

# The 1997 Guyana Elections

## Post-Election Report

Douglas W. Payne

Western Hemisphere Election Study Series  
Volume XVI Study 2

February 3, 1998

CSIS Americas Program

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), founded in 1962, is an independent, tax-exempt, public policy research institution based in Washington, D.C.

The mission of CSIS is to advance the understanding of emerging world issues in the areas of international economics, politics, security, and business. It does so by providing a strategic perspective to decision makers that is integrative in nature, international in scope, anticipatory in timing, and bipartisan in approach. The Center's commitment is to serve the common interests and values of the United States and other countries around the world that support representative government and the rule of law.

CSIS, as a public policy research institution, does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this report should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

© 1998 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

This study was prepared under the aegis of the CSIS Western Hemisphere Election Study Series. Comments are welcome and should be directed to:

Joyce Hoebing  
CSIS Americas Program  
1800 K Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
Phone: (202) 775-3299  
Fax: (202) 477-4739  
E-mail: [hoebingj@csis.org](mailto:hoebingj@csis.org)

# Contents

General Data .....	i
Parties and Coalitions Involved .....	i
Results: General Election .....	i
Results: National Assembly Election .....	ii
Executive Summary .....	1
Background .....	2
The Jagan Administration .....	6
Prelude to the Elections .....	8
The Campaign .....	9
The Vote .....	11
Breakdown and Upheaval .....	12
The Results .....	15
CARICOM Mediation .....	16
The Task of the Auditors .....	18
Concluding Assessments .....	22
About the Author .....	24
Appendix: Results by Region .....	25

---

## General Data

Population	778,000 (1997 est.)
Voting age	18 and over
Registered voters	461,481
Voters who received I.D. card and therefore were able to vote	423,209
Total votes cast	408,057
Voter participation as a percentage of registered voters	88.42 percent
Voter participation as a percentage of I.D. card holders	96.42 percent
Rejected ballots	8,747
Valid votes	399,310

---

## Parties and Coalitions Involved

AFG	Alliance for Guyana
GBG	God Bless Guyana
GDP	Guyana Democratic Party
GCG	Good and Green Guyana
JEAP	Justice for All Party
NDF	National Democratic Front
NIP	National Independent Party
PNC	People's National Congress
PPP/Civic	People's Progressive Party/Civic
TUF	The United Force

---

## Results: General Election

The following general election results were issued by the Guyana Elections Commission on December 30, 1998. They are subject to change pending an audit by a CARICOM-appointed team of electoral experts scheduled to be completed by mid-April.

Party/Presidential Candidate	Total Votes	% Vote (1992)
PPP/Civic - Janet Jagan	220,667	55.26 (53.45)
PNC - Desmond Hoyte	161,901	40.54 (42.31)
TUF - Manzoor Nadir	5,937	1.48 (1.05)

AFG - Rupert Roopnarine	4,783	1.20 (2.00)*
GDP - Asgar Ally	2,528	0.63
GGG - Hamilton Green	1,552	0.39
JFAP - C. N. Sharma	1,265	0.32
GBG - Hardat Persaud	314	0.08
NIP - Shaier Hussain	258	0.07
NDF - Joseph Bacchus	105	0.03

\*Two percent was the percentage won in 1992 by the Working People's Alliance (WPA), the principal member of the AFG coalition.

## Results: National Assembly Election

The following shows the allocation of seats in the 65-member National Assembly, also subject to change pending the completion of the audit.

The 53 seats distributed by proportional representation based on the general election results are:

PPP/Civic	29
PNC	22
AFG	1
TUC	1

The remaining 12 seats in the National Assembly are determined by the outcome of the 10 Regional Council elections. Each Regional Council elects one member of the National Assembly and two representatives to the National Conference of Local Democratic Organs (NCLDO). The NCLDO then elects the remaining two members of the National Assembly.

In the Regional Council balloting, the PPP/Civic won majorities in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. The PNC won majorities in Regions 4, 7, and 10. In Regions 8 and 9, no party won a majority. In the horse-trading that followed, the AFG secured the seat from Region 8, TUF the seat from Region 9, and the PPP/Civic 11 of the 20 seats in the NCLDO, which virtually assured it the final two seats in parliament. With the new parliament expected to convene on February 26, and barring any last-minute deals, the composition was expected to be as follows:

PPP/Civic	36
PNC	25
AFG	2
TUF	2

In 1992 the PPP/Civic won 36 seats, the PNC 26, the WPA two, and TUF one.



## Executive Summary

On December 15, 1997, the incumbent Indo-Guyanese-based People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/Civic) defeated the Afro-Guyanese-based People's National Congress (PNC) in racially charged elections which remain in dispute. A nearly wholesale breakdown of the electoral machinery after the voting was completed led to charges of fraud against the PPP/Civic, a hurried and possibly illegal swearing-in of its presidential candidate, Janet Jagan, and PNC-instigated upheaval in the streets. Until mediators from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) arrived in mid-January, the unrest in this desperately poor country seemed on the verge of spiraling out of control.

Despite the best efforts of civic and religious leaders, both parties exploited racial insecurity during a campaign marked by sporadic violence and ugly personal attacks. The PNC targeted Jagan—the 77-year-old, Chicago-born widow of former president Cheddi Jagan, who died in office in March 1997—calling her “a Caucasian old lady...who does not belong here.” The PPP/Civic stridently equated the PNC and its candidate, former president Desmond Hoyte, with the anti-Indo-Guyanese thuggery of Forbes Burnham, the PNC founder whose authoritarian rule lasted for nearly 20 years until his death in 1985.

On December 19 Jagan was sworn in as president in defiance of a Supreme Court order blocking her from taking office. The injunction was based on a PNC petition that Elections Commission chairman Doodnauth Singh had acted unconstitutionally in declaring a winner before the count had been completed and without the consent of three opposition-party members of the commission.

On December 30 the commission released final results, which gave the PPP/Civic 55.26 percent of the vote to 40.54 percent for the PNC. In the proportional allocation of seats in the unicameral 65-member parliament, the PPP/Civic was assured 36 seats and the PNC 23. The United Force (TUF) and the Alliance for Guyana (AFG) each won two seats. The AFG is a coalition whose most important member is the Working People's Alliance (WPA). The WPA is a multi-ethnic party whose call for racial healing continues to be overpowered by the entrenched tradition among both Indo- and Afro-Guyanese of *Apan Jhaat*, a Hindi expression meaning “Vote your race.”

Hoyte rejected the results and vowed to make the country “ungovernable.” PNC demonstrators shut down government ministries amid anonymous, small-bomb attacks on a pro-government television station and the country's largest hotel. On January 12, 1998, the Supreme Court ruled that it did not have jurisdiction in the matter of the PNC petition, setting off two days of rioting by PNC supporters that left dozens of people injured.

The violence finally abated with the arrival of a high-level CARICOM delegation led by Sir Henry Forde, a former foreign minister of Barbados. Three days of negotiations produced an agreement signed by the PPP/Civic and the PNC on January 17. The key elements were:

AFG - Rupert Roopnarine	4,783	1.20 (2.00)*
GDP - Asgar Ally	2,528	0.63
GGG - Hamilton Green	1,552	0.39
JFAP - C. N. Sharma	1,265	0.32
GBG - Hardat Persaud	314	0.08
NIP - Shaier Hussain	258	0.07
NDF - Joseph Bacchus	105	0.03

\*Two percent was the percentage won in 1992 by the Working People's Alliance (WPA), the principal member of the AFG coalition.

## Results: National Assembly Election

The following shows the allocation of seats in the 65-member National Assembly, also subject to change pending the completion of the audit.

The 53 seats distributed by proportional representation based on the general election results are:

PPP/Civic	29
PNC	22
AFG	1
TUC	1

The remaining 12 seats in the National Assembly are determined by the outcome of the 10 Regional Council elections. Each Regional Council elects one member of the National Assembly and two representatives to the National Conference of Local Democratic Organs (NCLDO). The NCLDO then elects the remaining two members of the National Assembly.

