



COOLING ETHNIC CONFLICT OVER A HEATED ELECTION: GUYANA, 2001–2006

SYNOPSIS

On 28 August 2006, Guyana held its most peaceful election in decades. In previous polls, inefficiencies in the electoral process had fueled rumors of electoral fraud by the ruling party, inflaming violent tensions between Guyana's two main ethnic groups, the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese. Ethnicity and party affiliation had long been linked in Guyanese politics. In the run-up to the 2006 vote, the elections commission, international donors and civil society groups worked together to thwart election-related violence. The commission rebuilt trust in the voter registry, decentralized administrative processes, improved field communications and better coordinated security plans. Recognizing the media's role in fomenting violence, the commission established a Media Monitoring Unit and urged media outlets to cooperate to draft and abide by a new voluntary code of conduct. At the same time, civil society groups instituted a series of peace-building initiatives that included high-level dialogues and grassroots forums. These efforts helped ensure a free and fair election, with results accepted by all parties. Although violence reemerged in 2008, these reforms provided a foundation for renewed counter-efforts before the 2011 elections. This case offers insights to reformers seeking to break the cycle of electoral violence in ethnically divided societies.

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INTRODUCTION

When Steve Surujbally became chairman of the Guyana Elections Commission in September 2001, he had no experience in election administration. Best known to the public for his satirical newspaper column, he was a veterinarian by training who had recently quit his job advising the minister of agriculture when the president tapped him for a new role. "I wanted a switch from battering my head against the wall and not getting too much success," Surujbally said.

Surujbally was well aware of how politically freighted his new role would be. Guyana's history of tense, racially-aligned politics predated the

country's independence from Britain in 1966. Since free elections had resumed in 1992, campaign seasons had been marred by violence, ranging from riots to assassinations, between the primarily Indo-Guyanese supporters of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and the primarily Afro-Guyanese supporters of the People's National Congress (PNC). Political candidates competed fiercely for every vote in a country with a small population and a unicameral parliament of 65 members elected through proportional representation. The elections commission, which became a permanent institution under the 2000 constitution, was often

caught in the crossfire between the two political forces. With three commissioners from the PPP and PNC respectively and a tiebreaking chair appointed by the ruling party, the commission was alternatively attacked as biased or indecisive.

Six months before Surujbally took office, the elections commission had overseen general and regional elections afflicted by violence once again. Conflicts between supporters of the incumbent PPP and the opposition PNC had worsened as the March 2001 elections loomed. On election day, many citizens discovered their names missing from the registry, or voters roll, leading PNC supporters to accuse the PPP of dirty tricks. The elections commission's four-day delay in reporting results exacerbated tensions, and television and radio hosts contributed to the frenzy by pushing rival narratives about the source of the delay. When the commission declared the incumbent PPP had won, many on the PNC side became convinced the PPP had rigged the election, even though international observers had declared it to be free and fair. Violent incidents, which had been markedly limited in the days leading up to the polls, quickly escalated into the angry public protests and violent retaliations among party agents and supporters that had accompanied previous Guyanese elections.¹

In April 2001, a month after the elections, calm returned to the streets of Guyana's capital, Georgetown, and the new Parliament was sworn in. But from the spring of 2002 to the summer of 2003, a vicious crime wave with ethnic and political undercurrents hit the country, raising fears about the 2006 elections. Disputes over the validity of the 2001 election results still simmered, and relations between the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities deteriorated.²

Surujbally led an effort to revamp the elections commission to avoid repeating the mistakes of 2001. The commission implemented a wide range of reforms designed to rebuild

credibility by improving election administration and limiting political activists' ability to spread inflammatory rumors over the airwaves. Assisted by foreign advisers, the commission overhauled the voter registration process, improved lines of communication with field staff, added new staff and polling stations in overworked districts, and created a Media Monitoring Unit to keep tabs on partisan disinformation. As the 2006 election drew closer, other organizations stepped in to complement the commission's work. Donors agreed to cover just over half of the election's US\$7 million budget, and local civil society organizations ran various peacekeeping initiatives encouraging tolerance and calm.

This case details how Guyana's elections commission was able to deliver a free, peaceful election in 2006 despite the country's deep fractures over ethnic and political lines and a long history of election-related violence. In particular, the case demonstrates the importance of running administratively credible elections that limit the space for rumor and suspicion to take hold.

THE CHALLENGE

Guyana had a long history of violence at election time, and previous efforts to address the recurrent problem had consistently fallen short. "Every single election in this country was associated with bloodshed, burning," Surujbally said. "It was as if concomitant with an election there must be mayhem."

