

CHRISRAM.NET

Articles, letters and other publications by Christopher Ram

AUGUST 16, 2014 BY CHRISRAM

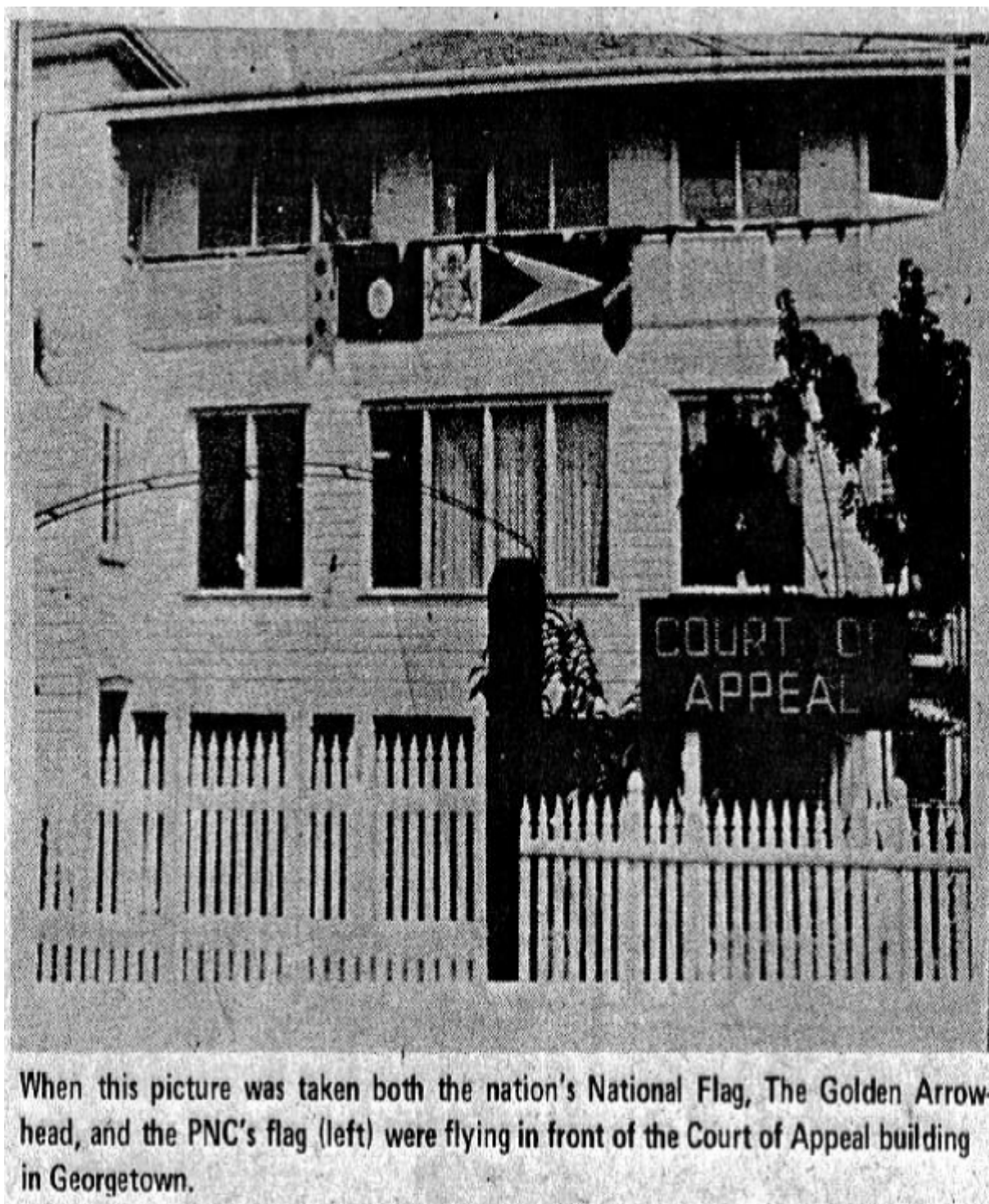
PNC-R and PPP/C: six of one and four-fifths of the other

Introduction

In 1992, after 28 years of the PNC rule of Guyana the call for a change in government became an end in itself. The reason why an electorate comprising hundreds of thousands of persons votes in any particular way – or not vote – will always be complex. Yet, in 1992 there was a feeling that any government would be better than the PNC for which paramountcy of the party, rigged elections and long queues for basic food items had become the defining features. In the circumstances the 1992 elections did produce a change of government with the PPP/C gaining an outright majority of votes and seats in the National Assembly.

Fast-forward to 2014, and 22 years of PPP/C government. For this government, and particularly since Jagdeo became President, the defining issues have been corruption, constitutional violations and failure to hold local government elections. To deduce from this that the two parties are significantly different from each other would be simplistic. In vital areas of democracy and governance their similarities vastly outweigh their differences and in terms of elections the PNC offered rigged elections at the national level while the PPP/C follows a policy of no elections at the local government level.