In the Regional Council balloting, the PPP/Civic won majorities in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. The PNC won majorities in Regions 4, 7, and 10. In Regions 8 and 9, no party won a majority. In the horse-trading that followed, the AFG secured the seat from Region 8, TUF the seat from Region 9, and the PPP/Civic 11 of the 20 seats in the NCLDO, which virtually assured it the final two seats in parliament. With the new parliament expected to convene on February 26, and barring any last-minute deals, the composition was expected to be as follows:

PPP/Civic	36
PNC	25
AFG	2
TUF	2

In 1992 the PPP/Civic won 36 seats, the PNC 26, the WPA two, and TUF one.

- A two-stage audit of the elections and the electoral system by CARICOM-appointed specialists, to be completed within 90 days of January 17 and with the results binding on both parties.
- The establishment of a "broad-based" Constitutional Reform Commission to propose to the National Assembly within 18 months "measures and arrangements for the improvement of race relations," with new elections to be held within another 18 months.

There are a number of electoral anomalies for the auditors to consider, including circumstantial evidence that fraud may have affected the composition of the National Assembly, although almost certainly not the outcome of the presidential race.

But the key to Guyana's future will be determined by the effort to reform an essentially all-or-nothing electoral system. The constitutional reform commission and its mandate provide an opportunity for Guyanese to finally realize a national rather than a racial definition of themselves. It will be a long, arduous process, and bumps in the road are a certainty. CARICOM's role as a trusted broker will surely need to be sustained.

## Background

### *The Country*

Guyana, roughly the size of Idaho, is situated on the northeast shoulder of South America. Its neighbors are Suriname to the east, Venezuela to the west, and Brazil to the south. The population in 1997 was estimated by the government of Guyana at 778,000, based on the 1991 census with adjustments for annual natural net increase and net migration. Up to 90 percent of the population resides in a 10-to-40-mile band, less than 5 percent of the total land area, which extends along the 270-mile Atlantic coast.

Georgetown, located at the mouth of the Demerara River, is the capital and principal port. The city and its metropolitan area are home to more than a third of the population.

Guyanese society is ethnically bipolar. The largest group is Indo-Guyanese, descendants of indentured servants brought from India following the abolition of slavery in 1833. Indo-Guyanese account for about 50 percent of the population. Afro-Guyanese, descendants of slaves brought from Africa, constitute a little over 40 percent if those people of mixed but predominantly black ancestry are included. Small European and Chinese minorities account for a little over 2 percent of the population, while indigenous Amerindians account for between 4 and 5 percent. The national language is English.

Guyana's currency is the Guyanese dollar, whose symbol is G\$1. All monetary figures used in this report are in U.S. dollars unless otherwise specified.

The economy is based on agriculture (rice and sugar) and mining (bauxite and gold). Guyana is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Despite



sustained growth in the 1990s, its per capita GDP in 1996 was \$766, about 55 percent less than that of Jamaica.

Guyana's two principal trading partners are the United Kingdom and the United States, each of which represents about a third of the country's international trade. Guyanese products have preferential market access to the United States under the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI).

Guyana is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), and is a signatory of the Lomé Convention.

### ***System of Government***

Guyana, a member of the British Commonwealth, was granted internal self-government based on universal adult suffrage prior to elections in 1953 and became independent in 1966. The monarchical structure and the office of the governor-general were abandoned in 1970. The system of government is a hybrid: a presidential-legislative framework which retains elements of a parliamentary system and in which disproportionate power is granted to the president under the 1980 constitution. The constitution states that the president and the 65-member National Assembly are elected for five years and together constitute the parliament. The leader of the political party with the highest percentage of votes becomes president, while seats are distributed proportionally in the National Assembly.

### ***Historical Background***

Guyanese politics has been defined by racial polarization since the mid-1950s. Initially, the political arena was dominated by the People's Progressive Party (PPP), a multi-ethnic party founded in 1950 by Cheddi Jagan, a Marxist Indo-Guyanese; Janet Jagan, his white, Chicago-born wife; and Forbes Burnham, a left-leaning Afro-Guyanese. Cheddi Jagan was party leader, Janet was general secretary, and Burnham the party chairman. The PPP was a formidable, mass political party supported by both East Indian and black workers and intellectuals. The PPP easily won the 1953 parliamentary elections, the first under universal adult suffrage, winning 18 of 24 seats against a handful of right-wing and business-backed parties.

After 133 days, the British suspended the constitution and removed Jagan from office because of his Communist policies. The British Governor would rule until 1957. The ouster of the PPP government heightened already existing ethnic tensions within the party. Burnham unsuccessfully challenged Jagan for the party leadership on numerous occasions and finally broke away to found the People's National Congress (PNC). From that point on, Guyana's political landscape would be dominated by the clash between an Indo-Guyanese-based PPP and an Afro-Guyanese-based PNC. It was also a rural-urban

divide as the PPP derived its strength from the sugar belts, while the PNC was rooted in the coastal cities and mining towns.

The rallying cry of the PPP became *Apan Jhaat*, a way of saying in Hindi, "Vote your race." Burnham and the PNC, in turn, appealed to blacks as the only defense against Indo-Guyanese domination. Voting divided sharply along racial lines in fair elections in 1957 and 1961; the PPP, backed by the larger Indo-Guyanese segment of the population, won on each occasion.

Both the PPP and PNC strongly supported independence, but Britain and the United States did not want independence granted to a Marxist government under Jagan. London and Washington therefore backed the ideologically more moderate Burnham and his demand for a new constitution based on proportional representation. The Indo-Guyanese community, although the nation's largest, was thought to number less than half the total population, as the PPP had won with about 43 percent of the vote in 1961, against 41 percent for the PNC. But in the first-past-the-post system the PPP had gained almost double the number of seats. The PNC and its foreign backers believed that proportional representation would make it possible for a coalition of forces to defeat the PPP.

Jagan balked at the idea, but was soon confronted by mass demonstrations led by the PNC and PNC-linked trade unions supported by the United States. A general strike in 1993 sparked interracial violence that eventually led to more than 150 deaths among both Afro- and Indo-Guyanese. In the wake of the 11-week strike Jagan conceded. He agreed to allow Duncan Sandys, the British Colonial Secretary, to rule on the constitutional issue and a system of proportional representation was installed for the 1964 elections. Jagan would later state that, given the domestic and international forces allied against him, it was impossible to rule.

In 1964, under the new system, the PNC won 40.5 percent of the votes and 22 seats and the PPP 46 percent and 24 seats. The United Force (UF), an anti-communist, right-wing party supported by business interests, won 11.4 percent of the votes and seven seats. The PNC combined with the UF to form a coalition government. Britain granted Guyana independence in 1966.

Once in power, Burnham consolidated PNC rule and took control of the electoral system. The PNC-controlled National Assembly transferred the authority of the Elections Commission to a governmental department headed by a political appointee under the control of Burnham. By the time of the 1968 elections, the electoral machinery was sufficiently rigged, including PNC control over the "overseas vote," that the UF was no longer needed. The PNC secured a healthy majority for itself and allocated the PPP about a third of the seats in the legislature.

The outcome was similar in the 1973 elections, when the hijacking of ballot boxes in Indo-Guyanese communities by the predominantly Afro-Guyanese army became a common practice. In an address to a delegation of Caribbean visitors in 1976, Burnham, echoing New York City's William Marcy "Boss" Tweed, said that elections are not a matter of who votes, but who counts the votes.



In 1970 Burnham declared Guyana a "cooperative republic" and moved to establish ties with Eastern Bloc countries and radical Third World states. In 1974 he set out a stronger socialist line, to be carried out through "party paramountcy," in which all organs of the state would become agencies of the PNC and subject to its control. Party paramountcy was formalized through a rigged referendum in 1978, which led to the installation of a new constitution in 1980. The document retained the presidential-legislative framework, but granted the president excessive authority and immunity from criminal or civil prosecution.

