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*Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Aug 26, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times  
pg. F2

# Troubled Little Guyana's Problems Extend Far Beyond Jonestown

**BY CLAUDIA MITCHELL-KERNAN**

Most of the world's small countries, such as Botswana, Gabon, Papua New Guinea and Surinam, seem fated to exist outside the awareness or consciousness of big nations. Attention is focused on such countries only when something sensational happens, like famine, plague or war.

Guyana is such a country; it was last November's startling mass suicide of some 900 American followers of the Rev. Jim Jones that made it a household word. Hundreds of journalists flocked to the Idaho-sized South American nation like flies buzzing about an open sore. As the blood caked and dried, the journalists departed, and Guyana was once again left to tend to its own history, away from the glare cast by the press.

That was unfortunate. In the 10 months since Jones died with his followers, Prime Minister Forbes Burnham has tightened his grip on the nation's political life. Guyana's balance-of-payments problem has created severe shortages of essential goods, a flourishing black market and increasingly stringent economic conditions for most of the 800,000 people who live in the former British colony.

Last month, violence broke out between members of the opposition People's Progressive Party and a group composed of ruling People's National Congress Party members and members of the House of Israel, a sect from Cleveland with close ties to Burnham's government.

On July 11, the headquarters of the PNC, the Ministry of National Mobilization and the Guyana Sugar Co. were set afire. Four scholars of international reputation were arrested and charged with arson: Maurice Odle, director of the institute for development studies at the University of Guyana; Omawale, (who uses a single name) a former lecturer at the same university; Walter Rodney, former lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and renowned Africanist who was invited to teach in Guyana but later denied a faculty position, and Rupert Roopnarine, also a lecturer at the university. All four have been active in organizing the Working People's Alliance (WPA), an organization which seeks to unite Guyana's ethnic groups to oppose the Burnham government.

On July 14, at a demonstration protesting the arrest of the four scholars, a Jesuit priest and reporter for the Catholic Standard, Father Bernard Darke, was killed.

The current political upheavals are the result of growing public resentment toward Burnham's increasingly dictatorial rule. The government has put off indefinitely its plan to increase the national minimum wage from \$11 to \$14 a day. In response, Guyana's four major unions launched a general strike last week, which is still going on and which may rival the 135-day sugar workers' strike of 1977. Key to the strike's success will be the militancy of workers in the bauxite industry, Guyana's second biggest (after sugar) export earner.

Public discontent is also fueled by widespread suspicion of Burnham's electoral manipulations. Last August, the government reported that 75% of the electorate turned out to vote and that 97% of the voters approved a Burnham-backed referendum suspending elections. Independent observers who monitored polling places on election day found that only between 12% and 14% of the population actually voted.

Forbes Burnham has held power since before Guyana was granted independence from Britain in 1966. In the early '60s, the United States, alarmed at former premier Cheddi Jagan's left-wing policies and fearful of another Cuba in the Western Hemisphere, helped the British to create a system of proportional representation to ensure that Jagan, who had a clear majority of Guyana's East Indian population behind him, could not win the pre-independence elections.

Since then, ethnic issues have been at the center of Guyanese politics. East Indians, the largest ethnic group, descendants of thousands brought to Guyana as indentured plantation workers after slavery was abolished in 1833, are

mostly represented by Cheddi Jagan's Marxist group, the People's Progressive Party. The descendants of African slaves are largely represented by Forbes Burnham's ruling minority party, the People's National Congress. The newly founded Working People's Alliance hopes to unite all ethnic factions in an effort to unseat Burnham, and has become the most volatile element in the drama now unfolding.

The WPA represents a significant departure from the politics of racialism that has afflicted Guyana for years. Since the arrest of Rodney, Roopnarine, Omawale and Odle, additional arrests of opposition leaders have occurred. On July 17, three organizers of bauxite workers—Desmond Ali, St. John and Ali Majhid—were detained without charges, and Kwame Apata, a political activist associated with the WPA, was arrested as well.

To these political tensions must be added the current economic crisis. The decline in Guyana's agricultural and bauxite production is largely the result of government mismanagement and corruption. Burnham has squandered

vast sums of public funds for political patronage in an attempt to consolidate his power. In part, Burnham's fear of the Indo-Guyanese is motivated by past discrimination against Afro-Guyanese when Cheddi Jagan was in power; Burnham's own discriminatory practices against the Indo-Guyanese make him fear reprisals should he lose his office.

There is a serious food shortage in Guyana which has necessitated the importation of vast quantities of food, including rice, a staple. This, in turn, has aggravated Guyana's balance-of-payments problem and has created a foreign exchange shortage.

Of course, had there not been systematic discrimination against the largely Indo-Guyanese dominated agricultural sector through the reduction or elimination of farm subsidies, and through failure to provide adequate governmental support for fertilization and irrigation, the food shortage might not have happened.

In an effort to attract needed foreign exchange, Guyana has been compelled to turn to the International Monetary Fund for relief. But the fund's monies come with condi-

tions and its insistence on tight monetary and fiscal policies has further exacerbated tensions between the government and the unions and the business community.

Guyana is today on the brink of catastrophe: an economic "meltdown" that is bound to get worse before it gets better, and a rapidly deteriorating political climate. The acts of political repression and the recent efforts by Burnham to silence any potentially effective opposition have gone virtually unreported in the American press.

Must we wait for another catastrophe of the magnitude of a Jonestown before public interest is aroused in the affairs of this distant and forgotten country? □

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