



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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CHAUBEY: Today is May 21st, 2009. My name is Varanya Chaubey, and I'm in conversation with Mr. Boodoo, who is chief elections officer at GECOM (Guyana Elections Commission). Thank you, Mr. Boodoo, for participating in this interview.

BOODOO: *You're welcome.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to begin by asking a little bit about your personal background. Would you describe the work that you're doing now, and how you came into this position?

BOODOO: *Originally, I was a head of department at the local university. Prior to that, I was a teacher for a number of years, and I got a Commonwealth Scholarship. I went to Manchester in the United Kingdom. I did a master's in education. I came back and taught at the local university. I was in the Department of Foundations and Administration of the School of Education. I was asked by the Elections Commission in 1994 to assist them with preparation of manuals. Electoral laws were required to be translated into administrative practices for delivery and for training people. There was a gap there at the Elections Commission. So I came on board, and I started to help them to prepare manuals in terms of curriculum delivery for adult learners.*

Thereafter, I stayed on. I kept working part-time, and then I was offered a full-time position in 2000 as administration and public relations manager. I worked with that until a new commission came into being in 2000, around May. I was then appointed as deputy commissioner, administration. I worked for that year, and the then-chief election officer took ill in September and died later. I was then catapulted into the post because we had general elections in 2001. (The elections) should have been in January but were deferred because we were not quite ready until March the 19th.

From the 22nd of January, I was appointed to act as CEO (chief election officer) because there were statutory processes to be fulfilled. Later on, I was confirmed in that position in April 2002. Since then, I am here. I supervised the 2001 elections, another one in 2006, and we are right now in preparation for the local government elections to be held later this year.

CHAUBEY: This is a very interesting career trajectory. Going back to the very beginning, you mentioned that you worked on translating the law into procedures and compiling them into manuals for people. I'd be interested to know how you went about doing that. What were the sorts of factors you considered?

BOODOO: *There are several factors. You have to look at the target population who you want to train, and you have to look at the legal requirements, as the laws are set out. They're old, British constitution-type laws from 1945. We have now been amending that. So it is a patchwork, pieces of amendments all over the place. Now you've got to get all those pieces together and make certain that you set them out step-by-step. You mechanize the process so that people can now understand what they have to do step-by-step—if it is polling, or if it is registration of a person. We had to rework all the forms. They were so old and required information which we considered irrelevant, whether you are Afro-Guyanese, whether you are Indo—we deleted all of that. If you are Guyanese, you are Guyanese.*

We would have done over all the forms, amended the registration processes and the electoral laws. There has been constitution work done and legislative amendments for Local Government which needed a lot of work. All those things

we modified then, and we are now implementing them in a more transparent, more meaningful way, in terms of technology as well. We are meeting the standards other countries are moving, to build confidence in the whole electoral process.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that you had to rework some of the forms. To clarify, when was this done?

BOODOO: *We started with the forms in 2004, and we have changed all. We hired a consultant who helped us along, a forms specialist. For the 2006 elections the whole registration process was conducted using new forms, when we implemented continuous registration. We had periodic registration before. We only registered people up to an election. Then we started continuously registering all the time, updating the register. When people die, you delete. When people come of age, you add on and you keep going. So you can call a snap election and have a very effective voters' roll ready.*

CHAUBEY: Now I don't know if you could maybe, off the top of your head, offer a few examples of the sorts of changes you made to the forms leading up to the 2006 election. Were there a few fields that were new or—?

BOODOO: *Several fields were reorganized. There were some compulsory fields, which you must provide information on before you can be registered. There were some optional fields. Changes now include digital photographs, which are printed immediately. Although we used to take the thumbprint, now take ten (finger) prints. These prints are cross-matched electronically to remove duplicates, and the forms are stored. They're scanned and stored in an electronic database as well as in a manual database. So there is always a manual backup to our electronic backup.*

CHAUBEY: I notice on one of the registration forms, there was an "also known as" field. Would you describe how that came into being and when that was instituted?

BOODOO: *We have a country where you have a lot of immigrants who came here from different communities. While their names on the documents would be (stated as) Marjorie Persaud, people don't know them (by that name). People around would know her as Betty or Auntie Ranny or something of this sort, because they have hardly been using this name. If you go asking for these people nobody knows them (by their documented names). So we use the alias, AKA, also known as so-and-so. So when you go out and you ask, people say, "Oh Auntie Betty, she lives over there or so-and-so, she lives there," and that kind of thing. So it helps in locating and identifying people quickly.*

CHAUBEY: I notice this "also known as" is not included on the RO1 form that is for initial registration. Why was it not included on that form?