Such fierce conflict might seem surprising in a Caribbean country that had a population of just 760,000. But the Guyanese population was ethnically fractured. The largest ethnic group according to the 2002 census was the Indo-Guyanese, comprising 43.5% of the population. Descendants of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent, the Indo-Guyanese tended to support the PPP, which led Guyana after free elections were restored in 1992. The second-

largest ethnic group, the Afro-Guyanese, accounted for 30.2% of the population in the 2002 census. Descended from African slaves, they tended to support the PNC, which dominated the country from 1968 to 1992, a radical socialist period during which opposition parties were suppressed. The remaining one-quarter of the population included those of mixed heritage (16.7%), indigenous Amerindians (9.2%), and other minorities with limited political influence.³ Guyana's tradition of ethnically divisive politics had roots in colonial policies, Cold War alliances and the personal rivalries of the nation's founders. Over time, the fault line between the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese deepened and became a permanent source of election-related violence.

After the PNC rejected the results of the December 1997 elections, riots rocked Georgetown for almost two weeks before the Caribbean Community, an organization promoting economic integration among 15 Caribbean countries and dependencies, intervened to broker a peace agreement. Under the Herdmanston Accord, signed in January 1998, elections were set for 2001, two years earlier than planned. The parties also committed to improve political dialogue, submit to an external audit of the election results and reform the constitution. The parties jointly set up an umbrella commission to manage constitutional changes, parliamentary strengthening and electoral reforms.

As part of the electoral reforms, Parliament introduced stringent new language to the main electoral law making it a criminal offense for any person to make or publish any statement, or take any action that could result in racial or ethnic violence, or hatred among people. Any political candidate convicted of this offense could be barred from running for elected office for five years, and the case would be referred to a new body, the Ethnic Relations Commission. If the commission

determined that the candidate's party was complicit, the party could also be banned for five years and fined as much as US\$500,000.⁴ The measure was legal under Guyana's constitution, which specifically exempted "expressions, in whatever form, capable of exciting hostility or ill will against any person or class of persons" from freedoms of expression, due to the country's history of racial strife.⁵

Although the reforms were significant, some, particularly the Afro-Guyanese, felt the process was too slow, stalling the effort and allowing tensions to fester. Only after an additional agreement, the Saint Lucia Statement, was signed seven months after the Herdmanston Accord, did serious discussions commence over constitutional reforms. This slow pace was dangerous, said Rupert Roopnaraine, co-leader of one of Guyana's smaller opposition parties, because the unrest following the 1997 elections "developed its own dynamic, and in a very real sense, the accord—which was an accord of leaders and politicians—did not really reach into the fibers and the nerves of the people on the streets."

In addition, although Parliament approved many constitutional amendments related to elections relatively quickly, meeting deadlines for the 2001 elections, some of the planned commissions did not form on time, including the important Ethnic Relations Commission.⁶ The reform process also failed to adequately address some of the administrative shortfalls that had undermined previous elections.

Frustrated by the pace of reform and believing that the PPP had stolen the 1997 elections, PNC supporters went into the 2001 vote wary of any signs of fraud. Aware of the high stakes, six international observation teams with 150 individual observers came to monitor the elections.⁷ All these missions later declared the vote to be largely free and fair but criticized the elections commission's inefficiencies. In their

joint final report on the election, the Guyana Long Term Observation Group—jointly funded by the European Union, Great Britain, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—and the EU Observation Mission concluded that the elections “left many questions over the efficiency and accuracy of the process,” and recommended that the elections commission “review current staffing lessons, administrative structures, management systems and communications systems.”⁸

The recurrence of violence after the 2001 elections made clear the urgency of further reforms. The political parties, through Parliament, had not adequately implemented all elements of the constitutional reforms as scheduled, particularly those parts that were meant to restore trust between the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities, and many of the recurrent triggers of violence had barely been addressed. The elections commission needed a new, more proactive approach.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

To deliver peaceful elections, Surujbally and his six fellow commissioners knew they had to improve the commission’s performance. Fortunately, the commission already had a starting point for reform. In the months following the 2001 election, before Surujbally took office as chairman, the elections commission had hired the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), a Stockholm-based intergovernmental organization that promotes democracy worldwide, to undertake a comprehensive systems review and audit of the 2001 election. International IDEA’s final report outlined various mistakes that the elections commission had made and laid out five pages of recommendations that focused broadly on voter

registration, IT systems, vote counting and results compilation, and staff recruitment.

Deciding what to do about the voter registration process was the commission’s most urgent priority because of the lead times required. Yet the issue was politically charged. The three PNC-nominated commissioners supported the PNC’s call for a full door-to-door verification of the registry, which had not been conducted since 1997. The PNC-nominated members felt that the registry used in 2001 had been compromised and needed to be redrawn from scratch. But the three PPP-nominated commissioners—as well as Surujbally, who had been nominated by the PPP-dominated administration—believed that setting up a continuous registration system would be a more cost-effective and sustainable use of the commission’s resources. Such a system would not jettison previous registrations, but would be continuously updated with new and corrected voter registration forms, even between election periods.

