



Ethnic Stratification and Structural Pluralism in Guyana

Duane Edwards

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Dedicated to Abiola, Askale and Addis, the A-Team.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND

In 2015, Guyana experienced a change of government after 23 years of rule by the People's Progressive Party Civic (PPP/C) which was preceded by another 28 years of rule by the People's National Congress (PNC). In the 50 years preceding 2015, therefore, a change of government only occurred once; that was in 1992. As one could imagine, the change of government in 2015, the second in 50 years, was attended with much joy, fanfare and celebration. It inspired hope in the citizenry that Guyana was now on a different development path having been plagued with high levels of corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism, criminality and extrajudicial killings for a major part of the previous 50 years. This hope was compounded by the fact that the government comprised a coalition of forces which included representatives from the major ethnic/racial groups in the country. This political change was taken as a signal that Guyana was moving away not only from one party rule but from the cultural dominance of one ethnic/racial group. Five years after what many had no doubt seen as a historic change, Guyana experienced an election that sent shockwaves not just throughout Guyana, but throughout the Caribbean region and to a lesser extent, the world. The political and ethnic coalition which came to power just five years earlier with great hope and promise was defeated by a higher margin and by the same party it had defeated in

2015. The hope that Guyana had moved away from one-party and one racial group dominance had been dashed. What sent shockwaves through the country, however, was the unwillingness of the coalition government to cede the formal reins of government to the victor. On account of this unwillingness to concede, a series of activities ensued which dragged out the elections process for five months. The series of events included naked attempts to manipulate numbers on statements of poll, objections by domestic and international observers, judicial proceedings challenging published tabulated statements of poll, strongly worded statements by powerful Western countries, a recounting process overseen by a regional body, protests by supporters of both parties, among other things. The weight of the ensuing events eventually led to the capitulation of the defeated party and the new government was sworn in five months after.

The normal response to the unfolding in Guyana would be to dismiss it as the act of power-hungry politicians looking to retain their hold on power. This explanation, though true, barely scratches the surface, however. There has to be something more structural at play to enable Justin Gest, a US Foreign Policy Analyst, to predict with pinpoint accuracy the same events playing out in the USA elections eight months after in November 2020.¹

What are the forces at play which engendered the string of events surrounding the 2020 elections in Guyana and similar events in the USA eight months after? This book provides a partial answer to this question. The book does not, however, set out to directly provide answers to this single event. It, in fact, attempts to shine some light on the conditions of structural pluralism which make societies so characterised prone to ethnic-based political contestations, tensions and conflicts. In directly tackling the broader issues of structural pluralism, the book provides tentative answers to the more specific question raised above. To explicitly state what was implied above, the current study represents a case study of and using Guyana as an ideal case.

1.1.1 Guyana: A Brief Profile

Guyana is an upper middle-income Caribbean country situated on the northern coast of the South American continent. It is the only English-speaking country on the South American continent. Its three immediate neighbours are Venezuela to the West, Surinam to the East and Brazil to the South. Although lodged between these Latin American countries, Guyana

is more often culturally aligned with the English-speaking Caribbean because of the shared history of British colonialism. It is a key member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) group. In fact, it was one of the first four signatories to the Treaty of Chaguaramas which established the CARICOM Community (CARICOM 2019). Its population size according to the National Census 2012 is approximately 750,000. The largest ethnic group is the Indo-Guyanese group which comprises 40% of the population. This is followed by the Afro-Guyanese group which comprises 29%, the Mixed group, 20% and the Indigenous Peoples group at 10.5%. These groups are dispersed primarily along the coasts and banks of the three main rivers in the country leaving 90% of the 83,000 square miles unoccupied. Most of this unoccupied territory comprises dense forest.

The economy is fueled primarily by activities in the agricultural sector, government and wholesale and retail services, gold mining, and construction sector. Its GDP for 2015 was 3.2 billion USD.² Being primarily a primary commodity exporter, the health of the economy is largely dependent on the global demand for sugar, gold, timber and rice. Whenever the prices for these commodities are favourable, the country enjoys favourable economic growth. On the other hand, whenever the prices are unfavourable the country experiences economic hardships. Recently, however, a series of oil discovery off the northern coast of the country promises to dramatically change the countries' economic fortunes. Estimates from various sources put the total oil reserves at 8 billion barrel with a production capacity of 750,000 bpd.³ When translated into economic development, the country is projected to grow by 33.5% in 2020.⁴ Apart from these exogenous shocks, other factors such as geographic factors, unfavourable political environment, ethnic conflicts, migration and brain drain and lack of domestic and foreign direct investments negatively affect the economy (Staritz et al. 2007; Khemraj 2015). As a result, many are of the view that if these social problems are not skilfully dealt with, they could have negative effects on economic growth and distribution even in a petroleum economy.

