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1

Political History

Guyana's ethnic problems have arisen out of the evolution of the country's political economy in which power has always been ethno-racially determined. The Guyanese state emerged during the slavery era or what Thomas (1984) calls "the slave mode of production." During this period - which spans the years from the colonial conquest of

the “New World” in the early sixteenth century to the end of slavery in the 1830s - the state functioned primarily as the medium of colonial control and regulation. The very nature of colonial activities-- the seizure of land from the indigenous population, the annihilation of their indigenous forms of government and the system of forced labor from the imported slaves-- necessitated the emergence of a coercive medium.

The abolition of slavery in 1838 led to the introduction of an indentureship scheme, which was meant to ensure the maintenance of the plantation as the engine of the economy. The ruling class justified indentureship through a narrative of the lazy African who abandoned the sugar plantation. The new immigrants, who came from China, India and Madeira, were introduced as saviors of the economy and as being more industrious than the ex-slaves. The latter, beginning in 1838, pooled their resources and bought what Kwayana and Kwayana (2002) call “cooperative villages.” Soon an African Guyanese economy took root in these villages much to the chagrin of the plantation owners who used every power at their disposal to crush it. These included the denial of capital to the villagers, flooding of their lands and competition from the newly arrived immigrants, which was part of a deliberate “divide and rule” strategy.¹

When plantation labor was deemed to be beneath the socio-racial status of the Portuguese immigrants, they were officially given a monopoly of commercial activity that was intended to push Africans out of this sector of the economy. This official assault on the desires of the Africans for self reliance and self emancipation had three major effects. It led to mistrust between Africans and the other ethnic groups which would greatly influence the country’s social and political evolution. Second, it served to demarcate the political economy along ethno-racial lines. Third, the groups developed stereotypes of each other, which helped to shape ethnic relations.

According to Kwayana, an important factor was the levying of taxes on the freed Africans to finance indentureship. He argues that this “social injustice” was manifested, “but it has to be noted that oppression was the work of the plantocracy using the power of the purse to secure its profits.” He also points out that “there was not a single Indian in the law-making machinery in those days, nor was there any African” (Kwayana 1988:2). The problem also has to do with the fact that two different ethnic groups were transplanted from their roots and placed in a hostile and alien environment. This view is supported by Premdas, who contends that “the foundations of inter-ethnic rivalry were forged in the anvil of the colonial policy of immigration and divide and rule.” (Premdas 1993). These factors combined to create the deep suspicion and distrust which exist between the two groups. Kwayana (1988:15-17) refers to this development as the inter-racial dynamic:

There has long existed an interracial dynamic in Guyanese society. In the absence of forward planning to contain racial rivalries, it could not be avoided. There are dynamics in social life in any case. And in areas where there are ethnic groups and where there is no forward planning or thinking for mutual security and for solving problems which arise, what can be called "the interracial dynamics" come into play. The fact that Guyana was becoming and had already become the home base of a population of inhabitants, most of whom were laborers or farmers, but who were defined by time, right of occupation of time of arrival, and to a large extent by ethnic-type corresponding with these, gave rise to the need for management of the more important differences and conflicts of interest among these groups.

But as the plantation owners' drive for maximum profits intensified, the common suffering of the two groups became more evident. The working and living conditions of the Indians were no better than those of their African counterparts who had begun to move to the urban centers. The conditions of the "barrackyard" were similar to those in the "niggeryard." This common suffering precipitated united action between the two groups, despite their uneasy relationship. There were numerous instances of cooperation especially on the political and industrial fronts. One high point of this solidarity was the famous "1905 riots" when a strike against unbearable working conditions by African workers in Georgetown was joined by Indian sugar workers in the rural areas.²

Later, when strikes and demonstrations rocked the entire English speaking Caribbean during the 1930s, the protests in Guyana for the most part assumed a multiethnic character. The African based trade union, the British Guiana Labor Union (BGLU), and the Indian based union, the Manpower Citizens Association (MPCA), took a common stand against the poor working conditions and the excesses of the colonial state. This trend was manifested again in 1947, this time on the political front when at the elections of that year Cheddi Jagan, an Indian dentist, won a seat in the Legislative Assembly in a constituency that was evenly populated by Africans and Indians. Although he was Indian he won the support of the majority of poor, working class Africans who rallied to his call for workers' power.

