Today is May 8th, 2009. My name is Varanya Chaubey, and I’m sitting here with Mr. Raphael Trotman, who is a member of Parliament and leader of the Alliance for Change [AFC] party in Guyana. Thank you so much, Mr. Trotman, for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Thank you.

We’d like to begin by asking a little bit about your personal background. Would you describe briefly the path that you took to get here, and what you are doing with the AFC now?

Personal background. Well, I am a lawyer professionally. I never envisaged a career in politics, quite frankly. After graduating from law school, I found myself drawn to politics, but with a desire to not just be involved or to find myself being elected but to make some positive change or bring about some positive change. I’ve always had a passion as well for conflict, understanding conflict and resolving it. So that’s it. My parents, I believe would have had an influence on the way I think. I’m a little different in that I have within me East Indian, Chinese, the indigenous Amerindian, African, and some European. So that gave me an opportunity to see things from different perspectives, because things are very stratified in Guyana between East Indians and Africans, and that’s where the tension lies. So there are many of us, many like me, in the middle with one or two or more of the mixtures. That’s really where I’m coming from.

But in terms of the AFC, the idea was that we would form a political party that would get in between and separate the two dominant parties, the PPP/C [People’s Progressive Party/Civic] and the People’s National Congress/Reform [PNC/R]. Our intention, even though we said so publicly, was not necessarily to win elections. It would have been fantastic if we won, but we got a sense leading up to the 2006 elections that we were heading along a dangerous path that was likely to end in some serious bloodshed. We thought that by our very presence, and by being able to offer for the first time a credible alternative to the two, that it would have one, the impact of—well, it would impact by reducing tensions and that people didn’t see everything in a zero-sum way: I either voted for this one or that, and if this happened that would happen.

Secondly, by our mere presence, it would force the others to adopt less aggressive postures and language, and in fact we believe that our involvement and participation—along with a lot of work done by the UN and other agencies—did help to calm things to the point where the 2006 elections have been hailed as the most peaceful in decades. We’ve been attacked viciously for that, accused of being agents of different spy agencies and that we had an ulterior motive to inject a sense of calm. Our list of candidates did have a number of religious persons. We have been accused publicly of deliberately injecting these religious personalities as another way of pacifying people. So, inasmuch as our presence was hailed as being partially responsible for the peace—keeping the peace—some advocates have come out against us and accused us of being part of some grand plan to placate people and to upset, in a sense, what was perhaps planned to be something much bigger, most combustible.

The AFC, I believe, in countries like ours, heterogeneous communities and societies—you need third parties, because if everything is seen in a zero-sum way—either you are black or red, you’re either with me or against me—people don’t want to live like that any longer. They want a chance to either not participate, or if they do choose to participate, to have something other than what is just presented to them as a two-dimensional matrix: that is, either this or that.
So I was personally disappointed that we didn’t do better than we did. On the other hand, we did better than any other party had done in the past. But perhaps, later in my years I can reflect on it and feel that I was more successful. We are hoping to be in place for the next general elections. I think there were many predictions that we would collapse. So far, with great effort I should say, we have survived. We’re trying on a daily basis to keep ourselves topical and try to fill as many spaces as we can whenever we can. That’s were the AFC is now.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that leading up to the 2006 elections the AFC had some role to play in calming the situation down. Would you describe some of the activities undertaken to that end?

TROTMAN: We ran many advertisements that said, for example [...] change, by the way, not race. Don’t vote race, vote change. We appealed particularly to younger Guyanese, giving our message of hope. Our little manifesto, [...] have a copy here, but we stress a lot on healing and reconciliation, how to heal the rifts and to reconcile the differences. I remember we used a dove, which is of course the universal symbol of peace, in that publication. We took out many front-page newspaper advertisements. We’d say with a white dove speaking about peace and reconciliation. So that message I believe resonated—at least it did with about 30,000 people who voted for us—and it had some impact or effect on thousands of others, even though they may not have voted for us. We became identified in a sense as the peace party. People wanted us, saw us as the party that wanted to bring healing. We were the ones saying that the time has come to stop the fighting and it is not helping. Those are some of the things that we did.

