



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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CHAUBEY: My name is Varanya Chaubey and I speaking with Dr. Steve Surujbally who is Chairman of Guyana Elections Commission. Today is May 8, 2009. Dr. Surujbally I would like to thank you for participating in this interview.

SURUJBALLY: *You're most welcome.*

CHAUBEY: We're very interested in the story of election reform in Guyana, there's been some history of election violence in Guyana, but the 2006 elections were declared the most peaceful in the country and we'd like to know how—the steps you took to achieve this good outcome. And to hear the story we'd like to go back to the very beginning when you were first appointed Chairman of the Commission, so if you could offer a little bit about your personal background and how you came into this position?

SURUJBALLY: *Right, well I think I was chosen to be the Chairman of the Elections Commission because the political parties and other stakeholders must have recognized something. One thing might have found to be characteristic of me is an unquestionable honesty and integrity and they would have recognized such features as characteristics that they need in a Chairman. There might have been political considerations, but I think less of that because I am not a politician, never been involved in politics actively, though I have always had a great interest in politics. I think it might have come down to the common denominator that they accepted that I detest them all equally.*

The process relative to the election of a chairman is a legal prerequisite. It's anchored even in the Constitution that the leader of opposition—and there is a constitutional position called Leader of the Opposition, - submits six names to the President of the country. And the president in his great wisdom will choose one of the six. The leader of the opposition was at one time my boss when, in another life, I was in the Ministry of Agriculture and I thought he felt that I worked well and also that I would not be influenced too much by anybody trying to browbeat me.

So I dare say that might have been one the reasons he submitted my name. When I saw the six names, I realized it was only really one name that he had submitted. The other five were known people with political affiliations. I had a political affiliation with the Rodneyite party. Walter Rodney was one of our icons and I was associated with the Working People's Alliance, mostly as someone to bounce ideas off of. I am a veterinarian and one would wonder why a veterinarian could get a position like this. I had been involved in writing articles in the newspapers, satirical and cynical articles every Sunday entitled "Things that Make Me Smile" and that series evolved into something called "Cassandra's Candid Corner", Cassandra being the person, a woman actually, who in Greek mythology always knew the future but nobody would listen to her. I thought that was an apt name. This is a small community and everybody knew eventually who it was that was writing the "Things that Make Me Smile" by "Scio" is Latin for "I know".

Anyway, that might have been a factor, since most of the articles and most of the comments in that column, which was a very popular column, would have been a politically scathing to all political parties.

Whatever the reason, Mr. Desmond Hoyte "Leader of the Opposition" called me up on my way to the airport and asked me if I wished to, if I wished to be considered as Chairman of Elections Commission. Just about that time I had sort of given up on the then Minister of Agriculture whose Technical Advisor I was. I

had already sent in my letter of resignation that I was finished with that and with him. Unfortunately, eventually the same minister was assassinated by criminals unknown to this day. Isn't it very strange that a political party allows one of its cadre, a big one of its cadre to be assassinated in a small country like this and cannot find the people who perpetrated this heinous act. While that's not for me to discuss, it is interesting.

I told Mr. Hoyte while I was on the way to the airport to enjoy a much earned vacation. He was the leader of the opposition and he was a former President of Guyana. I've been on trips with him internationally and Mr. Hoyte and myself got on pretty well; and so did Dr. Jagan and myself and of course so did the Working People's Alliance and myself. In fact in the 1992 elections both Dr. Jagan and Dr. Rupert Roopnaraine leader of the Working People's Alliance had asked me to write the agriculture aspect of their respective manifestos going into that election, which I did. I mean for me it was only agriculture that was important and not which party would carry through what I thought was the future of agriculture in this country. I did have some experience in animal agriculture. I do have a Bachelor's degree in veterinarian medicine, a Master's degree, I have a doctorate in veterinary medicine and I am a Fulbright scholar from the University of Davis in California and I have worked in four continents in agriculture practice – research and administration.

So that having been said, I told Mr. Hoyte that I would send in my CV (Curriculum Vitae), which was in the bottom left hand corner of my drawer. My son was taking me to the airport and he was given the duty of taking an unedited, unsigned copy of my CV to Mr. Hoyte and the next thing I knew, months later was that the President was asking me whether I was still interested in, in the job as Chairman of Elections Commission that time I had come back from my leave and the answer was yes. And I wanted a switch anyway from being in agriculture and battering my head against a brick wall and not getting enough success. That basically is how I became Chairman of GECOM. I did not at all lobby for the job.

So now, to the story of the Election Commission, again, the GECOM is constitutional anchored. Its composition is based on a formula called the Carter-Price Formula, President Carter and George Price who was at one time the Prime Minister of Belize, they formulated this thing. Now I've spoken to Mr. Carter on several occasions about this formula, and he maintains that this formula was a formula for the 1997 elections only, and it should not have been perpetuated forward and onward. Well, it was such a formula, that as you will see when I describe it, that the both political parties, both major political parties just loved it. What it dictated was that the leader of the party in power would nominate three members on the commission and—the major opposition would have two seats and the combined opposition of the smaller parties would be able to nominate one person for a seat on the Commission. Now that alone is an anomaly because once you come into this Commission, once you swear and take that oath you are or you should be above the political mêlée above the political fray and not be partisan to any political party, you've gone past that once you come here as a commissioner.

