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Navigating Guyana's muddy waters

By Evan Ellis / [Twitter](#) REvanEllis / March 4, 2019

From February 19 through 27, I traveled to Georgetown, Guyana, to speak with individuals in the government and the private sector about the nation's security challenges and internal dynamics. The country is in a potentially explosive political crisis with at least some similarities to the polarized situation in Washington, DC. In the midst of legal battles with consequences for who controls the country, intelligent, sincere people are convinced that the taking of or continuation in power by their political opponents will be destructive for the nation and their own interests.



Behind the current political struggle

In Guyana, people of Indian and African descent are the two principal ethnic groups, and the relationship between ethnicity, power, and the spoils flowing from control of government have always been complex. While Guyanese founding fathers Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham built the People's Progressive Party (PPP) on multi-ethnic principles during the independence struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, ideological differences became intertwined with racial identity, with the PPP viewed by many Afro-Guyanese as disproportionately representing Indo-Guyanese interests (particularly poor rice and sugar farmers). Driven in part by Jagan's leftist orientation, Burnham ultimately formed an alternate party, the People's National Congress (PNC), which disproportionately attracted Afro-Guyanese (particularly those in urban areas and mining).

Many Indo-Guyanese believe that the PNC, with U.S. and British support, hijacked the supervised pre-independence elections in 1964, in which the PPP received the plurality of votes, but the PNC was invited by the British, after a procedural change, to form a coalition government. The PNC went on to rule for 28 years until 1992, bolstered (especially in the eyes of some indoguyanese) by rigged elections and other undemocratic practices.

For their part, many Afro-Guyanese believe that, once the PPP captured power in 1992, it similarly built a system rigged to sustain itself in power (including not holding local elections during its 23 years in power) and disproportionately

benefitting its own politicians and affiliated (typically Indo-Guyanese) businessmen and farmers.

By incorporating other parties to broaden its base (it now calls itself “A Party for National Unity” [APNU]), and forging a coalition with a new splinter party drawing heavily on Indo-Guyanese voters, the Alliance for Change (AFC), the PNC recaptured power in 2015.

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The December 2018 defection of Charandass Persaud, an AFC parliamentarian who joined the PPP opposition in a no-confidence vote against the government, has set the stage for new elections and unearthed a new high-stakes conflict between ethnic groups.

During the APNU-AFC administration of former Brigadier General David Granger (2015-present), an international oil consortium led by Exxon Mobil enjoyed a remarkable string of successes in discovering oil in the waters of Guyana's Exclusive Economic Zone. The discovery has positioned the country to receive an oil bonanza that will begin next year, and that, by 2025, could provide the government \$1 billion or more per year in oil revenues to benefit its small population, which numbers approximately 800,000 people. The party in power when the oil money starts to roll in will likely hold onto power for a generation.

The current struggle

Persaud's vote with the opposition to bring down the government is understandably seen by many in the ruling coalition as a PPP dirty trick, particularly on the eve of the oil windfall, although suggestions that Persaud was bribed have not been proven. In fact, the downturn in Guyana's sugar sector, which has the government to close several sugar estates in his rural district of Berbice, is a plausible reason for turning against his own government. Still, it's suspicious given Persaud's on-record speeches praising the government just weeks before.

In the eyes of the PPP, the Granger government has done everything possible to avoid or postpone the election that the Constitution says has to occur within 90 days of the no-confidence vote. For example, it has challenged Persaud's ability to vote, due to his dual citizenship (forbidden by the Constitution, but a violation also shared by various other members of parliament, including in the governing coalition). It has also unsuccessfully challenged whether the 33 votes received for the no confidence motion in the 65-seat parliament constituted a "majority," and further sought (also unsuccessfully) to suspend the running of the electoral clock while an appeal on the matter was considered by the Guyanese judiciary.