Surujbally and the other PPP-nominated members thought that spreading registration across the electoral cycle would make the process less open to political criticism. In 2001, as in previous election cycles, the commission had registered people only during the few months preceding the election, as political tensions began to mount. Parties seized on any opportunity to criticize the process, which undermined the credibility of both the registry and the national identity cards that the commission distributed as part of the registration drive. “People started to politicize registration,” explained Calvin Benn, the deputy chief electoral officer, “and we felt that wasn’t right.”

After developing a concept paper and holding many meetings, the PPP-nominated members overruled their PNC-nominated colleagues and called for the 2001 registry to be

reused, supplemented by continuous registration. While Surujbally's decisive action allowed registration to proceed on schedule, the move angered the PNC commissioners and led to later difficulties.

Another contentious issue was the dissemination of results. Managers at the Permanent Election Secretariat, which implemented the elections commission's policy and was headed by the chief electoral officer, realized that better management could help election day go more smoothly and, crucially, speed up the compilation and declaration of the final results. "We recognized that at the managerial level in the field we needed to do something to improve our rate of return of results," Benn said.

Staff in Georgetown began close consultations with field agents to work out the best way to speed the dissemination of results, identifying bottlenecks in the system, the overworked offices serving the most populated regions. They addressed this problem by expanding support staff for these locations, improving reporting procedures, and updating the communications network that field staff used to send results to headquarters.

The final area that the commission chose to focus on in advance of the 2006 election was the media. Although this was not a focus of the International IDEA report, the commissioners agreed that the media had been a crucial instigator of violence in the 2001 elections. The commission therefore proposed to create a new Media Monitoring Unit, with funding from the UNDP and other international donors.

Other organizations stepped in to help. The Ethnic Relations Commission and the UNDP set up a joint effort called the Social Cohesion Program to work to bridge the divide between the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities. Lawrence Lachmansingh, a Guyanese

development consultant who worked for the UNDP, explained the motivation behind the Social Cohesion Program: "Back in 2002 and 2003, our calculation was, if there was a political conflict in Guyana, it was an ethnic conflict largely driven from the center, a nationally-driven problem. The people at the local level did not spontaneously combust."

From the spring of 2002 until the summer of 2003, a crime wave with political dimensions—aggravated by the death of former President and PNC leader Desmond Hoyte—had threatened the uneasy peace established after the Herdmanston Accord. In mid-2003, Guyana's president met with the PNC's new leader, and the two sides agreed to work on reducing tension. The Ethnic Relations Commission and the UNDP took their cue from this meeting, and followed up with many meetings around the country. With support on all sides, they decided to focus their program on building peace and trust at all levels of society.

Because the interactions between the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities were so charged, the UNDP took the lead in implementing the program. "It was intended that the UNDP itself would implement it," said Trevor Benn, a Guyanese governance adviser at the UNDP, "because there was a high level of mistrust of the government at that time. It was intended to heal the wounds of racial issues that we faced for so long, as well as the political tensions."

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Preparing for the 2006 vote, the commission needed to create a registry accepted by all sides, maintain calm in the run-up to the elections, and ensure a smooth vote and quick delivery of results. Fortunately, the commission could rely on critical domestic and international partners to fill gaps in programming.

Improving the voter registry

After the commission decided to introduce a continuous registration system, its next challenge was deciding where to establish registration field offices. Keith Lowenfield, the commission's assistant chief electoral officer, said the commission aimed to place one office in each of Guyana's 10 administrative regions, with additional offices for bigger or more populous regions. In the densely populated coastal areas prone to election-related violence, the commission established extra offices to avoid having large crowds at any one time. To cope with increased registrations before an election, it set up temporary offices in some areas. In total, the commission set up 23 permanent field offices and 160 temporary ones.

Beverly Critchlow, the commission's voter registration manager, said the commission rewrote the registration forms and procedures to make a more accurate list. Voters were given unique computer-generated identity numbers to safeguard privacy and reduce the opportunity for errors.

Under the old registration procedures, voters had been assigned the numbers that were on their registration forms. However, because field officers used sequentially numbered books, identification numbers for people with the same last name and address sometimes differed only by one digit. The commission's IT manager, Gavin Campbell, observed, "We had quite a few errors of this type—changing the father's name instead of the son's name because they all live in the same place and have very similar identity numbers." To ensure fewer mix-ups in the new list, Campbell added so-called "check digits" to the computer-generated voter identity numbers. The check digits—two random digits that the IT department affixed to the end of each voter identity number—helped to distinguish similar entries.

After voters registered at one of the field offices, officials visited their homes to verify and collect biometric information and copy source documents, such as birth certificates. Digital cameras were used to take pictures of both voters and their documents, reducing the workload for registration officials while providing images of supporting documents at an acceptable quality level. The registration forms were simplified to two pages: one for voter information and one for the voter's fingerprints and photo. Registration officials used portable printers.

