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The Struggle for Recognition of the Indigenous Voice: Amerindians in Guyanese Politics

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ABSTRACT In Guyana’s racialised geography, Amerindians live in scattered villages in the vast hinterland that covers 90% of the country. Amerindian iconography is appropriated in state-making, even while Amerindians themselves are consigned to a patron–client relationship with the dominant ‘coastlander’ society. In the late 1950s, Amerindians made up only 4% of the national population but voted as a bloc in the national elections of 1957, 1961 and 1964, rallying around Stephen Campbell, the first Amerindian member of the legislature. Their unified position allowed their political leaders to negotiate a commitment to the settlement of Amerindian land claims as a condition of Independence in 1966. After losing its parliamentary majority in 2011, the coastlander-based party in power has been working to disrupt cohesion among Amerindian community leaders. The government uses a variety of funds to reward community leaders who will sign pre-prepared resolutions at the statutory National Toshaos Council meetings, and denies funds to leaders and communities that protest at government neglect and mismanagement of the traditional areas claimed by the indigenous peoples.

KEY WORDS: Amerindians, coastlanders, reserves, mining, Venezuelan land claim, Rupununi Uprising, proportional representation, government-organised non-governmental organisations, Guyana Action Party

Introduction

From the early 20th century, use of the term ‘Amerindian’ to refer to the indigenous peoples of Guyana in northern South America began to supersede the earlier use of ‘Indian’. This usage was perhaps to differentiate the ‘original lords of the soil’ (Menezes, 1988) from the East Indian indentured servants imported from 1838 to 1917 to labour on the sugar cane plantations after the abolition of African slavery. ‘Amerindian’ is now used both as a term of self-ascription and to refer to the surviving...
nine indigenous nations. In 2005, the three national indigenous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) unsuccessfully recommended that the term ‘Indigenous Peoples’ be used in place of ‘Amerindian’ in the revised Amerindian Act then before Parliament (Stabroek News, 2005). The ruling party, characteristically, refused to make any substantive change to the Bill. However, it did not advance their cause that two of the three Amerindian NGOs involved had (and have) retained the term ‘Amerindian’ in their own names.

A racialised geography persists in Guyana. In the stratified coastal-dominated economy and society, about 86% (mainly African, East Indian and ‘Mixed’) of the population occupy 5% of the land area. Amerindians use the term ‘coastlanders’ to refer to these non-indigenous, ‘settler’ populations. In his book on race relations in Guyana in the 1960s, the anthropologist Andrew Sanders perceptively noted:

In Guyana the distinction between the Coast and the Interior is more than merely a geographical one. It dominates the Coastal society’s conception of its country … The town … is a bright, exciting place, full of interesting people. At the other extreme the Bush is a dark, dangerous, uninteresting place, inhabited by fierce animals and backward, furtive Amerindians. (Sanders, 1987, p. 11)

Not much has changed in the intervening half century. The coastlander approach to the interior lands in which Amerindians form the majority population remains extractivist, exploitative, and rent seeking in orientation. At the same time, Amerindian iconography continues to be appropriated as national symbols: timehri (rock) paintings is an airport name; the Umana Yana is a traditional Amerindian house built in Georgetown, the capital, in 1972; pepperpot, made with Amerindian cassareep (boiled cassava juice), is the national dish; Amerindian words are used to name new ferries (Stabroek News, 2012b), and so on. The national ethos remains that of assimilation of Amerindians into national society.

This article deals with intra- and inter-community politics in the hinterland, and with politics between hinterland peoples and coastlanders. The focus is especially on two periods: when Amerindians perceived that they could hold a balance between two dominant coastlander political parties during 1953–1965, and the present day, when the party in power strives to prevent the emergence of an Amerindian political bloc.

