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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Guyana

Guyana | Freedom in the World 2012 |

OVERVIEW:

The ruling alliance of the People's Progressive Party and the Civic Party (PPP-C) won reelection in November 2011 over the newly formed opposition group Partnership Through National Unity. The PPP-C's Donald Ramotar became president of Guyana in December.

Guyana gained independence from Britain in 1966 and was ruled by the autocratic, predominantly Afro-Guyanese People's National Congress (PNC) for the next 26 years. In 1992, Cheddi Jagan of the largely Indo-Guyanese People's Progressive Party (PPP) won the presidency in Guyana's first free and fair elections. He died in 1997, and the office passed to his wife, Janet, who resigned in 1999 for health reasons. She was succeeded by Finance Minister Bharrat Jagdeo of the PPP-C, an alliance of the PPP and the Civic Party. Jagdeo was elected in his own right in 2001.

Guyanese politics are dominated by a tense split between descendants of indentured workers from India, known as Indo-Guyanese, who generally back the PPP-C, and Afro-Guyanese, who largely support the PNC-Reform (PNC-R) party. In 2004, the political climate showed brief signs of improving when the PPP-C and PNC-R announced that they had reached agreement on a wide variety of issues. However, the emerging harmony was disrupted when a police informant revealed the existence of death squads that enjoyed official sanction and had killed some 64 people. An investigation exposed apparent links to the home affairs minister, Ronald Gajraj, but he was largely exonerated by an official inquiry in 2005.

In the run-up to the 2006 legislative elections, Agriculture Minister Satyadeo Sawh was brutally slain by masked gunmen, and four newspaper employees were

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shot dead on the outskirts of the capital. The elections were delayed by several weeks as deep conflicts within the seven-member Guyana Elections Commission undermined the credibility of the process. Nevertheless, the elections took place without incident in August, due in part to the presence of international observers. The PPP-C emerged victorious, with President Jagdeo securing another five-year term.

In November 2011 elections, the PPP-C's reelection bid was led by 61-year-old Donald Ramotar, an economist. Denis Marshall, the chairperson of a Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2011 national and regional elections in Guyana noted that, despite some minor issues, the elections represented progress in strengthening Guyana's democratic processes. The PPP-C captured 32 seats, while the newly established Partnership For National Unity took 26 seats, and the Alliance For Change (AFC) won 7 seats. Ramotar became president in December.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Guyana is an electoral democracy. The 1980 constitution provides for a strong president and a 65-seat National Assembly, with members elected every five years. Two additional, nonvoting members are appointed by the president. The leader of the party with a plurality of parliamentary seats becomes president for a five-year term and appoints the prime minister and cabinet.

The 2006 elections strengthened the hand of the ruling PPP-C, but also demonstrated that some Guyanese are beginning to vote across racial lines, as symbolized by the establishment of the multiracial AFC. The main opposition party remains the PNC-R. Other significant political parties or groupings include the Alliance for Guyana, the Guyana Labor Party, the United Force, the Justice for All Party, the Working People's Alliance, and the Guyana Action Party, which enjoys strong support from indigenous communities in the south.

Guyana is home to nine indigenous groups with a total population of about 80,000. Human rights violations against them, particularly with respect to land and resource use, are widespread and pervasive. Indigenous peoples' attempts to seek redress through the courts have been met with unwarranted delays by the judiciary. While racial clashes have diminished in the last decade, long-standing animosity between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese remains a serious concern. A 2002 Racial Hostility Bill increased penalties for race-based crimes.

The country is a transshipment point for South American cocaine destined for North America and Europe, and counternarcotics efforts are undermined by corruption that reaches to high levels of the government. The informal economy is driven primarily by drug proceeds and may be equal to between 40 and 60 percent of formal economic activity. Guyana was ranked 134 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although freedom of the press is generally respected, an uneasy tension between

the state and the media persists. Several independent newspapers operate freely, including the daily *Stabroek News* and *Kaieteur News*. However, opposition party leaders complain that they lack access to state media. The state owns and operates the country's sole radio station, which broadcasts on three frequencies. In 2009, the Guyana Press Association denounced a government initiative to license media professionals as an attempt to impose control over the profession. Government officials occasionally use libel lawsuits to suppress criticism. The government also closed an internationally-funded Media-Monitoring Unit, established in 2006 to monitor media ahead of national elections. Prior to the 2011 elections, President Bharrat Jagdeo had disparaged journalists from Guyana's best known media outlets as "vultures and carrion crows." In October, Guyana Elections Commission Chairman Steve Surujbally expressed concern about such attacks, calling them "self-destructive, nation-wrecking, counterproductive and, quite frankly, inane." There are no government restrictions on the internet.

Guyanese generally enjoy freedom of religion, and the government does not restrict academic freedom.

The government largely respects freedoms of assembly and association. The right to form labor unions is also generally upheld, and unions are well organized. However, employers are not required to recognize unions in former state enterprises.

The judicial system is independent, but due process is undermined by shortages of staff and funds. In 2005, Guyana cut all ties to the Privy Council in London, the court of last resort for other former British colonies in the region, and adopted the Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice as its highest appellate court. Prisons are overcrowded, and conditions are poor.

The Guyana Defence Force and the national Guyana Police Force are under civilian control. Racial polarization has seriously eroded law enforcement, with many Indo-Guyanese complaining that they are victimized by Afro-Guyanese criminals and ignored by the predominantly Afro-Guyanese police. Meanwhile, many Afro-Guyanese claim that the police are manipulated by the government for its own purposes. Official inquiries have repeatedly called for improved investigative techniques, more funding, community-oriented policing, better disciplinary procedures, greater accountability, and a better ethnic balance in the police force, but the government has taken few concrete steps to implement the proposed reforms.

Violence against women, including domestic abuse, is widespread. Rape often goes unreported and is rarely prosecuted. The Guyana Human Rights Association has charged that the legal system's treatment of victims of sexual violence is intentionally humiliating. The 2010 Sexual Offenses Act makes rape gender-neutral and expands its definition to include spousal rape and coercion and child abuse; the new law also provides for offenses committed against the mentally disabled. Sodomy is punishable with a maximum sentence of life in prison, and cross-dressing is criminalized for both men and women. In February 2010, the Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination filed a motion with

the Supreme Court, challenging the constitutionality of the law banning cross-dressing; a hearing on the issue is expected by mid-2012.

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