Well needless to say that does not obtain and there are those who see the commissioners as members of the extended arm of Political Parties on the commission. It was my job to change that, and to some extent, we have so done. And over almost eight years now of my being here, we have voted hundreds of times unanimously on issues. Now for me that's a reflection of commissioners going beyond their, their partisanship, their affiliations and seeing the

commission for what it should be namely to charter the best course for best practice in elections. Of course, as I discuss this matter, you will see that when a time of arises comes they could revert to type.

But I must say in the eight years, that I've been here, September will be eight years, I have never had to make a casting vote. I do have two votes so I can make a casting vote. I do if there is a stalemate. I've never had to do so and that's because —it comes down to who has the longest breath, who's going to blink first. And I had no intention of making a casting vote. They must, out of necessity, come up unanimously or definitely with a great majority among themselves to solve the issue and I maintain that to this day.

I keep telling Commissioners basically that I want them to be above the political fray and so on. I expect some levity in the discussion but no obscenities and no shorting. They will usually adhere to that, if anybody gets annoyed and shouts it mostly is me and then I apologize from time to time for it.

This Commission in essence represents the first permanent, long-standing Commission. I'm sure the others were sort of semi-permanent but after a year, three months, or so they're gone. But this under my watch was going to be one in which we would stay on and not disband after every election. And that augured well for our, for our future.

Right from the beginning, we commenced developing Rule of Procedure for every single activity that would confront this Commission and this Secretariat. Whether it was the recruitment of staff, whether it was the promotion of staff, whether it was how we handle financial matters, etc. There is a Rules of Procedure for every single aspect of the day-to-day workings of this Secretariat and that has served us in good stead.

Over the last, almost eight years, things have changed and therefore we've had to review, these Rules of Procedure. For example, one of the major differences came in 2003 when we woke up one morning to find ourselves as what is known as a Budget Agency, after an Act had been speedily run through Parliament and ourselves and thirty something other units or independent agencies were suddenly under the rubric of a Minister and that included the judiciary and the "Speaker's" Office. So in my mind I think that was a bit of a, I use the word anomaly, it's not what I would wish to use. I would have liked to have more independence; however, I must say that I have never been thwarted in my thrust to get monies from the government, we've had great debates but I've never lost out on any. I mean it might still happen because this integrated system that we have for the financial accounting and management allows for the Head of the Presidential Secretariat to be the quasi Minister governing the Guyana Election Commission. Now we do get on well, but it's a job on it's own trying to liaise properly and with the Head of the Presidential Secretariat, who is also the Secretary to the Cabinet and the right hand man of the President to get those things that we want and what we want done. Sometimes we lose; there was one particular issue over a building that I wanted to rehabilitate to house the Secretariat, and that one I lost on. But it has not disturbed me greatly other than the philosophy behind this thing of me or the Commission being under a budget head. As I said the judiciary, the army all of these agencies and Commissions come under some budget agency. But up to now it has been working reasonable well so I'm not going to complain too much on that. But it's always sort of hanging there like the sword of Damocles suspended by a thread and you think that it's going to drop one day and disturb us in our work immensely.

Well, so that's how the Commission was formed and that's how we started off. Going into elections there is always the issue of lists – Lists of Registrants, Preliminary Voters lists, Final Voters Lists, etc. Now it is my own opinion that we put to much value on electoral lists. I recall, and I do get around the world observing elections, I do recall in South Africa when they went for their first free elections that they practically went without a list into that election. I recall being in Mozambique one time observing elections there and they had four lists, so somewhere your names going to be on the list. St. Vincent recently had elections where the Voters List had 92,000 names out of a population of 112,000 people.

The Voters' Lists that were used for the 2001 and 2006 elections were not lists that emerged from a valid house-to-house registration based on specific source documents, the most important of which would be the birth certificate. So we started off very early in the game, as early as when joined GECOM in September 2001, we began with the issue of having the list looked at with greater scrutiny and we started off with the idea of having something called a continuous registration. So it would mean that people will come in for four weeks or six weeks and register with us. We would see if their names are already on the list that is—we were using and that had been used in the elections in 2001 because basically my predecessor would have put together a reasonable list but it was based too much to my mind and to our minds collectively on unverifiable evidence, say on a pastor in a village saying yes this guy is a Guyanese or an Amerindian Toshao, Amerindian chief saying yes this guy is a Guyanese, a school teacher a headmaster saying yes we can vouch that this guy is a Guyanese and he lives in this area. Well that is not good enough, not good enough for me. I'm not saying that Amerindians drink more than anybody else, surely I'm not saying that but as is the case in America there's, indisputably an alcohol problem among native Americans, I dare say it's the same with us here and I would hate to know that an inebriated Toshao, and inebriated chief would, would give the right to be an Guyanese to a person who just came across the border from Brazil.

So we decided that the continuous registration would be the best way to go. Subsequent to the continuous registration there's the claims and objections period. Now that means that we hand out the lists for the different areas and we would establish that persons can come in and look at the list and say but look I would like to claim that my name is not on that list and look I can prove that I am a Guyanese or I can object to that person's name on the list because he does not live here anymore. We do not have overseas voting by the way he's or she's dead and so I object to that name being on the list. We would then do the necessary search and research and change the list by removing or adding the respective name, if necessary.