Perhaps most troublesome, the Guyana electoral commission (GECOM), which was explicitly created to prepare for and conduct elections (which the Constitution specifies could be held at any time), and which exists to continuously update the voter registry and otherwise prepare for elections at any time (including biometric data to verify the identity of voters), now says that it does not have the money to hold an election, and cannot do so without first conducting a manual

house-to-house update of the registry. Such a manual count would push the country far beyond the March 19 deadline for holding elections, and could possibly delay them until 2020. The PPP dismisses the GECOM position as unacceptable stalling, since by law the current registry is technically good until the end of April. It notes that GECOM just conducted elections in November 2018 (albeit at the local level) without significant complaints involving the registry. Moreover, when roles were reversed in 2015, and the PPP government was forced to call elections, it successfully held them without significant delays.

PPP leaders further note what appears to be partisan behavior of GECOM; in five recent votes, the three PPP-appointed electoral commissioners voted one way, the three government-appointed commissioners voted the opposite way, and the government-appointed head, James Patterson, broke the tie in support of the government's position. The PPP has challenged Patterson's appointment in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) with a ruling possibly to be handed down within the next several weeks.

Even without the house-to-house update of the voter registry, the election will not be able to take place before the 3-month constitutionally-mandated deadline expires. Yet while the constitution provides for an extension of the timeframe (*if* approved by the Assembly), PPP leaders argue that without signs of good faith (such as a concrete commitment to hold elections by a specific close-in date such as June), they are prepared to allow the “clock to run-out” making the government “illegal” in their interpretation. The PPP clearly hopes that in the process, the international community (including the United States, which they believe the Granger government relies on as its supporter and protector) will pressure the government to commit to

elections, and perhaps even sanction it (as occurred in Venezuela) if it is seen to have violated the electoral provisions of its own constitution.

PPP leaders are careful to express their support for Exxon, and it is the party's intention to honor the contracts Guyana has signed under the Granger government (even while complaining that the government did not get as good of a deal as it should have). But the PPP emphasis on the "illegality" of the government after March 19 indirectly pressures Exxon and other players in the sector by casting doubt over any contractual proceedings that they enter into with the government, as the possible start of oil production in 2020 draws closer. In so doing, PPP leaders doubtlessly understand that creating contractual concerns for Exxon (with its strong connections in Washington), could further motivate Washington to put pressure on the Granger government to resolve the elections dispute with an urgency that would favor the PPP.

If a time-consuming house-to-house verification of the voter registry goes forward, Guyana's political and contractual crisis could also affect the approval of the 2020 budget, leading to a possible government shutdown. PPP leaders argue that, following the no-confidence motion, the Granger government cannot take new actions beyond implementing decisions already made (particularly regarding the allocation of resources). With a paralyzed Constituent Assembly, complicated by a fight over whether certain parliamentarians are ineligible to vote because of their dual citizenship, approval of a budget for 2020 could be delayed, reducing the government's capacity to monitor and mobilize actions necessary to begin oil production.

Washington's role

In the context of Guyana's current constitutional crisis, Washington has both an important role to play and a complex set of strategic imperatives to consider in doing so.

The U.S. has significant historic baggage in its relationship with the PPP. Many Guyanese, particularly PPP members, perceive that the U.S., along with the British, acted to prevent the PPP from taking power after the party won the most votes in the 1964 election. Under the PPP governments of Bharat Jagdeo and Donald Ramortar, relations were strained, owing to a combination of differences over foreign policy, the rapid advance of relations with the PRC, and concerns over corruption and undemocratic practices. Matters hit a low point in July 2014 when a PPP functionary harshly and publicly reproached outgoing U.S. ambassador to Guyana Brent Hardt for his criticisms of the PPP government, during what was supposed to be a pleasant sendoff for the ambassador at his own residence.

Under President David Granger and the APNU-AFC government which came to power in May 2015, the relationship with the U.S. strengthened notably, due largely to the latter's cooperation on anti-corruption and other good-governance matters, as well as the government's positive relationship with Exxon.

PPP leaders believe rightly or wrongly that the U.S. has been willing to overlook corruption and undemocratic practices in the Granger government, just as it had for PNC governments in the past, while criticizing PPP ones.

To a degree, Guyanese views on the current political crisis, including the role of the U.S., is strongly shaped by their perceptions of the past.