To minimize physical paperwork, the commission decided to scan completed registration forms and work off the electronic copies. The two pages were scanned into computers at different resolutions to economize on file size. IT Manager Gavin Campbell explained, "On the first page, we don't need a very high quality scan because all we are going to do is blow it up big and put it on the screen. The second page needs to be scanned at a good enough resolution to produce the fingerprints." Operators then input data off electronic copies of scanned forms. Two operators separately keyed in each form so that the system could flag data entry errors.

The commission sent all the scanned fingerprints to a U.S. vendor to crosscheck them for any identical matches, as a safeguard against multiple registrations. Campbell said involving an overseas company helped allay some of the parties' distrust of local institutions. Because Guyana had fewer than a half-million voters, it also made economic sense to send the data overseas rather than invest in the technology to conduct the cross-matching exercise domestically. "It cost about 30 cents U.S. per record, off the top of my head, which is all right if it's Guyana," Campbell said. "If you were in Nigeria, you might want to think differently about it."

The commission launched the continuous registration system in October 2005.

Monitoring the media

The commission worked with international donor agencies to establish a Media Monitoring Unit ahead of the 2006 election. The unit's job was to monitor print and broadcast media for inaccurate, biased or inflammatory statements.

Before establishing the unit, managers at the elections commission met with members of the media and showed them examples of irresponsible reporting from the 2001 elections. They then discussed the subsequent violence. Keen to clean up their reputations, leading media houses agreed to create and adhere to a new code of conduct, substantially revised from a previous code drafted for the 2001 vote.

To draft the new code, the elections commission and the UNDP organized a two-day conference attended by leading media representatives. Participants debated the wording of provisions extensively. To help write the code and set up the monitoring unit, donor organizations hired Tim Neale, a consultant who had more than 30 years experience with the BBC. Remington Eastman, a supervisor at the monitoring unit, said Neale "played a very critical and important role in the formation of the unit." The new media code committed the media "to provide fair, balanced and accurate information, including voter education and to help deliver successful elections by enabling voters to make informed decisions at the ballot box."⁹

Jainarine Deonauth, the unit's deputy manager, was put in charge of recruiting new staff members for the monitoring unit. He was one of two members on the 16-person staff who had experience monitoring the media from the 2001 elections.

The monitoring unit assessed the media's

behavior against the new code of conduct before, during and after the election. Eastman explained that the unit monitored the media for both quality and quantity. It flagged reports that violated the code of conduct on television, radio or in newspapers, and it examined the volume of election coverage—column inches in newspapers or minutes in broadcasts—given to each party, whether negative or positive.

If the unit found any infractions of the code, the commission wrote the violators a letter "very gently," Surujbally said, reminding them of their commitment. Deonauth explained that the commission had to be careful not to be too forceful in its criticisms: "It was not easy to get the rogue talk-show hosts under control. It was a major challenge. Some of them ... thought they were fighting a battle to represent their race group, their ethnic group, and any attempt to control them was looked at as stifling media freedom." To avoid having to make public judgments on media conduct, the unit referred any infractions to an Independent Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel. This panel, set up by the elections commission the month before the election and financed by the UNDP and the Commonwealth, comprised two veteran journalists from Caribbean countries, both chosen by local journalists.

Expediting the count, improving management

The commission made a number of changes to ensure it would be able to release election results quickly in 2006. In 2001 the commission had assigned too few staff to key areas. For example, in Region 4, which included Georgetown and contained almost 50% of the electorate, the commission had assigned only 20 deputies to collect election results. In one extreme instance, a deputy had been given sole responsibility for compiling results from more

than 20 polling places.

Calvin Benn, the commission's deputy chief electoral officer, decided to increase the number of deputies in Region 4 to 68 for the 2006 election. He explained that this gave deputies "a more manageable number of polling places" to deal with. Benn added that the extra support staff in 2006 helped each deputy get the results more quickly to the electoral administrator at the district level, who in turn was able to send results faster to the command center at the Permanent Election Secretariat.

In addition to increasing support staff, the commission changed the way staff transmitted results to the center. Vincent Alexander of the UNDP explained that in 2001 too many people had called in results to the elections commission at the same time, jamming the phone lines. The commission depended on a central results center, the National Results Control Room, to compile all the results and make the final tabulations. Before this centralized office had finished tabulation, however, political parties would often declare their own count of local results based on their representatives at the polling stations. Benn said the commission's inability to announce national results quickly, when local results were already available, gave the impression that the commission might be "deliberately stymieing or withholding information."

In 2006, the commission decentralized the process by shifting the collection of each polling station's official record of results to people on the ground. Vote tabulation was carried out in centers based in each region. With final tallies coming straight to the results control room from the regional centers, secretariat staff could work out the overall national results more quickly.