Before the incursion of the European powers in the seventeenth century, the country was inhabited by the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Bollers et al. 2019). European incursion, however, initiated a string of events which is largely responsible for the nature, character and state of the present nation-state. The first set of Europeans to settle in Guyana were the Dutch (Thomas 1984; McGowan 2009). They came to Guyana in the seventeenth century and engaged in trading items with the Indigenous population they found in the country. They soon after shifted from trading

to sugar production for which they imported enslaved labour from West Africa. Sugar production under enslaved labour lasted from 1661 to 1838, a period of 177 years. During this period, the claim over the colony shifted among three European powers, namely, the Dutch, the British and the French. The British eventually took over final colonial authority in 1803. Subjecting a large population of West Africans to a pernicious system of slavery required both a structural and ideological system of racism (Lewis 2011; Patterson 1982). Both the structural and ideological character of Guyana were laid in this period as explained and extended in Chaps. 4 and 6. Enslaved Africans were subjected to the most egregious of working and living conditions and the most pernicious system of dehumanisation. After emancipation in 1838, indentured workers from various parts of the world were imported into the colony to satisfy the colony's desire for cheap, exploited labour. Among those who were brought were Portuguese from Madeira, Chinese from China and Indians from India. This importation led to massive changes to the demography of the colony. It also led to a further complication of racial/ethnic relations in the colony (Danns 2014). Demographically speaking, the colony was no longer characterised by the simple stratified system of white planters and colonists on top, enslaved Africans at the bottom and free colored and mulattos in the middle. This simple system gave way to a more complex racial/ethnic relations in which groups on roughly the same class and strata competed among themselves for economic and social space. The society was so strategically organized that ethnic groups became associated with various other social sectors. For example, the whites became associated with public sector management and ownership of plantations. The Portuguese and Chinese became associated with commerce and retail trade. The East Indians with plantation agriculture, the Africans with peasant agriculture and the Indigenous Peoples with economic activities in the hinterland regions (Mohamed 2008; Ishmael 1993). Association with these different trades and occupation also meant that the various groups resided in different geographic regions and depended upon different primary (family and kinship) and secondary (cultural associations) institutions. This effectively created a situation in which ethnic pluralism, that is, the mere differences in ethnic/racial outlook, coincided perfectly with structural pluralism, that is, the geographic, occupational and institutional differences (Ishmael 1993). This made Guyana a complex plurality, or an ideal type plural society (Smith 1974, 1991, 1984).

This way of organising the society insulated the white minority by sowing seeds of discord among the former enslaved group and the newly indentured groups (Wagner 1975). Before emancipation, the conflicts between the two groups essentially manifested themselves as revolutions and rebellions by the enslaved Africans against the system of slavery imposed by the Europeans. Such major rebellions and revolutions such as the 1763, 1828 and 1834 rebellions are etched in the collective psyche of the nation (Lean 2002; da Costa 1994; Rodway 2009). This tradition of rebellion continued after the abolition of slavery as most of the working conditions and the racism also continued after formal abolition. The Enmore Martyrs and the Rupununi uprisings are two popular examples. The first was by Indo-Guyanese workers against the colonial government and the second, by Indigenous Peoples against the post-Independent government of Forbes Burnham. Notwithstanding independence in 1966, the ethnic conflict between these groups continued into the present era with some important differences. One major difference is the absence of the white colonist and the reduction of both the numbers and economic stake of the Portuguese group in the country. This veritably resulted in the Indo-Guyanese and the Afro-Guyanese jostling each other for social, cultural, economic and political space. With the reduction of the numbers of the Whites and Portuguese after independence, the society still maintained its structural pluralism. These changes along with the economic and institutional changes implemented since the colonial period, failed to result in changes in the essential structure of the society. It is for this reason that as a society with what is considered a type of pluralism approaching the ideal type, Guyana becomes an ideal case if one intends to study such social processes as ethnicisation, ethnopolitics, ethnic conflicts and the persistence of ethnicity as a dominant social diacritica.