The 1980 elections saw a new player, the Working People's Alliance (WPA), a party formed the year before. The WPA brought together politicians and intellectuals from both major ethnic groups pledged to racial harmony, free elections, and democratic socialism. Led by prominent Caribbean historian Walter Rodney, the WPA tried to project itself as a viable alternative to Burnham's fraud and corruption and the hard-line Marxism of Jagan.

In June 1980 Rodney was killed in a mysterious car explosion which many Guyanese believed was an assassination plot carried out by the PNC regime. The WPA boycotted the December 1980 election, in which the PNC gave itself 77 percent of the vote against the PPP and the UF. A team of international observers headed by British peer Lord Avebury stated that "the election was rigged massively and flagrantly."

Burnham died in August 1985. Desmond Hoyte, Burnham's appointed prime minister and long-time PNC stalwart, replaced him as interim president. Hoyte was generally considered more moderate than Burnham. Still, in December 1985, Hoyte secured a full five-year term in elections that were fraudulent in virtually every respect. In 1986 the PPP, the WPA, and three small parties, including a reconstituted UF, formed the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) to demand electoral reform.

In 1990 the PCD obtained international support for free elections. Burnham-style socialism had left the economy in ruins and since 1988 Hoyte had been liberalizing the economy and seeking Western assistance and trade. In 1990 the U.S. Congress and international human rights organizations pressed Washington to tie economic aid to democratic reform. Hoyte began making concessions. He eased media restrictions and allowed the start-up of an independent daily newspaper, the *Starbrook News*, which soon became the most respected and balanced source of news in the country. He invited electoral observation missions from the British Commonwealth and the Atlanta-based Carter Center, and committed to an independent electoral commission, a complete revision of voter registration rolls, and vote counting at polling places.

The Carter Center forged a compromise between the PNC and the PCD on the composition of an electoral commission. The new commission included three members appointed by the PNC, three from the PCD, and a chairman chosen by President Hoyte from a list of nominees submitted by opposition parties. The reform process nearly broke down over serious flaws in the new voter registration list and elections were delayed. After two postponements, three efforts to create a valid voter list, and with the constant mediation of the Carter Center, the election was finally held on October 5, 1992.

Hoyte touted recent economic growth after years of decline, but the social costs of an austerity program in what was already one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere had been severe. The PPP decided to run alone and the PCD unraveled. Jagan moderated his Marxist rhetoric, promised not to overturn Hoyte's economic reforms, and presented himself as a democratic candidate, and the only candidate capable of ending PNC domination. To reassure the business community, Jagan attached a "civic" group to the PPP, composed of supportive professionals and technocrats, and the party formally became the PPP/Civic. The WPA ran on a platform of racial cooperation and was the only other party to run a full slate of candidates.

The Indo-Guyanese majority turned out for Jagan. When it was apparent the PPP would win, PNC hard-liners orchestrated violent disturbances to establish a pretext for annulling the vote. But with Jimmy Carter and Commonwealth observers pressing Hoyte to call off the PNC cadres and urging the Elections Commission to proceed with the count, the process was completed. Jagan was elected president with 53.45 percent of the vote and Hoyte took 42.31 percent, percentages that mirrored the country's racial composition. The PPP took 36 seats in the National Assembly to 26 for the PNC, two for the WPA, and one for the UF. The WPA candidate, noted economist Clive Thomas, won less than 2 percent of the vote. Amid racial polarization, *Apan Jhaat* had prevailed, just as it had in the last fair elections of the pre-Burnham years.

## The Jagan Administration

President Jagan kept his commitment to the business community. During his tenure he did not reverse the economic restructuring carried out by his predecessor, although he significantly slowed the pace of privatization. He also named Samuel Hinds, the titular head of the Civic group, as prime minister. Under the 1980 constitution, the prime minister is granted few real powers, except as a stand-in or replacement for the president.

In the wake of the violent disturbances on election day, Jagan promised to establish a broad-based commission to promote racial tolerance. The commission was never established, nor was a promised White Paper on the matter ever written by a designated task force. According to Mike McCormick, co-president of the highly respected, multi-ethnic Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA), there was no political will on the part of the PPP and the PNC to move the project forward. As he told this writer, "It is symptomatic of the inability of these two parties to overcome their fundamental racial bias."

Jagan also had promised to initiate reform of the 1980 constitution beyond the changes to the electoral system. Throughout the 1980s the PPP had criticized the inordinate powers granted to the president and the president's virtual immunity from any kind of legal prosecution or impeachment. Although many of the mechanisms of party paramountcy had been let go under Hoyte, the PPP and prominent intellectual and civic



figures had argued that Guyana could not be fully democratic without further constitutional reform.

Once in office, Jagan governed in a generally evenhanded manner and rarely abused the authority granted to him by the constitution. But in the end he never moved seriously toward reforms that would dilute that authority. A constitutional reform committee was finally set up in the National Assembly in late 1996 with a mandate to publish a report before the next general elections. No report was ever issued. The GHRA stated in August 1996, "The lack of interest by the current ruling party in creating a new constitution is not lost on a population which was promised, when his party was in opposition, that a new constitution would be given the highest priority."

In 1994 local elections were held for the first time in 24 years to fill 1,238 council seats in Guyana's six principal municipalities and 65 local districts. A key role was played by the newly formed Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB), a nonpartisan local civic organization. The EAB promoted voter education and conducted Guyana's first domestic election-monitoring effort.

The PPP/Civic won a majority of the local districts and triumphed in the three municipalities where Indo-Guyanese are strong. The PNC won in two where Afro-Guyanese are a majority. The hottest race was in predominantly Afro-Guyanese Georgetown. The PNC was challenged in the capital by Good and Green Guyana (GGG), a party founded by Hamilton Green, a former prime minister under Burnham in the 1970s. Green, a traditional PNC hard-liner who appeared to be behind much of the election-day violence in 1992, had challenged Hoyte for the PNC leadership following the party's loss of power. When he failed, he formed the GGG. In the Georgetown race, the GGG won 12 of 30 seats on the city council, to 10 for the PNC and 8 for the PPP/Civic. Despite the animus between Green and Hoyte, the GGG and PNC managed to combine forces against the PPP/Civic to make Green the mayor.

The elections were relatively free of violence for the first time in more than 30 years. Voter turnout, however, was low, 47 percent nationally and just 33 percent in Georgetown. The EAB and other observers attributed that to fear of violence and a popular perception that local elections were unimportant. One of the reasons the WPA did not participate was its criticism that constitutionally, local authorities have little power vis-à-vis the national government.

Cheddi Jagan died of a heart attack at the age of 78 in March 1997 and Samuel Hinds assumed the presidency. Hinds appointed Janet Jagan, a member of the PPP's central and executive committees, as prime minister. For a brief period the nation seemed to come together in mourning, with even the PNC praising Cheddi Jagan as "one of the outstanding people in our history." But less than a week later, the PNC targeted Janet Jagan. It called her "a ruthless and vicious person" unfit to be prime minister and claimed that she was bent on promoting racial strife. The PNC was reproved by civic leaders and the Anglican Bishop of Guyana, but the attack was a harbinger of what was to come.

## Prelude to the Elections

In early September the PPP/Civic nominated Janet Jagan as its presidential candidate and government officials stated that the elections, constitutionally due by March 1998, would be held before the end of the year. Jagan told a crowd of supporters that it was her husband's dying wish that she "take over" for him. Samuel Hinds was announced as the nominee for prime minister and first vice-president, and Bharrat Jagdeo, the 33-year-old finance minister and Moscow-trained economist, the choice for second vice-president.