BOODOO: *Because for that form, the source document must correspond with the information that is on that form. It is a copy of the back, and we can't have anything else. The Residence Verification—where you're going you'll use the AKA, but on the technical form you use strict information on the source document.*

CHAUBEY: I see.

You've held a number of positions within GECOM, and I wonder if you could summarize for us, perhaps briefly, some of the major operational changes you've seen implemented during your time here.

BOODOO: *Well, we have revamped the whole Secretariat. A job evaluation study was done, (of) the piecemeal manner in which things were being done for an election. You bring people on board, and three months after you dismantle and every(one) goes, and when you're ready (you have) to start again, so we have consolidated that. We have put a permanent commission and Secretariat in place. We have institutionalized all the reports. There's now institutional memory going back to a number of years where you could find things and you could research, and all of that.*

We have changed the electoral laws in accordance. We have brought technology fully aboard, digital photographs, reading of fingerprints—those things never used to happen. We have cemented scrutineering work at all levels of what the commission is doing, in order to build confidence and transparency in what we do. More people used to quarrel and fight and think about this. Now they don't have a need to; they're seeing everything at every level, and they're always there, looking on at what is being done. So you have a lot of tolerance and understanding and confidence in what we do.

CHAUBEY: I'd like to go back to the point you mentioned about revamping the Secretariat. Would you be able to offer us examples of the way in which this was done? For instance, positions that might have been created, or how it was done.

BOODOO: *The Secretariat prior to the whole job evaluation exercise had people appointed piecemeal.*

CHAUBEY: Sorry, just to clarify, when was that done, the job evaluation exercise?

BOODOO: *The job evaluation was done in 2001, and the recommendations were implemented in 2003. You had: you needed somebody for this job, you brought them in for three months or four months, and at the end they were gone. So the expertise they would have developed was lost. It was not harnessed and stored for future elections. Every time you brought in different people. Now, the commission has a structure, a permanent structure, with a CEO, a deputy, an assistant, and senior managers responsible for various aspects. Human resources, administrative and support services, information technology, voter registration and elections, and those kinds of positions. Those people are there all year round with the knowledge and expertise of how to approach and do certain things.*

CHAUBEY: Then I'd like to follow up with you on the fact that you mentioned procedures are now institutionalized. Are there certain monthly reports or weekly reports?

BOODOO: *Yes, every activity we undertake, there are reports to support that activity. There is a financial report. There is a report on figures being done in the field—everything, you've got a report. Work now is treated as project-oriented, clearly established objectives in a Microsoft Project Plan, timeframes and all of that. We never used to do that. Early start, late starters, early finishers, monitoring resources, and everything.*

CHAUBEY: This was not done prior?

BOODOO: *No we hadn't the technology—we hadn't the skills to do that. Now we're relating with many agencies. We can get information quickly, we share information and we will see, we are affiliated with the Association of Caribbean Electoral Organization, with the OAS (Organization of American States,) and we all link and we share information, we network, we produce information for the magazines and the reports produced in the region.*

CHAUBEY: What were some of the electoral laws that were changed?

BOODOO: *The last one we have changed is the Local government election laws amendment. It is to be shortly before Parliament. That is going to influence the local government elections coming up.*

CHAUBEY: Was that drafted by GECOM?

BOODOO: *No, the Local Government Task Force. While they have drafted in theory, GECOM has to make sense (of it) and put it in a manner that it can be implemented—the practicalities of the thing can be implemented in the form of changing ballot paper, changing forms, modifying various things before implementation can take place.*

CHAUBEY: Was there some consultation between the local government task force as they were creating this amendment and GECOM?

BOODOO: *They didn't ask us because that is politically motivated. GECOM has a mandate, based on what they come up with to run the election, the registration. We don't get involved in that. That's more part of the work from the legislature.*

CHAUBEY: In 2001, you mentioned, very shortly before the election you were catapulted into the position of chief election officer and responsible for running the 2001 elections. Would you describe, when you first entered, the sorts of challenges you faced and how you went about it?