CHAUBEY: Now the 2006 elections were hailed by the Carter Center as the most peaceful that the country had had. Would you describe some of the reforms in electoral administration or changes in policy, legislation that may have been put in place in the period between the 2001 and 2006 elections that may have contributed towards this atmosphere?

TROTMAN: I don’t know. Quite frankly, I’m not very close to the actual process. Whether the reforms per se had an impact—I think it was more the presence of an [...] of the donor community than it was the mechanism. A lot had to do with, I believe, that the UNDP [United Nations Development Program] had a social—ran a program that helped a great deal.

I don’t think it was necessary that people had renewed confidence in GECOM [Guyana Elections Commission] or the electoral systems. It was a functional thing of people becoming just tired and being worn out. Secondly, the heavy presence of observers helped. The messages that were coming from the religious community, civil society, before the election was one that says, no violence. I think those helped tremendously. There were no fundamental changes in the system between 2001 and 2006. I believe that at most we may have had more polling places, but not significantly many more. There were still many hiccups on the day of election itself. But I wouldn’t credit GECOM as being solely responsible or largely responsible. At the same time, I’m not at all discounting that GECOM had a role, an important role—one of them, of course, being able to produce an election result in a matter of days rather than weeks. We’ve had situations here where it has taken some time to get an official result. I believe that helped as well.

The AFC with—unwittingly or not, we had working alongside us this Dick Morris, you’ve heard of Dick Morris. Dick Morris was Bill Clinton’s advisor that got Clinton into the White House. So Morris’s presence in Guyana—and he had brought with
him some internationally known pollsters. I think their presence—there were some 
guys in the camp who had just worked on the Mexican president’s 
campaign, [Felipe De Jesus] Calderon. Their presence and talk of an exit poll—
they said they were going to run an exit poll—I think it helped to sharpen 
GECOM a bit. The chairman of the commission had contacted me and asked me not to publish the results of this exit poll if we did it, for fear that if the exit poll came out before GECOM was able to it would be a problem, and if it came out before and with a different result than that which GECOM produced [it] would be another problem.

So we had an understanding that whatever information we got from our exit poll we would not make public. But at the same time, I think, it had the indirect effect of causing GECOM to be a little more alert and to step up its pace far more than it would have normally, because there was now an outside pressure to produce results far quicker than they’ve done in the past. I forgot about that.

CHAUBEY: This is an interesting avenue you chose to pursue. Are there any other such examples of ways in which you worked alongside, or you presented options to GECOM which helped shape some of their work?

TROTMAN: The truth is, there must have been, but none—I just remember that one, the exit poll. Nothing comes to mind immediately. Maybe during the course of discussion something will come up, but that one I just remember, GECOM and the Chairman, Dr. [Steve] Surujbally, and I had a conversation and an agreement that we would not publish this exit poll.

CHAUBEY: In terms of conducting the exit poll, were you involved in planning it?

TROTMAN: No, I had nothing to do with it at all.

CHAUBEY: One of the things that has been covered widely in the media is this issue of scrutineers. Would you like to explain a little bit what the debate is about?

TROTMAN: I’d love to. I will locate it to 2006. It was our understanding from GECOM that when the nomination day was announced—this is the way it is done here—we all became contesting parties, and there was no government in opposition because Parliament was dissolved. But because of the dominance of the two large parties, that really didn’t obtain—that playing field was never level. So much so that we discovered about two days before the election that some 12 million dollars had been shared between the two parties for the payment of their polling day scrutineers and agents. This is from the government’s money.

CHAUBEY: From budget?

TROTMAN: Yes, it was a quiet deal. Each party got six million dollars from the state’s funds.

CHAUBEY: In Guyana dollars?