Lowenfield, the commission's assistant chief electoral officer, said improving communications capacity also proved critical to speeding up the compilation of results. The commission increased

its phone capacity and backed the system up with a more robust national radio network to reduce the phone jams experienced in the past.

Improving the communications network also helped the commission to touch base with field offices and manage events throughout election day. "As it unfolds, you must be in a position to know what is happening or you will lose control," Lowenfield said. He added that it was crucial to "manage the seconds, the minutes and the hours." Lowenfield assigned clerks at each regional office to report to him regularly on election day and respond to his queries using the revamped phone and radio networks. He said he wanted to make sure that when the polls opened he could go on television and confidently tell the public, "I can say categorically to you that we've started in each of the 1,906 polling stations."

The communication networks also allowed managers at the secretariat to make necessary adjustments when things went wrong. For example, the operations room received information at 11 a.m. on election day that a presiding officer was violating rules. "We had him removed," Lowenfield said. "Within an hour he was at the center and providing statements as to why this happened."

Lowenfield said "history and mistrust" required the creation of working relationships between field agents and local police. Benn and Lowenfield reached out to local police during the preparatory phase of the 2006 elections to ensure security arrangements would be fully integrated into the commission's plans. Lowenfield encouraged local-level electoral staff and police to team up and act as single units.

Greater collaboration with police allowed the commission to draw on police officers' expertise in a way that had not been possible previously. "Sometimes they would come and say, 'Listen, we don't think that location is ideal from a security standpoint,'" Benn said. The commission would

then work with the political parties to find a more suitable poll site.

Mobilizing for peace

While the commission focused on the technical aspects of improving election administration, other organizations worked directly to rebuild relations between the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities to avert violence.

In 2003, the Ethnic Relations Commission and the UNDP began work on the Social Cohesion Program. The program involved organizing conversations between members of the two communities across the country. Trevor Benn, who worked for the UNDP, explained, “We felt that one of the challenges we faced in Guyana was that people did not have an opportunity to vent, and so these forums gave them an opportunity to do that.”

Because many of the activities involved working with local communities, the UNDP quickly realized the need to recruit local residents. They hired Alexander, who had a background in youth work and had been working with Guyana’s regional development councils. “One of the things we tried to do in the Social Cohesion Program,” said Alexander, “given the ethnic insecurities we face in this country, was to assemble a mixed team.” Alexander was Afro-Guyanese, his colleague was Indo-Guyanese, and the team had a European peace and development adviser.

Alexander said the program organized more than 3,000 conversations around the country, and “from that we extrapolated the ideas that had some traction, and we worked with them.”

In the run-up to the election, the Social Cohesion Program shifted gears to focus on facilitating conversations among the political parties. “We did some things like working with the youth arms of the two main political parties, bringing them together,” said Lachmansingh, who

worked on the program. The program tailored the locations of its activities to areas most prone to electoral violence. “We focused on the communities that were most affected by crime and instability around election time,” Alexander said. “These communities are generally those on the coastal plain with the greatest population.”

The UNDP also arranged to bring a prominent conflict expert from South Africa—Roelf Meyer, a lead negotiator in South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994—to host an event with Guyana’s senior politicians. “They all sat across from each other for three days, and they talked about the mistrust that each had with the other,” said the UNDP’s Benn. “For three days, we had the head of the presidential secretariat and the prime minister, who did not go to their office but arrived at 9 in the morning and never left until 5 every day.” Benn felt the serious commitment of political leaders on all sides was unprecedented. “You don’t usually get people to do that,” he said.

As election day neared, prominent civil society and religious groups joined in the movement for peace. The Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB), a local civil society organization, recruited prominent Guyanese personalities to convey messages of peace on the radio and television in advance of the election. “We decided we’ll just get a whole set of prominent persons like bishops, big top businessmen, former elections commissions, commissioners and so forth to just give a snippet on the radio and television on the need for elections free of violence,” said Father Malcolm Rodrigues of the EAB, “and it worked like a bombshell.”

The EAB also worked closely with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a non-governmental organization, to monitor violence around the time of the 2006 poll. The project involved implementing a model called Elections Violence Education and Resolution that IFES had used in other ethnically

diverse countries such as Iraq, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan and Liberia. The project's goal was to "start a public discussion about the causes of electoral violence in order to find ways to address trends that emerge in the short-term as well as prevent violence in the future."¹⁰

The IFES project depended heavily on local monitors, mostly drawn from EAB and members of Guyana's Chamber of Commerce, who observed campaign rallies and collected detailed information on cases of electoral violence by interviewing elections commission officials, local leaders and law enforcement. The project operated in the seven regions of Guyana most affected by election-related violence. Project staff members verified and analyzed the data collected by the monitors before sharing the information with the public. Politicians frequently cited the reports to warn supporters against using violence.

