Council and the political parties needed to receive a final copy of the voters' list at least three weeks before the election, in order to judge whether it would be a satisfactory basis for the election. If the list were unacceptable, or had not been received by then, Carter indicated that the Council would not observe the elections unless these were postponed with sufficient time to correct the list. In Carter's meetings with representatives of the Guyanese Government, these points were repeated. The US and UK governments also began to urge President Hoyte to postpone elections.

With time running short, President Hoyte announced in mid-November that elections would be held on 16 December, noting that this decision was based on the projections of the Elections Commission for completion of the list. The call for elections created divisions within the PCD, with some parties deciding to boycott the elections, and the PPP deciding to participate. (The PPP added civic leaders to its party list for the election and renamed itself 'PPP/Civic'.)

Shortly before the Council deadline, Collins finally reported that he was 'unable to guarantee the presentation of a final voters' list in sufficient time for it to be verified by the electorate'. In response, President Hoyte postponed the elections and recalled Parliament to pass legislation which would enable a 1992 election. Most Guyanese breathed a collective sigh of relief and began preparing for new elections. The UN Development Program (UNDP) offered a package of technical advisers and assistance to correct and verify the list. In April, a 'People Test' aimed at detecting whether the new list was padded with names of deceased or non-existent persons was conducted, by selecting a sample of names and trying to locate them. According to the UNDP, the 'not found' rate was only 4.4%.

Another outstanding issue concerned the ability of the Elections Commission to implement decisions regarding election personnel and local observers. Council

observers believed that the independent authority of this Commission had already been established, and all that remained was for Chairman Collins to assert his authority. Consequently, the Council chose not to get involved in this issue, and instead encouraged the Guyanese to resolve it.

In Guyana, as in other transitional elections, the Council realized that suspicions often linger well after actual disagreements are resolved. The Council therefore tried to use its moral authority to urge parties and the public to participate fully in the process.

In anticipation of the completion of the final voters' list, the Council sent a delegation to Guyana on 27-31 July 1992, to assess the list and other preparations for the forthcoming elections. The delegation found the new voters' list acceptable to all the major parties. While several logistical matters remained unresolved, the largest problem was that the public, given the repeated delays and mismanagement, lacked confidence and accurate information about the electoral preparations and the mechanics of the voting process. There were widespread suspicions that the government would never allow a free election and would somehow steal the vote, and that racial violence was inevitable. The delegation publicly urged all Guyanese, including the private sector and other non-governmental actors, to assist the Commission in mounting a public information campaign. Finally, the delegation urged the Commission to use its good offices to re-introduce the Electoral Peace Accord, a document committing the parties to conduct a campaign free from violence, racial incitement, or vandalism to property.

On 10 August, Elections Commission Chairman Collins informed President Hoyte that the final voters' list was completed. This paved the way for President Hoyte's 29 August dissolution of Parliament and announcement that elections would be held on 5 October.

5. THE ELECTIONS

To be effective, observers should be able to make a complete assessment of the process, including a thorough evaluation of election-day balloting, both by random visits to polling sites, and by conducting a parallel vote tabulation or 'quick count'. Such systematic information boosts public confidence because it provides a means to detect fraud. Observers must work as a team, and if possible coordinate their efforts with any other observers, to ensure that the international community speaks with a single voice. Obviously, if systematic fraud is detected, the observers must either convince the parties to correct the process or denounce the final outcome.

5.1 The Campaign

Given the deep-seated tensions between Indo- and Afro-Guyanese, many Guyanese feared that the campaign would be marked by attacks on one community or the other. In fact this rarely occurred. The campaign was virtually free from intimidation and violence. Party rallies were peaceful across the country, and police were present to restrict disturbances to name calling and heckling. Periodic visits and reports by the Council helped to dispel any unfounded rumors.

A significant defect of the campaign was the ruling party's use of state-owned media to promote the PNC campaign, which the opposition and observers criticized as an abuse of public agencies. More important, however, was the fact that all parties had sufficient opportunity to get their message to the public. Independent newspapers ran paid ads from all parties and claimed editorial independence, and TV and radio coverage of the electoral campaign was uncensored and generally vigorous.

5.2 Election-Eve Uncertainties

The day before transitional elections is always a time of high tension. All of the suspicions harbored over decades among the leaders of the various political parties come to the surface. Reports of administrative foul-ups are interpreted as the tip-of-an-iceberg-like conspiracy to steal the election.