TROTMAN: Yes, this would be equivalent—divide by about 200, so $60,000 US. That’s not enough to finance a campaign a lot, but it pays for your polling day; it gives them a little honorarium and perhaps a meal or two so that they will stay vigilant. None of the other opposition parties—put it another way: none of the other contesting parties were made aware that this money had been approved by the minister of finance and disbursed. So right away the playing field was not level.
I was very disappointed that when the deal was struck Dr. Surujbally was present at the office of the president. It was he who alerted us but said there was nothing he could do about it. Now, I would have thought that as Chairman of GECOM he could have publicly protested. I think he tried to make amends by alerting us that this money was shared out. That’s one infraction.

A second infraction was that we were all required to produce lists of our polling day scrutineers, or polling agents, as they’re called on that day. I started getting reports from our agents that they were being telephoned and offered employment by GECOM. So we had agreed to pay our people, I think, 2,000 Guyana dollars, which would be equivalent to about $10 US with meals. GECOM had called and was offering 10,000 [Guyana] dollars, which was $50 [US] with meals. It was very offensive, because that was all that we could have afforded. If we submitted our list to GECOM for accreditation, GECOM officials had no right to then go through our lists and call up our people, because you had to put the accompanying address and contact number and offer them employment to fill their own quotas.

I called Dr. Surujbally. He apologized, he laughed. He said, “It’s a free-market system we’re operating in.” I said, “But this is unfair. You wouldn’t risk that with the other parties.” But again he promised, and to his credit he said he would put an end to it immediately, which he did—by which time damage had been done. We had lost about 15% of our persons on our list. We had to go and recruit new people. It was a little difficult. Then the psychological impact of us offering 2,000 dollars when it was then public that others were being offered 10—so people abandoned us. They liked us, yes, but if I’m getting 10,000 dollars there, I need the money. I’m sorry about this. That was the second infraction.

A third happened on election day itself, where when our polling agents turned up to man the polling booths on behalf of the AFC they were told that they needed a letter of appointment. Now polling starts at 6 a.m.; you’ve got to be present from 5, check the polling place, check the box—it’s not tampered with, it’s empty of any ballots—make sure that your pens are working, and all that. So by the time at 6 o’clock, they’re told that they’re not accredited because there’s no letter of appointment.

We started getting the reports about 7 or 8 in the morning. By this time I get Dr. Surujbally; it’s 10 a.m. He says, “It’s nonsense, where did that come from.” That’s the level of mischief. He may be operating at that level, but those below who have party affiliation, we believe and we have proof of it: that the two bigger ones are conspiring and colluding against us. So they sent out this message to the presiding officers that a letter of appointment was necessary. So got a hold of Dr. Surujbally. He said it was nonsense indeed, and he will put an end to it, which he did. But again, the damage done between 6 a.m. and about 11 o’clock was tremendous.

In some instances, we were not able to observe the poll from 6 to, say, 10 or 11. In many instances, particularly in the rural areas, people left and went home in anger or frustration, and there was little or no way of contacting them by phone or otherwise to say this problem has been cleared up, return to your post. According to our records, we weren’t able to have people at at least 25% of the polling places because of this problem, and we had our full complement. But because of the problem of the letter of appointment nonsense, we were unable to have people there. So it goes back to 2006.

Fast forward to 2008. We are all gathered at the office of the president. What’s the word they use, they like big words—not a treaty or MOU [Memo of
Understanding]—some fancy thing is signed between the political parties, the parliamentary political parties and the donor community. That is going to be a new house-to-house registration process with verification, and this will make a new list, and the new list will be for local government elections and continuous registration. Fine.

Then, lo and behold, we are all individual signatories. Lo and behold, the money is shared between the PPP and the PNC.

CHAUBEY: The money for...?

TROTMAN: The payment of scrutineers. Even though, as I said, the agreement signed in the office of the president was not signed between the government and the leader of the opposition on behalf of the opposition parties, we were all in a sense signatories and stakeholders. But this amounted to over a million US dollars for the payment of party scrutineers. We were told that if we wanted money we had to go to the leader of the opposition and ask for it. Which we did. He then said, put up a work program. We need to put up a work program as to how we’re going to spend this money, which we found to be atrocious. We might be opposition parties alike, and there should be a certain level of camaraderie. But we felt it was an affront to us not to sign and that we numbered just five in Parliament in terms of seats, to be asked to put up a work program. In other words, we were being asked to justify how this money was going to be spent by us, like children.