BOODOO: *The then-chief then took ill on September the 22nd, and nobody was appointed. The chairman was there, and I was the next senior person in line. For whatever reason, when it came, reached the stage where statutory provisions had to be implemented, the chief had to sign, there had to be a chief election officer. Then I was catapulted. But I was there a long time, so I knew much of what I had to do. I could have drafted the orders OK—as a matter of fact I do many things which a lawyer would be required to do: the draft, the orders for publication, and all the official notices were published in the official gazette. I was able to cope and run the elections. We got in a lot of observers and a joint international technical assessor to monitor what was happening at every stage and to inform the donors whether the elections could be held. The elections were brought off very successfully, 2001, the 19th of March.*

CHAUBEY: Were there some lessons learned during the 2001 election that formed the basis for changes leading up to the 2006 election? I know you mentioned that the forms were changed for registration. Were there some other lessons?

BOODOO: *There were other lessons. We had a Commonwealth Fellow, Tim Neal, who as a communication expert related with the media, and he developed a code of conduct for them, because the media could inflame lots of things and misrepresent. Although there were not really serious sanctions on their behavior,*

we were able to establish a different kind of relationship with the media. The reporting mechanisms were much more responsible.

Then we were able to deal with a more mature audience; lots of people were instigated to be violent and so on. We sought a voter education awareness program to sensitize them to go and register and then vote. Many of them responded. Then we took the whole operation into various aspects of the country. We had a more informed operation, and the response was very rewarding.

CHAUBEY: Now the 2006 elections have been hailed as the most free and fair in the country for decades.

BOODOO: Yes.

CHAUBEY: In your view, what was the reason for them being quite as peaceful as they were?

BOODOO: *We had moved to another level of transparency. All the people who were complaining, we brought them on board, scrutineers to look at every aspect of what we do. I had monthly meetings with the chief scrutineers, all the political parties. I brought them in, gave them all the documents, explained to them all the various things. But there is always a demand where the stakeholders want to take over the process and we resisted that. I mean, they were reporting that—look, polling stations had this and that. There were observers there who commented this is not true. I think they had exhausted their strategies to frustrate the whole process, because they were behind people not to sign statements of poll. As for transparency and confidence building, we brought in observers since we started the registration, and we took them all over the country. We had civil society groups, the donor groups, and we held regular consultations and meetings with them, and they were monitoring progress all over the place.*

So they could have judged quickly when they saw the reports in the papers and so on what was really happening. They were very satisfied with the progress we were making and how we were dealing with the issues. [interruption, end of file 1.]

CHAUBEY: This scrutineers' issue that has been covered widely in the media, with some parties suggesting they were left out of this process: would you comment briefly on that?

BOODOO: *This country, for a small country with less than 400,000 voters, we have 33 political parties. Parties just say they're parties. Some can't field a list of candidates in order to contest. Many of them come to us for funding support, which we do not deal with. Many of them wanted to be involved, but they don't have any clout, any representation. We often document piles and piles of stuff and give to these parties. We have been inviting them out on nomination day; we draw the line in relation to who are contesting and who are not. Who are not contesting, we sever relationships with them, since they can no longer be deemed an active political party. If you can't field a list of candidates to contest, why do you want a relationship with us? That's the position.*

A list of candidates has got to be supported by electors. Even some of those who contest we had to call them and show them that there were the same

electors on two separate lists. They had to correct them. Some of them were writing people's names en-bloc. People were calling us and telling us they did not sign up to support them. So there was a lot of fraud with improper submissions. We took on board only those who qualified to contest.

Our relationship with political parties focuses on those represented in the National Assembly until the next nomination day. Those who contest, we can have a relationship until the election results are out. When the results are out, we issue certificates of election to those who are elected. Those who fail do not worry too much. We cannot use the resources of this agency to give to every Tom, Dick— imagine 33 political parties. All of them want to have a copy of the voters' list. You know how many volumes you've got to print? All of them want electronic copies.

So the Scrutineers for the main party were there, and for the joint parliamentary opposition, and I think that's adequate. You could imagine, you have a polling station with polling going on, where you have representatives of 33 parties sitting in there? Where are we going to find the accommodation to put them? And there're not contesting. If you're not contesting, what interest do you have to be there? So that's the reason why we can't accommodate all of them, and we have said that to them, to their annoyance. They make demands on various things. We don't have unlimited resources. We have limited money to spend, and we have to get our priorities right.