Now it sounds very simple that we do a continuous registration program but you have to understand that's it a little bit more complicated than that. We did have seminars on it we brought in people from abroad, not lastly countries within the Caribbean who have been successful in continuous registration like Jamaica and we sort of followed their model and it has served us in good stead. Of course, you can imagine the great logistical problems. We had to get the buildings where the people will come to be registered; we have to get the staff; we have to get people trained, we have to develop the manuals. And then there is always the big time problem to get the Commissioners to agree to every sentence in that manual. However we have a great team in the Secretariat: Chief Election Officer, Deputy Chief Election Officer, the Assistant Chief Election Officer, the Voter

Education Officer and the Registration Officer and the PR (public relations) person who all do a great job sending the messages to the public. These are people that you would have interviewed or will interview and I dare say you'll will see and confirm what I'm saying as being correct that they are a pretty good team. And so together we established all the components, manuals included which are associated with Continuous Registration and Claims and Objections.

Now there were agencies and political parties who felt that we should have done a house-to-house verification, which means that we should have visited the homes of everyone on the list to see if in fact they are actually there.

My contention was, as I said as a preface that we put too much value I think on lists within the context of electoral processes. At the South African elections when Mandela won, there was for all practical purposes no patent list. In 2007 in the Mozambique elections there were 4 Voters list. Somewhere the elector would find his or her name. A classic example was in recently Saint Vincent, where there were 112 thousand people living on the island and they had an electoral list of 90 thousand. Well of course you can see that mathematically won't work. However, since many people have emigrated from Saint Vincent they had a voter turnout rate of 60 something percent and that dovetailed quite correctly mathematically with what we would expect. The people who were actually there turned out to vote, and there was no quarrel about the result. The important thing is to prevent multiple voting. People cannot multiply vote if you put procedures in place and measures in place to stymie that possibility.

In Guyana, before the 2006 elections, certain political elements and political parties took to the streets and that was an especially harrowing time because they were insisting that we have this house-to-house verification (HHV) of the people's names were on the list relative to their respective residences. But my timelines for the preparation of the 2006 elections did not allow for a HHV. I must say though that political parties had raised the issue much earlier than the 2006 elections as early as 2003, 2004 but since we had other things to do before, was not possible or even important to have that house-to-house verification done. Instead, we put together measures, very solid measures, to ensure that people didn't vote twice. For example, the usual ink used for staining fingers after voting was of the highest strength. Also, we did something more we did for the 2006 elections a finger-print cross matching exercise. Now that is a superb methodology in ensuring that the person is who he says he is or she is. And that has served us well and will continue I think until we have enough confidence or the nation has enough confidence in the Guyana Elections Commission so that we don't have to spend this money fingerprinting people who in fact never had the ideas or intention of multiply voting.

The truth is that we do not have a culture of double registering and double voting. I recall in Ireland there was a statement that says vote early, vote often. Well that was not so in Guyana; that has not been in our historical past. Electors didn't have to double vote on behalf of the Party during the dictatorship between 1966-1992 because during that time ballots were not counted in the place of poll; ballot boxes were taken away and I think there is enough evidence for me to say that they were stuffed and the elections were rigged. So that's the sort of thing that went on, people from overseas would vote. I recall in the village that Dr. Jagan, the leader of the Opposition, came from, he lost in that village, though that's almost impossible. There's an island in the Essequibo River that suddenly had 100 plus percent voter turnout, so you know that Party hacks were stuffing the ballot boxes. But that's a time of the past and I'm not going to dwell on that and

irrespective of whether that government of that day might have been cheating in elections, they too were able to substantially alter the, the well being of our people to some extent for the positive, although in other areas then did not fare so well.

But as I say those are things in the past and they really don't concern me too much as Chairman of the Elections Commission now. We were able to carry out that 2006 election also because we had legal regulations put in place. We changed laws, we had a National Registration Amendment Bill passed in 2005. I will give you the notes on that, if you need any verification on any one of these things that I say. The whole set of regulations associated with that Amendment Bill had to be crafted anew, not lastly with the participation of all members of the Elections Commission. Two of the Commissioners were in fact, one has died now, but two were eminent lawyers so they were able to help guide the Commission.

Also within the context of enhancing the credibility of the elections we introduced something called "scrutineers". The political parties, the major political parties, have scrutineers overlooking every aspect of our fieldwork. Of course, we also had to train the scrutineers, so they are on the same page with our field workers. We had also to print new registration forms. In doing that we had brought in expertise from outside but it turned out that our people were knowledgeable enough to design the forms and ensure that everything was correct and above board.

We had to establish registration offices and find the staff in a country that has some degree of paucity in erudition and scholasticism. I think it was a very trying exercise to get the best of the best to become members of GECOM. You must understand that because of the very turbulence that we have had in the past, many were reluctant to join GECOM. Since 1992 every single elections in this country was associated with bloodshed; burning was concomitant with elections; it seems that there had to be mayhem. Getting all of the people on board was one thing. But vehicles had to be bought in, stationery brought in; the computers, the furniture to equip the registration offices; generators had to be set up, because certain areas don't have electricity and we would have to have photocopiers, things like that.

