

## Newsmax

# Washington, the Hague Should Not Sidestep Events in Suriname

Thursday, June 4, 2020 01:27 PM

By: Evan Ellis

On May 25, voters in Suriname [decisively rejected the National Democratic Party](#) (NDP) of incumbent President Desi Bouterse. Bouterse's NDP declined from [26 seats](#) in the 51 seat National Assembly [to 16](#), behind [the 20 won by Chandrikapersad Santokhi's United Reform Party \(VHP\)](#). Despite Bouterse's occupation of the office since August 2010, Santokhi is now [poised to replace](#) him.

The VHP has [formed an alliance](#) with three other parties, the National Party of Suriname (NPS), the Brotherhood and Unity in Politics (ABOP) party, and Pertjajah Luhur, leaving it [one seat short](#) of the 34 to choose the president.

In a system characterized by shady deals, shifting alliances, and political intrigue, Bouterse has ample resources, and strong motivation to avoid ceding power.

A generation of business and military elites have their fates tied to him through past patronage. Leaving the presidency implies losing the immunity which has protected Bouterse [1999 narcotrafficking charges in the Netherlands](#), and his [conviction in Suriname for the 1982 murder of 15 opponents](#).

It was Santokhi who, in 2007, [led the investigation](#) into the murders.

Santokhi, if he assumes the presidency, could significantly improve relations with the U.S. and Europe. He studied policework on scholarship in the Netherlands, then had a successful law enforcement career, becoming [police commissioner in 1991](#), and [Minister of Justice in 2005](#). Santokhi served for 15 years on the Organization of American States Inter American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), being elected [CICAD President in 2010](#).

For the United States and Europe, enhanced law enforcement cooperation under a Santokhi government would contribute substantially to regional security, given that Suriname under Bouterse was [a hub for shipping drugs to Europe](#).

It is less clear whether Santokhi would diversify away from Suriname's deepening dependence on the PRC. Starting with the entry into the country of the [Chinese construction firm Dalian](#), under President Jules Wijdenbosch, Chinese companies expanded their presence under Bouterse, with an associated, largely unknown [growth of the Chinese population](#).

In 2018, Bouterse aligned Suriname with the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) in 2018, and in [November 2019](#), visited the People's Republic of China (PRC), establishing a [strategic partnership](#), and signing agreements potentially [doubling the \\$500 million](#) that the Chinese government has loaned Suriname.

If the Covid-19 crisis forces Suriname to default on its loans from the Interamerican Development Bank and other Western financial institutions, and restructure its debt to the PRC, Santokhi will be in a weak position to turn away PRC loans and investment.

Santokhi might also rein in political and criminal ties with Nicholas Maduro and his accomplices in Venezuela, such as the [laundering Venezuelan gold](#).

A Santokhi government could increase Suriname's positive role in the Caribbean.

Its elections, conducted amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, although [arguably chaotic](#), were admirably [free of serious problems](#), contrasting with difficulties in neighboring Guyana, and in February local elections in the Dominican Republic.

If the People's Progressive Party (PPP) returns to power in Guyana, the rule in both by ethnically diverse but Indian-centered parties, could strengthen the bond between the countries. Moreover, although Suriname has suffered ethnic clientelism in politics and [inter-group violence](#), it stands as a relatively [positive example of tolerance](#) between Hindu, Javanese Muslim, Chinese, European, and Afro-descendant populations.

It is difficult to anticipate where Santokhi's coalition will take the country, but he will likely be obliged to move cautiously. Those whose fortunes were tied to Bouterse may seek to compromise or obstruct him, or both.

Even if successful, the new government faces enormous challenges. The country owes [\\$2.4 billion in debt](#), representing 71% of Suriname's GDP. Corruption is rampant; the head of the Central Bank, [Robert Van Tritt](#), and Finance Minister [Gillmore Hoefdraad](#) were charged criminally after \$100 million [went missing](#) from the bank.

Although Suriname's isolation and sparse population has thus far spared it from Covid-19, with [only 43 confirmed cases](#), informal migration from Guyana across the [Corentyne River delta](#) presents a continuing risk in a country lacking significant healthcare facilities if Covid-19 took off in the country. Complicating matters, the pandemic-induced depression of commodity prices undercuts Suriname's gold industry, its primary export commodity since the November 2015 [shutdown of bauxite production by Suralco](#).

Recent offshore [petroleum discoveries in the Maka field](#), adjacent to [promising finds in Guyanese waters](#), raise hopes of a [Suriname oil boom](#).

Yet low current prices are delaying investment across the industry.

The U.S. should proceed with caution and respect.

A Santokhi government would likely be open to a greater commitment to transparency, law and order, and [Western investment](#) than its predecessor, and may or may not imprison or extradite Bouterse, yet will have neither the political latitude nor the interest to be an agent of Washington in the Caribbean basin. If it is willing to be a respected partner, however, that would be a significant advance for both the U.S. and the region.

**Dr. Evan Ellis is Senior Non-Resident Fellow at CSIS, and Professor of Latin American and Caribbean Studies. His work focuses on security and defense issues, including transnational organized crime, populism, and the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has published over 250 works, including three books, and has presented his work in 26 countries across four continents. He has testified on multiple occasions regarding Latin America and the Caribbean before the U.S. Congress, and his work regularly appears in the media in both the U.S. and the region. Through his work, Dr. Ellis calls attention to the strategic importance of Latin America and the Caribbean for the United States through bonds of geography, commerce, and family, and how the prosperity and security of the U.S. are tied to that of its partners in the region. To read more of his reports — [Click Here Now](#).**

© 2020 Newsmax. All rights reserved.