CHAUBEY: Did the opposition party, the PNC, have to also?

TROTMAN: No, because they have the money; there were just handed the money. But when we went for what we thought was our proportional share, we were told to put up a work program, and in which regions we’ll have and how many people, in a sense making it impossible for us to get the money. We then decided to approach the courts for an interpretation of the law. The court ruled that GECOM as the independent moderator, arbiter, should be responsible for the disbursement of this money, for the scrutinizing of this process, and not the leader of the opposition. That the money should be apportioned on a proportionality basis. So you have 10% of the seats, you get 10% of the money, simple arithmetical calculation.

GECOM—and this I think is my fifth infraction against GECOM—GECOM appealed the court ruling. So for the first time in the courts, it is GECOM versus a political party, which should never, ever have happened. GECOM stopped being neutral.

CHAUBEY: The fifth infraction.

TROTMAN: The fifth infraction, GECOM and AFC. We went to court, not naming anyone as a defendant or respondent, just asking the court for an interpretation, which you’re allowed to do under our legal procedures, asking the court to interpret or give meaning to a particular bit of legislation or regulation. The court interpreted it to say that the political parliamentary party shall share the money on a proportional basis. The most frightening, or frighteningly surprising thing that happened was that GECOM, and not the PNC, from whom the money would have had to come, appealed to the Court of Appeals.

CHAUBEY: Why do you think they did this? Is it just not to enter into the fray?
TROTMAN: But they have entered into the fray by becoming an appellant in a legal matter. It was then GECOM v. AFC. How can you be seen as an independent arbiter if you have taken up a legal challenge against a political party in Guyana? It really has damaged my confidence. The Court of Appeal affirmed the decision of the lower court, awarding costs in favor of the AFC against GECOM, which have never been paid. The matter became contentious. From merely seeking a declaratory order or an interpretation of the law, GECOM made it contentious when it made itself a party and challenged. Since then, as I said, the communication between GECOM and the AFC has ground to a halt. Things are said at cocktail parties and at functions. Curse words have been exchanged. Snide remarks. I saw Dr. Surujbally at a reception for the Queen of England’s birthday, at the British High Commissioner’s residence last year. He says, “I have mail for you, but the AFC doesn’t seem to have an office.” Our office had been damaged by flood. But he was making this sarcastic comment that we were like a fly-by-night party without an office. But that’s—almost mockingly.

So as it is now, we have no representation on the commission. We have no contact or communication with GECOM. We are not updated, consulted, briefed on anything. It is really sad. I have tried to get people I know to perhaps mediate, but it really will be something that has to be dealt with before the next elections, because at some stage I am going to publicly say, if it continues like this, that we have no confidence in GECOM because of all these things that have happened. But more so because of the continuance of this behavior, particularly where, as I said, there are no letters—we know nothing. What we know is what we read in the newspapers. So that was I think the fifth.

The sixth infraction, of course, is as I said, making things so contentious now to the point where we’re not speaking to each other. Sad. But that’s the way things are there.

CHAUBEY: Now this seems to have come to a head after the 2006 election.

TROTMAN: Yes.

CHAUBEY: What were the moves GECOM took leading up to the 2006 election? I’d like to get a sense of the sorts of communications you had during that phase. Would you describe the issues you were consulted on and briefed on? How did that relationship—how was it before this came to a head?

TROTMAN: It was good. We were consulted. We did feel that things were not as level as they ought to be, but we were consulted. We did have a right of audience. Like I said, even though there were transgressions, whenever I made contact with Dr. Surujbally, to his credit he dealt with them immediately. Notwithstanding the fact that they should not have happened, whenever he was alerted that we had a complaint he addressed our complaints. So in the pre-2006, leading up to the elections, I would say that GECOM, the relationship between GECOM and the AFC or vice versa was good. We had confidence in GECOM and its ability to discharge its functions.

I still believe that GECOM is capable of discharging its functions, but I’m concerned that personal issues have colored GECOM’s ability to look at the AFC as a political party that has certain rights and entitlements.