But this show of unity was followed by ethnic distrust, which surfaced between African and Indian leaders. This dynamic was demonstrated during the 1945 debate on universal adult suffrage when most of the African legislators voted against the suffrage.

There was an alleged fear of Indian domination in the political arena, given their majority status. However, Kwayana (1988:56) contends that this defensive position by the African middle class, and favored by the working class leader, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, who had earlier supported suffrage, was fueled in part by “the Indian revival movement, a section of which talked of making Guyana an Indian colony.”

The Birth of the PPP

Dr. Jagan’s election in 1947 was the forerunner to the formation of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP), the country’s first mass based political party, which was founded in 1950. Its leadership included Cheddi and Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase, HJM Hubbard, Forbes Burnham, Martin Carter, Eusi Kwayana (Sydney King), Rory Westmaas and Boysie Ramkarran. This leadership represented a departure from the old reformist type—they were committed to the total dismantling of colonialism, not afraid to use socialist rhetoric in their campaigns and fiercely pro-worker. Another significance of this leadership was its multiethnic composition, which enabled the party to speak to and on the behalf of members of both the major ethnic groups. This brought the party into conflict with the local elites, who felt threatened by the new movement.

Dr. Jagan, who was instrumental in the party’s formation, was named leader and Forbes Burnham, an African who had recently returned from studies abroad, was appointed chairman or the de facto deputy leader. The multiethnic image of the party, however, masked the fragility of the coalition. The chief concern was the top spot. Some Africans in the leadership thought that Burnham was the better candidate and did not hide their feelings. At the party congress held before the crucial 1953 election, Burnham made a bid to wrest the leadership from Jagan. But he was thwarted by Eusi Kwayana, an African leader and ally of Jagan, who successfully defended Jagan against the no-confidence motion brought by Burnham’s supporters.³

The party, therefore, entered the 1953 election as a coalition united mostly in its desire to win. Kwayana and Martin Carter proposed that instead of trying to gain a majority in the National Assembly, the party should aim to win just enough seats to give it a strong voice. The reasoning was that such an outcome would have given the party more time to strengthen the fragile multiethnic unity before eventually taking office. But the proposal was rejected by the executive including Burnham and Jagan. Kwayana and Carter were influenced not only by the ethnic division in the leadership but also by what was happening among the rank and file of the party. While most Indian supporters were satisfied with Jagan as the top leader, they had begun to express concern over the number of African candidates on the PPP’s electoral slate, particularly those who were

contesting predominantly Indian constituencies. African supporters were, on the other hand, unsatisfied that the maximum leader was not of their ethnic group.⁴

These attitudes were fueled in part by ethnic appeals mainly from parties and interests opposed to the PPP. Some Indian-centric parties in collusion with the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) accused Jagan of sacrificing Indian interests in his pursuit of socialism and unity with Africans. On the African side an African party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), with close links to the Africanist League of Colored People (LCP) argued that Burnham and other African PPP leaders were being manipulated by the Indian leadership, which sought Indian domination.⁵

The PPP, however, overcame these criticisms and not unexpectedly won the election with an overwhelming majority of the contested seats. The victory was understandably hailed as a triumph of class over ethnicity. But the euphoria was marred by another crisis over the position of maximum leader. As political leader of the party, it was thought that Jagan would become Head of Government. But Burnham had other ideas. He demanded the position of leader and refused to cooperate in appointing the cabinet. Some members attempted to break the deadlock by proposing Kwayana as the compromise leader. While Burnham expressed support for Kwayana's candidacy Jagan was noncommittal. Kwayana, however, declined the position and supported Jagan partly because he felt that Jagan had done nothing to warrant his ouster and partly because he did not want to be seen to be part of an African cabal that ousted the Indian leader.⁶ Jagan eventually prevailed but the ethnic coalition was severely weakened.

The leadership crisis reflected the underlying ethnic tensions in the party and the society at large. Although the ethnic groups were united in the same party, both groups wanted its leader to be the maximum leader. The PPP's embrace of class politics based on multi-ethnic solidarity was both its strength and weakness. While it was correct in stressing the need for working class solidarity, it was mistaken in believing that class solidarity would be easily translated into ethnic unity. Its failure to directly address the ethnic question both at the level of the leadership and among the rank and file turned out to be a grave error. Further, the electoral success convinced the leadership that ethnic unity among the population was stronger than it actually was. They either did not realize or ignored the strong possibility that the results was less a reflection of ethnic cohesiveness and more a case of the two ethnic communities tying their separate interests to the party's victory-- both groups wanted independence and saw the PPP as the most potent vehicle for achieving that outcome.