Since independence in 1966, ethnic competition between the two major ethnic groups in Guyana has been the number one social problem affecting the development of Guyana (Bisram 2015). The period of independence itself was wrought with ethnic conflicts as geopolitical issues combined with the ethnic groups quest for power and control in the country produced the most tragic period in twentieth century Guyana (Bisram 2015; Garner 2007; Drakes 1990). Five decades after independence and the ethnic conflicts generated around the independence struggle, the problem of ethnic competition played out by means of a sometimes brutal, sometimes subdued clash for power and for control of resources remains among the foremost of problems affecting the development of the country. The

results of the 2020 General and Regional Elections serve as evidence of the sharpness of the differences between the two groups as both groups consolidated their support behind the parties which reflected their ethnic make-up, and which have been historically aligned with their ethnic interest.

Ethnic voting, though not a problem in itself, becomes a problem in a society which has deep-seated structural issues and weak political and other corrective institutions. In this case, having an assured ethnic constituency which offers uncritical support and places the interest of the ethnic group above the larger national interest becomes a moral hazard as those who assume power on account of the unwavering and uncritical support of their constituency and are unconstrained by any oversight institutions have absolutely no reason to govern according to modern principles of democracy. And, they tend to use government as a means to transfer resources from the state to a narrow set of political elites sharing their own ethnicity and political values (Edwards 2017; Khemraj 2013). In the absence of any pressure towards democracy, whether it expresses itself through the randomness of voting choices or through the presence and effective functioning of good governance institutions, self-interest abounds. This has been the story of Guyana since independence from Britain in 1966. More glaringly, however, the last two decades have seen a massive transfer of wealth from the state to private individuals aligned with the then ruling People's Progressive Party Civic (PPP/C). Invariably, the beneficiaries of these transfers were of one ethnic group (Edwards 2017). This gives rise to heightened ethnic suspicions and ethno-political conflicts and also to widespread perception of corruption in the society resulting in Guyana scoring very low in the Perception of Corruption Index as among the most corrupt countries in the Caribbean.

Attempting to understand how a government so insensitive to the needs of the country could repeatedly secure the votes of a majority of the electorate, many social commentators and academics have proffered varying viewpoints and accompanying solutions. These viewpoints are theoretically influenced by the dominant theories of Caribbean society particularly the dependency theory (Mars 2001; Hintzen 1985), plantation society theory (Dodd 1982; Rodney 1981), the plural society theory (Despres 1975; Danns 2012) and various combinations of the two (Khemraj 2015, 2013). One shortcoming of most of these analyses is that they focus overly on the relationship between ethnic differences and political mobilisation, political power and conflicts. There is, therefore, a dearth of literature exploring the

continuity and/or changes of the social and economic relations instituted by the plantation system, the structures which under-gird those relations, and how those relations impact or are impacted by the ethnopolitical conflicts. This book intends to fill this gap.

1.1.2 Structural Pluralism as Analytic Framework

Pluralism as an analytic framework has been first introduced by Furnivall in his study of colonial societies. The Furnivall variant of pluralism, developed in reaction to the dominant structural/functionalist theories of society fashionable in his times, demonstrates the possibility of society existing without any social consensus, kept together only by force and market transactions (Furnivall 1984). The second variant of the plural society model was postulated by the Jamaican social anthropologist, Michael Garfield Smith. Smith's pluralism classifies societies into three ideal types, namely homogenous, heterogenous and plural societies. Whether a society is homogenous, heterogenous or plural depends by and large on the character of the compulsory and alternative institutions in the society. By compulsory institutions, Smith means those institutions which are integral to the socialisation and integration of group members. These would include kinship, religion, family, etc. Alternative institutions on the other hand are those responsible for aggregating and articulating the interest of specific groups in the public sphere. Examples of such include trade and labour organisations, political parties and civil society organisations. If the compulsory institutions are shared by all individuals in the society, then the society could be considered a homogenous society. Otherwise, the society is either heterogeneous or plural. Heterogenous and plural societies, therefore, share the common defining characteristic of exclusive compulsory institutions. What differentiates them from each other, however, is whether the dominant political group is also the dominant cultural group. If the dominant political group is also the dominant cultural group, then the society is a heterogeneous society, and if the dominant political group is a cultural minority, then the society is a plural society. Smith emphasises the role of force and regulation as opposed to normative consensus in keeping plural societies together (Smith 1974). Structurally, therefore, a plural society is a society which is made up of socially and culturally discrete units which lack shared institutions and which are held together by the force, de jure and/or de facto, of a small dominant group.