CHAUBEY: Now during that period, what were the sorts of issues that they would consult with you on or have briefing?
TROTMAN: The regular things. They would consult us about the elections schedule to see whether it was being kept, our comments, appointment of agents, scrutineers, training sessions, concerns about language, campaign materials. I must say it was very consultative. Dr. Surujbally was proactive. If he felt that something was said at a rally or that a particular party was not conducting itself in a manner befitting a good modern wholesome party, he would make it known. He might send a message through a friend to get to me. I have no doubt he did this with the other parties. So it is a stark difference today. What obtains today as against what was. That is why it is so glaring.

CHAUBEY: Now have there been attempts by—you mentioned one of the ways in which GECOM tried to perhaps maintain some sort of code of contact was to monitor what parties were doing. What might have been some of the other things that GECOM did, or the government did, to try and ensure that—or to try and to some degree level the playing field?

TROTMAN: I don't want to be cynical, but I don't think government did much—or anything at all. Just before elections, for example, the entire cabinet went out on a cabinet outreach, around the country. Three months before an election, using state funds to campaign. I think GECOM in tandem with the donor community, the OAS [Organization of American States]—and I need to give credit to the OAS in particular, Dr. what's-his-name, I don't remember his name. Anyway, he's Surinamese, I think the deputy director general of the OAS. He came here often. His presence, I thought, and his involvement, diplomacy, is very good. But I wouldn't credit the government; it was more GECOM working with international agencies and the donor community that set the tone for a successful election.

CHAUBEY: What were some of the ways in which they did that?

TROTMAN: Like I said, the OAS took the lead by setting up an office here months before elections, perhaps even a year before, which is quite different from past elections when observers would come a month before and come skirting around and sniffing around. But this was an office established about a year before. There were almost monthly visits from Washington. We were kept abreast. That I thought was very helpful.

The ERC [Ethnic Relations Commission] and UNDP did—I remember now—it was a social cohesion program. I remember an expert had been brought here from South Africa, meeting leaders and looking at possible triggers for violence and how to diffuse them. That I believe was helpful. But there was a greater presence of the international community. That helped, that helped the lot.

CHAUBEY: One of the things I read about was the Media Monitoring Unit that GECOM established to monitor the language used across various media. What were your views on the effect—?

TROTMAN: I had very little contact with the unit, because of course I was out on a daily basis. I thought they functioned, but there were some very damaging ads that came out which the medial unit was too slow to react to, so by the time they were pulled it would have been 72 hours or more after the damage had been done. But I still think that the Media Monitoring Unit was a useful component and helpful—yes, it was. But to me, hopefully, on the next occasion they'll be far better organized than they were now.
CHAUBEY: You mentioned that during the issue of scrutineers it was taken to the courts. Were there any other tactics used alongside—either using the media to inform the public or to raise public debate on this issue?

TROTMAN: Yes, it was very well publicized, the fact that we were going to court, the fact that we were fighting for what we thought were our just entitlements. So I don't think—the public was well aware, but it came down to having to go to court for what we thought was justice, but we didn’t in the end.

CHAUBEY: I’d like to talk now about polling and counting on election day. Would you speak about any aspects of the polling and counting that you think have improved, or not improved, over the last elections?

TROTMAN: Certainly the counting, the fact that there were more polling places, was helpful because it lessened the number of people who voted, and therefore made it easier to have the poll and quicken the count at the end of poll. The availability of material—in past elections there was always some confusion about insufficient ballot papers or something. I think this time around, if at all, it was in excess. Also the transmission of the results, the system to get that done, I’m not aware of how it was set up, but that seemed to be far superior than anything before. That seemed to have worked better than previous elections, so that GECOM got the results quicker. I didn’t mention to you the most serious infraction against the AFC, have I?

CHAUBEY: No, not yet.

TROTMAN: By GECOM?

CHAUBEY: No.