The party's tenure in office was short lived. After a mere 133 days the British, at the urging of the US government, sent troops into the colony, deposed the elected

government and suspended the constitution. In the context of the Cold War, the intervention was explained as an action aimed at putting down a communist conspiracy. The effect on the PPP was two-fold. First, the party was demobilized as several party leaders were detained while others were confined to their communities. Second, it created the context for the subsequent split in 1955.

The PPP Split and the Consolidation

A third challenge to Jagan's leadership occurred at the 1955 party congress, the first since the suspension of the constitution. Taking advantage of the fact that the congress was held in Georgetown where African Guyanese were the majority group, the Burnham faction packed the hall with its supporters. Sensing that it was being outmaneuvered the Jagan faction walked out, which effectively marked the end of the original PPP.⁷ The ethnic nature of the split was not immediately obvious as most of the leading Africans stayed with the Jagan faction and two prominent Indians left with Burnham. While both maximum leaders publicly described the breach in ideological terms, they soon embraced ethnic mobilization as both tactic and strategy. Ironically it was a Jagan-Kwayana feud in 1956-57 that would elevate the ethnic consequences of the 1955 split and push the PPP and later the PNC into becoming full-fledged ethnic parties.

After attempts at reconciliation failed, the Jagan faction embarked on a strategy to woo hitherto hostile Indian support, particularly the Indian commercial and professional classes. This new attitude by the Jaganites was captured in Dr. Jagan's 1956 congress address in which he went to great lengths to portray these classes as patriotic. He, however, portrayed their African counterparts in unflattering terms. The address also tacitly endorsed a view among the Indian rank and file that the African leaders had not made much sacrifice during the period after the suspension of the constitution.⁸ This accusation was unsubstantiated as African leaders were among those jailed upon the arrival of the British troops. Burnham was not detained largely due to a party directive which advised against further detentions; this directive was flouted by Dr. Jagan who broke the ban on his movements and was imprisoned.

Dr. Jagan also blamed the largely African "ultra left" of the PPP for the suspension of the constitution and made a strong case against Guyana's membership of the imminent West Indies Federation, a federation of the various Anglophone Caribbean colonies, partly on the grounds that Indians felt they would be a minority in such a federation. This caused Kwayana, who was thought by Dr. Jagan to be loyal to the ultra left, to declare that Dr. Jagan had lost confidence in the African executives of the party. He replied to Dr. Jagan by highlighting what he thought to be inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the address. But,

most of all, he exposed the ethnic undertones and overtones. This exchange was followed by the exit of most of the African leaders from the party, leaving it solely in the hands of a mostly Indian leadership. By this time some prominent Indian businessmen, religious leaders and professionals had become part of the leadership.

Kwayana had delayed his departure because he did not want to exacerbate the ethnic problem. He had a strong following among rural Africans who looked to him for guidance; thus they did not immediately join the Burnhamite faction. He had also turned down Dr. Jagan's offer of the chairmanship of the Jaganite PPP, which would have made him the defacto deputy leader of the party. He also refused to be a candidate on the party's slate at the 1957 election and instead ran as an independent.⁹ While the Jaganites fielded an Indian candidate, Balram Singh Rai, a recent recruit to the party, against him the PNC did not contest the seat, thus giving him its tact support. Rai narrowly won the contest, which turned out to be a dress rehearsal for the ethnic voting pattern that has since characterized the country's elections.

The Jaganite PPP won a majority of the seats at the election, a victory that proved to be the beginning of one of the most tumultuous period in the country's politics. The election was followed by two major developments. First, there was a closing of ranks on the African side. The conservative United Democratic Party (UDP) merged with the Burnhamite PPP to form the People's National Congress (PNC). This African consolidation was completed when Kwayana joined the PNC and became its General Secretary. As was the case with the Jaganite PPP, the early PNC came into being as an ethnic alliance that transcended ideology and class.