The Colonial Period

The Guiana coast and its peoples were claimed by both the Spanish and Portuguese colonial powers but left alone, on account of inhospitable terrain and scattered acephalous populations with little extractable wealth. Dutch traders took advantage of this opening from the 1580s to establish trading relations with host Amerindian groups. In time they beat off rival European contenders and consolidated their foothold on the mainland. From initial interactions as equals, the Dutch over time began to set the terms of their relationship with their indigenous hosts. The Dutch decided whom they would recognise as Amerindian leaders, and those men were in turn conferred with presents and tokens of authority at triennial events (Menezes, 1977). As a plantation economy built on African slave labour was instituted on the reclaimed coastlands, the Dutch encouraged Amerindian settlements in the vicinity to serve as a cordon sanitaire.
Colonial records suggest some ad hoc inter-Amerindian community cooperation in forming the colonist-sponsored Amerindian militias to capture escaped African slaves and to help suppress slave revolts. The antipathy between these two races has not been entirely overcome in race-conscious Guyana. After the British annexation in 1803, and particularly after the abolition of African slavery in 1833, the planter-dominated Combined Court (a sort of primitive colonial parliament) and the London-appointed Governors frequently disagreed on the need to maintain the traditions of providing presents to the Amerindians. As a result, Amerindians withdrew into the hinterland, cementing the contemporary coastlanders/Amerindian settlement pattern (Menezes, 1979).

Land Reservations, Land Insecurity

By the beginning of the 20th century, the total number of Amerindians had been reduced to perhaps one-fifth of their pre-colonial numbers, as a result of introduced diseases to which they had no immunity (Seggar, 1958; Forte, 1988). Partly on account of the general feeling that the indigenous race would die out, to protect Amerindians from the increasing tide of gold miners and as a reward for support to the Crown in the boundary dispute with Venezuela in the 1890s, the colonial government gazetted 10 Reserves for Amerindian habitation in 1902, with four more areas reserved between 1904 and 1945/46, for a total of 1.3 million hectares (Mha); not a large proportion of Guyana’s 21 Mha. These reserves excluded entry by non-Amerindians but did not confirm Native Title3 (Bulkan and Bulkan, 2008). Even during the late 1950s when Amerindians were exerting a political role, the insecurity of tenure was shown by the de-reservation of almost 0.4 Mha in the Upper Mazaruni in 1959 and its replacement by a Mining District when diamonds were found. The failure to institute the participatory reservation processes in Guyana that had been formalised in most of the British Empire during the previous century (Troup, 1939) partially explains the absence of inter-agency collaboration in land use planning in the present.

Schools and health services provided through Christianising missions stimulated an increase in the size of semi-settled Amerindian populations while subsistence agriculture continued to rely on fallow periods to revive soil fertility. The sizes of main settlements are now increasing rapidly because of the inability or unwillingness of post-colonial governments to provide dispersed services. However, there is little evidence that Amerindians have developed dispute resolution systems to manage governance in these larger communities. Inter-family rivalries are now less able to be resolved by splitting of communities, because families wish to stay near the school and health services, and because customary lands have been alienated to ranching, mining, logging and other interests. The internal strains are especially evident at the times of elections of village councils, as council members are perceived or are alleged to use their positions to obtain preferential access by their families to government favours; see below.

The Political Importance of Amerindian Demography

The Amerindians population has quadrupled in the past 60 years, increasing from an estimated 16,000 persons in the mid-1940s (Peberdy, 1948) to about 70,000 in nine nations (Guyana Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Amerindians are the fourth largest ethnic
group, at 9.2% in the 2002 census. East Indians are the largest, comprising 43.5% of a total of 751,000 persons, followed by African Guyanese (28.8%) and ‘Mixed’ (16.7%). Amerindians also have the largest net growth rate, of around 3.5%, versus 2% for the other ethnic groups of Guyana, which have a strong tendency to emigrate for economic reasons to northern countries.

About 90% of Amerindians live in scattered villages in the hinterland, forming the majority populations in Regions 1, 8 and 9—three of the 10 administrative Regions. The enduring pattern of ethnic voting at all reasonably ‘free and fair’ national elections from 1957 favoured the East Indian-dominated Peoples’ Progressive Party (PPP) until the November 2011 elections. By that date, the decline in coastlander populations on account of high rates of migration—East Indians by 17% and Africans by 10% between the censuses of 1980 and 20024—and the loss of votes to a third party, the Alliance for Change (AFC), had resulted in the PPP losing its parliamentary majority by one seat. In consequence, for the first time since 1992 the party in power controls only the Executive branch of government. Consequently, Amerindian votes can determine the outcome of national elections, as was the case between 1957 and 1964. All institutions in Guyana are weak, including those of civil society.5