TROTMAN: Sorry to do this to you. How could this one slip me? We have regional seats, and in a place known as region number 10, near the mining community, the AFC won one of the two seats. GECOM announced that the PPP had won the seat. How could you do that? Using their Statements of Poll we showed them: just simply add. We won. At a meeting called by Dr. Surujbally, which I went to in January 2007, he explained that a mistake was made. He apologized and asked that we not see it as a deliberate move to disenfranchise the AFC—all the people of that community—but that the lawyers had advised that once the pronouncement had been made, rightly or wrongly, he was statutorily bound by whatever had been pronounced, and only a court following a petition filed could overturn what he had said. So we filed our petition. That is since May 2009; we still can’t get the court to hear our case. GECOM has sworn affidavits saying that the AFC has a pretended claim to the seat—that is the language. After Surujbally admitted to us and it was established that a mistake has been made. The prime minister of Guyana occupies the seat, which the AFC won unashamedly; doesn’t seem to matter to him. The prime minister occupies the seat as a representative of this community, when it was we who won that seat.

The fact that Dr. Surujbally could in a meeting with several persons say to us that a mistake—in fact he brought the Statements of Poll to show where the mistake was made—and he put it down to either the presiding officer being tired or maybe trying to get done, mistakes are made. Training, the kind of people you have to work with, not very bright and all that. We believe that this would have been a simple matter, would have been taken care of in a matter of weeks. We were led to believe that. Three years after we are still hoping to get a court to
hear our petition. But what has hurt and affected us most is that GECOM has taken the position of the government.

The government is saying no, the AFC didn’t win this seat, and GECOM has joined with similar language, saying that it is a pretended claim, even though their certified Statements of Poll are what we have used as exhibits to support us. We had our own, but we thought it would strengthen our case, we would not use our Statements of Poll but the ones that GECOM delivered to us, their copies, and there are just 100 and something of them to count. The count is clear that we won. That is the sixth and most serious infraction. AFC—or GECOM versus the AFC. We would have thought that GECOM would have taken the moral high ground, independent ground, and said this is what happened; it may have been a mistake, but we are statutorily bound by it, and maybe there is nothing we can do but at least speak the truth. That one is serious.

CHAUBEY: On the issue of scrutineers, when you took it to the court, the court did rule in your favor. What would you ascribe that to? How did that come about?

TROTMAN: The ruling in the favor of the AFC?

CHAUBEY: Yes.

TROTMAN: It was a very common-sense argument. There are 200 million dollars to be disbursed, to be paid to political party scrutineers. There are, in Parliament, four political parties that are entitled to share this money. What would be the best means of ensuring that it is fair? We proposed that on a proportional basis, based on the number of seats you have and your numerical strength and the court accepted the argument. The matter went to the Court of Appeals of Guyana, and the Court of Appeal of Guyana agreed that the argument had merit and the judge’s ruling had merit. So to us it was a simple matter that any court would have ruled that way on. It was not a contentious issue. Remember, we had just asked the court to interpret a section of the law. The law says that party scrutineers shall be paid but is silent as to how this payment is to be disbursed. We asked the court to give effect in a sense as to how this should be done.

I should tell you that two weeks ago, the government came to Parliament and passed a law, supported by the PNC, that says that money goes to the opposition. So they have defeated the ruling of the court and shut us out again. Serious.

CHAUBEY: I’d like to move a little bit into the security aspect of the election, since this was a peaceful election. What were the sorts of security arrangements made, and in your view how well did they work?

TROTMAN: Security—honestly, I’m not very familiar with the day-to-day security, the details rather, because I was, as I said, out campaigning. But I’d like to commend the commissioner of police. I think he did a good job with the resources that were available to him. That helped. Then you know we have in Guyana voting before—the Discipline Forces vote about a week before, so that on election day they are available in barracks or in their stations, not voting. They’ve already voted. I don’t think that, again, that the absence of violence was as a result of better security arrangements. I won’t say so. I don’t think that any of the new arrangements, or the arrangements put in place, were that much better or different from that obtained in the past. I think it was more again the effect of different things happening on the outside that placated—there was almost,
indeed it was like, people were just calm as if they were drugged or something. It was strange.