While all of this is going on, again as I said, the scrutineers are monitoring our activities, and ensuring that we are doing everything correctly. We had great civic and voter education activities, donor agencies helped us out in that respect, but a large percentage of that came from the national budget. We established a GECOM website which I think is worth its salt, you can basically, find everything about GECOM's past and present there. In fact, you could have gone to the website and gotten everything and not interviewed me. You'd see everything there and we continuously improve upon it and so on.

We established for the elections, the 2006 elections, a project plan, in a Microsoft project format, and tried to stick by it. Of course, they're prerequisite activities that if you do not follow then the rest down the line won't follow either. And here I must make an aside because at that point everything was not going as well as I had envisaged, because there was a stipulated date by which the elections must be held; I think September the 4th was that day and so we—knowing that day we worked our way backwards, I do think that there might have been elements who wanted to derail the electoral process and therefore for whatever reason they would have felt that they could if we did not have an elections by the stipulated

time. Then if there is no elections it would have led—we would have a constitutional crisis. And the next thing you know there would be developments that would be not necessarily be good for the country.

Within that context, I'm making a aside that says: if I as the Chairman of the Elections Commission resigned out of disgust out of frustration or for whatever reason, it follows: no chairman, no commission and therefore no elections. At about the same time, it emerged that my name was on an assassination list, a hit list. On one occasion in the middle of the night I was taken with my family and put in a safe house, which turned out to be not so safe as my own house. That time was the most horrendous period where I had in my vehicle driving armed guards. There was an armed vehicle in front of me, and behind me. Walking on the sea wall and relaxing was out of the question. At my home there was barbed wire all around my home, there were guards, armed guards 24 hours a day, there were—the government insisted on this because I think they recognized that if something happened to me that would have been a calamity for the country. My wife and my daughter got posted away to Trinidad, so then I was alone in this pickle.

But it was a time that I felt that there was enough commitment all around and since we were falling back on our schedule the activities that had to take place. I got more involved in the actual running of the elections, which really is not my job and together with this team that I speak of, highly, I—we put together a plan that showed that we would have the elections even before that date of September the 4th. And there were even then instances where we had to reassess our position and so on and find new methodologies to solve problems.

In the mean time, three of the commissioners moved away and had their own public press conference in which they said unanimously that the chairman was fooling, except they didn't use the word fooling, was fooling the president and saying that we can bring off the elections; that I was fooling the stakeholders and electorate and fooling the nation at large. One person went so far as to bring a letter of resignation, my letter of resignation, already written for me, already written for me, that I was supposed to have signed, so that—and this is not something that I tell people generally, in fact I don't think I've made it public and this is not public, though it might emerge as public at one time or the other, whether in my own memoirs or when you decide to publish what I am saying. But these are what countries like ours, third world countries, as I say, I go around countries and I see how elections commissions and their chairmen, chairpersons can be intimidated massively whether because of tribalism, or politics or whatever or just straight power plays.

So my theory was that if I signed that and we have total disruption, the army will step in and form (what I've seen happen so often around the world) they will then establish their National Redemption Council or their National Reconciliation Committee. Bringing together all parties that are bickering and either put in who they wish to be the government or horrors of horrors, the arms stays in government and you can't get them out. And the history is replete, recent histories are replete all over the world with examples of this nature. So I didn't sign that document, in fact it turned out later and I'm now going really further afield making this aside, the government seemed to have known about all of this, all of these developments and would have impeached me from treason, that's what they told me subsequently, impeach me for treason and that would have been an attempt to intimidate me to retract my resignation should I have resigned.

So it was quite a complot quite a conspiracy going on at that time by all parties. In the end however we persevered. I should mention that we put together a memorandum of understanding which the political parties were expected to follow, a memorandum understanding with the donor agencies that they would help in certain areas. We agreed to employ something called the Joint International Technical Assessors, it's a very interesting group of people, well a group of two. One came via a UNDP (United Nations Development Program) via monies pooled by the Donor and one came from the Commonwealth Secretariat, both to my mind able men and knowledgeable persons in the electoral process. One of them particularly I met in India at some meeting or another and he had impressed me. He was from Ghana, in fact he was the chief—the chairman of the election commission of Ghana and he impressed me as a) being un-intimidatable and b) very knowledgeable, a person with some great integrity.

CHAUBEY: Is that Dr. Afari Gyan?

SURUJBALLY: *Yes, Dr. Afari Gyan. And he in conversation with me once mentioned that it's not enough to manage an electoral process. One should get involved in managing the political process, well that's like heresy; that's not for the Elections Commission to do. But I could have seen wisdom in that. I myself wrote a counter paper against Dr. Afari Gyan's paper on that matter, in the end I found that there was great wisdom in what he said. Great risk too. The bombast inherent in each and every one of us (leaders of Election Management Bodies) might make us believe that we are so much better than the political activist and the politicians. The truth of the matter is, I am not unconvinced that that is true and so I thought that it was not a bad idea to have a lot more dialog with these political parties, using an intellectual tour de force to influence them..*

So we embarked upon that and meeting with this the political parties, the major stakeholders. We met also with other aspects of the society whether it be the lawyers, whether it be the religious bodies, whether it be the trade unions, explaining to them what our processes were and how we intended to carryout the elections. I think that stood us in good stead at the end. Then we put together observer groups, local observer groups and well we didn't, we didn't put them together, we made it easy for observer groups to come together, whether it be the lawyers or the trade unions or whatever, whether they wanted to be under the umbrella of an Elections Assistance Bureau, which the UNDP was funding or whether they wanted to do it on their own. Whatever, they were there.