The belief that the U.S. blocked the assumption of power by Jagan over fears he was a communist arguably drove the PPP to a disproportionate effort to convince Washington that they are now a responsible party of businessmen. Reciprocally, memories of the role of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter pressuring the PNC government on elections, ultimately facilitating the capture of power by the PPP in 1992, color PPP hopes that U.S. NGOs such as the Carter Center and the U.S. government itself will similarly pressure the Granger government.

The shadow of the U.S., going back to before 1964, is long in Guyana. The statement from President Trump regarding Guyanese democracy, delivered while I was in Georgetown, received remarkably close and widespread attention from my Guyanese colleagues. In our conversations, I noticed that they'd weighed every word of the speech, asking whether President Trump's positive statement reflected support for President Granger's position in the political crisis, or alternatively, if it was a polite warning that the U.S. could reconsider that support after March 19 (the end of the constitutionally-specified 3-month deadline for holding elections) if the APNU-AFC government does not more clearly embrace a path to a vote in the near term.

Perhaps nothing convinced me more of the PPP's concern over Washington's intentions than the enormously generous time made to talk to me (a mere professor employed by the U.S. Army), in separate interviews granted by Guyana's most recent two PPP presidents, as well as its current Presidential candidate, two of its leading contenders for Prime Minister, and various other senior party functionaries. I found myself wrestling with the disconnect between the intelligent, articulate, seemingly reasonable and responsible persons with whom I spoke, and the stories of corruption and nefarious actions that I had

heard about these same persons elsewhere. Yet whatever the truth, the PPP is clearly intent on communicating that, if it returns to power, it wants to work with Washington (as well as China and others) and wants to reassure Washington that it does not represent a threat to U.S. interests.

In its campaign of reassurance, for me, the PPP is missing the point. The U.S. concern (misplaced or not) is not the Cheddi Jagan era fear of “communism.” It is about the risk to Guyana and the hemisphere of unbridled corruption, magnified by the arrival of unprecedented oil wealth and the opportunity to work with Chinese companies and financiers who do not ask difficult questions if the deals advance their interests. As demonstrated tragically by neighboring Venezuela, the real threat for the U.S. is the possibility that such corruption, from leaders who cloak themselves in the rhetoric of national self-determination and past U.S. errors, opens the door to economic malaise, rampant criminality, and the unhealthiest types of engagement with actors such as Russia and China in the hemisphere.

Whatever the character of the current PPP, the United States does have reasons to feel good about the Granger government, even if its record on economic management, fighting corruption and other issues has been mixed. As one colleague in Georgetown put it, although the government has only taken “baby steps,” there is a budding new perception that corruption is “wrong” ...and possibly even punishable. Yet while President Granger’s time in office has been positive for strengthening of the U.S.-Guyana relationship and incrementally advancing good governance in the country, recent APNU-AFC attempts to avoid or postpone an early election do not, for me at least, seem to pass the common-sense test.

The challenge for the U.S. is not to allow its good relationship with the Granger government to lead it into condoning behaviors that could undermine the credibility of advocacy of healthy democracy elsewhere. At the same time, the U.S. must be careful not to pressure a friend in a way that enables something worse.

The only realistic solution is to proceed cautiously, evaluating each step that both sides take, against Guyana's own constitution and principles of democracy. If, in the end, the PPP returns to power, the United States should embrace the opportunity to work with it, respecting their choices on foreign policy and economic management, but watching closely, and insisting that they live up to the commitments to transparency, good governance, and respect for the rule of law that they are now so eloquently making.

R. Evan Ellis is Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The opinions expressed here are strictly his own. The author thanks Guyanese Vice President Carl Greenidge, Ambassador Riyad Insanally, Ambassador Ronald Sanders, former Presidents Bharat Jagdeo and Donald Ramotar, Ralph Ramkarran, Anil Nandlall, Brigadier Mark Phillips, Hugh Todd, Dr. Ivelaw Griffith, Dr. Fitzgerald Yaw, Captain John Flores, John Chester-Iniss, Russell Combe, Brian Chinn, Raymond Hall, Wallace Ng-see-Quan, Jerry Guevarra, Mark Wilson, William Walker, Mike Singh, David Lewis, and Ronald Gross for their contributions to this article.

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