The PNC named Hoyte, its now 68-year-old party leader, as candidate for president. The WPA formed a coalition, the Alliance for Guyana (AFG), with the small Guyana Labour Party (GLP) and a civic action group headed by consumer advocate Sheila Holder. The AFG nominated Rupert Roopnarine, a member of the WPA's collective leadership and one of the party's two representatives in the National Assembly, as its presidential nominee. The UF, now formally known as The United Force (TUF), nominated Manzoor Nadir, its leader and the party's sole representative in the National Assembly, as its candidate.

During the summer there were about 20 other political parties, many of them one-man shows, which said they would run. By the time the government called the elections for December 15, with Nomination Day scheduled for November 5, many had dropped out. In the end, 10 parties or coalitions fulfilled the requirements of the electoral law to run candidates. Besides the PPP/Civic, the PNC, the AFG, and TUF, there were:

- Good and Green Guyana (GGG), with party leader Hamilton Green as presidential candidate.
- Guyana Democratic Party (GDP), whose leader and candidate, Asgar Ally, a former World Bank official, had been the first finance minister in the Jagan government and founded the party after leaving because of policy disputes.
- Justice for All Party (JFAP), whose founder and candidate, C. N. Sharma, owns a television station which he uses to highlight the plight of the poor.
- National Independent Party (NIP), whose leader and candidate, Shaier Hussain, promised a new constitution.
- National Democratic Front (NDF), a minuscule party based in the city of Linden whose leader and candidate, Joseph Bacchus, advocated free markets and free education.
- God Bless Guyana (GBG), led by Hardat Persaud, who said he had been compelled by God to run, and that as president would drive out the "nest of demons" from the National Assembly.

On Nomination Day, only 60 percent of the 461,369 registered voters had collected their voter I.D. cards, without which people could not vote. The Elections Commission used the media to encourage registered voters to pick up their cards, and as



election day approached the commission made arrangements to have outstanding cards delivered directly. The cut-off date was subsequently extended to the day before the vote and to the day itself in interior regions. In the end, 423,209 registered voters received their cards, while 38,160, or 8.3 percent, did not.

The Elections Commission consists of a chairman and six members. Following the same formula as in 1992, the chairman, Doodnauth Singh, a prominent lawyer, was appointed by former president Cheddi Jagan from a list of six people submitted by the three opposition parties represented in the National Assembly. Of the six other members, three were named by Jagan on behalf of the ruling party. Following negotiations between the opposition parties, the PNC named two members to the Commission, while a third was named on behalf of the AFG and TUF. The Commission has authority over Stanley Singh, the Chief Elections Officer, who coordinates polling station officials and other staff.

The government, with the concurrence of the opposition, invited international organizations to join the EAB in observing the electoral process. The Carter Center was already committed to Jamaica, where elections would take place the same week as in Guyana. But the Commonwealth, the OAS, and the Washington-based International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) agreed to send observer delegations.

## The Campaign

The campaign began in earnest following the PPP/Civic's nomination of Jagan in September. At the end of August, an opinion poll commissioned by the state-owned, pro-PPP/Civic *Guyana Chronicle* newspaper had the ruling party ahead of the PNC by 57 percent to 27 percent. The poll was conducted by the New York-based North American Caribbean Teachers Association (NACTA), which had correctly picked the winners in Guyana in 1992 and Trinidad and Tobago in 1995. NACTA stated that among those polled, opinion broke sharply along racial lines.

Independent local analysts generally saw Jagan as the front-runner in a two-way contest, but they suspected that bias was a factor in the wide margin of NACTA poll. The results were prominently featured by the two pro-PPP/Civic, state-run television stations. Most analysts looked for a closer race and many considered the possibility that Jagan might win the presidency with a plurality while the PPP/Civic might fail to gain a majority in the 65-seat National Assembly. NACTA conducted a second poll in late November which showed a slight narrowing of the margin between the PPP/Civic and the PNC. There were no surveys by fully independent firms.

Jagan's advanced age and recent heart trouble led to suggestions from senior PPP officials that if she were to win she might step down before the end of her term. Jagan did not deny the possibility, and even hinted that Jagdeo would be her successor. Some observers thought at first that Jagdeo was placed on the ticket simply because with Jagan

and Hinds, the party needed an Indo-Guyanese on the ticket. But grumbling from PPP party stalwarts suggested that Jagdeo had indeed been leapfrogged to the top of the party without their consent, heralding a probable leadership struggle when Jagan leaves the scene.

Initially, the two main parties focused on economic policy. The PPP/Civic pointed to the rapid expansion of the economy and the decline of inflation into single digits under Cheddi Jagan's administration. It used the slogan, "One good term deserves another." The party promised that in the next term the benefits of growth would be distributed to all, particularly in the area of housing. Jagan also touted her party's record of reducing an inherited foreign debt of \$2.1 billion by about 25 percent through negotiated write-offs. (Guyana's foreign debt remains one of the highest per capita in the world.)

Hoyte countered by arguing that growth had been a result of policies originally implemented by the PNC and that further expansion was at risk because the Jagan government had failed to follow through on advancing privatization. Hoyte promised to attract \$500 million annually in foreign investment, double economic growth to 12 percent annually, and create 25,000 jobs a year.

But with the growing sense that the elections might be closer than expected, the campaign soon descended to the level of personal attacks and, at the end, racial fear-mongering. Some local analysts initially expressed hope that it would not happen, noting that both the PPP/Civic and the PNC had incorporated some candidates of different ethnicity on their National Assembly slates. But others noted that it had been done in the past and turned out to be just window-dressing. Notably, in the detailed manifestos issued by the PPP/Civic and the PNC, each about 40 pages, neither party had more than a sentence on promoting racial harmony.

Tensions began to mount when PNC supporters disrupted a number of PPP/Civic public meetings, throwing rocks at speakers. PPP/Civic supporters responded in kind and eventually Hoyte, Jagan, and Hinds were all pelted with stones and eggs during separate rallies. There were also incidents in which the houses of known political activists residing in another party's stronghold were stoned. The Elections Commission intervened in late November with a Code of Conduct to promote peaceful campaigning. The PPP/Civic, the PNC, and most of the smaller parties signed the document, but violent incidents continued.

After the initial PNC assaults on PPP/Civic rallies, the PPP/Civic began to stridently equate Hoyte with the anti-Indo-Guyanese thuggery of Burnham, a not very subtle call for *Apan Jhaat*. Hoyte and the PNC responded with ugly attacks on Jagan. Hoyte called her "an antique" and said the PPP was "obsessed with the dead." Other party figures railed against her as "a Caucasian old lady...who does not belong here and who is not one of us." Hoyte also played on Afro-Guyanese fears of Indo-Guyanese domination by declaring that if Jagan were elected, Guyanese would be living in "Jagana." When Jagan accused Hoyte of being "racial," he countered that she was the one playing "the racist card," and on it went.



Civic and religious leaders, the GHRA, and the editors of *Stabroek News* called for an end to the racial war of words, but the ugly messages were amplified by the broadcast media, which have grown rapidly in the 1990s. The government controls two television stations and radio, all of which are biased in favor of the PPP/Civic. There are a number of independent television stations, one biased in favor of the PNC, another rabidly so, and one that unswervingly supports the PPP/Civic. There is also the station owned by JFAP candidate C. N. Sharma.

As it had done for nearly two decades, the social democratic WPA and its coalition partners in the AFG campaigned for racial tolerance and cooperation, saying in the AFG manifesto that for 40 years the PNC and the PPP "have divided the people and kept them divided." Presidential candidate Roopnarine described the PPP/Civic and PNC campaigns as "drumming up tribal support." Noting the nation's great natural resources, the AFG said that "fear and hate" had made Guyana "the richest country in the Caribbean with the poorest people." The only way to turn that around, it stated, was to achieve unity among all races.