The 1950s and 1960s Pre-independence Period

Coastlander government assumed a protectionist approach to Amerindians in the first half of the 20th century. A less patronising view was reflected in the Amerindian Act passed in 1951, which formalised elections for Village Captains and Councillors. It is unclear how much training was given to Amerindian communities in the implementation of this Act. More significant politically was the reform of electoral law in 1953 to enable universal adult suffrage. Although only comprising 4% of the national population, Amerindians used the literacy that they had acquired through mission schools (and provision was made for illiterates) to be a visible part of the electorate in 1957. Amerindians voted on the advice of the clergy against the two dominant left-leaning parties. The sole Amerindian candidate, Stephen Campbell, secured the single seat won by the National Labour Front party out of the then 15 seats in the Legislative Council. Campbell was Arawak by ethnicity, and had spent his working life as a Catholic teacher and catechist, and later a manager of forestry operations in various interior districts (Pierre, 1993).

Thereafter, the bloc support of Amerindians in the geographical constituency (the North West District) contested by Stephen Campbell, and for the United Force (UF) party in the hinterland Rupununi District, permitted this ‘third force’ party to be the kingmaker in the internecine struggle waged between the coastlander East Indian and African parties from 1955 (Palmer, 2010). The coalition between the UF and the African People’s National Congress (PNC) in 1964 ended the East Indian PPP’s stint at the helm of government for the following 28 years. The coalition government created a special Department for Amerindian Affairs (within the Ministry of Home Affairs), responsibility for which was given to Stephen Campbell as Parliamentary Secretary (Pierre, 1993). However, the Department was little more than honorific, lacking an independent budget line or staff. The inclusion in the Independence agreement of a commitment to settle Amerindian land claims was due to Campbell’s single-handed lobbying, and marked the high point of Amerindians as a political force in Guyana.
In the ensuing decades and until 1993, responsibility for Amerindian Affairs was shifted to the Chief Hinterland Affairs Officer, located within the Ministry of Local Government. As with indigenous peoples in other countries, a persistent concern of Amerindians has been to secure a strong legal basis for recognition of their rights to natural resources on which they have traditionally depended for livelihoods and their social and cultural existence. The petitions and lobbies organised by Stephen Campbell resulted in the explicit commitment in the Independence Agreement (1965, Annex C, Section L; Menezes, 1988, pp. 361–362; Letwiniuk, 1996, p. 51) that required the independent government to provide legal ownership or rights of occupancy for Amerindians over:

areas and reservations or parts thereof where any tribe or community of Amerindians is now ordinarily resident or settled and other legal rights, such as rights of passage, in respect of any other lands they now by tradition or custom de facto enjoy freedoms and permissions corresponding to rights of that nature. In this context, it is intended that legal ownership shall comprise all rights normally attaching to such ownership. (HMSO, 1965)

Had it not been for Campbell’s single-minded focus on land rights, Guyanese Amerindians might well lack secure land tenure, as is the case for indigenous peoples in the other circum-Caribbean territories of Belize and Suriname.

Post-Independence Land Claims

Notwithstanding repeated assurances by post-Independence governments, implementation of this commitment has been sluggish. Some 104 Amerindian Villages have been awarded communal tenure under the ex gratia terms of the Amerindian Acts of 1951 and 2006, covering about 2.9 Mha or 13.8% of Guyana (Ministry of Amerindian Affairs (MoAA) blog, August 2012). There is some confusion in MoAA as to whether 120 or 138 communities are eligible for title. In addition, 41 Amerindian Villages have outstanding claims for extension of titled lands (MoAA, 2012; Office of Climate Change, Guyana, 2012). The Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) implies that some of the claims for extension are very large and would bring titled Amerindian Village Lands to 35% of the country (Isles, 2012). This area should be contrasted with the 11.1 Mha (53% of Guyana) claimed by Amerindian communities during the survey by the Amerindian Lands Commission (ALC) during 1967–1969 (Government of Guyana, 1969). In other words, although the Amerindian population has doubled since 1969, their land claims have reduced by 20%.

