



National
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Center

17

Latin America Review

12 December 1980

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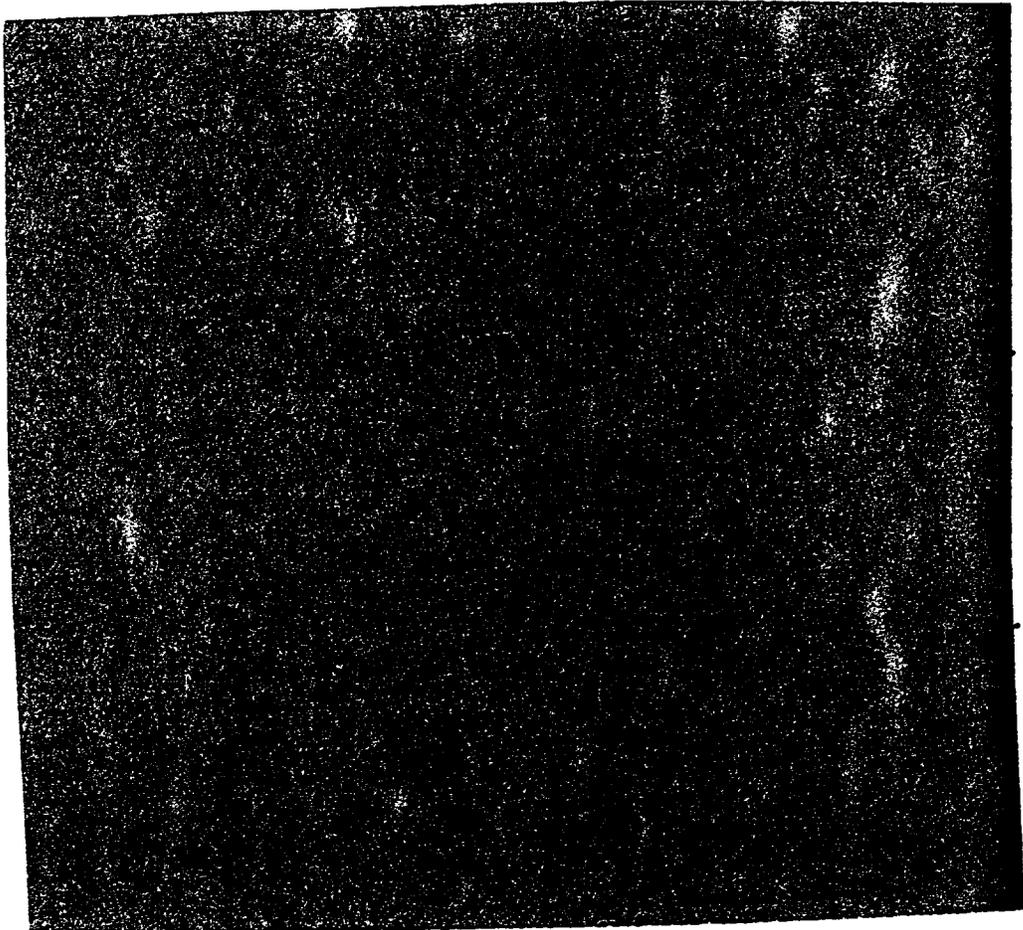


LATIN AMERICA REVIEW



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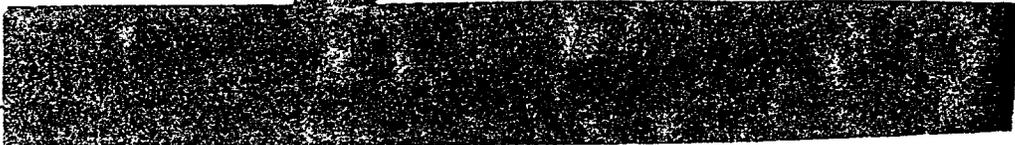
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Guyana: Burnham and the Election

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President Burnham and his party will emerge from the national election on 15 December in an even stronger position, but economic problems will continue to work against his regime.



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GUYANA: BURNHAM AND THE ELECTION [REDACTED]

President Forbes Burnham and his People's National Congress will emerge from the national election on 15 December in an even stronger position, although economic problems will continue to work against the regime.

During the past year, Burnham has survived the greatest threat yet to his political power and has engineered the holding of elections with characteristically good timing. The election is being contested by the opposition People's Progressive Party led by Cheddi Jagan and the small, conservative United Front Party.

[REDACTED]

Burnham's Style



President Burnham

A shrewd political manipulator, Burnham has dominated Guyanese politics since he and his Afro-Guyanese party wrested power from Jagan and his East Indian majority party in 1964. Burnham consolidated his minority-based position in October 1980 in a new constitution that named him Executive President. While lending the trappings of democracy to his regime, the constitution formally grants the executive branch extensive powers at the expense of the already rubberstamp legislature.

*The source of the above copyrighted photograph is Cuba International, November 1979. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Burnham makes all party decisions. He listens to many points of view, giving party members the illusion that they contribute to his decisions.