The Council election observation delegation saw the same syndrome in Guyana. Many normally sober people became convinced that the election was about to be stolen, even before it had occurred. Generally, in transitional elections, the opposition and its supporters are the ones who are most fearful. In Guyana, the tension was compounded because the governing party felt that it had lost control over the election machinery. But while the Elections Commission had gained some control over the conduct of the election, most of the power remained in the hands of mid-level government bureaucrats, who were resentful of both the government and the Elections Commission for changing the rules of the game without consulting them. The result was confused lines of authority and high levels of administrative incompetence.

The nature and the magnitude of the crisis were not recognized until the day after the election, but two serious problems were evident already on the eve of the election. The Elections Commission had sorted out all of the polling sites too late. It had printed the list of locations only hours before the voting was scheduled to begin, and it did not have enough time or high-speed photocopiers to make copies of all the voters' lists to be packed in ballot boxes and shipped to all the new sites. This problem affected both Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese. The Council found no evidence of racial, ethnic, or party bias in the numbers of persons claiming not to have found their names on the official list. Still, this irregularity generated suspicion and instability in some communities.

A second issue emerged from the inadequate number of trained election officials, and the fear of opposition parties that some polling officers would be ordered by the governing party not to show up on election day. Since the polling officers were in control of the ballots and boxes, that would disenfranchise whole communities. In response to this fear, the Elections Commission and a civic group, the Electoral Assistance Bureau, had trained over 200 volunteers to function as a rapid deployment force on election day. As it turned out, only a few were needed or used.

Finally, communication between elections officials in the field and the Elections Commission's Command Center was difficult. There were insufficient phone lines and a lack of preparation on how to report the results by radio. This meant many delays and confusion in the days immediately after the election. In addition, communication between the Elections Commission and the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation was inadequate. The state radio broadcast unconfirmed reports of disturbances at polling places and contributed to the problems and confusion at some locations.

5.3 Election-Day Observation

The Council's 63-person election observation team included three Council members, representatives of 13 other Council members, a representative of the Organization of American States (OAS), a delegation of Canadians from the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, and a British Member of Parliament. The Council and Commonwealth Secretariat groups communicated regularly throughout the mission and participated in joint briefings, although both organizations retained their independence.

On election day, observers arrived at their assigned polling places before 5:30 a.m. and witnessed the procedures for opening the poll. Then, they randomly visited the other sites assigned to them. At each site, observers interviewed elections officials, voters, and polling agents, and completed a survey form evaluating the effectiveness of the process. Heavy voter turnout (approximately 81%) and organizational and logistical problems contributed to problems at some polling places. Overall, however, the process went smoothly. Council observers visited 586 of the nearly 1,000 polling places and found that 98% functioned satisfactorily. Still, violence, intimidation, and attempts to manipulate the process did occur. Council observers witnessed disturbances in Georgetown, Linden, and New Amsterdam.

Most important, in the afternoon, the Elections Commission headquarters in Georgetown was attacked by a violent and angry crowd claiming disenfranchisement. This nearly caused the election to collapse. By mid-afternoon, after the arrival of a succession of mini-buses, the crowd had grown to 1,500. Following protracted stoning and attempts to storm the building, Guyanese and UNDP technicians were forced to evacuate the building and shut

down operations. Violence and looting spread to the business district, resulting in at least two deaths and extensive damage.

Chairman Collins, who had refused to abandon the building, permitted the crowd to vote at the Commission headquarters in an attempt to defuse the situation. (These votes were in fact not counted, and elections officials later determined that only 21% of these persons were registered voters.) Carter joined Collins, and succeeded in convincing President Hoyte and Police Commissioner Laurie Lewis to send armed police to defend the Commission. Police dispersed the crowd and cordoned off the block, allowing the Guyanese and UNDP technicians to return and re-establish operations.

When the polls closed at the end of the day, observers went to pre-assigned polling places, representing a statistical sample of 7% of the total, to witness the counting of ballots, and to conduct a parallel vote tabulation or 'quick count'. As soon as the vote tally was completed, Council observers reported the results of their sites by radio, or in person, to Council headquarters in Georgetown. With a margin of error of 3%, the Council was able to use the quick-count sample to determine before 1:00 a.m. (just 7 hours after polls had closed) that the PPP/Civic had won the national election by a wide margin. The quick count projected that the PPP/Civic would receive 54.8% of the vote and the PNC 40.8%. Official results later gave 53.5% to the PPP/Civic and 42.3% to the PNC.