The government has failed to implement the national policy of integrated land use planning (Government of Guyana, 1997), in spite of a successful demonstration in Region 10 in 1997. Furthermore, government agencies such as the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) and Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) are unfamiliar with the protections of Amerindian customary rights in the land laws, regulations and procedures. The GFC and GGMC have continued to issue overlapping logging and mining concessions over Amerindian traditional lands in spite of explicit protection in the Mining Act (1989, Article 111) and State Forest Exploratory Permission procedures (GFC, 1997, Section 4). Miners disregard the requirements to
apply to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for environmental permits prior to mining, and to submit an environmental impact assessment (EIA) in support of their application. In turn, the GGMC improperly awards mining licences in the absence of environmental permits. With the continued rise in the price of gold and the clamour for more mining concessions, a conflict between persistent Amerindian claims to traditional lands and customary rights and the GGDMA is inevitable (Appendix 1, full-page advertisements in Stabroek News, 15 August 2012, and Kaieteur News, 15 August 2012). It is thus not surprising that concerns about land security tend to dominate Amerindian contacts with the government.

There seems to be no willingness or no understanding on the part of government or Amerindian leaders/spokespersons of the need for a participatory reservation settlement process to avoid future arguments over locations and boundaries; nor of the need for a strategic view of land allocation when demographic increase is coupled with stagnant subsistence-level agricultural productivity and the consequent ecological logic of semi-nomadic agricultural cropping on the very poor hinterland soils (Bulkan and Palmer, 2009).

Mis-steps in the Assertion of Amerindian Rights, 1967–1969

In 1962, Venezuela reopened a territorial claim to lands west of the Essequibo River, or three-quarters of the landmass of Guyana, disregarding the 1899 final boundary settlement. In 1963, the Amerindian Association of Guiana (AAG) was founded, with the mandate to press for firm title to all lands occupied by Amerindians (Menezes, 1988, p. 361). The AAG claimed to have 5,000 members in 1969, with branches in 20 villages. However, the AAG was riddled with internal dissension, resulting in the expulsion or withdrawal of its nationally known leaders, including Campbell. The AAG then embarked on a course of action that would cast all Amerindians in an unfavourable light. The AAG took advantage of Amerindian fears of domination by a coastlander government to enlist about 36 Amerindian leaders to attend a secret convention held at the Kabakaburi Amerindian Reservation in April 1967. The convention was allegedly funded by a Venezuelan diplomat, a claim made plausible by the news that the AAG convention had both endorsed Venezuela’s territorial claim, and passed a resolution supporting a Venezuelan proposal for joint development of the Essequibo. When news of the gathering broke, the Parliament of Guyana quickly responded by asking a Venezuelan diplomat to leave, and deporting an expatriate leader of the AAG (Sanders, 1987, pp. 195–202).

Another setback to Amerindian–coastlander relations was an attempted secession of the Rupununi led by the settler ranching families in January 1969, with the support of a small number of Amerindians. The ‘Rupununi Rebellion’ (or ‘Uprising’) was also allegedly financed and supported covertly by the Venezuelan government (Simmons, 1993). The Guyana Defence Force (GDF) quickly reasserted control but the effects of the ethnic cleavages that were laid bare and the punitive actions against the Rupununi’s economy and population were long lasting. Amerindians were seen as traitors, and at the First Conference of Amerindian Leaders held two months later, Amerindian leaders were asked to sign a six-point pledge of allegiance to the country. Government also assured an early settlement of land rights, a promise that did not begin to be enacted for another seven years (Menezes, 1988, pp. 363–365).
Although only a handful of Amerindians had taken part in the 1967 AAG Convention and in the 1969 Rupununi Uprising, those events fed coastlanders’ negative stereotyping of Amerindians, then cast as traitors and anti-national. As in other countries, Amerindian organisations joined forces in regional and international indigenous networks to press for recognition of pre-existing Native Title and the right to self-determination (Conklin, 1997, 2002, details a parallel process in Brazil).