According to a report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 78 percent of the Guyanese population lived below the absolute poverty line in 1996, i.e., they were unable to obtain the food and non-food requirements necessary for survival. For the Amerindian population, the percentage was 83 percent. Unemployment nationally was 12 percent, but nearly triple that percentage for those between the ages of 15 and 24. At least 40 percent of the workforce was categorized as self-employed, mostly people struggling to get by in the informal sector.

The AFG knew that it had no chance to win the presidency. Rather, it aimed to build upon the two seats already held by the WPA in the National Assembly. It hoped that if the PPP/Civic did not win a majority, the AFG could strengthen its influence in government through the horse-trading that would inevitably follow. Eusi Kwayana, a WPA founder and a member of its multi-ethnic, collective leadership, made a public appeal to Guyanese who felt compelled for whatever reason to vote their race. He asked that just one member of their families vote for the AFG as a gesture toward racial healing.

The GGG and TUF also were angling for a role if the PPP/Civic did not win a majority of seats. The PPP/Civic, despite the NACTA poll results, was clearly concerned about the possibility. Jagan publicly warned supporters about opposition parties forming a coalition against the ruling party. Thereafter, PPP/Civic spokespersons and candidates on the stump took aim at the key smaller parties as well as the PNC.

## The Vote

On December 15, 1997, voters went to the polls in an orderly and peaceful fashion. There were 1,844 polling stations throughout the country, nearly double the number used in 1992 when there were long lines and congestion. Many shops and businesses in

Georgetown and other cities were boarded shut for fear of violence, but the day passed tranquilly.

EAB project director Lawrence Lachmansingh and his staff placed just over 700 trained observers in polling stations throughout the country. According to the EAB's interim report issued on December 24, most presiding officers and other polling station staff conducted themselves in "a businesslike manner," although "knowledge of the relevant procedures varied greatly from station to station." The EAB stated that despite some irregularities, "The secrecy of the ballot was not compromised and electoral procedures were generally carried out with impartiality."

Some anxiety was caused by scattered incidents in which the names of voters with I.D. cards were not found on the registration list. A number of cases were resolved when voters were directed to the correct polling station, but others were unable to vote.

Each ballot had two sections. The first was for the general election in which people voted for a political party's list of candidates for the National Assembly. In the other section, they voted for a party's list for Regional Councils. People could split their vote. The general election is for president and for 53 of the 65 seats in the National Assembly. A party needs only to obtain a plurality of votes for its presidential candidate to win. The 53 seats are awarded to the parties in the National Assembly in proportion to the percentage of votes they obtain, as if the country were one large constituency. Seats in each of the 10 Regional Councils are also awarded proportionally. The number of seats in each council is determined by the number of registered voters in the region.

The remaining 12 seats in the National Assembly are filled based on the outcome of the regional elections. Each of the 10 Regional Councils elects a member of the National Assembly and two representatives to the National Conference of Local Democratic Organs (NCLDO). The NCLDO then elects the last two members of the National Assembly.

The polls closed at 6 p.m. The EAB estimated voter turnout at between 82 percent and 85 percent, as compared to around 81 percent in 1992. The Elections Commission promised the results by that night, but few returns were released. The following day, the eight-member IFES observer delegation and the somewhat larger OAS mission stated that the elections had been conducted in an open and transparent manner. But as the 14-member Commonwealth observer team stated in a detailed report issued the following weekend, "Tallying: here the problems began."

## Breakdown and Upheaval

There were only scattered problems or delays in the counting of votes at the 1,844 polling stations. What followed, however, was a nearly across-the-board breakdown in the transmission of results, particularly in Region 4, home to 43.3 percent of registered voters and a traditional PNC stronghold.



The procedure called for the 1,844 presiding officers to take the ballot boxes and the Statements of Poll, placed in separately sealed envelopes, to the Elections Commission district offices. From there they were to be transferred to the Commission headquarters in Georgetown. In many regions, but not Region 4, results were to be communicated by telephone or radio to Georgetown. The Statement of Poll is the legal document for the official tallying of results by the Commission, and each was to be signed by the presiding officer, other poll staff, and political party agents.

The EAB stated in its December 24 report, "There was an unbelievable breakdown...Instructions for administering these arrangements appeared to have been either altered, countermanded or, in some cases, were non-existent." The EAB also noted widespread irregularities in the preparation of Statements of Poll. A majority of those collected by EAB observers were not properly completed. A good number lacked signatures of presiding officers, poll staff, and party agents or were missing critical information such as division numbers and subdivision designations.

Many of the initial returns released by the Commission came from Regions 2, 3, and 6, PPP/Civic strongholds. By late Tuesday, December 16, the P/P/Civic was declaring victory through the state-run media. The PNC declared victory, too, stating that it would surge ahead once the returns from Region 4 came in, a message broadcast by pro-PNC television stations. But the process of feeding Statements of Poll into the computers bogged down terribly because the statements were improperly completed or missing. It turned out, too, that many had been wrongly placed inside sealed ballot boxes or taken home by presiding officers.

With the country clamoring for results, and the PNC and the PPP/Civic exciting supporters with expectations of triumph, pressure mounted on the Elections Commission. On the morning of Wednesday the 17th, Chairman Doodnauth Singh called in representatives of the political parties and the EAB so that their tally sheets could be used for reconciliation with the returns the Commission had received. But the Commission was not properly prepared to conduct the verification exercise. Commonwealth observers on the scene reported that Statements of Poll were not presented in sequential order, which led to double tallying of some polls. In a number of cases, the party representatives found that national and regional results had been combined by presiding officers into one total, and in other cases national and regional sheets had become separated. More than 90 percent of the Statements of Poll from Region 4 had been improperly completed.

The representatives of the PNC and other opposition parties complained, but the grueling verification process continued on Thursday the 18th, even as both the PPP/Civic and the PNC continued to claim victory. But there were yet more problems. The Commonwealth team noted a "worrying disparity" between the results that were agreed between the Commission and the party representatives and those that were being announced publicly by Chairman Singh. In its report issued a few days later, the Commonwealth group stated the performance of the Commission in verifying the results "was not only not transparent but very poor."

Late Thursday the 18th the PNC stated that it would not accept the results, which at the time showed the PPP/Civic well ahead of the PNC. That night thousands of angry PNC supporters were on the verge of assaulting the Elections Commission headquarters in downtown Georgetown. Police launched tear gas canisters and fired pellet guns to disperse rock-throwing demonstrators. Twelve people were injured, six taken to hospitals. The government ordered the army into the streets to assist the police in preventing further incidents.

On the morning of Friday the 19th Hoyte announced at a press conference that the PNC would petition the Supreme Court to block the results of the elections. At midday, Chairman Singh declared Janet Jagan president based on the returns tallied to that point. He said that with 90 percent of the vote counted, the PPP/Civic's advantage over the PNC was greater than the approximately 37,000 votes left to be counted.

Soon after, the media were hastily summoned to the presidential office at the State House for a ceremony in which Cecil Kennard, the Chancellor of the Judiciary, would swear in Jagan in the presence of Chairman Singh. Before they could begin, however, two court officers arrived with an injunction from Desiree Bernard, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, which blocked Jagan from taking office. The injunction was based on a petition by the PNC that Chairman Singh had acted unconstitutionally in declaring the winner of the elections before the count had been completed, and without the consent of the three opposition members of the Elections Commission.

Commission member Jocelyn Dow, representing the AFG and TUF, had joined the two PNC members in opposing the chairman's declaration. She said that the procedures after the close of polls lacked consistency and often legality, and that Stanley Singh, the Chief Elections Officer, "had constantly to be altering his numbers without convincing explanation, his latest revision being made just a few hours ago."

Jagan's presidential security guards manhandled the court officers to keep them from serving the injunction. Observers focused on Chancellor Kennard, expecting him to protest such treatment of court officers. But he did not intervene. Chairman Singh then announced that Jagan had already been secretly sworn in at the Elections Commission and that, in effect, the media had been invited to a reenactment. Once that had taken place, the court officers made their way through the crowd and handed the Supreme Court injunction to Jagan. She disdainfully threw them over her shoulder, a gesture captured by the television cameras, and a number of those present heard Chairman Singh tell her, "That's good."