But we had stipulated very clearly that these local Observer Groups must stay on the straight and narrow path because if at anytime they were not prepared to, to follow and behave decently, we set-up the parameters that we would take away their right to be observers. Similarly we have it legally anchored where the foreign observers are concerned and of course we had several foreign observers coming in, the Commonwealth, the OAS for the first time the Carter Center, Caricom, the European Union sent people in. So with all these people they were able to observe the elections. I mentioned the Joint International Technical Assessors that came in long before the elections and they were able to give me some solid advice - you take some you leave some.

We then reconstructed to a large extent our IT (Information Technology) division, re-tooled it, re-organized it, we ensured that there would be a constant energy supply, electricity supply there. So in terms of the IT section we were really on

the ball and here I must make another aside for you to understand what goes on here.

Who is going to head the IT section, information technology section, we had an Afro-Guyanese and that person resigned in frustration and vexation because people were slandering him. Oh, even before we hired these IT specialist we had a committee set up, then we had to have the parameters for the committee to be set up and we brought in people from all over to decided who would be the best candidate for this IT section.

But the people on the Panel who we brought in had themselves to be scrutinized, a real madness. Well after the resignation of the Afro-Gyanese IT Head, came an Indo-Guyanese IT Head. The young lady herself soon also resigned in disgust so the best thing was to get somebody from foreign, from abroad, we say it in the colloquial way from foreign. And we got a guy who was working with a company who helped set up the, set up the IT section in the first instance for the 2001 elections, so we were able to get him with help from the donor group (they call themselves now the International Development Partners; the same thing just different people, different acts but a different name, but interesting nevertheless but we won't comment too much on that).

But the donor group did help in paying for he foreign recruit, and still do help in paying for this foreign person from Britain to man our IT section. Isn't that something? That we are not having the credibility established as a Commission enough for us to have our own person with whom the political parties would find favor and satisfaction. And you know it is the political parties that say quite clearly and adamantly, let it be so, let it not be a Guyanese. Well I wish one of these days that a) I never have to take one cent from foreign money to run what is an integral part of our country's integrity, namely the elections which is a most important title in the whole mosaic of democracy. We should pay every single cent for that from our national coffers, and not have some external agent help us out. And secondly, that we don't need all these scrutineers and fingerprint cross matching exercises. We must reach a point when we at the commission say something the nation believes in us. Well I don't know that I will live to see that, but that would be my dream and hope that we have done so much towards that direction that it comes to pass.

We did something else that I thought was of major importance relative to the 2006 elections and that was we brought in from Britain a person who has worked I think with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) among others to help us establish a Media Code of Conduct. Now we had already a Media Code of Conduct which was superb, but with the help of this gentlemen and with the help of some of the Guyanese practitioners in this area and very knowledgeable people, real professionals, we were able to put together a beautiful Media Code of Conduct. However, having a Media Code of Conduct is one thing, having the media practitioners and the leaders of the political parties and the media houses endorsed it and sign onto it is a whole different, a whole different ball game and in fact we achieved that. All the media houses, some with fanfare and some refused to sign unless there were cameras on the person signing and they signed it twice just to get their pictures in the papers and so on in the media, they probably knew the value of the media.

But this establishment of the Media Code of Conduct together with the getting and ensuring that all the media houses signed onto this, how to behave during the pre-, peri-, and post electoral periods was of great, great importance because

in the past it was the very media that ensured that we had blood and thunder at elections. You cannot imagine how bad it was, racism reared its ugly head they fostered it, it was scandalous. And since then I've seen other countries where it's equally scandalous, I was in one country in the Caribbean recently where the media represented, in my mind, a great depravity but that's that country's business. We must not forget that GECOM has its Media Monitoring Unit still existing and up to now, the media houses have withstood the temptation to get away from what they signed onto. Anytime they slip off the radar and they slip away from the correctness of their practice, we write them a letter, very gently but very persuasive. We have 24 hours a day monitoring of every TV program, of every radio broadcast that has to deal with politics and we have these records, so we can show them and in verbatim, we can write to them and say, "Sir you, you said X, Y and Z on this day, during this program. You had a call-in program and the program—the person who said X, Y and Z there should not have been allowed to say those terrible things, because it was calling for the assassination of people and so on." And I must say they adhere to a large extent to what they signed on to; and they take our corrections in good faith. And I thought that it was a great plus which ensured that the elections were done in a correct way.

CHAUBEY: To clarify; is it the Media Monitoring Unit that is doing it?