Representation of Amerindian Issues

A statutory body, the National Toshao’s Council (NTC), is mandated by Part IV of the Amerindian Act 2006. The NTC is made up of the leaders of Amerindian villages with land titles. The NTC has no decision-making powers, or dispute resolution process. National funds are apparently not available to finance a secretariat, but the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) provided a grant of US$125,000 to the Government of Guyana, seemingly for that purpose, in 2011. The now annual meetings of the NTC are convened by the government and are primarily for the government to present its information and to secure signatures on pre-prepared resolutions, not necessarily related to issues of concern to Amerindians (Stabroek News, 2010b). Points raised by Amerindian leaders that do not accord with government views may be suppressed (Stabroek News, 2010a, 2012e; Kaieteur News, 2011).

Similarly, Amerindian representation on the President’s Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee (MSSC) for the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) is by invitation of the President. Two organisations are government-organised NGOs (GONGOs)—family-based Georgetown-resident NGOs, allegedly funded entirely by the Office of the President (OP). The heads of these two GONGOs are regular contributors of letters to the press in support of the party in power. A third NGO, the Guyanese Organisation of Indigenous Peoples (GOIP), is partly independent. The Amerindian Peoples Association (APA), the largest Amerindian representative organisation, was subjected to sustained vilification by the last president and MoAA and does not attend MSSC meetings. None of the Amerindian-related LCDS projects was developed from participatory consultation with Amerindians. No LCDS project has been discussed strategically at MSSC meetings, or the priorities between projects, or the proposed budgets.

Apart from the APA, there are no forums at national level where Amerindians can debate their own collective problems and opportunities free of government oversight. One of many examples of the lack of autonomy of the NTC was a state-publicised picketing exercise led by the chairperson of the NTC and the Minister of Amerindian Affairs outside an APA information-sharing workshop on the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) initiative in April 2010 (Nauth, 2010). That workshop was co-hosted by Rainforest Foundation Norway, an officially accredited NGO to the Norway–Guyana REDD agreement.

Although Amerindians constitute almost 10% of the population and are increasing most rapidly in net percentages, political issues and resource allocations are still dominated by the coastland parties and their concerns. The PPP, and the PNC during the 1960s–1980s, spent small parts of the national budget in Amerindian areas, but the amounts and types of expenditure were not decided in the Amerindian communities. Allocations of donor funds to Amerindian communities are also strongly conditioned by
coastlander calculations of overt support from some Amerindian communities. One result of the system of ‘counting at the place of poll’ at regional and national elections is that the government knows in which villages it garnered the majority of votes. Unsurprisingly in a patronage system, the villages selected to benefit from US$1.8 million disbursed up to December 2012 to the Amerindian Development Fund from the Norwegian-funded Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund (GRIF) are ones that supported the government. Conversely, none of the Upper Mazaruni villages, which took the government to court in 1998 over their land claims, is among the proposed beneficiaries (UNDP, 2012).

Amerindians in the National Assembly

The overarching post-Independence political situation in Guyana was not sympathetic to any declaration of rights, Amerindian or other. The PNC, the dominant party in the two-party coalition that had led the country into Independence, rigged national elections in 1968, and would continue to do so over the next two decades. The PNC no longer needed the votes of any ethnic group. In addition, ‘the alphabet system of proportional representation’ was proposed and then instituted by Prime Minister Forbes Burnham in 1968, ending whatever separation of power existed between the Executive and Legislative branches of government (Lutchman, 1972, p. 20). Parliamentarians who voted along party lines replaced the previous geographical constituency representatives exemplified by Stephen Campbell for the North West District.

In 2000, the electoral laws were changed to assign 25 of the 65 seats in the National Assembly to nominal geographical constituencies. However, as the political party leaders select the Members of Parliament (MPs) from their lists to fill all seats, there is no MP elected directly by Amerindians to represent them geographically or thematically. Further, the two major (coastlander) parties signed an agreement in mid-2007 to amend the Constitution so as to enable recall of MPs by their parties, thereby disbarring MPs from crossing the floor or acting as independents (Stabroek News, 2007). This course of action was widely interpreted as entrenching further the power of party leaders, and foreclosing any independent action by MPs, such as acting across party lines for Amerindian interests. Amerindians’ MPs rarely speak in the National Assembly on Amerindian issues, or they speak to a script approved by their party’s executive.