Paramountcy



When this picture was taken both the nation's National Flag, The Golden Arrowhead, and the PNC's flag (left) were flying in front of the Court of Appeal building in Georgetown.

(Photograph courtesy Caribbean Contact)

In 1973 the PNC announced the Sophia Declaration that pronounced the PNC the paramount institution in Guyana, the most egregious symbol of which was the posting of the flag of the PNC on the Court of Appeal Building. Confirming that the separation of powers – the bedrock of democracy – was no longer applicable to Guyana, Mr. Burnham transplanted the concept of paramountcy into the 1980 Constitution making himself paramount in the designated three supreme organs of democratic power: the Parliament

over which he exercised veto powers, the President, and the Cabinet whose role the Constitution defined as merely advisory to the President.

Both the PPP and the PNC had the opportunity during the constitutional reform process in the late 90s to remove the constitutional and institutional presidential supremacy. They did not act. The result is one of the great ironies of politics in Guyana: that the Constitution which was framed by and for a PNC dictatorship is used as a justification by the PPP to defend its use and abuse of the very concept of democracy.

All legislation passed in the era of Mr. Burnham and his successor placed “the Minister” as the authority over all state agencies and statutory bodies. Not only has the PPP done nothing to dismantle such an autocratic structure but it has continued the practice in each piece of legislation it introduced in the National Assembly since 1992.

Indeed, the jealous embrace of that principle by the PPP/C contributed in no small measure to the failure to pass anti-money laundering amendments legislation since the PPP is unwilling to give up control over the appointment of and by extension the functions of the FIU director. Perhaps more significant is the spending by the Minister of monies expressly rejected by the National Assembly. That clearly diminished the legislature as junior to, rather than as a co-equal check on the executive.

The dilemma for this country is that while the PNC introduced and never renounced paramountcy, the PPP/C practises it without a blush.

Financing the Party

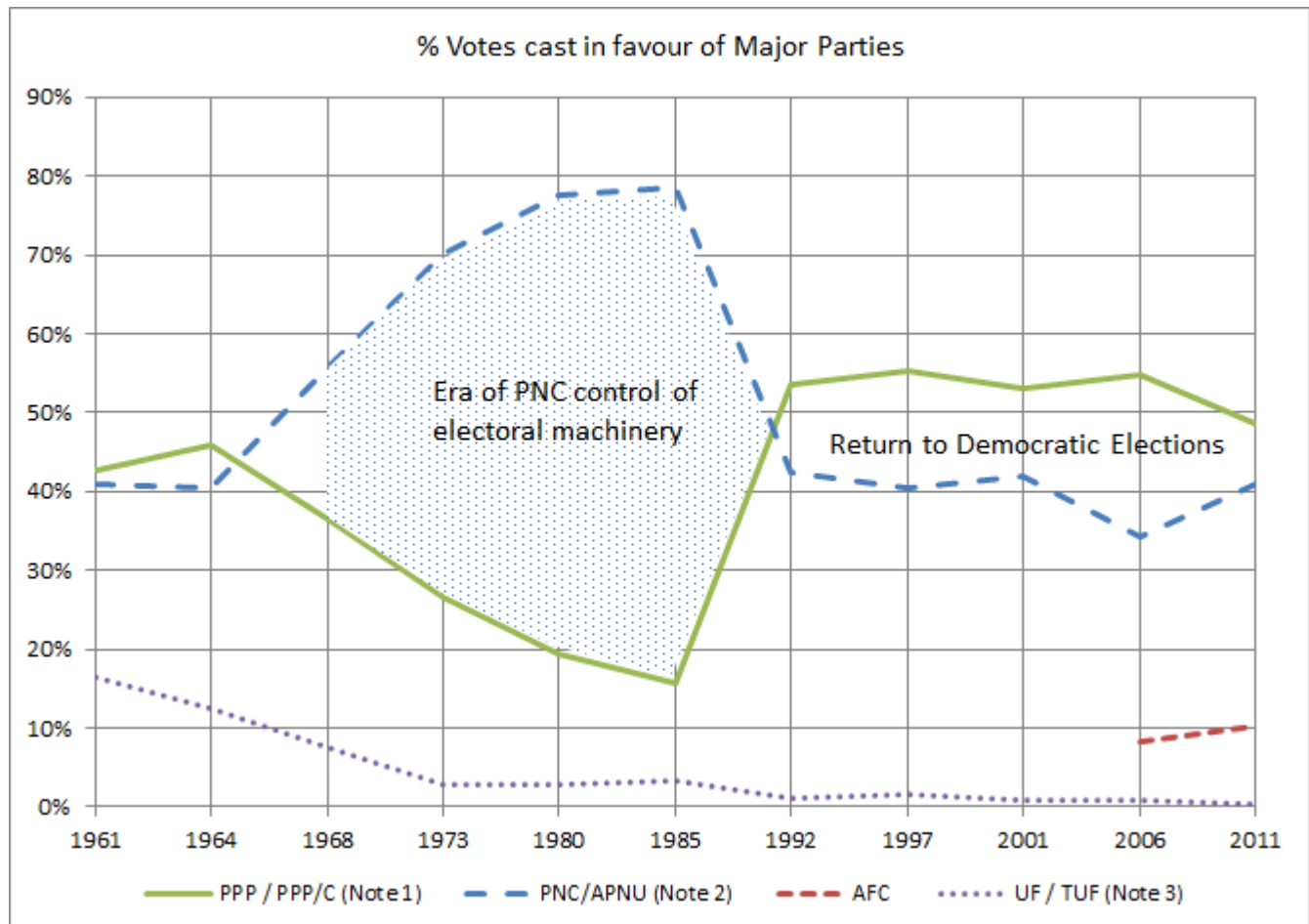
Partly in pursuit of paramountcy, and partly to divert resources from the state to the party, the Office of the General Secretary of the PNC was made part of the government machinery with the creation of the Office of the General Secretary and the Ministry of National Development. The funds for this entity were provided from the Consolidated Fund mainly by a block vote under the description “Other Charges”. Mr. Hoyte eventually abolished that entity and returned the Office of the General Secretary to Sophia.