[REDACTED]

Viewing himself as the model socialist leader in the Caribbean, Burnham was quick to offer recognition and assistance to the revolutionary governments of Grenada and Suriname. Many Caribbean socialists, however, recognize him as an opportunist. Grenada's Prime Minister Bishop preferred to support Burnham's now-deceased, radical opponent, Walter Rodney,

[REDACTED]

Burnham's desire to be a revolutionary socialist leader also has come in conflict with the practical need to develop Guyana. Burnham has built his regime on non-aligned socialist rhetoric--in contrast to the Moscow-line Marxism of Jagan--but in recent years he has come to realize that little economic assistance would be forthcoming from socialist sources. As a result, he has modified his definition of socialism to become more appealing to potential Western sources of aid.

[REDACTED]

The Opposition

Jagan believes his People's Progressive Party must participate in the election in order to survive. In 1978, he boycotted the referendum on the country's British-drafted constitution, leaving his party without a voice in drafting the new document.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Jagan apparently has concluded that the only effective way to deal with Burnham is through the electoral process.

[REDACTED]

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Opposition Leader Jagan

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Earlier this year the radical Working People's Alliance and its popular leader, the late Dr. Walter Rodney, posed a serious threat to the Burnham government. A racially mixed party, it attracted many opposition followers disaffected by Jagan's passivity, and many Afro-Guyanese disenchanted by the ruling party. The death of Rodney in a bomb blast last June threw the party into disarray and drove many of its members underground.

Burnham and his followers have stifled opponents in the past by rigging elections and denying newsprint to opposition publications ostensibly for economic reasons.

In addition to Rodney's killing, the opposition says the government was involved in the murder of a Jesuit priest who was photographing government efforts to break up an opposition rally. Opponents also accused the government of setting fire to the Ministry of National Development in an attempt to frame opposition leaders.

*The source of the above copyrighted photograph is United Press International, 3 January 1979.

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The Election

Burnham has called the election at a politically opportune time. The threat posed by the Working People's Alliance is on the wane, the public is politically apathetic, and Jagan's [REDACTED] party is willing to lend legitimacy to the contest by participating. Moreover, the deteriorating economic situation has not yet become a political liability despite electricity shortages, decreased productivity, and the scarcity of consumer goods. [REDACTED]

When he was faced with similar economic problems and greater political discontent in 1978, Burnham postponed the parliamentary elections by holding a heavily boycotted constitutional referendum. Although he now is in a stronger position politically, his party has made preparations to ensure that it wins at least two-thirds of the 65 seats in the legislature. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In addition, recent constitutional changes assure his party of 12 additional seats; the names of deceased members of the Jonestown cult allegedly were registered on voting lists; and security forces will "guard" the polls. [REDACTED]

In recent days, Burnham party members and the security forces have disrupted opposition rallies and arrested several of Jagan's party members. [REDACTED] Jagan's aversion to violence and memories of bitter inter-party racial strife in the early 1960s argue against election-related violence by his followers, but the Working People's Alliance has threatened to sabotage government industries and otherwise use violence to force voters to boycott the polls. Even so, they do not appear capable of significantly disrupting the election. [REDACTED]

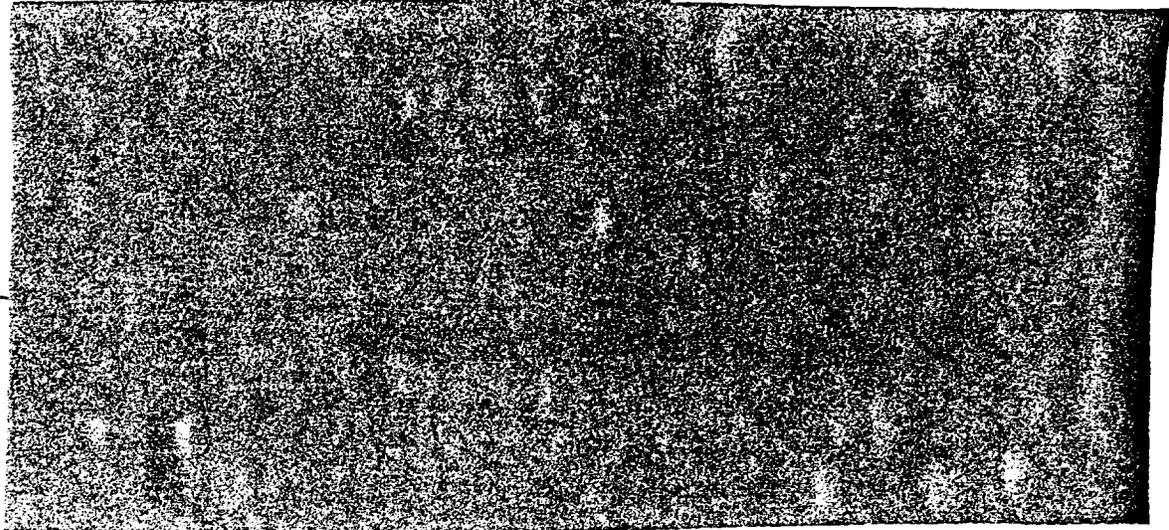
Prospects

Burnham's preeminence is such that he probably could have named himself President-for-Life when the new constitution was drafted. The opposition parties present little threat to his continued hold on power. He will not step down voluntarily even though he is not in the best of health. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Hamilton Green, Minister
of Health, Housing, and Labor, is waiting in the wings
for Burnham's demise.



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