Chairman Singh later stated that the army chief of staff and the police commissioner had advised the quick swearing-in because of the security situation in the streets. They responded with a joint statement denying that they had given the chairman any such advice. Early on Sunday the 21st police defused two bombs found about a quarter mile from Jagan's residence. Later, following a rally of more than 10,000 PNC supporters in Georgetown on Sunday the 21st, Hoyte said, "We now have an unlawful government...We shall shut the country down."



On Monday the 22nd Judge Bernard said that she would begin hearing arguments on the PNC petition on December 30. On Tuesday the 23rd Chairman Singh, under fire from the *Stabroek News* and prominent civic leaders as well as the PNC, invited the EAB and the political parties to participate in a second attempt to verify the vote. The PNC agreed, but during the process its representatives took issue with a number of ballot-box discrepancies. Outside, Chairman Singh stated to some reporters that the PNC's complaints did not matter because the PPP/Civic had already won.

When that remark reached the PNC its representatives stormed out of the Electoral Commission. The PNC issued a statement alleging "massive fraud" and initiated daily street protests in downtown Georgetown to demand the holding of new elections. Washington advised U.S. citizens not to travel to Guyana because of the danger of "sporadic violence."

On Monday the 29th police used tear gas and batons to end a five-hour siege of Jagan's office by PNC supporters, some of whom used racial epithets in demanding that she step down. Jagan accused the PNC of "seditious statements, calculated to incite racism and promote mutiny," and said that procedural difficulties had been "exploited by the major minority party to raise claims of rigging and fraud, and to stir unrest."

## The Results

On Tuesday, December 30, the Elections Commission issued final results. In the general election, the PPP/Civic received 220,667 votes, or 55.26 percent of the valid votes cast. The PNC garnered 161,901 votes, or 40.54 percent. Compared to the 1992 elections, when the PPP/Civic received 53.45 percent and the PNC 42.31 percent, the PPP/Civic had widened the spread from 11.14 percent to 14.72 percent.

Based on the proportional system, the PPP/Civic was allocated 29 of 53 seats in the National Assembly, against 22 for the PNC (compared with 28 for the PPP/Civic and 23 for the PNC in 1992). One seat went to TUF, which came third with 5,937 votes, and one to the AFG, which came fourth with 4,783 votes.

In the vote for Regional Councils, the PPP/Civic won majorities in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. The PNC won majorities in Regions 4, 7, and 10. In regions 8 and 9, no party won a majority. In the horse-trading that followed, the AFG secured the seat from Region 8, TUF the seat from Region 9, and the PPP/Civic 11 of the 20 seats in the NCLDO, which virtually assured it the final two seats in parliament. With the new parliament expected to convene on February 26, and barring any last-minute deals, the PPP/Civic was expected to have 36 members, the PNC 25, and the AFG and TUF two each.

## CARICOM Mediation

In her inaugural speech, Janet Jagan accepted a proposal by the private sector, civic leaders, and the EAB for an international audit of the election results. The PNC rejected the idea, saying that it was only a delaying tactic by the PPP/Civic. Later, the PNC appeared to accept the idea in principle, but maintained its position that the Jagan government was illegal and that new elections were required.

The *Stabroek News* said in an editorial on January 3, "We have a de facto government. Whether it is *dé jure* remains to be decided by the court." The next day it said, "Mrs. Jagan should abide by the court order until the resolution of the court case currently being heard by the Chief Justice. It should be the former administration which should be functioning at present." In turn, it chastised Hoyte and the PNC for holding illegal demonstrations that "are aggravating the situation and opening him to the charge that he does not want a resolution of crisis," noting that protest marches require written permission from the police under the law. In a subsequent editorial the newspaper stated—echoing the opinion of civic groups, business, church leaders, the GHRA, and EAB—that a simple audit of the vote count would be insufficient, that a thorough inquiry into the entire electoral process was required.

As the nation waited for Judge Bernard's decision, the PNC adopted new protest tactics. Marchers would surround government ministries and offices, hurling racially-antagonist anti-Jagan remarks and demanding that workers come out. Often, white-skinned toy dolls impaled on sticks were held aloft and Obeah rituals invoking evil against Jagan were performed in front of ministry entrances. (A number of Afro-Guyanese practice Obeah, which originated among the slaves brought from West Africa.) More often than not, employees would eventually exit the building and the marchers would proceed to the next target. Pro-PNC television stations provided supportive and frequently inflammatory coverage.

Pro-PPP/Civic media assailed the marchers as "thugs" and worse. On Monday, January 5, two small bombs were hurled at the NTN television station run by a strident PPP/Civic supporter, critically injuring a security guard. The next day a bomb shattered windows at Le Meridien Pegasus, Georgetown's largest hotel. Jagan stated, "It is clear to the entire nation who is responsible for the escalation of terrorism and violence. On the eve of the attack, the PNC had resorted to public incitement."

By the end of that week the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Jamaica, and Barbados had formally recognized Jagan as president, but all urged that an international audit of the elections be conducted to ease the unrest.

The PNC denied responsibility for the bombings and, as of the date of this report, the incidents had not been resolved. Some local analysts suggested drug traffickers might have carried out the bombings, hoping to further tie down the army and police. In this decade Guyana has been increasingly used as a transshipment point for narcotics, mostly cocaine, which enters Guyana from neighboring Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname.



On Monday the 12th Judge Bernard dismissed the PNC's petition to declare Jagan's presidency illegal, stating that under the constitution it was not within the Supreme Court's jurisdiction to rule on the matter. She said the petition could only be judged by the Court of Appeal. Following the ruling PNC protesters surged into the streets, smashing windows, looting stores, and assaulting and robbing passers-by. The government issued a ban on marches and public meetings and police in riot gear re-took the streets. Hoyte responded by saying, "We will not be silenced" and urged supporters to protest peacefully.

The next day thousands of PNC protesters defied the ban, hurling missiles at government buildings and setting fire to tires in the street. Businesses and schools closed and police again responded with tear gas and pellet guns. In the two days, there were nearly three dozen people injured and more than 50 arrests. The government accused the PNC of "terrorism," while the PNC denied any responsibility for "violent and criminal behavior."

A CARICOM delegation arrived on Wednesday the 14th and met separately in Georgetown with Jagan and Hoyte the following day. The mission was sent by Prime Minister Keith Mitchell of Grenada, the current chairman of the organization, after consultation with Caribbean leaders, particularly Prime Minister Owen Arthur of Barbados and Prime Minister P. J. Patterson of Jamaica. The 15-member CARICOM consists of the nations of the English-speaking Caribbean plus Haiti and Suriname. The delegation to Guyana was led by Sir Henry Forde, a former foreign minister and attorney general of Barbados. The other two members were Sir Shridath Ramphal, CARICOM's external trade negotiator and former Commonwealth secretary general, and Sir Alister McIntyre, vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies and former CARICOM secretary general.

The delegation succeeded in bringing Jagan and Hoyte to the table. PNC supporters continued to demonstrate, but the protests were carried out peacefully and without incident. Following three days of private negotiations, an agreement was reached the night of Saturday the 17th and signed by Jagan and Hoyte. The accord called for the following measures:

- A two-stage audit to be conducted by CARICOM-appointed election specialists within 90 days of January 17. The first stage would be to verify the election results and the second would entail an inquiry into the overall electoral process. The PPP/Civic and the PNC agreed to cooperate in passing legislation to establish the exact terms of reference for the auditing team. The two parties also agreed to abide by the results of the audit. The audit would be carried out without prejudice to any court actions challenging the outcome of the elections, which meant the PNC would be able to pursue its petition at the Court of Appeal.
- The establishment of a "broad-based" Constitutional Reform Commission to address "measures and arrangements for the improvement of race relations in

Guyana, including the contribution which equal opportunity legislation and concepts drawn from the CARICOM Charter of Civil Society can contribute to the cause of justice, equity and progress." The commission's terms of reference would be determined by the National Assembly after consultations with political parties, and membership would be drawn from the civic, religious, and private sectors. The commission would present its recommendations to the National Assembly within 18 months of January 17. New elections based on reforms implemented by the National Assembly would be held within 18 months of the commission's presentation.