This ethnic consolidation was also manifested at the non-party level. Ethnic interest groups emerged in both communities. One such group was the African Society for Racial Equality (ASRE) whose leadership included Kwayana. While he had taken an interest in ethnic issues, Kwayana had not joined any of the African centered organizations up till the formation of ASRE. His movement towards an ethnic-centered politics has been described as an abandonment of his earlier Marxist and multi-ethnic orientation. However, such a reading is not consistent with his political actions. First, while he embraced Black Nationalism, his was a working class nationalism. Second, although he emphasized Black cultural empowerment, he eschewed Black superiority and saw ethnic unity as the ultimate solution to the country's problems. His embrace of the African cause was driven by what he perceived as a blanket Indian solidarity around the PPP. With the imminence of independence, he and others in ASRE felt that Africans were threatened with ethnic disenfranchisement. They also felt that while the PNC provided political representation and hope it did not engage the cultural question.

ASRE, therefore, was primarily an organization concerned with both cultural empowerment and, as its name suggested, political equality.¹⁰

On the political front, ASRE proposed a joint-premiership of the leaders of the two major ethnic groups. It argued that since neither group was prepared to accept the leadership of the other, this was a just solution with partition as a last resort. The proposal was rejected by both the PPP and the PNC and Kwayana was accused of racism. The "partition as a last resort" aspect was treated as the proposal's "first resort." When the PNC leader pledged support for independence under a PPP government, Kwayana withdrew as a candidate for the party at the 1961 election and was later expelled for advocating racialism.

Kwayana's and ASRE's concerns arose in part from the growing restlessness among African Guyanese. The PPP's 1957-61 stewardship of the political economy had engendered a growing insecurity among them. Given their minority status, they not only felt the possibility of being shut out from government, but they also began to feel marginalized from the economic sector. Kwayana's stance, therefore, gave voice to this concern and in turn launched what would become a new movement in the African-Guyanese community. On the Indian side, the fact that the Indian party held political power and was perceived to be protecting and promoting Indian interests meant that Indian insecurity was less of a problem. In fact, there were signs of Indian triumphalism, which was first exhibited after the PPP's victory at the 1961 election. Although the leadership of the PPP utilized the rhetoric of ethnic unity, it did little to frustrate this development.

By rejecting ASRE's power sharing proposal, the PPP and the PNC had tacitly accepted domination as the solution. The 1961 election, therefore, became an ethnic zero-sum exercise. The PPP's predictably won the contest despite an increase in the PNC's share of the popular vote. This resulted from a higher voter turnout among Africans and the PPP loss of most of the African votes it got at the 1957 election. An interesting development was the relatively good showing of a new party, the United Force (UF), which captured the support of the Amerindian and Portuguese communities and some members of the Indian commercial class. The PPP tactically did not contest the Georgetown constituencies; thus allowing its supporters to vote for the UF.

The election results had immediate ethnic consequences. The PPP organized victory marches into the city, which turned ugly as marchers taunted Africans and poked fun at the PNC. This was followed by violent attacks against Africans in majority Indian villages. Kwayana, who had not been active on the national stage following his expulsion from the PNC, recorded these attacks and Dr. Jagan made reference to them in a radio broadcast.¹¹

But the national media generally reported them as isolated incidents. In 1962 Indians came under attack in Georgetown, which became the epicenter of the conflict. Opposition to the PPP's 1962 budget by the PNC, the UF and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) took the form of street demonstrations, which threatened to dislodge the government. Appeals by the PPP to the British authorities for help went unheeded.

The following year the government's attempt to pass a Labor Relations bill aimed at giving workers the right to be recognized by a union of their choice led to fresh eruption of violence. The opposition charged that the bill gave considerable power to the Minister of Labor. But of equal importance was the perception that it was a maneuver to get the PPP affiliated union, the Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU), to oust the anti-PPP Man Power Citizens Associations (MPCA) as the official representative of the mainly Indian sugar workers. When the government refused to withdraw the bill, the TUC called a general strike, which was supported by African workers while their Indian counterparts continued to show up for work. The strike, which lasted for eighty days, was accompanied by violent demonstrations that targeted Indian-owned businesses and PPP supporters.

Ethnic violence escalated in 1964 to war proportions. The opposition had convinced the British government to change the electoral system from first- past- the- post to proportional representation, much to the chagrin of the PPP. But the PPP contributed to its defeat on this issue by leaving the final decision entirely up to the Colonial Secretary. With the prospect of power slipping away, the PPP offered to form a coalition government with the PNC. But the PNC, buoyed by the PR victory, declined the offer. The PPP retaliated with a strike in the sugar industry. Attempts by African workers to break the strike resulted in violence, which quickly spread to the rest of the country. For six months the country experienced its worse period of ethnic conflict which resulted in widespread loss of life and property. The outcome was a de facto partitioned country as many people were forced to flee their homes for communities in which their group was in the majority.