SURUJBALLY: *Yes, GECOM's Media Monitoring Unit (MMU), which is quite distinct from the Advisory Committee for Broadcasting, which resides in the Office of the Prime Minister, and therefore cannot possibly be, an independent unit. The fact that the Media Monitoring Unit is part of GECOM definitively makes it an independent unit. The MMU sends out every quarter a report with analysis of all the times that people (journalists) sway from the straight and narrow path. And how many times one radio or TV station would be pro the government, anti another party. Similarly, every newspaper is monitored and we put the pie chart up and histograms to show exactly how often they were not complying with what they had signed.*

But interestingly the aberrations really are at a minimum and the methodology anchored in the Media Code of Conduct that we use as a base should really be patented, because we know that the guy who came to help us to establish it has taken it to Bangladesh and to Malawi and is using it as the model. I think in some one of the northern, well in the Himalayan regions Bhutan or Nepal might be. In one of the regions there, they've looked at our Media Code of Conduct and wanted to adopt it as well.

Well basically I think we have, we have concluded with the matters leading up to the elections. Now let's look at elections day itself because that is now the pudding. I have no doubts in my mind that there were elements on the starting blocks ready and waiting to create havoc in the society. At every occasion where we saw that there might have been even the minutest of tendencies for something to get out of hand, we nipped it in the bud. We had on polling day, at every polling station, at every polling station cluster a person who would, as the potential voter arrives, tell that person where to go exactly to cast the ballot. So there was no milling around because the voter was not sure where to go, and ending up in the wrong place. Well we were able to hit those potential problems down very quickly. And I must hasten to add that political parties also were helping us in saying well at polling area X there seems to be some discrepancy; within minutes we would have our person, our officer with the computer down at that site and be able to solve, sort out the problem and solve whatever discrepancy there was.

What I have—what has emerged from this exercise is that in recruiting people, we usually put the brightest persons to be the presiding officer or the returning officer or the deputy presiding officer. And the least educated we put to be that usher. It is clear to me that as of now if I should be here for another elections, the usher is going to be one of the brightest people in that process, because that Usher solves most of the problems before the Voter reaches the polling booth.

CHAUBEY: Why do you feel that way?

SURUJBALLY: Because they're the ones that can that can stop the nonsense or the heat of the moment. They can assuage that voter vexation if they're trained well enough, if they understand the process, if they are competently manning a computer. Now our ushers had the list on hard copy, but it would have been more difficult for them to find a persons' name on the list where to go rather than if comparably if the person were able to use the computer. So now, we're going to be in the next time using better people as ushers who represent the first point of contact with the voter on Elections Day.

We'll talk about what came out of the whole elections afterwards. But perhaps we should now look at the Voter Education exercise and the rules that govern elections, these rules that were sent out all over the country. We had acting groups doing skits as to how people should vote, what the voting process is and we had it on television with actors and so on. We covered that pretty well, I don't think there was anybody in Guyana who would have not known how to vote. In the very great and rural and hinterland areas, almost inaccessible areas, we sent persons out, our own officers, to train people. Now that costs money, imagine that you are sending a person out to a polling station that has a group of perhaps three or four persons, you know, if the village size is three or four persons only two are eligible to vote. But the Constitution is very clear on this, you cannot disenfranchise those two people.

So there we go via motorboat, plane, whatever to get the ballot boxes in place. That's a big thing, the logistics area of pre-electoral exercises to get all the materials on site. The material can be as simple as a pencil, or the ink that we use to stain fingers after the vote is cast. As an aside, I am a Scientist and I did some experimentation with the ink on my own. Whereas the silver nitrate which is usually used would be about twelve to fifteen percent strength, I went right up to the almost toxic level of almost twenty, twenty-five percent. Nobody was poisoned but of course, it was a decision that had to be made, but the stain remained on the fingernail and the cuticle for many, many days, weeks in fact. In fact, until the actual fingernail grew out you would not be devoid of that stain.

CHAUBEY: Can I ask a quick question, in some countries I've come across the practice of when there are very small clusters of voters bring the voters themselves into a center where they can vote or register. Did you consider that option?

SURUJBALLY: Yes of course we would have considered that option. There is nothing you can tell me that we would not have considered before, obviously. But, no, your point does not reflect a practical option. What must GECOM do, paddle down river for 20 miles, or do we, send in a plane to carry out two voters 20 miles and then bring him back in? No, I think the better idea was that we got our people in even the remotest village.

What I saw developing as a problem, minor but still something to be considered and that is if there are only two people voting and both vote for a party then I suddenly know exactly, how they voted. Now, within the context of confidentiality of the vote, which is again constitutionally and legally anchored, that should not be the case. Here's one of the dilemmas, it's one of the catch 22's. So we went for the level of who cares if both of them voted for one party or the other, nobody is going to look at it ever. Of course, we could and we would know, if somebody wanted to do research and see how different areas voted then they would know how the two persons voted and therefore that would be a breach of confidentiality. But we would not very easily give out the information that was given to us.

Although I must say we have some degree of, I use the word loosely, "partnership" with the Ministry of Home Affairs, relative to drug traffickers and their visages, their physiognomies on the ID card. They'll say yes this is the person or not, what is a fake ID card, and so on. On the ID card we have several security features inside there so we know pretty well what is a false ID card.

I think I've covered a lot of the prerequisite work, things that we had to do. The security aspects with the police should be touched. We and the army we cultivated a great friendship with them and I must say they acted most professionally. I've been to countries where they might be garrisons of voters and if the army is not there they will kill each other. We've not had that, but at the same time the police and the army were on standby, the police were at every polling station and we really had no severe problems at polling stations. I can't even think of one, as I speak I'm trying to remember at least one.