The Elections Commission's official results trickled in much more slowly. By 5:00 a.m. on 6 October, the Elections Commission had received only 19,293 votes or roughly 5% of the eligible votes from 61 polling places. The release of preliminary results was discontinued soon after this. The biggest problem was that many polling officials were not trained to send their results directly to the Commission. It took several days before the majority of the polling sites had reported. The delays, some from traditional PNC strongholds of support, created the suspicion that results from these areas were being 'fixed' in favor of the ruling party.

The Council's quick count proved extremely important in calming such fears. A quick-count is a powerful tool for deterring attempts to manipulate election results, and detecting such fraud if it occurs. Because the public and all parties know that the count is being implemented as a check on the official tabulation, this also means greater public confidence in the official election results.

On the morning after the election, Carter visited both President Hoyte and Dr. Jagan and shared with them the results of the quick count. Hoyte acknowledged the figures but was unwilling to concede the election until after reviewing the official national returns and tabulations of his own party. Jagan agreed to calm his supporters and wait for the results to be published by the Elections Commission. At a press conference later that day, Carter and Council member Prime Minister George Price of Belize announced that while the delay in reporting returns was a source of frustration, the Council had seen no evidence

that the integrity of reporting the count had been compromised. The Commonwealth observers held their own conference and announced similar findings. Carter said that violence on election day had been confined largely to the Elections Commission and subsequent looting in Georgetown's business district. Carter also announced that he had shared the quick-count results with President Hoyte and Dr. Jagan, and that both had agreed to hold the information in confidence.

On 7 October, as the official returns began to indicate an insurmountable lead for Dr. Jagan, Carter asked Jagan and President Hoyte to name senior representatives to begin plans for an orderly transition. At his final press conference later that day, Carter announced that the Council had found that Guyana's elections were conducted freely and fairly, and that President Hoyte and Dr. Jagan had named representatives to plan for the transition. That evening, Elections Commission Chairman Rudy Collins announced that with 95% of the ballots counted, the PPP/Civic had won the presidency with about 54% of the vote.

6. CONCLUSION

The Council's election monitoring efforts provide a model for how international observers can assist in peaceful mediation in countries undergoing the transition to democracy. By means of a sustained presence and unquestioned credibility, international observers can help parties divided by ethnicity, religion, or ideology to begin to overcome their mutual suspicion by agreeing to new rules of the game. In order to succeed, the observers must be viewed as impartial, and should have the support of key governments and international organizations.

The Council's mission in Guyana was its longest commitment, its largest delegation, and its most active involvement in negotiating electoral reforms. Council representatives monitored the entire electoral process, starting with key reforms initiated in October 1990 and lasting through the election in 1992.

The Council could draw five lessons: First, it is important for international observers to have all sides agree to their presence, and to do so early in the electoral process so that trust can be built and credibility established. Second, the observers need to help all sides to focus on the most important issues that divide them, and to assist in finding fair solutions. Third, when an important agreement is not implemented, the observers must exercise their influence on the responsible parties to correct the problem, or if necessary to withdraw, rather than endorse a flawed process. Fourth, since suspicions often persist in deeply-divided societies long after actual disagreements are resolved, international observers should use their prestige to encourage public confidence and participation. Finally, in addition to monitoring the process before the election, observers should evaluate the balloting, both by random visits to polling sites and by conducting 'quick count'. The systematic information provides a means to

detect fraud. If systematic fraud is detected, the observers must either convince the guilty parties to correct the process, or denounce the final outcome.

The process of democratization is hardly completed with a free election. In the case of Guyana, the Council remained in close contact with the new government and the opposition. President Jagan was invited to a conference on development at the Carter Center in December 1992; subsequently a three-person team was sent to Guyana in February 1993 to help leaders from the government and private sector in three areas: sustainable economic development; electoral reforms to institutionalize the rule changes; and ethnic reconciliation. The success of democratic consolidation in Guyana will depend on the extent to which the people of Guyana can meet these challenges.

Once fighting starts in an ethnically-divided society, the bitterness between groups grows so deep that it becomes very difficult to heal the wounds. The time to deal with such a problem is *before* the conflict begins. And the best approach is to negotiate the basis for an election that all sides can view as fair.

Notes

Note *: David J. Carroll is the Assistant Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Program of the Carter Center of Emory University, Georgia, USA. Robert A. Pastor is the Director and a Professor of Political Science at Emory. The two helped organize the monitoring of the elections in Guyana. Dr. Pastor is the author of several books, most recently of *Whirlpool: US Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton University Press, 1992). [Back.](#)

Note 1: See Douglas E. Schoen, 'How Milosevic Stole the Election', *New York Times Magazine*, 14 February 1993, pp. 32-40. [Back.](#)