Rodriguez felt the project worked well because it collated the data more systematically than EAB had been able to do in the past. He also credited the project for working closely with the police. "They actually went and met the local police and told them what they were doing and got their help and got their support for what they were doing," he said.

Learning lessons from Ghana

In early 2006, the Commonwealth and the UNDP jointly funded two technical assessors to advise the commission, one of whom was Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, the respected head of the Electoral Commission of Ghana. According to Trevor Benn, Afari-Gyan "was the conduit between the Elections Commission of Guyana and the donors. He sat in on the commission meetings and he reported to the donors on issues of interest. He reported on things that affected timing or lack of resources or other issues that would come up. He was the man that would say

to donors, 'Sign off on this, don't sign off on that,' and that worked very well."

Because of his experience handling elections in an ethnically divided country, Afari-Gyan proved to be a great source of advice. "He impressed me as a) being un-intimidated and b) being very knowledgeable, a person with some great integrity," Surujbally said. Afari-Gyan suggested to Surujbally that the commission should get more involved in the political management of the electoral process. "In conversation with me once he mentioned that 'it's not enough to manage an electoral process. One should get involved in managing the political process,'" Surujbally recalled. At first, Surujbally strongly resisted the idea and wrote a public essay denouncing Afari-Gyan's suggestion. But as Guyana's security deteriorated in the weeks leading up to election day, and political infighting began to affect the elections commission's work, Surujbally came around to Afari-Gyan's thinking.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The elections commission ran into several problems as it worked to restore the public's trust in the registration process, especially due to lingering resentment over the commission's decision not to rebuild the registry from scratch.

In the past, much of the public suspicion over the registry had been focused on the commission's information-technology department, responsible for entering and storing voter registration data. "There had been allegations in the past that there had been tampering with the database," said Trevor Benn of the UNDP.

In the run-up to the 2006 poll, the IT department once again came under scrutiny and the elections commission struggled to find a qualified person to head the department. To make the recruitment process for the IT department more open and transparent, the

commission put together a committee. “We brought in people from all over to decide who would be the best candidate for this IT section,” Surujbally recalled.

Unfortunately, the position experienced high turnover. Between 2001 and 2005, the IT department had three different heads. Surujbally recalled: “We had an Afro-Guyanese [person], and that person resigned in frustration and vexation because people were slandering him.” His replacement, a relatively young woman, “also resigned in disgust,” Surujbally said. Gavin Campbell, a British citizen who took over the department in 2005 and knew his predecessors well, said “the level of political mistrust made it basically intolerable for them.”

The elections commission had initially hired Campbell as a consultant in 2001. At the time, he worked for De La Rue, an international company that specializes in elections and identity technology solutions. Campbell helped set up the commission’s new voter database, which also doubled as the country’s national identity database.

With financial assistance from UNDP, the commission was able to bring Campbell back in April 2005 to head the IT department. By selecting a foreigner, the commission hoped to quell public perceptions of political bias in the IT department. Campbell said the strategy worked. “Since then, we’ve not had the kind of fantastic stories about what’s going on in the IT department that we used to have,” he said. “I think it’s just the fact of having me here and having me able to answer back to the political people.”

Campbell said it was a challenge to find people to help him run the database, for technical as well as political reasons. “I think one of the problems in Guyana is finding people to do this fairly specialized database-type work, because that’s not the kind of work that exists in the

private sector in Guyana,” he said. “Given that those skills are not readily transferred outside of [the commission], it’s quite a difficult thing to get people who are already qualified in those areas.” Campbell eventually realized he would have to train his team on the job. For a few hours every day he taught team members how to resolve various technical issues.

Although the commission managed to address suspicions about the IT department, many opposition supporters still doubted the accuracy of the registry. When the commission released the final list of electors in July, one of the commissioners, W. H. Parris, resigned in protest, “citing his inability to be further involved with a process that he believed had been discredited.”¹¹ The resignation of an elections commissioner less than two months before the election was both an embarrassment to the commission and a blow to its credibility.

Then, only a month before election day, four journalists were killed in a brutal attack on the outskirts of Georgetown. Afterwards, “It emerged that my name was on an assassination list, a hit list,” said Surujbally, “and in the middle of the night I was taken with my family and put in a safe house.” Surujbally eventually returned to his home under 24-hour armed guard, without his family. “My wife and my daughter got posted away to Trinidad, so then I was alone in this pickle,” he said.

Surujbally and his supporters at the commission decided they had to do something to restore confidence—not just in the registry but in the entire electoral process. “We put together a plan that showed that we would have the elections even before [the planned] date of September 4,” Surujbally said. At the same time, however, three of the other commissioners held their own press conference “in which they said unanimously that the chairman was fooling the president in saying that we can bring off the elections, was fooling the

stakeholders and electorate and fooling the nation at large,” Surujbally said.