Now we have arrived at Election Day. I can't think of anything that went awry. Rain fell at certain areas and we found that some of the polling stations, two out of 2000 of them were leaking and to the credit of the polling day workers they withstood the elements and continued the polling as best they could, whether it was with umbrellas or whatever. And I think the donor agencies, sorry the foreign observers found that to be a very praise worthy exercise.

Important after or during the Elections Day is to get the communications system relative to the transfer of the results, and any other relevant information from the ballot place (the polling station) to the GECOM administrative center and that was done with walkie-talkies, with the Marconi sets and with cell phones. So every polling station could have gotten within seconds in touch with the head office. And with the help of the Guyana Telephone and Telegraph Service, and with the help of the purchased radio sets for the far flung areas, we were able to be in touch with out officers. It could have been a problem if we couldn't be in touch with the field.

Now a big issue is after the elections have taken place, is giving the results. Big problem, because if you have a day, two days, three days, a week elapsing, the population believes that you are cooking up something. Zimbabwe is a classic case of that, what happened recently there. I mean not only there, but also in Kenya as well other places. We established a system to broadcast election results as ballots were coming in, as the returning officers were sending in their reports. We were broadcasting to the nation by television and radio what the results were, as they came in. And the National Television Network they were having their own analysis to being interviewed and so on. It looked so American like, but the important thing for us was that the election results could be declared as soon as possible.

Really that was it, but emanating from all our experiences are some ideas of what we should do to further improve the systems in the future. You will speak with the other persons and getting other opinions, but I will give you in writing my own report, my final report as to what transpired during the elections. There's also the report from the Chief Election Officer which is different from mine, since it has a different focus. There is a component in my report, which lists about twenty-two issues that we should look into in the future. Things like the ferry that brings the ballot box down, is suddenly not working. What are the standby procedures? As always there must be a plan B. No disastrous developments happened at this time, but it could happen in the future. So we must always have contingencies plans, for example we must have our speedboats ready and waiting even if it's in the night. Here, for example, is a problem, the polling station closes at six. By the time you finish counting it's seven, eight. You have got to get the sealed ballot boxes down to the collection point where the boxes must travel across some of these huge rivers. The Essequibo River is twenty-five miles wide at its mouth. If we have to get something done quickly, we could do it by plane but then the small aircraft would have to land at the national airport because it can't land at the urban airport because they close at 6 p.m. The ballot boxes would have to come from the National Airport police escorts. All these contingencies have to be planned for in advance.

But these alternative exercises are not simple. We don't want a boat to be traveling on the river in the night where a log can turn over a boat and we loose the ballot boxes. Nobody is going to believe that it was an accident. They will believe that it was contrived.

One of the bigger potential problems in planning for a National Elections is the caliber of staff especially to man the more important positions: the presiding officer and the returning officer. You need, well if you have 2000 polling stations you need 2000 well trained presiding officers. I have begun a dialog with the University of Guyana that as a part of one of their academic programs they could introduce a subject called "Elections Management", in which all of these issues that we have been talking about, whether it's logistics, whether it's preparation, of training manuals, whether it's voter education, and so on, they learn about that. So that when time comes for an election I have a ready pool from which I can hire these people and they hit the ground running. I don't have to train them anymore, they have already been trained. I can brush up their knowledge of course, give them refresher courses. In the end I would have bright young people out of the university with their BA degrees or whatever but with a component which is "elections management". We're discussing that even as we speak now.

So that is it Miss in a nutshell any other questions you'd like to ask me?

CHAUBEY: This is very interesting about the university credits, I have never come across something like this, how did you come up with this idea?

SURUJBALLY: *Necessity is the mother of invention. Do you have any further questions?*

CHAUBEY: I would like to ask a point you brought up in this dialog between you and Dr. Afari Gyan, this is something that I've come across, what is the degree of political involvement that election chairmen or commissioners?

SURUJBALLY: *It all has to do with subtlety.*

CHAUBEY: So what are the ways in which you think—you feel is an appropriate way to deal with politicians as Chairman of an Elections Management Body?

SURUJBALLY: I always feel that it's a one-on-one thing. I do not want to meet with a political party and discuss certain political issues. I will discuss electoral issues with them. But when I'm coming to the political issues I'm going to talk with the political leader of the party, eyeball to eyeball and explain to him the repercussions of certain actions he might wish to proceed with. The repercussive effects might have to do with my reaction or the national reaction. So you bring these things out and if they're wise enough and they should be wise enough—after all they are seeking highest office, they would listen. Sometimes they would think “you know I never thought about that but that could have a very deleterious effect on my campaign”.

You know for example, if during the campaign the politician on the hustling were to say something about GECOM that would be the quintessence of negating our work. I have the right to close them down, I have the right to stop him, I have the right to put him in jail, I think. Now he has to believe that I will do that or not. Well that's where the subtlety comes in, he must leave feeling that I will do it, you know. But if of course you are pusillanimous as the head, as the chairman and you go with an approach that is submissive and subservient, he the politician, who knows about power will eat you raw. Well it has not happened so far. I will recall a time not in the 2006 elections when a presidential candidate was being maligned as being homosexual but in the most obscene of terms. That would be for me a “no, no”. And had anybody done something like that even in the form of innuendo I would have gotten very angry with that and so on.