- A lifting of the ban on public meetings and an immediate moratorium on public demonstrations and marches for a minimum of three months from January 17.

## The Task of the Auditors

After the agreement was signed, Prime Minister Mitchell proposed to the political parties in Guyana a list of names for the auditing team. The PPP/Civic and the PNC were not satisfied and Mitchell went to Guyana in late January to move the process along. He stated that the team would consist of six to seven members, "people who have vast experience in electoral machinery" in their individual countries in the Caribbean.

The team will need to look at these elections from a number of angles. Following the release of final results by the Elections Commission on December 30, Chairman Singh ordered that ballot boxes, Statements of Poll, and all other relevant materials be secured in metal containers and moved to a vault in the privately-owned Demerara Bank in Georgetown. The Commission members representing the PNC, the AFG, and TUF protested that they were not properly informed of this measure, and therefore no opposition representatives were present to witness the transfer. Although an EAB observer was on hand, PNC commissioner Barton Scotland described it as bolting the stable door after the horses escaped. The first task therefore will be to inventory the contents of the bank vault to determine if anything is missing.

The team may have difficulty in keeping the two stages of the audit separate. In the first stage, the team is to verify the elections results. Presumably, this will involve comparing ballot box contents with Statements of Poll and the tally sheets kept by political parties and the EAB. But it is known that many Statements of Poll were improperly filled out and that at least some were missing. Also, AFG representatives involved in the two aborted verification attempts in December allege that the signatures of presiding officers on many statements had evidently been falsified. If the auditors determine that there are significant problems with the Statements of Poll, then already an investigation of the overall electoral process itself becomes warranted.

In the course of the audit the PNC should have the opportunity to present the evidence of "massive fraud" that it claims to have. Prior to the CARICOM-brokered



agreement, the PPP/Civic repeatedly challenged the PNC to present proof or shut up. While offering no concrete evidence, PNC representatives involved in the verification process stated in the media that they found at least 159 Statements of Poll missing in Region 4 alone and charged that Chairman Singh and the PPP/Civic commissioners had "concocted replacement documents." Robert Corbin, head of the PNC verification team, stated that he had seen results from polling stations in PNC strongholds with "very low PNC vote totals." He alleged that "the entire system was hijacked right after the polls closed" in order to commit systematic fraud, and that the administrative confusion was deliberately created to cover it up.

According to David de Caires, publisher of the *Stabroek News*, he and the editors considered three possible scenarios for what had happened. The one painted by the PNC was considered highly unlikely. Another was that the PNC itself created the problems as a pretext to cry fraud. The newspaper believes that 80 percent to 90 percent of the presiding officers and polling staff in Region 4 would have been PNC members or sympathizers. The PNC also had agents at every polling station in the country and would have been able to know early in the evening of December 15 which way the elections were going. If it realized it was going to lose, the theory goes, the PNC, historically well-versed in organized electoral manipulation, could have ordered its people to botch the Statement of Poll and the transfer of materials to the Elections Commission.

The *Stabroek News* was skeptical that the PNC would resort to such measures, but prior to the January 17 accord it recommended that at all presiding officers and polling staff in Region 4 be summoned and made to account for their conduct after the polls closed. The question at the end of January was whether the CARICOM team, with its exact terms of reference still to be determined, would have the legal latitude to conduct such an investigation.

The more likely scenario, according to the *Stabroek News* and a number of local analysts, was that the confusion following the vote was the result of a gross administrative breakdown stemming from bad planning, poor training, and general incompetence. The *Stabroek News* even theorized that the advanced deterioration of the education system after decades of authoritarian rule and economic decline was a factor.

The question then becomes whether any of the parties took advantage of the confusion to actually commit fraud and, if so, to what extent. In late January the quick count conducted by the EAB on election day became known. Based on the results from about 100 polling stations, it showed the PPP/Civic with 53.3 percent and the PNC with 43.5 percent, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent. That would seem to dispel the idea that massive fraud had been committed.

Still, there are a number of anomalies for the auditors to consider, including circumstantial evidence that the PPP/Civic or people on behalf of the party may have rigged sufficient numbers to alter the composition of the National Assembly. There may be plausible explanations, but given the level of uncertainty and distrust created by the administrative breakdown, everything should be looked into. As one local analyst said to

this writer, "When the auditors come, they will not find Burnham-style fraud. What they need to look for is rodent fraud, a nibble here, a nibble there, then determine what it adds up to. If it made a difference between the PPP/Civic having a majority or a plurality in the assembly, then that's a big thing."

First, there is the question of voter turnout. As noted earlier, there were 461,481 registered voters, but by election day only 423,209 had obtained the voter I.D. cards necessary to vote. The Elections Commission attributed the shortfall to people being out of the country; people whose jobs, especially miners, kept them away from their home regions; and deaths, because registration period began in June 1996. According to the final results issued by the Elections Commission, a total of 408,057 votes were cast. The official turnout, as a percentage of registered voters, therefore was 88.42 percent, compared to approximately 81 percent in 1992. But turnout as a percentage of those actually holding I.D. cards was 96.42 percent. The AFG stated in a press release, "This percentage is not credible where voting is not compulsory."

Some local analysts point out that the procedures for card distribution depended in large part on the will of registered voters to pick them up. And since the cards are only useful for voting, people who endured the process would have done so because they were determined to vote. Still, that nearly all of the actually eligible voters would have turned out is extraordinary by any reckoning. If the auditors find there was no artificial inflation, the enormous turnout could indicate a strong sense of civic duty or, and this may be more likely, the effectiveness of both major parties in playing on racial insecurity to drum up tribal support. It's clear that very few families responded to Eusi Kwayana's plea to have at least one member vote for the AFG in the name of racial harmony.

There also appear to be discrepancies between the incomplete results released by the Elections Commission on December 19, the day Jagan was sworn in, and the final results issued on December 30. For example, on December 19, Chairman Singh stated that he was able to declare Jagan president because with 90 percent of the vote counted, the PPP/Civic's advantage over the PNC was greater than the approximately 37,000 votes left to be counted. In examining the final results released on December 29, however, one finds that there were actually 59,146 votes still to be counted, 37,477 in Region 4 alone. When Singh declared Jagan president, the PPP/Civic was leading by only 46,973 votes, which undermines Singh's justification for declaring Jagan president before all the votes were counted.

As noted earlier, Chairman Singh also stated that the army chief of staff and the police commissioner had advised a quick swearing-in, which they denied. More than one local analyst told this writer it was possible that the PPP/Civic leaned on Singh in the name of racial solidarity to declare Jagan president and have her sworn in before it was legitimate to do so. It is also possible that Singh was misinformed, deliberately or otherwise, by members of his staff or Chief Elections Officer Stanley Singh about the number of votes still to be counted.



There also appears to be a possible discrepancy between the December 19 results for Region 4 and the final results for that region. On December 19, the PNC was leading the PPP/Civic in Region 4 by 55.46 percent to 41.45 percent, a difference of 14.01 percent, with 22 percent of the votes in that region still to be counted. The final results for Region 4—52.15 percent for the PNC and 44.67 percent for the PPP/Civic—showed that the PNC margin had somehow narrowed by nearly half to 7.48 percent.