CHAUBEY: One of the exercises you mentioned you're undertaking now in preparation for local government election, is constituency delimitation.

BOODOO: *That's right.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe some of the factors you're considering and how you're going about your work?

BOODOO: *Well, we have looked at—I've been looking at these practices in a number of countries around the world, and we're concerned about the process. We are preparing our people to understand that the authority responsible for this is the Elections Commission and that we must project a very impartial, objective, and professional outlook when we are undertaking this exercise. We must do this exercise within the framework of the laws. We must make certain that we do not cut off communities. We must look at representativeness, common interests among people culturally, and sharing their communities—that we do not disrupt those things. You do have to maintain some equality of the vote. You don't vary so that one constituency got 15,000 and one got 500. You try to maintain some kind of parity. We must consult, there must be ongoing consultation with all the relevant stakeholders, the political parties, the seniors in the communities, local government bodies, and all the administrative people to make certain that what we're doing is known and there is a rational justification for recommending certain things in certain areas.*

But the final body to determine that would be the Elections Commission, based on our recommendations, with data collected from the field to support these recommendations. So we are preparing them for that. We have looked at all the concerns raised and what have you, and what these are not going to be; these are only for the administrative framework for the elections. After them they become blurred, invisible again until some other time.

CHAUBEY: Why did GECOM feel that these boundaries needed to be changed? What were they addressing?

BOODOO: *The boundaries needed to be changed based on the local government laws that are going before the Parliament. Previously we had PR (promotional representation) system. Now there is a plurality system where 50% of the councilors will be elected by PR and 50% will be elected by first-past-the-post. You have your constituencies now. Independent people can contest.*

Other groups, civil groups can contest, also along with political parties. So we had to limit constituencies for the first-past-the-post aspect.

CHAUBEY: I see. Now the legislation actually hasn't gone through Parliament yet. So in light of the fact that it hasn't, how easy or difficult is it for GECOM to continue with its work?

BOODOO: *We have been given a draft of the legislation already. It should go to Parliament, and we have been advised that preparatory work should proceed; the bill will be enacted shortly. I had a meeting with the President Tuesday afternoon. There are concerns from the opposition—that is not our business. When it goes to Parliament, they must address those concerns, but we cannot wait; we have to proceed with our preparatory work.*

CHAUBEY: How much time does GECOM need in order to field the local government election?

BOODOO: *We are preparing, and we can deliver by the end of the year. Once the legislation is through, we have other mechanisms, we already trained a lot of people to do claims and objections. We can start shortly, revise the voters' list, have it ready and run the elections. Local government is not as demanding as general elections. I was there in '94 when we ran the last, and we managed fairly well. We're talking about—not the whole country could be involved, 65 NDC's and 6 municipalities. So large parts of the country will not be involved in voting. We're scantily populated in some rural areas.*

For example, Region nine has one NDC; Region eight, nobody will be voting; Region seven, only Bartica. Region one: two areas. The whole coastline will be involved, nobody else. So we can handle it; it's not a difficulty. We are preparing to handle it, to run it off.

CHAUBEY: Are you also discussing the upcoming elections with donor agencies?

BOODOO: *Yes, we have ongoing discussions with them. We have achieved a lot of things. We can print our own ID cards here. We're hoping to be able to do cross-matching by next year, and we're in constant relationship with the donors discussing various projects and where they can help.*

CHAUBEY: We've covered a lot of areas, and I know that your time is limited, so I'd like to ask you now if there is something you would like to discuss that we haven't talked about yet.

BOODOO: *We are an agency and we have to be responsive to changes. Maybe the next time somebody comes here we'll be thinking about electronic voting. Because we*

are responding to change. Not many countries in the Caribbean would have gone as far as we have in terms of improving the system, technologically as well as maintaining a valid electoral roll at all times. So we're keeping in that spirit, and we've seen change as the catalyst to guide our vision all along, where we can improve things so that we can have the best system in place when the elections are ready.

CHAUBEY: So electronic voting is something that has been discussed at GECOM?

BOODOO: *We're looking at it, but I think there's going to be a lot of mistrust, because they have been using some things, some agencies have been using it in terms of TV programs and radio programs. People call in and express their view and vote and all of that. So it is going to catch on, it is only a matter of time.*

CHAUBEY: Thank you so much, Mr. Boodoo, for participating in this interview.

BOODOO: *Thank you, and welcome any time.*