If I sensed an intimidation of voters, I would have spoken to the leaders of the parties or the general secretaries of the parties for them to get themselves in order and to refrain from such activities. We could have great dialogs, because if one political party went to old people's home and picked up all fifty of the House's residents and took them in Party bus to the polling station that they are supposed to vote at and then influences these 80; 90 year olds, I would be very unhappy. But I wouldn't know how to stop it or whether it should be stooped. This is the sort of debate I was alluding to. Actually, I think that political parties should not abrogate their responsibility to get their people out to vote.

Another thing is the reaction with the public on a one on one. The public doesn't like anything better than to have the chairman speak to them, I think. They already see the Commissioners as perhaps being partisan, so every time I speak and have a national broadcast, I like Commissioners to be with me. Also, it doesn't hurt me to make statements and calling the media in and just have what we call a “gaffe”. A “gaffe” in Guyana means well a discussion with some frivolity in it.

CHAUBEY: One other question I'd like to ask you, you mentioned how in 2002 or was it or 2001 that the Commission was made permanent. What were some of the reasons to move from a temporary established Commission to one that is permanent?

SURUJBALLY: That's an interesting question. The simple answer is to retain and maintain the institutional memory which resides in long serving Commissioners. One would want the commissioners to be noble men and not bagged with party partisanship. That's what I would want and therefore I would want this independent Commission without people not a priori being members of a political party. Party

card carrying members have no place in this Commission. However in a society such as ours, where do I find these six noble men. I might find two, my predecessor I always say and myself. And even then I can only speak for myself. So people argued it's better that you deal with the devil you know than those you don't know, those who pretend to be noble and pretend to be without party affiliation when in their hearts they are pro this party or pro that.

We in our recruitment, for example, stay away from asking possible candidates if they are politically affiliated. Of course, it's clear if their name is on a Party list then they have no place at GECOM. But I don't hire Afro-Guyanese and I don't hire Indo-Guyanese, I hire Guyanese so I don't care where they come from, once they have the requisite knowledge, specific qualifications that we ask for, then they will be hired if they are good enough and they can withstand the stress that GECOM gives. Under the probation period we will assess them. So I think we have some of the crème de la crème in the society working here in this specific area of elections.

So even though I who would want to have this set of noble men sitting around me, I've gotten accustomed to the Commissioners that I have, Hundreds of times they have voted unanimously on issues, it's only for me to ensure that continues. It might not but I think it will.

CHAUBEY: So is it that there's a certain critical mass of staff that's been taken on and then keeping them on permanently reduces the sort of transaction costs of doing it over and over?

SURUJBALLY: *Yes, absolutely. We have, as you can see on the back wall here, an organogram, that's our permanent staff. That's the amount of people we have working with us, 120 or something like that. At elections time, GECOM becomes the greatest employer of labor with many thousand people working on a very temporary basis. But that's clear, it's just for Election Day and a period before and after Election Day. The moment after they have given off their election results and they have all signed off on it, the scrutineers have signed off on it and the party agents have signed off on it, they're disbanded. Though obviously the people who have proven their merit we will try to keep those you know.*

CHAUBEY: Now in the future do you see a role for GECOM in facilitating dialog between parties?

SURUJBALLY: *That could happen but GECOM has to have it's own self in order first. We can't propose and take it for granted that we can speak and be the mediator between political parties when we as a Commission are having contradicting views. It would be like party people speaking to party people. The day when the Commissioners will be beyond the political fray and have no partisanship, is the day when we can meaningfully mediate. It should.*

Donor agencies with their governance issues and democrats with their democratic traditions and people from academia might be able and want to bring them together. It's I think a waste of time. It's a waste of time because the political parties would listen to you (we are a very polite people, very hospitable people) and as you go away they would laugh at you and say why the hell these academics and Donor groups want to change our reality. The reality is that people to a large extent vote race in this country. One should wonder why would an Afro-Guyanese vote for a party that did not serve them well in twenty-eight years of government. I'm taking for granted that they feel that the party did not

serve them well, and question where on the social, economic, political and educational ladder are these people now. By the same token why would a professed socialist (communist?) party like the People's Progressive Party (and it's manifesto still says that), be attractive to an Indian who almost genetically is a businessman and who wants to get involved in business. Why, if not for "race" would an Indian want to go with a party, which wants a cooperative socialist/communist modus-operandi. But they do and they vote for their political parties, because of racial insecurities which are exploited by politicians with agendas.

Now there are people who argue it's not just a race thing. There's a colleague of mine, an erstwhile commissioner who argued and showed mathematically, in fact he is a mathematician that it wasn't just racial voting that we practice. But he can say what he wants. To a large percentage, it was racial voting, yes. And you'd go out with your questionnaires and you would find out that that is so.

CHAUBEY: Now we've covered a lot of ground.

SURUJBALLY: *And I think that we are going to have to close off now because I have another appointment. If there's more ground to be covered and more questions you'll get back to me and make another date for next week*

CHAUBEY: Sounds good.

CHAUBEY: Well thank you so much for taking the time out today, thank you very much.

SURUJBALLY: *Good.*