



PRESS RELEASE

CALL FOR PRESERVATION OF CIVIC SPACE IN GUYANA

The current Government of Guyana won the most bitterly contested elections in the modern era. Despite the slimmest of majorities, the election left the political opposition adrift, providing the Government a lengthy opportunity to get into its stride. Although both domestic and international political fortunes seem aligned in their favour, the Government is more focused on the past and has little to say about the present.

Economically, Guyana's lucky windfall, both in the discovery of fossil fuel and the priority they now assume among world supplies, strengthens the likelihood of achieving the prosperity which dazzles the imagination of politicians. Moreover, calls for halting fossil fuel production stemming from the climate crisis have been tempered by repercussions of the war against Ukraine.

Given these political and economic good fortune, firstly in the discovery of immense petroleum reserves and secondly, being an economic beneficiary from a tragic war, why is the Government so insecure with regard both to the political opposition and to civic voices?

Civic space in Guyana is steadily shrinking. The following evidence supports this statement.

- Well-established and respected organizations such as the Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA), Red Thread and the Transparency Institute (TIGI), along with other named religious and community-based organizations, were targeted for attack by the ruling party for identifying themselves with a civic statement critical of decision-making in the extractive sector
- Exclusion of civil society from policy-making bodies such as the EPA, Natural Resources Fund (NRF), Statutory Commissions and Boards. Independent civil society nominees can bring valuable societal insights to such bodies.
- Acceleration of the state-owned media Agencies from information outlets into organs of party-directed public relations that are mobilized against civil society.
- A formidable mobilization of intimidation involving Government Ministers, State institutions and the Government-controlled press, to daunt and dissuade criticism from civil society.
- Highly-controlled, or no consultations at all with civil society, on major national decision-making processes (e.g. climate policy, Amaila Falls, Gas to shore LCDS, NRF Act).

This level of intolerance for criticism is against the spirit of a democratic polity, which requires an active civil society, even when it disagrees with Government policies or actions.

The concerted effort to suppress criticism broke new ground with the deployment of Department of Public Information (DPI) personnel masquerading as ‘free-lance’ journalists, who pressurized and panicked elderly citizens into disassociating themselves from their original statements. Both Ministers and newcomers in Parliament found Facebook fortitude to troll what they described as ‘unknowns’ in civil society, emboldening assorted self-styled ‘news’ outlets and self-styled ‘journalists’ to reproduce the Facebook slander.

Slanted newspaper columnists and ‘wanna be’ elder statesmen joined the chorus, risking to be taken seriously neither by their friends nor their adversaries. Everything, moral or material, it seems, is to be pawned in the anxiety for ‘notice’ from party grandees.

The challenge Guyana faces is one of character – learning how to become civil - when our political history is littered with low-intensity warfare, verbal scorn and electoral skirmishes. On the one hand, Ministers derided civic bodies as few in number and small in size, while simultaneously mobilizing whatever was available to frighten and repress people from seeking to express their views. All of which makes politics loathsome to those who want to create a better society, particularly the young.

This race to the bottom in terms of shrinking civil society space should be a matter of concern for all. Freeing civic space from constraints on truth and decency is of benefit to everyone and requires more people finding their voices more routinely on issues in the public domain. Given the economic and political good fortune the Government enjoys, its leadership would do well to adopt a more gracious, less strident and frenzied approach to governing.

POLICY FORUM GUYANA

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