Based on this framework, Caribbean societies fall into the two categories which share exclusive compulsory institutions as their common defining characteristic; they are either heterogeneous or plural. Most British Caribbean societies are creole societies because they are characterised by various variants or adaptation of creole culture. Demographically, in the pre-Independence period, these societies comprised a small white minority with a large black majority. In these societies, European culture with various black adaptations dominated. There are those societies like Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, however, which because of the presence of indentured labourers existing outside the hierarchical structure, the simple demographic structure becomes more complicated. This complication, however, draws attention to an important distinction between ethnic and cultural pluralism. Smith claims, in line with creole society scholars, that a convergence of institutional norms characterises most British Caribbean societies. The creole scholars would call these creole societies, while Smith refers to them as heterogeneous societies. He posits that ‘if compatibility of institutional norms characterises ethnic pluralism, their incompatibility may be taken to distinguish cultural pluralism’ (1965:15). In necessarily simplified terms, wherever racial and/or ethnic differences exist but the society is tied together by a dominant creole culture that binds the different racial/ethnic groups together, the society could be deemed as an expression of ethnic pluralism. But, where the racial and ethnic differences accord or overlap with differences in primary institutions such as kinship, religious, cultural, etc., the societies could be deemed as expressing cultural pluralism. Most Caribbean societies are beset by ethnic pluralism (or ethnic diversity) while a few are also beset by cultural pluralism.

In his later works, Smith shifted focus from the institutional dimensions of pluralism to the political dimensions thereby acknowledging that pluralism could be conceptually and analytically approached from either of these conceptual or analytic vantage points (Smith 1974: 205). In these later conceptualisations emphasis shifted to how citizens are incorporated within the general political system. In the case of universalistic incorporation, citizens’ membership and identity proceed directly from being part of the general political system. In cases of differential incorporation, membership and citizenship come from sectional corporate groups which represent their interest at the national level (Kuper 1971, 241). There is really no distinctive break in the earlier and later works save for the shifting of the point of analytic intervention.

Another point of contention in Smithian pluralism is its insistence on the political domination by a small cultural faction. While this was no doubt a fact in colonial society, it cannot be said to be applicable to post-colonial, democratic states. In democratic societies the majority section is more likely to win political power against the minority section. And, if political domination by a minority cultural section is a defining feature of plural societies, then Guyana pre-1992 could have been considered a plural society while Guyana post-1992 could not. Therefore, a country could change between heterogeneous and plural simply by a change of political regime without undergoing any socio-cultural and structural changes. These shortcomings notwithstanding, Smith contributed to an understanding of the political dynamics in plural societies.

Later theorists recognized and responded to these shortcomings in classical plural theory and revised and extended the model to correct these shortcomings. Among these, the most popular is Leo Despres. Despres (1967) shifts away from Smith's insistence that a defining feature of a plural society is rule by a cultural minority. While agreeing with Smith's institutionalism, Despres adds that a plural society is distinguished by the presence of maximal cultural sections and not necessarily by the rule of a cultural minority. Accepting the essence of Smith's institutional variations, Despres distinguishes between minimal and maximal cultural sections. He posits that when institutional activities serve to maintain cultural differentiation among groups at the local level, the groups thereby set apart from each other could be referred to as minimal cultural sections. On the other hand, if institutional activities effect cultural differentiation at the national level, the groups are referred to as maximal cultural sections. The existence of minimal cultural sections is the least amount of variation which could exist in a society that is not totally homogenous, and the existence of maximal cultural sections is the highest amount of variation a society could accommodate without becoming totally bifurcated into independent politico-cultural units. Societies characterised by the presence of minimal cultural sections only are referred to as heterogeneous societies in keeping with Smith's terminology. Societies which are constituted by both minimal and maximal cultural sections are plural societies. Despres agrees with Smith that the United States of America would be classified as a heterogeneous society since it possesses a large swathe of minimal cultural sections (Mexicans, West Indians, Italians, Jews) but also lack any institutional activities which seek to separate these groups at the national level. Nigeria, on the other hand, would be an ideal case of a plural society