The PNC's rise to Power and Indian disenfranchisement

The PNC's rise to power had immediate ethnic consequences. As was the case with African Guyanese during the tenure of the PPP, Indian Guyanese political instincts and actions were greatly influenced by the perception of disenfranchisement. The PPP's slogan, "Cheated, Not Defeated" reflected the feelings of the wider Indian community. The defeat of the PPP, therefore, served to further deepen Indian solidarity as several protest activities between 1964 and 1970 were widely and actively supported by the

Indian community. In addition to the feeling of disenfranchisement, there was also fear of marginalization in the economic sector, which were somewhat justified as the new government sought to neutralize Indian control of the rice industry while facilitating more African involvement in the agricultural sector.

On the electoral front the PNC confirmed Indian suspicions by wresting control of the electoral machinery, a development that was crucial to the PNC's victory at the next election. The electoral changes, which provided the basis for the widespread malpractices that characterized the election, included the expansion of proxy voting, introduction of overseas voting and placing the Minister of Home Affairs in charge of the elections. The government also launched an expansion of the coercive arms of the state, which eventually transformed Guyana into the most militarized country in the Anglophone Caribbean. This expansion of the military and police had direct ethnic consequences. First, it became a major source of employment for Africans, especially the youth who were more willing than their Indian counterparts to join the forces. Second, in confrontations between the government and opposition the African dominated military was used against the largely Indian opposition.

With the PNC's rise to power the perception of African disenfranchisement dissipated. The government was fully in the control of African elites in the PNC. But the traditional African middle class, though supportive of the PNC government, gradually found itself at odds with the party which had begun to show authoritarian tendencies. Many of the former UDP leaders were either marginalized from the center of power within the party and government or sent overseas as ambassadors. This vacuum was filled with a new cadre of PNC activists whose positions were premised on their loyalty to Mr. Burnham. While he was able to neutralize the middle class leadership, Mr. Burnham was not as successful with Kwayana and ASCRIA. Attempts to appoint him as United Nations ambassador and to the cabinet were rebuffed by Kwayana who was able to influence government policy from outside of the formal structures of the party. But, more importantly, he influenced the party's ideological direction on both the ethnic and ideological fronts, ASCRIA, whose membership overlapped with the PNC's, pushed the PNC to the left and influenced its attentiveness to African empowerment.

The advent of the WPA

ASCRIA, however, fell out with the PNC in 1971 mainly on the issue of corruption in government, a development that had a defining impact on ethnic relations and ethnic politics in the country. The PNC was robbed of the cover ASCRIA provided on two fronts. ASCRIA's promotion of African culture in the community meant that the PNC

did not have to be overtly Black Nationalist, thus allowing it to project itself as a national party. ASCRIA also provided class cover for the PNC inside the Black community where the party was seen as a political defense against Indian political hegemony but not as a champion of the African poor.

With Kwayana's departure from the fold the PNC became more overtly African as it competed with ASRCRIA for the loyalty of the African working class. Kwayana took with him some of the radical Black Nationalists whose ideological outlook was shaped by a combination of working class politics and Black cultural nationalism. The significance of this would be felt when this constituency became one of the initial bases of the Working People's Alliance (WPA). Kwayana's break with the PNC also ignited a new anti-government movement that, for the first time since the PNC came to power, cut across ethnic lines. ASCRIA's first action after the rupture was to initiate joint activities with a pan-Indian group led by PPP dissident, Moses Bhagwan, the Indian People's Revolutionary Associates (IPRA). These activities proved to be the building blocks of the multi-ethnic WPA and the wider multi-ethnic pro-democracy movement which emerged in the latter half of the 1970s.

Since the PPP drew its support mainly from the East Indian section of the population, its opposition to the PNC government was represented by the latter, and sometimes interpreted by the African masses, as ethnically motivated. Further, the Africans' participation in anti-government protests that included the PPP was viewed by the government as betrayal. This, therefore, hampered the development of a multiethnic resistance movement until the appearance of the WPA in 1974. Its platform of multi-ethnicity struck a chord among a population that had begun to show frustration with the politics of ethnic division and the rise of dictatorial rule. The WPA began as an alliance of pressure groups consisting of ASCRIA, IPRA, RATOON, a university-based group led by Clive Thomas and Joshua Ramsammy and the Working People's Vanguard Party (WPVP) led by Brindley Benn, a former PPP chairman. It also attracted activists of the Movement against Oppression (MAO), an urban-based grassroots organization, a group of young University of Guyana students and individuals such as Rupert Roopnarine and Andaiye.

