

# BURNHAM DESTROYED GUYANA-New York Times

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Amid growing food shortages and hardship, increasing layoffs and dismal economic prospects, the Government of Forbes Burnham has never been more unpopular - or more solidly in power - according to Guyanese who support and oppose him.

President Burnham's opponents, as well as numerous members of the diplomatic community here, say that his continued political good health is the result of rigged elections, manipulation of the work force in the largely nationalized industrial sector and political repression, possibly including the assassination of a political opponent two years ago.

President Burnham, a large, bearded man with a quick wit and a disconcerting laugh, painted a very different picture from that heard on the streets. In an interview in his modest book-lined office here, he brushed aside charges against him, crediting his political wellbeing to a slowly growing public understanding of the goals of his "cooperative socialism" and to a disorganized and ineffectual opposition.

And he said his nation's problems are the result not of mismanagement, as his opposition charges, but of the worldwide recession, the vestiges of British colonial dependency and the international isolation caused by Guyana's efforts to remain politically unaligned. Police State Charge Denied

"Our political opposition must justify its existence," he said of his critics. "An oppressive Government cannot last this long. We don't have the financial accouterments for a police state."

A police state is what the opposition charges that the Government, led by Mr. Burnham's People's National Congress, has become. "Fear is an ingredient, of course," said Janet Jagan, a Member of Parliament whose husband, Cheddi Jagan, is head of the opposition People's Progressive Party. "Fear that you'll lose your job - that's the real fear at the moment, the economic fear." By official estimates, 9,000 people have been laid off from the Government and its state-run industries so far this year.

The Government controls the three radio stations and the only daily newspaper, and news of the political opposition is nonexistent. Two opposition publications still exist, but are given just enough newsprint to make a weekly appearance. Television has been promised for several years now, but the Government's economic crisis has pushed that further into the distance.

On the streets, people speak fearfully of the House of Israel, a religious sect of several thousand Guyanese headed by a man who calls himself Rabbi Washington but is really a fugitive from the United States named David Hill. There is a widespread belief among Guyanese that the group operates as a paramilitary squad for the Government - a belief the President Burnham denies has a basis in fact.

Rabbi Washington, whose organization has gained favor with the Government by investing heavily in Guyana Defense Bonds, was quoted earlier this year by the Government-controlled newspaper, however, as having said that his was "not only a religious group, we are also considered a somewhat military organization." He added that the House of Israel had been involved in military training for the last six years.

It was in Guyana nearly four years ago that Jim Jones, the leader of a religious sect called the People's Temple, died with 912 of his followers in a ritual of murders and suicides,

Whatever the reality, the perception that the Government has painful ways of dealing with political opposition has sharply discouraged public displays of it, opponents assert.

The most dramatic example was the death of Walter Rodney, a leader of the Working People's Alliance, two years ago. Mr. Rodney, an outspoken critic of President Burnham, died when a device he was carrying - reportedly in the belief he was testing a walkie-talkie - exploded in his lap a few blocks from the Georgetown prison.

His brother Donald, who was with him at the time, has charged the Government was behind the death, a view shared by a large number of Guyanese and many diplomats here.

President Burnham denied the Government was involved. "We had nothing to do with Rodney's death," he said. "Rodney was not important politically. He was up to mischief - to blow up the jail. He picked the wrong frequency for the device and blew himself up." The Government has yet to hold an inquest into the death to settle the issue.

For the Guyanese, what little political choice there is exists along a narrow band of the philosophical spectrum -the socialism of Mr. Burnham's People's National Congress and the more traditionally Soviet Marxism-Leninism espoused by Mr. Jagan's People's Progressive Party.

This does not seem to satisfy everyone's political interests. As one small-business man put it, "Mr. Burnham is bad, but to tell the truth, sir, anybody they put in would be worse." Election Fraud Charged

Mr. Burnham tends to gain the support of the country's blacks, who make up about a third of the population; Mr. Jagan's party tends to get the backing of those of Indian origin, who make up more than half. Nevertheless, Mr. Burnham has repeatedly won. The opposition has attributed this to fraud; Mr. Burnham attributes it to superior organization and to the fact that "no other party had a program."

With his political situation relatively secure, through whatever means, Mr. Burnham has pursued his policy of "cooperative socialism" - a program intended to make Guyana self-sufficient in food, clothing and shelter.

To its credit, although falling far short of its goal, the Government has built more than 30,000 units of new housing in the past decade. In the worst Georgetown neighborhoods, the housing appears to surpass that of the poor in most of the country's Central American and Caribbean neighbors.

In its effort to attain self-sufficiency in clothing, the Government, with the help of the Chinese, has built a large textile mill on the outskirts of this city but it still cannot produce enough cotton and the quality of the goods has led to public resistance.

Perhaps the greatest dislocations are taking place in the food supply, as the lack of foreign exchange and the Government's selfsufficiency program combine to create shortages. This has led to food lines and continued grumbling by the population. But Mr. Burnham is convinced his program is the right one.

"We are struggling against great odds to carry out a social revolution," he said. "The Soviet Union is not going to run to our defense, because we exercise an independent judgment on such issues as Afghanistan and Czechoslovakia. The United States isn't going to run to our defense because we exercise an independent judgment on Nicaragua and South Africa and the Middle East.

"But we will survive," he continued. "And even if we all perish, since we are only about a million people, we wouldn't create a public nuisance."