There is no evidence, however, of Amerindian collective thinking or planning in a common interest since 1965, nor have there been organised platforms for policies for Amerindian development. Percentages of Amerindians who voted in national elections were about 10% lower than those of coastlanders, or a little over 60% of registered voters in 2011. However, because of the near-absence of pre-election voter education and perhaps some decline in literacy, the proportion of spoiled ballot papers was substantially higher in Amerindian areas (Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB), 2012).

The Guyana Action Party, 1992 to the Present

The Guyana Action Party (GAP) was formed in 1992, led by Paul Hardy, a scion of the Melville ranching family of the Rupununi. The majority of the Melvilles, including Hardy’s family, had fled to Brazil in the wake of the 1969 Rupununi Uprising. The two
dominant parties took note of Amerindian interest in GAP and before the 2001 elections actively tried to lower GAP’s prospects. Allegedly, the official understanding was that Hardy had only been resident in Guyana for five years prior to the election date. The Constitution was amended in December 2000 to stipulate that presidential candidates had to be ‘ordinarily resident’ in Guyana for seven years, a move intended to disqualify Hardy from being the face of his party in the 19 March 2001 election (Stabroek News, 2001). However, Hardy was able to prove that he had been resident in Guyana for 7.5 years (personal communication). In spite of the government’s efforts to derail GAP, the GAP combination with the Working People’s Alliance (WPA) won two out of 65 seats at the 2001 national elections. At the regional level, GAP won six of the nine seats in Region 7 (Mazaruni) and a majority of the Region 9 (Rupununi) seats, both of them Amerindian areas.

GAP formed a coalition with Rise, Organise and Rebuild (ROAR), a coastlander-based party, to contest the 2006 national elections, and the coalition won one seat at the national level. In 2011, GAP joined A Partnership for National Unity (APNU), an umbrella coalition of opposition parties.

At every election, GAP has faced unrelenting hostility from the governing PPP, determined to thwart the formation of an Amerindian political bloc that could tip the balance of seats in the National Assembly. The PPP’s abuse of state resources in successive national elections has been well documented in the press and the NGO Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB, 2007, 2012). In addition, from 2006, only the polling agents of the two principal parties have been paid from the public purse for their work.

The Regional System of Government, 1980

In 1980, Guyana instituted a regional system of sub-national administration consisting of 10 Regions, mostly demarcated by following the course of rivers rather than watersheds (Figure 1). There has been no devolution of power from central to lower levels of government, nor have local government elections been held since 1994. The 1951 Amerindian Ordinance had instituted some local governmental autonomy at the village level so that villagers elected a Captain and Village Council every two to three years. However, these Village Councils have no formal link with the Regional system of government, which deepens Amerindian isolation from the political process. Additionally, the party in power has historically and currently interferes in village-level elections, seeking to ensure election of its favoured candidates (George, 2012; Stabroek News, 2012a, c).

Voting for sub-national regional parliamentary seats is simultaneous with national elections in Guyana. Since 1980 the regional MPs have not had any separate forum or meeting place and have not had a budget; the votes are practically meaningless. However, comparison with the votes for national-level candidates showed that in 2011 there was stronger support for the opposition parties at regional than at national level (EAB, 2012).

The two levels of dysfunctional government (regional and local) mean that there is no effective channel for issues to reach national-level attention from Amerindian Village Councils and Community Development Councils. The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and the statutory NTC are one-way speakers for communicating government intentions downwards. The failure of the government (MoAA and NTC) to reply to hundreds of
questions raised at the 13 hinterland meetings following the launch of the President’s LCDS in mid-2009 is a major example of government not responding to Amerindian concerns.

Notwithstanding superficial decentralisation in decision-making, deeper structures of political patronage and information asymmetries continue to influence the distribution

Figure 1. Map of Guyana showing 10 administrative regions, formally titled indigenous areas, and names of indigenous nations. Source: Map prepared by Anthony Cummings.
of government resources to communities. There is no formula for returning a percentage of the revenues from natural resource extraction to the region of origin. In all the interior Regions the revenues allocated by Central Government are much lower than the revenues extracted from royalties and rents on natural resources exploitation (Ram, 2012). Instead the hinterland residents, who are Amerindians in the majority, are saddled with the negative externalities—including polluted rivers, riverbanks and land, social ills and the inflation that accompanies mining. Press interviews with Amerindian leaders (toshao) in the margins of the meetings of the National Toshaos Council show that the leaders have a wide range of concerns about education, economic development and services in their communities (Stabroek News, 2010a, 2012d).