The shift is significant. If the percentages established during the count of 78 percent of the vote in the region had held, the PNC would have defeated the PPP/Civic by about 24,000 votes in Region 4. With the change in pattern during the counting of the last 22 percent, the PNC won by only 12,856 votes. The difference, more than 11,000 votes, would have meant at least one more seat for the PNC in the National Assembly and one less for the PPP/Civic.

In examining the evidence, the auditors will want to keep in mind that the computerized tallying of votes was halted on December 18 because of malfunctioning programs. The computer department in the main Elections Commission building was shut down and the computer staff, selected by a consensus of all Commission members, removed from the process. The counting then reverted to the old method of calculators and spread sheets, conducted by other staff in a separate building in the Commission compound.

The auditors also should look into the decision by the Elections Commission on the eve of the elections to have voter I.D. cards put in the ballot boxes along with the ballots rather than be retained by the voters. According to the last-minute instructions, poll staff were to separate the ballots before the counting and then place them in a separate bag. The Commission's thinking apparently was to retain the cards for use in local elections due by June 1998.

Even though the cards were supposed to be machine-punched to indicate the card holder had voted, the PNC protested that the change in procedure provided an opportunity for "recycling" cards and double voting. EAB project director Lachmansingh said the PNC may have had a case, given that EAB observers saw poll staff at some stations incorrectly placing the cards in separate bags or containers while voting was still underway.

Also worthy of scrutiny is the outcome in Region 1, where previously the PPP/Civic had never won. In these elections the PPP/Civic out-pollled the PNC by 57.01 percent to 26.50 percent, better than two to one. Lachmansingh notes that Region 1 did benefit from improvements in education and infrastructure during the Jagan administration. The AFG, in turn, alleges that the PPP/Civic used a government food program to "flood" Region 1 and the heavily Amerindian regions 8 and 9 with flour and sardines during the campaign. The use of government resources for partisan electoral purposes is illegal under the electoral law.

In this regard, the Commonwealth observers found that in some regions during the campaign "there was a very fine line between the work done by some people in their role



as government officials and their work as party representatives." There is also the question of the PPP/Civic's biased use of state-run television. The Commonwealth team recommended that "a formula should be devised to ensure equitable use of the public media by all political parties." It remained to be seen whether the CARICOM auditors would take into account the utilization of state resources by the ruling party in determining the overall legitimacy of the elections.

## Concluding Assessments

On December 20 the Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA) released a statement worthy of being quoted at length:

Once again the Guyanese people have been robbed of the satisfaction of a peaceful and efficient elections by racial animosity, perceptions of fraud and political thuggery which have carried us to the brink of communal violence. Despite the widespread longing for racial harmony and peace, we are again forced back into racial rather than national definitions of ourselves.

While an explanation for the extraordinary administrative failures needs to be thorough and to be quick, this must not distract us from the real issue, which is the lengths to which both major parties will go to avoid losing an election to the other. Let us not forget that before the elections began, neither party was able to convince citizens that its commitment to multi-racial politics would prevail over an obsession with power...

The nation is sick and tired of the evasion and excuses by both parties; sick and tired of nicely balanced racial slates of candidates disguising the racial cultures of these parties; sick and tired of racist attitudes and conversations tolerated by leaders unwilling to put their racial support at risk. This basic racial culture rapidly reasserts itself when the electoral tide turns and the more unscrupulous elements in the media and the parties gain ascendancy...

...the urgent need for a political solution to racial vulnerability is the overwhelming priority...a beginning is for the leadership of both major parties to establish a process immediately to ensure significant participation in government of all racial factions.

Regardless of whether this is acceptable to the hard-core followers, conditioned over the years to view tolerance as weakness, nothing less will be acceptable to the vast majority of this battered nation.

The GHRA issued its statement when the worst of the crisis was yet to come. When CARICOM intervened, Guyana appeared on the brink of a wholesale bloodletting not seen since the racial strife of the early 1960s. To the great credit of the CARICOM negotiators, the agreement reached between the PPP/Civic and the PNC on January 17 provides a framework through which to address not just the elections, but also the fundamental issue of racial insecurity.

The CARICOM auditors have their work cut out for them, but Guyana's future will be determined in large part by the success or failure of the constitutional reform effort. Somehow Guyana must find a way to change the essentially all-or-nothing nature of its political system. Thus far the leadership of the PPP/Civic and the PNC have exhibited little political will to move in that direction. The PPP/Civic has a built-in Indo-Guyanese majority and believes that with *Apan Jhaat* it can win elections indefinitely. Hard-liners in the party were quietly chafing at the terms of the January 17 agreement within days of its signing. The PNC, in turn, sees democracy as a permanent threat to the Afro-Guyanese minority, hence the party's congenital impulse to subvert it.

As the late Martin Carter, the renowned Guyanese poet and intellectual, wrote in 1962, "None of the groups in Guyanese society is prepared to have any other group ruling it. Not until each group is confident that no other group will rule will there be real peace in this country."

Many of Guyana's civic and church leaders, as well as the *Stabroek News*, the GHRA, the AFG, and a number of independent analysts and intellectuals believe that some form of democratic power-sharing, based on a redesigned electoral system, is needed. The model mentioned most frequently is democratic South Africa, although none of its promoters see a Mandela-type figure on the horizon in Guyana. That the agreement calls for a broad-based reform commission is promising, because some of Guyana's best and brightest should finally have real authority to make concrete contributions. But the initial delays in simply naming the CARICOM auditing team indicate that making the agreement work will be a long and arduous process.

The continued role of CARICOM therefore will be critical. It rose to the occasion in unprecedented fashion, which bodes well for the English-speaking Caribbean as a whole and its prospects for addressing region-wide economic and social challenges. CARICOM intervention helped to restore calm and provided hope that Guyanese might finally realize a national rather than a racial definition of themselves. But bumps in the road are a certainty, and CARICOM's role as a trusted broker will surely need to be sustained.

## About the Author

Douglas W. Payne is an adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. He has covered Latin American and the Caribbean since the early 1980s. He has reported on elections and political transitions throughout the region and testified on regional issues before the U.S. Congress. He is the author of the CSIS Western Hemisphere Election Study Series reports on the 1997 Jamaica and St. Lucia elections, the 1996 Suriname and Nicaragua elections, the 1995 Trinidad and Tobago elections, the 1994 Antigua and Barbuda and St. Vincent and the Grenadines elections, as well as *Democracy in the Caribbean: A Cause for Concern* (CSIS 1995). He has written for *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, *The Washington Post*, *The Journal of Commerce*, *The Miami Herald* and *The International Herald Tribune*.



## Appendix: Results by Region

Following are the general election totals by region for the four political parties that won seats in the National Assembly.

---

### Region 1 - Barima/Wain

PPP/Civic	5,461
PNC	2,535
TUF	1,065
AFG	154

---

### Region 2 - Pomeroon/Supenaam

PPP/Civic	17,081
PNC	6,552
TUF	292
AFG	121

---

### Region 3 - Essequibo Islands/West Demerara

PPP/Civic	40,604
PNC	13,817
AFG	300
TUF	163

---

### Region 4 - Demerara/Mahaica

PNC	89,609
PPP/Civic	76,753
AFG	1,963
TUF	881

---

### Region 5 - Mahaica/Berbice

PPP/Civic	18,468
PNC	10,168
AFG	164
TUF	55

---

Region 6 - East Berbice/Corentyne

PPP/Civic	52,205
PNC	17,183
AFG	391
TUF	228

---

Region 7 - Cuyuni/Mazaruni

PNC	4,316
PPP/Civic	3,299
TUF	195
AFG	127

---

Region 8 - Potaro/Siparuni

PNC	1,140
PPP/Civic	786
AFG	904
TUF	509

---

Region 9 - Upper Takutu/Upper Essequibo

PPP/Civic	2,605
TUF	2,431
PNC	1,767
AFG	342

---

Region 10 - Upper Demerara/Berbice

PNC	14,802
PPP/Civic	3,440
AFG	314
TUF	118

---