By contrast, the current General Secretary of the PPP combines his party role with that of Minister of Home Affairs. It is surely doubtful that the Minister will not be using state resources when he does his party work. But that is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to using state funds for partisan political purposes.

With substantially more funds at its disposal, the PPP has created myriad ways of financing its party activities out of state resources, both at elections time and on a continuous basis. Political activists for the party are guaranteed jobs at the Office of the President, in state agencies and in regional administrations without regard for Article 30G of the Constitution which guarantees the integrity of the public service. And as we saw recently, apparently innocuous sounding projects like the Amerindian Fund are smoke screens for financing party political work.

Elections

The interference by the PNC in the general elections from 1968 to 1985 has been well documented and pronounced on. The following chart shows the results of general elections from 1961 to 2011 and dramatically demonstrates the collapse of the PNC electoral supremacy after the process was cleaned up in 1992. You would have to be totally naive or dishonest to argue that the PNC did not systematically rig the general elections of 1968, 1973, 1980 and 1985.



Notes

1 PPP/C from 1992

2 APNU from 2011

3 TUF from 1992

Source: Reports of Elections Commission. Copyright

What is perhaps less well-known is that the PNC also suspended local government elections between 1973 and 1992, a period of nineteen years.

And now with the PPP/C at the helm, the citizens have since 1994 been cheated of the opportunity to choose those who will govern them at the local level. Unlike national elections, the holding of which is prescribed by the Constitution, the mechanics for local government elections are prescribed under the Local Authorities (Elections) Act. That Act compels the Minister of Local Government to call the elections for the City of Georgetown, Towns and Neighbourhood Democratic Councils in three years cycles, unless otherwise authorised by an Act of Parliament.

The tragedy for the citizens of the city, the towns and the NDC's is that the PPP/C by various devices managed to get the PNC-R to agree to the postponement of such elections on no less than fifteen occasions. The AFC too fell for the ruse until it was persuaded to argue that local government elections under the unreformed laws were preferable to no elections at all.

Winner-take-all

The very essence of the constitutional arrangements following general elections is the winner must take all. The Constitution provides that the party gaining the highest number of votes would form the government, even if those votes represent considerably less than 50% of the electorate. Neither President Burnham nor President Hoyte needed to have availed himself of this provision, having exercised winner-take-all over the entire election process.

Cheddi Jagan was adamant that the PPP would not take all and indeed brought in to his government a significant civic component. Over time, that component has been stripped of whatever independence it might have had – its members are expected to carry out party policies. One of the most independent minds of that component was sidelined into

resignation by then President Jagdeo – a man for whom taking all became a personal mission.

To crown the reversal, in the aftermath of the 2011 elections, the PPP/C chose to form a minority Government and risk gridlock rather than invite any of the two opposition parties to come into the Government.

Human Rights

It is often said of Mr. Burnham that even if he intended to carry out some improper act he took the great care to ensure that the State's actions had a veneer of legality. That does not appear true of his approach to human rights. During the PNC era violations, the human rights of citizens were systematically trampled on. These included the right to travel without harassment, the right to work, the right to vote, freedom of expression and the right to information, the right of association and to belong to any political or other organisation of one's choice, and most importantly, the right to life.

It is only in a matter of degree that the violation of most of these rights by the PPP differs from the practices of the PNC. Discrimination in the allocation of state resources, victimisation of perceived enemies and absolute control of the state media are alive and well.

Conclusion

This column is not intended as a complete comparison of the PNC and the PPP and does not address their practice of internal democracy, their socialist ideologies or examine their economic programmes. It does show however that in key matters touching on democracy, the democratic credentials of the two parties that have dominated the post-independence political space are severely tarnished.

Whatever the PNC did or did not do over two decades ago cannot be the benchmark and comparator for the PPP.

Share this:



BURNHAM, PNC

☺