On 8 August 2006, following Afari-Gyan’s advice, Surujbally held a press conference to announce a range of confidence-building measures. The commission published a leaflet detailing the measures entitled “Safeguards aimed at preventing multiple voting and other forms of skullduggery on election day.”¹²

Surujbally felt that his ability to stand up to people and resist external pressures was important. “Chairpersons can be intimidated massively whether because of tribalism, or politics or just straight power,” he said.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The 28 August 2006 election was the most peaceful poll Guyana had experienced in more than a decade. Although the incumbent PPP won for the fourth time in a row, this time the opposition PNC party did not reject the result and PNC supporters did not react violently. The Carter Center, an international organization that monitors elections worldwide, described the election as a “historic event.”

Malcolm Rodriguez of the EAB thought the activities that were aimed at reducing tensions had a significant impact. The elections “went off well, very well indeed, because we concentrated this time on the aspect of violence,” he said.

Because of careful preparations, the elections commission was able to release results within three days of the voting, sharply reducing the opportunity for rumors and frustration to take hold. “We were able to avoid the problem of this slow rate of return,” said Calvin Benn, deputy chief electoral officer. “Within three days we were able to declare the elections as opposed to the number of days [six] in 2001.” Keith Lowenfield, assistant chief electoral officer, was pleased that results were delivered much more quickly than in past elections, but he wanted to speed the process

even more. Building on the institutional knowledge the election managers had accumulated in 2006, Lowenfield was already preparing for the future. “I can give you [results] in a day,” he said. “I think that’s what we’re working towards for the next election.”

Gocool Boodoo, the commission’s chief electoral officer, highlighted the important work of the Media Monitoring Unit: “We were able to establish a different kind of relationship with the media. The reporting mechanisms were much more responsible.”

The Commonwealth’s observation mission also noted a change in the media’s behavior in 2006, reporting, “Noticeably reduced from the airwaves was the diet of wild rumors, inflammatory statements and accusations, which in the past, served only to fuel flames of fear, doubt, tensions and confusion during election campaigns.” The Commonwealth’s observers reported no incitement to violence or hatred at meetings they attended. At the launch of the PNC’s campaign, one speaker had hinted that the country could expect a violent reaction if the results did not favor the party, but subsequent speakers rejected his stance and took a more moderate stand. The Commonwealth observers felt, “This was a clear indication that the media code of conduct was being honored.”¹³

Trevor Benn from the UNDP felt the Social Cohesion Program had made a positive contribution. “[Participants] felt that someone was listening, and that they didn’t need to use alternative means to get their point across. And we believe that contributed significantly to the reduction in violence.” Benn’s colleague, Lawrence Lachmansingh, was more cautious, saying it was difficult to “quantify” the program’s “contribution to a peace process ... particularly when so many others are involved.”

As Lachmansingh suggested, other factors that had little to do with the work of the

commission, or any other organizations involved in the election, contributed to the reduction in violence and unrest in 2006. Rafael Trotman, the leader of a small party, said the elections were peaceful mainly because people were tired of violence. Aubrey Norton, a high-level PNC member agreed. “You had problems in 1992, 1997, 2001 and people had become battle-weary, and were prepared to give another approach a try,” Norton said. Vincent Alexander from the UNDP felt the turnout figures reflected this fatigue: “I think that the 2006 elections was the lowest turnout in the longest time. I think that was how the people responded, not by protesting but by simply not showing as great an interest in elections as they had shown in the past.” Voter turnout in 2006 was 20% lower than in 2001, with roughly 65,000 fewer votes cast, likely one of the reasons the vote count was quicker than in past elections.

At least one commentator felt that the overriding focus on reducing violence had a negative impact on the overall quality of the elections. Rupert Roopnaraine, the co-leader of a small party, said, “The 2006 election was far less violent mostly because of the large amounts of money spent on pacification. There was a lot of work that went into pacifying, especially the urban population. The UNDP and the banks and all kinds of people, and the churches, instead of putting their energies into ensuring proper election arrangements, they put their energies into pacification.”

Roopnaraine also thought the police’s efforts to prevent violent protests infringed on citizens’ rights. “A citizen’s right to be on the streets of their city in peaceful demonstrations is guaranteed by our constitution,” he said. “Once you are not breaking the law, you should be free to be on your streets.”

REFLECTIONS

Although the commission managed to reach consensus on most issues in 2006, the Commonwealth noted that, “the political nature of the commission’s composition created deadlock on many key issues, which caused delays and contributed significantly to the lack of trust and confidence in [the elections commission] felt by the public.”¹⁴ Perhaps the most noteworthy example was the commission’s split over how to compile the registry. While Chairman Steve Surujbally may have been justified in siding with the PPP-nominated members against a house-to-house survey of voters, the decision eventually led to the bitter resignation of one of the PNC-nominated commissioners and exacerbated perceptions of bias.