since it possesses both minimal and maximal cultural sections. The cultural differentiation between Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, etc., is replicated at the national level. A plural society, therefore, is one which is constituted by the presence of maximal cultural units. It is important to note that the presence of maximal cultural units presupposes minimal cultural units but not vice versa. There are indeed many cases in which a maximal cultural section representing a cultural minority ceases power through undemocratic means and exercises that power over other sections of the society. Readily available examples are the West Indies during colonial times, Guyana, under Forbes Burnham and South Africa under apartheid. Rule by a cultural minority, however, is not a *sine qua non* of pluralism.

In his development of the plural model, Despres took a very modest approach. He insists that although the plural model is very useful in distinguishing societies based on the presence and absence of certain types of institutional activities at the local and national level, it cannot be used as a predictive model capable of explaining and predicting the probability of conflicts arising in a society. The plural model by itself is not sufficient and adequate for an assessment of socio-cultural change or for predictive purposes (Despres 1967) especially with regards to the probability of conflict arising in a society.

Picking up on some of the shortcomings of Smith's and Despres' pluralism, Kuper (1971), for example, broadened the plural society conceptual scheme in order to cover heterogeneity between racial, ethnic and other groups with distinctive lifestyles in a plural society (Smootha 1974). While using Smith's schema of differential incorporation as the basis of his pluralist postulates, Kuper could be credited for clarifying the bases and conditions of conflict in plural societies, a task from which Depres shied away. In explaining conflict and stratification in plural societies, Kuper posits four dimensions of pluralism reminiscent of the pattern variables of Parsons' functionalism. These four dimensions are particularism/universalism; cultural diversity/homogeneity; segregation/assimilation; inequality/equality. What is immediately recognisable in this schematic variable is the inclusion of inequality as a manifestation of hierarchical plurality. These four variables through which plurality could be conceptualised could be further measured by two summary measures: discontinuity-continuity and superimposition-dissociation. The first has to do with the distribution of members of racial/ethnic groups throughout the various structures of society and the latter relates to how lines of cleavage between groups coincide or diverge throughout these structures.

It is through these measures that pluralism and conflict are associated. This conceptualisation accomplishes the potentialities of Smithian pluralism and gives much logic to Smithian structuralism by highlighting the link between social structures, ethnic and racial differences and conflict. As such it makes the plural society model more than a static model.

While the plural model, as developed by Furnival, Smith, Depres and Kuper, gives interesting descriptive accounts of the persistence of internal conflicts, ethnic conflicts, political unrest, political authoritarianism, etc., the plural society literature fails to adequately explore and explain why the social problems characteristic of a plural society persist. Because of this shortcoming the school was dubbed descriptive and conceptual rather than explanatory or theoretical (MacGaffey 2011). There is an adequate amount of literature drawing from a wide range of cases addressing what a plural society is and why and how it came into being, but hardly any literature addressing the question why such a society seems to persist even in the absence of the economic and other considerations which brought it into being. Moreover, there is a lack of scholarship outlining and explaining the connections among the various social and structural facts which provide pluralism with its structuring context.

This book is both guided by and intends to respond to some of the shortcomings of the plural society model. Its main aim is twofold. The first is empirical in nature. The book intends to explore the bases for the persistence of structural pluralism in Guyana. As such it explores the structural, institutional and ideological dynamics which work separately and in combination with each other to maintain the essential form of structural pluralism while the country undergoes changes from decade to decade. This is an important issue since it dominates public discourse in the country and provides the basis for ethnopoltics, ethnic inequality, corruption and efforts at subverting the democratic processes in the country. The 2020 elections in Guyana stands as a stark indication of the need to conceptually and theoretically think through Guyana and its problems with the aim of understanding the dynamics which fuel those problems and arriving at alternative ways of engineering social systems to bring about desirable outcomes for all groups in the society. Exploring this empirical issue within the general framework of the plural society model offers the opportunity of engaging and expanding this model based on the historical experiences of Guyana as a particular case of a plural society. By engaging the model in this way, the book brings out the theoretical potential of the model, suggesting new ways of deploying the