May, 2005

**Blowback: Burnham, Jagan, Rodney and the OR Tambo Award**

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Part 2

Just recently, last month to be exact, the late Cheddi Jagan, former President of the Republic of Guyana, and one of the heroes of the mass nationalist movement for independence, was awarded one of the Republic of South Africa's highest honors - the Order of the Companions of OR Tambo. This is a signal and significant award, for it signifies recognition of the recipient's commitment not only to the struggle against oppression worldwide, but also to a reaffirmation of the basic human rights, civil liberties and absolute freedom of all peoples - irrespective of gender, race, religion, age or ethnicity.

It is this goal that resonates in a new South Africa as it marches to build, at the end of apartheid, a civil society and nation in which an economic vibrancy and a non racial multiparty democracy can thrive - respectful of, and committed to, the enforcement of the rights of minorities in a de facto and de jure manner.

It is to such a plural society that the earlier freedom fighters - Norman and Michael Manley, Eric Williams, Eric Gary, Grantley Adams, Forbes Burnham, Cheddi Jagan, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and Sukarno for example - were committed. One other prominent West Indian national, who won the coveted award - again posthumously in 2004 -, was Michael Manley, when he was given the gold award with the designation "Supreme Companion".

As is typical in Guyana's fragmented racial and political context one columnist - qua political commentator - Freddie Kissoon, opined about this event in the Kaiiteur News on May 10th and has concluded that, not only is this a crowning achievement for Jagan, but that it forebodes badly for Burnham whom he argues will never receive the award because of his alleged complicity in the death of Guyanese patriot and friend Walter Rodney.

This, he implies, was an unforgivable sin in the eyes of freedom fighters and those aligned to fight against capitalist exploitation, and...
is an indelible blot on Burnham’s attempts at amassing a distinguished progressive record. This conclusion, I would contend, is not based on evidentiary data and, more so from the facts presented, is what one would clearly describe as conclusions based on non sequiturs and faulty assumptions.

It was William Shakespeare who intoned that, “The evil that men do lives after them, but the good is often interred with their bones”. This prophetic statement has a ring of truth for many statesmen: One is Richard Milhous Nixon, now reviled as the President who lied to the nation and committed an act that almost led to a traumatizing political impeachment before his ultimate resignation; that played the Cold war to his advantage and engaged in profound red-baiting, inter alia.

However, very little is extolled about his focus on Black capitalism; his efforts to enhance economic advancement for African Americans through the Philadelphia Plan; his rapprochement with China and attempts to engage that dormant potential superpower, whilst driving a wedge between China and the USSR; his weakening of the Soviet’s hold in eastern Europe, and its subsequent contribution to the implosion of what Ronald Reagan described as the “evil empire;” and so it is with Forbes Burnham - the first executive President of the Republic of Guyana.

For some, Forbes Burnham is a brutal despot who ruined the country and plundered its miniscule wealth; one who was implicated in the death of many of Guyana’s emerging political stalwarts- not excluding Walter Rodney; one who was an egotistical, maniacal and opportunistic leader whose shortcomings contributed, in a large way, to the ethnic rivalries and conflicts in the society between, and among, Indo and Afro Guyanese, for example. Others see him as disciplined nationalist whose fortitude and vision helped usher Guyana’s political independence from England; as a regional, integrationist whose frame of reference and paradigmatic thrust helped form the cornerstone for Caricom and other such on going successful ventures, today; as a gifted and renowned orator and intellectual whose brilliance, combined, pragmatic realism and leadership, was able to attract the “best and brightest” to serve Guyana at crucial junctures in regional and world affairs. I, in an earlier work, described Burnham as a dynamic part of a “dual charismatic” political formation that initially led to the rise of a popular mass movement in the 1950’s, only to fall prey to the disintegrative forces of Guyana’s plural society, and one who clearly contributed in some way to the factionalism that was rife between the two “maximum” leaders-he and Jagan.

In fact, Burnham was a much more complex and nuanced political figure-brilliant visionary, cavalier, dashing and ensnaring; he could also be calculatingly ruthless, pragmatic and pointedly instrumental in the pursuit in his goals. He was also destined- with the other great leader, Cheddi Bharrat Jagan- to play a lasting and tortuous role in the evolution of Guyana’s modern political and social history. Rodney, I knew from the early 50’s-1953 to be exact –and still remember clearly as young teenagers our giving the “V’ for victory sign from his parents’ home, to Cheddi Jagan who was incarcerated in the prison infirmary – a window of which faced the street where he resided. Indeed it was Burnham, in an act of defiance and empowerment against an elitist political and educational social structure, and as the new Minister of Education in the 1953 short-lived PPP government, who added a scholarship which catapulted Rodney from Tutorial High where he had started. He had qualified at the national common entrance [scholarship] examinations, but not high enough to attend the prestigious Queens College on a full scholarship. The rest is history; and, indeed, it was Burnham, who in a heated late night discussion, (gaffe), with me.
and another close friend and reputed distant relative who then had a senior position in his administration, reminded me of the fact that he not only “made” Rodney, and was not adverse to a robust political tussle with the young upstart. He admired Rodney’s brilliance and strong nationalistic stance; demurred that he had anything to do with Rodney’s inability to get an appointment at the University, and suggested that Hammy [Green] may have been the pivotal impediment; reminded me of the ubiquitous power of incumbency, and that power never conceded anything without a struggle; and of his feeling that Rodney was waging an undisciplined campaign at an “undignified level” and one that was totally unfamiliar to him [Rodney], yet favored a more seasoned, political veteran. ........

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