The churches were very involved. There was a lot of praying going on. There were ads on TV with gospel singing and different personalities, sports personalities and others appealing for calm. A lot of that helped. You were bombarded with that. Again, the language on the platform was not vicious, as vicious as it was before. The standard was a little higher.

Again, I’m not discounting entirely the security arrangements, but given the fact that they were not tested at all, we don’t know how they would have stood up. I would give more credit to a lot of the work being done on the outside by social activists.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that there was increased participation from religious groups and other entities who were urging calm. Was this part of a coordinated effort on the part of civil society?

TROTMAN: Yes, much of it was coordinated. I think the UNDP’s Social Cohesion Program, or Project, played a great part. On their own—there was this sense of doom. People felt that the 2006 elections would be the mother of all elections and that the country was going to break up. In a way it helped. I think the push—they didn’t want this breakup to happen, but a lot of the religious people, on their own, that were involved in a lot of praying and calling for calm, because there was this sense that something cataclysmic was about to happen in Guyana—. I think the reality or the possibility of this thing really happening scared people to the point where they decided, I’d better not get involved in this. So like I said, on television, a lot of the messages were for calm, for peace, not to be diverted, distracted or taken along any dangerous pathways, listening to people who call for violence.

CHAUBEY: On the subject of the media, I’d like to ask you about access to media for various parties. In your view, is that—?

TROTMAN: I don’t have—there were reports published which showed, depending on which television station you looked at or which newspaper you read, that different parties had greater or lesser access. But speaking for the AFC, I believe we got a fair—as a newcomer, we’d only been formed nine months before the election date, and I think we picked up fair coverage. Would have liked to have more, but we got fair coverage for a party that had just come on the scene, literally.

CHAUBEY: You come from a legal background; what is your view on the legal basis for conducting elections in Guyana, the legislative framework? Some reports suggest it’s too diffuse and it needs to be consolidated, all the laws under one umbrella. Do you have views on this?

TROTMAN: I’m not too sure; I’ve never really examined it from that angle. I’ve always examined it from the angle of whether or not the system is working. I’m more concerned right now about the local government elections being held or not held with reforms. But at the end of the day, I think we Guyanese have to remember, remind ourselves that we’re less than a million people. The voters’ list might hit half a million. There’s too much changing and adapting and engineering for half a million people. So bringing all the laws into one comprehensive—one law, or having it dispersed over 10 documents, is neither here or there for me. Like I said, it’s not rocket science; this is 2009, computers do a fantastic job. It is more about working the system rather than continuing to tinker and change laws. The size of our electorate is sometimes a little [...] in the US or some other place, and
they get a result, and they get their business done quite efficiently, and I don’t see why we can’t.

We have rural communities, and we take cognizance of that fact. Things might be a little more—the degree of difficulty would be a little greater, but that’s not to say that we can’t deliver to them elections or the mechanisms in a timely manner and get the results declared in a timely manner. We’re just not a million people. So I’m not in favor of great reform just for the sake of seeing reform. The laws need to be, perhaps—the ones that we have need to be observed rather than be changed and adapted all the time. There is always need for refining, but I don’t see this idea for a total overhaul being necessary.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned local government elections. That seems to be the next, or has been long awaited, in fact. In your view, how important are they, and do you feel like they will take place in the prescribed timeframe?

TROTMAN: They’re important. The prescribed timeframe—we’re off by many years already. I think that the importance of local government elections in Guyana is not being underscored sufficiently. I say so because in the context of a country with diversity like Guyana’s, you can actually deliver a greater strain of—or a purer strain of democracy at the local level than perhaps you can at the national level. Sounds strange, but if individual communities and little villages had more direct responsibility for their affairs, it may not matter to them as much who is president of Guyana or who is a member of Parliament, because I have—I can raise my own taxes, I can decide whether this bridge is repaired or that road is fixed or whether this school is going to be built and who the teacher is going to be. That I believe is very important for Guyana.