Village Councils (in the case of communities with titled lands) and Community Development Councils (in the case of untitled communities) have in some instances created their own sub-regional NGOs. Some of these NGOs have registered under the Friendly Societies Act in order to attain legal status, and have been able to sign small-scale project agreements with international and national NGOs. While not welcoming Amerindian autonomy outside its sphere of control, the government has resisted efforts to reform the local government system.

Gender

The male-dominated Amerindian traditions have mostly excluded women from the top positions in village and community councils. However, there are currently two presidentially appointed female Amerindian ministers. There are as many trained Amerindian teachers, nurses and health workers as men working in the villages; further, women are present and vocal in meetings of village and community councils.

Conclusion

The one-seat majority in Parliament held by the combined Opposition parties from the 2011 national election has slightly dented the two decades of near-dictatorship by the governing party. That party is accustomed to using controls on information under democratic centralism to minimise interactions with civil society including Amerindians. There is no evidence that Amerindians appointed to the National Assembly by the three political parties have any intention of combining across party boundaries to raise the public profile of Amerindian issues.

Amerindian communities have negligible net accumulations of resources or financial reserves, no tradition of such savings, and are not at present able to meet together without external finance. So the development and promotion of an autochthonous Amerindian agenda is still a distant prospect. At the current juncture, and unlike the late 1950s and early 1960s, Amerindians lack the political clout that would allow them to define and realise their own ambitions and plans in Guyana.

Notes

1. The National Constitution (Cap. 1:01) uses ‘Amerindian’ on page 72, Article 142 (2) (b) (i), on page 87, Article 149 (6) (c), on page 179, Article 212 (S), and on page 211, second schedule about the coat of arms of Guyana, which also uses ‘indigenous’. This armorial description mentions ‘Amerindians as the
indigenous people of the country’. ‘Indigenous’ is used on page 26 in the Preamble, in Article 149 (G) and in Articles 212 (S) and (T) about the Indigenous Peoples’ Commission on pages 178 and 179. The Amerindian Act (Cap. 29:01, 2006) uses ‘indigenous’ only on page 21, Article 41 (a) concerning the Indigenous Peoples Commission. The main indigenous NGO in Guyana is named the Amerindian Peoples Association.

2. The three NGOs are the Amerindian Peoples Association, The Amerindian Action Movement of Guyana and the Guyana Organisation of Indigenous Peoples.

3. Native title is the term used when there is legal recognition of pre-existing (before colonialism) indigenous rights of ownership to their customary lands traditionally occupied and used.


5. ‘The latest UN figures indicate that around 83% of Guyana’s university graduates do not live within the boundaries of the Co-operative Republic. In fact, where the export of tertiary-trained citizens is concerned, we have the dubious distinction of topping the region’ (‘Brain drain’, Stabroek News, 24 June 2007).


7. A ‘toshao’ is the elected Village Head in villages with land title; ‘Captain’ is the elected head in untitled communities.

8. IDB provided or agreed to provide US$125,000 for a secretariat for the NTC, possibly as part of a further grant of US$735,000 under project GY-T1076, approved 8 December 2010; see http://www.iadb.org/en/projects/project,1303.html?id=GY-T1076. However, this grant was directed to the Government of Guyana, the Guyana Forestry Commission, forest-dependent and other communities, according to the title, but the technical annex on the programme (document LEG/SGO-GY-35504590-10) indicated that this second grant was essentially directed to funding of the GFC, even though there is a specific mention of Amerindian communities in Section 2.03.

9. Democratic Centralism, as practised by the party in power, overrides valid legislation and regulations at the direction of Cabinet officers on the grounds that implementing the law would not be in the national interest. No criteria are ever provided for what that overriding national interest might be. Democratic Centralism also involves one-way communication in which the government presents its preconceived intentions to the passively listening citizens.

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