Vincent Alexander of the UNDP felt that Surujbally helped minimize political discord within the commission by abstaining on many votes. But Alexander also said that relying on the good nature of the commission chairman to not exercise a deciding vote was inadequate in Guyana’s polarized political environment. “There will always be problems with GECOM [the elections commission] if it is made up in the way it is presently made up,” Alexander said. “There will always be tension, there will always be suspicion and there will always be mistrust.”

Alexander saw hope for Guyana’s political future in local government reform. Overhauling local elections, he said, had the potential “to reduce the political stakes at the center and therefore reverse the need for ethnic politics at the center.” Effective local politics “could eventually lead to national politics being issue-based rather than ethnic-based.”

Aubrey Norton, a high-level PNC member, thought the solution lay elsewhere. “My leaning has been towards power-sharing,” he said.

Norton suggested that the two main parties would work together more if legislation required a two-thirds majority of parliament rather than a simple majority. However, such a supermajority requirement might create more legislative impasses.

EPILOGUE

Even those who felt the interventions to reduce violence in 2006 had been successful acknowledged that ethnic tensions re-emerged after the voting. Remington Eastman of the Media Monitoring Unit blamed the media for fueling a new rise in tensions. “At the end of the elections the media went back to its same old habits,” he said. “There were a lot of instances in both the print and the broadcast media of inaccuracies, unsubstantiated allegations, inflammatory rhetoric, the peddling of racial remarks and so on.”

The media’s role in stoking tensions became particularly marked after a gang of Afro-Guyanese men attacked two Indo-Guyanese villages in January 2008. Twenty-three people were killed in the attacks, including several children. Eastman said that in the wake of the massacres, Guyana “was almost on the brink of a racial war between the two major camps. And this racial war was being fueled, not implicitly but explicitly, through the media.”

The Media Monitoring Unit, which continued to operate after the 2006 election, encouraged the media to act more responsibly. Having learned from the 2006 experience, Eastman said the unit took “a more proactive approach.” Eastman said he went “from TV station to TV station, distributing newspapers,

showing them the consequences of filtering this kind of information ... referring to historical precedents like Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and so on.”

In 2010, with the assistance of consultant Tim Neale and financial support from the UNDP and the Commonwealth, media representatives met with the elections commission and agreed to a revised code of media conduct for the 2011 elections, giving a more prominent role to the Media Monitoring Unit.¹⁵

The rise of ethnic tension in the years after the 2006 elections showed that the elections commission faced challenges in preparing for the next election, slated to take place in late 2011. Speaking in mid-2009, Trevor Benn said, “Some people are of the view that we are back to square one. There’s a lot of hate in the air. It’s not as bad as it was prior to 2006, but there’s a feeling that it’s getting there.” In early 2011, Benn’s fears appeared to be validated by a series of politically motivated incidents ranging from a grenade attack in a crowded market to homemade bombs found in a school, a TV station and the home of a prominent legislator.

The commission faced other challenges in the lead-up to the 2011 elections, including mounting voter apathy, calls for absentee-voting rights by the large pool of Guyanese expatriates, and delays in shipments of materials to make ID cards. An opposition coalition formed in July 2011 and led by the PNC had the potential to make the 2011 national elections the closest in Guyana’s history, raising the premium on an accurate and rapid vote count. In addition, local government elections were scheduled for 2012, the first since 1994.

¹ European Union and GLOG, *Final Report: Guyana Long Term Observation Group and European Union Observation Mission, 19 March 2001, April 2001.*

² International IDEA, *Report of the Audit and Systems Review of the 2001 Elections Process in Guyana, July 2001.*

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- ³ Organization of American States, *Report of the Electoral Observation Mission, General and Regional Elections, August 28, 2006*, December 2006.
- ⁴ Representation of the People Act of 1964, Cap 1:03, Sec. 139(D-E), as amended by the Representative of the People (Amendment) Act No. 1 of 2001.
- ⁵ Constitution of the Co-Operative Republic of Guyana, Art. 146(3), Act No. 2 of 1980, Cap 1:01.
- ⁶ The Carter Center, *Observing the 2001 Elections*, February 2002, 15.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Background Note: Guyana*, 14 April 2011. Available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1984.htm> (accessed July 20, 2011).
- ⁸ U.S. Department of State, 53.
- ⁹ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Code of Conduct for the Media for Reporting and Coverage of Guyana Elections 2006 for Owners, Publishers, Editors and Journalists, including Associated Guidelines*, 7 January 2006.
- ¹⁰ IFES, *Guyana Vote Passes Peacefully*, 1 September 2006.
- ¹¹ IFES, 15.
- ¹² IFES, 21.
- ¹³ IFES.
- ¹⁴ Commonwealth Secretariat, 15.
- ¹⁵ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Code of Conduct for the Media*, 12 March 2010. Available at <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/files/222500/FileName/RevisedMediaCodeofConduct2010.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2011).

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