The birth of the WPA introduced a new chapter in ethnic relations and ethnic politics in Guyana. While ethnicity did not disappear, it was channeled into joint action by the two groups and this in turn opened up possibilities for a political solution. The central figure of this movement was Walter Rodney, an African Guyanese scholar who had developed an international reputation as a Marxist, Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist. His message of multi-ethnic action based on working class solidarity struck a

chord with sections of the African community already socialized by ASCRIA and among Indians frustrated with the PPP's lack of militancy.

While the WPA's thrust was similar to that of the PPP of the early 1950s, it differed in four significant ways. First, unlike the PPP, the WPA spent more time organizing in the two communities as it did not have the challenge of competing for office. Second, although the WPA stressed a class based message, it openly discussed ethnicity and race. Third, the WPA was not distracted by leadership problems; it adopted a joint leadership model whereby there was not a single leader even as Rodney emerged as the most forceful voice of the party. Finally, unlike the PPP, the WPA sought to build alliances with other parties and organizations in pursuit of a broad anti-dictatorial alliance. The growing popularity of the WPA put the PPP and the PNC on the defensive as the message of multi-ethnic solidarity threatened to undermine the overt and covert ethnic mobilization of both parties. The PNC fought back by projecting the WPA as a tool in an Indian bid to seize power from Africans while the PPP sought to portray it as an African party. The PPP protected its constituency from WPA's influence by suggesting that since the PPP was already organizing in the Indian community the WPA should concentrate on mobilizing the African community.

Soon Indians and Africans were jointly protesting the economic policies of the government and its human rights abuses. In 1977, for instance, African workers gave material and moral support to Indian sugar workers who went on strike for better wages. The strike, which threatened to shatter the growing ethnic solidarity, was partly motivated by the PPP's hurt over the PNC's rejection of its proposal for a power sharing arrangement between the two parties. However, the union, GAWU, officially called the strike over the sharing of profits accrued by the sugar industry. The PNC's message to the African community was that Indians wanted a disproportionate share of the nation's revenues. When ethnic tensions flared over the use of Africans as scabs it took the WPA's intervention, especially in the African community, to prevent the situation from exploding.¹²

Similarly, the trial of an Indian PPP activist for the murder of an African policeman was a source of ethnic tension. This shooting occurred against the backdrop of the Indian opposition to toll stations along the main highway on the Correntyne, a part of the country populated mainly by Indians. The government removed the trial from Correntyne to Georgetown on the grounds that it could not get an impartial jury in that part of the country. The Indian response was understandably hostile as it feared that a mostly African jury would convict Rampersaud. The politicization of the trial along ethnic lines by both sides of the political divide prompted the WPA to intervene. WPA

leaders particularly Rodney, Kwayana and Bhagwan were in the forefront of the Arnold Rampersaud Defense Committee, which mounted a national and international campaign to draw attention to the case. Kwayana and Rodney spent a lot of time in the African communities explaining the dangers of cooperating with the government on this issue. Rodney described the situation as an affront to the dignity of Africans.¹³ Rampersaud was eventually acquitted of the charges.

Earlier, the 1973 election turned out to be an ethnic flashpoint as elections usually are in Guyana. The PNC had announced its intention to seek a two-thirds majority, which required substantial cross-over votes from the Indian community. Given the ethnic polarization of the country, this was almost impossible. The PPP and its Indian constituency understandably interpreted this to mean that the PNC planned to massively rig the elections. Their fears were realized on Election Day when the army hijacked the ballot boxes and transported them to its headquarters. When PPP activists on the Correntyne attempted to prevent the boxes from being removed, three of them were fatally shot by the soldiers. The PNC declared itself the winner with the predicted two-thirds majority, including “victories” in several PPP strongholds. The electoral fraud and the murder of the “Ballot Box Martyrs” infuriated the Indian community. The PPP retaliated with a civil disobedience and non-corporation campaign, including marches, strikes and sabotage of the economy in sectors dominated by Indians. The party also refused to return to parliament. Meanwhile the government’s decision to introduce mandatory national service for university students was also opposed by the PPP; there was fear that Indian female students would be at risk at the camps, which were located in remote parts of the country.