But we’re talking about elections in the absence of meaningful reforms—or that kind of reform, the kind of reform which led to the power being devolved to the people, to take some of this burden or this responsibility away from the center, that it has to take care of everything and everyone. When you cannot because of scarcity of resources or otherwise, you get blamed for discriminating; sometimes you’re not. But the perception is that you’re discriminating against me because you’ve done the bridge in community A and you’ve forgotten me in community B. Sometimes it’s just a matter of programming or availability of resources.

But if communities A and B both got an equal amount of money from the state’s coffers and each had the ability to make their own decisions as to how this money is going to be spent, road or bridge, then blaming the government in power—it would to a great extent neutralize the ability of someone to point a finger and say, you have discriminated against me because I look different to you or because I live in a community that is different than yours. That to me is why these elections—or put it another way, why local government reform is so important, and any elections which are to be held should reinforce that importance rather than just be an exercise that we’ve held elections for the sake of holding elections. Because it will just repeat and entrench what we have now, which is what I’m fearing is about to happen.

CHAUBEY: In your view, what is the reason that the process has stalled so long?

TROTMAN: It’s a combination of many things. Guyana, our politics—we have, our default mode, without realizing it—we only function when in crisis. So we go, we undulate. In a year’s time there’s going to be a dialogue of some type. Then that is going to collapse, so we hit a trough. Then someone from somewhere is going to speak to the leaders, and then they’re going to speak again, and then we
resume speaking. Then that breaks down. It is just the pattern of the way things are done in Guyana, that by itself. Then you throw into that the high level of distrust, dislike of the government. I don’t think we’ve practiced anything near an orthodox type of politics in Guyana particularly since 1997.

So the government exists every day—I might use a bad analogy here—almost like the government of Israel operates. It wakes up every day with the belief that there are hungry wolves waiting to move in and consume it. It has led to kind of a siege mentality; they’re distrusting. If I put up a proposal, or another person, a citizen, puts up a proposal, excellent. But the first thing you do is reject the proposal. First thing, standard. Then about two months later, you go back and you sniff around it and you agree that it’s good, but then you want to know why did this citizen suggest it. Does he really like me? Does he have an ulterior motive? Something is up. Then another two months later, there is a decision to implement a quarter of the proposal, another […] So by the time you get around to the whole, circumstances have overtaken everything. You need to go back to the drawing board and design everything all over again. It sounds a little bizarre, but this is my little theory of what is happening in Guyana.

So you get a lot of finger-pointing and blame. So it is your fault. Both sides are probably right. They both see it through a different prism. It is your fault, you’re delaying, not me, you are. They both are right and they’re both probably—and that’s the PNC and the PPP, particularly for this local government reform. They’ve been locked together in a meeting for the last eight years. The local government task force was established in 2001. Talks broke down last month, in 2009, because they weren’t making headway. Now imagine, after eight years, you’re in a task force, and that in itself suggests some degree of urgency and action; it is an action-oriented place. Eight years. Both sides consistently blame each other for the breakdown. That’s just the way things happen—or don’t happen—in Guyana. Then they hit a thing, and somebody has to come in and […] and talk and stroke a few egos, and then they resume talking again, and then it breaks down again, and that’s how we’ve been going for the last 10, 12 years.

CHAUBEY: Well, we’ve covered a lot of topics, and now I’d like to ask you if there’s anything you would like to bring up that I haven’t brought up?

TROTMAN: Nothing I can think of, except that as I said before, I like the idea of this project. I’ll certainly be reading up on it some more, the whole concept of successful societies, how do you measure them, how do you measure success, and how to replicate successes in other countries. It could be the little things like removing your refuse. If community A has the ability to have its refuse properly removed and discarded, it wouldn’t blame the government, because all of a sudden indeed, you stop looking only at the garbage and you start looking at the roads, the schools; everything becomes a problem. But if at least there were one or maybe two success stories, life is far better for you. You are appreciative of the fact that not everything is fixable at the same time. But you get a sense that nothing is happening, that everything has collapsed. So I’ll check on it.

CHAUBEY: I’m glad you’re going to read up on this, and if you have any suggestions, we’ll be happy to hear. Thank you so much for participating.

TROTMAN: Thank you very much.