

Patricia Mohammed. (2024). *Janet Jagan: Freedom fighter of Guyana*. Ian Randle Publishers, xvii+533pp, ISBN: 978-976833918-8 (hbk). 978-976833919-5 (pbk). US\$35.00.

Janet Jagan: Freedom fighter of Guyana is a commissioned biography, the research for which began in 2019. It deals with the life of Janet Jagan, (née Rosenberg), a nursing student from Chicago, USA who married Dr. Cheddi Jagan, a Northwestern University dentistry graduate in 1943 and migrated to British Guiana (later Guyana) in that year. They both became involved in the political life of Guyana. Whilst Janet is the central figure of the book, the author recognises that it is virtually impossible to exclude her husband, Cheddi, from the biography. The *Introduction* lays the groundwork for the author's appreciation of this biography. She says:

I have stepped away from gossip, rumour or hearsay about their private lives in order to preserve the dignity they deserve in the afterlife and because none of these rumours impacts on the work and goals to which the main protagonist of this biography, Janet Jagan, remained fully committed (p. xvii).

This undertaking is comforting: the reader knows what to expect. However, some of the elements that cut across this biography are the underlying issues of race and ideology. There are contrasts that Mohammed shares with the reader on the question of ideology and race which are central to a critique of the service of Janet Jagan and her husband, Cheddi, during their time in government, fifty years apart.

The issue of race became toxic in Guyanese politics in the 1950s and 1960s. The statistically dominant population segments of Indo- and Afro-Guyanese became polarised, and Western involvement helped to stoke these divisions for political ends. At the height of the Cold War, US and British interests were threatened by the Jagans' socialist ideology; curtailing their political influence became a policy imperative on both sides of the Atlantic.

The international depiction of Janet over the sweep of her historical relocation to Guyana, after marrying Cheddi, is best captured by contrasting assessments in the book, quoted from TIME magazine in 1963 (p. 8) and 2011 (pp. 9-10). Illustrating this, perhaps, the most adverse depiction of her is captured by Mohammed in this passage:

When she campaigned for election as president under the PPP in 1997, she suffered the ignominy of demonisation as an outsider; again, her whiteness, foreign birth and Jewishness waved as symbols of her unsuitability to govern this republic (p. 10).

In many respects, this was an addition to the divisions of race and ethnicity that featured in politics of Guyana: a small state in the developing world. After all, in many ethnically-diverse small states, such as Trinidad and Tobago and Fiji, race is the engine of politics. In the Guyana case, some xenophobia was also included, for good measure.

Chapter Three, entitled *To repair the world*, introduces us to the formative dimensions of Janet's mindset and worldview. Janet and Cheddi were ideological soulmates, but their mixed marriage was of concern to both families. Mohammed here offers a socio-political analysis of the challenges of mixed marriages in the 1940s in metropolitan and developing worlds.

The author also interrogates the ideological influence that the pair had on one another, deftly addressing the issue of who influenced whom to become a socialist. There is no strong evidence that Janet influenced Cheddi into Marxism, or vice versa. Mohammed portrays Janet

and Cheddi as ideological partners, united in their outlook of a transformative politics “inextricably linked with social and economic advancement for people.” (p. 112).

In 1953, the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) won the general election and Cheddi and Janet came to power. Mohammed captures Janet’s victory speech that used an analogy to say that she gave birth to the baby of the Political Affairs Committee in 1946 and that during that night she saw it grow to maturity as a victorious PPP. She and her husband were about to enter the tumult of holding political office as socialists in the Western Hemisphere in the midst of a growing Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.

Later in 1953, the UK Churchill Government decided to suspend the Guyanese constitution. The Governor of the colony declared a state of emergency, Cheddi was arrested in April 1954, but his colleague in government, Forbes Burnham, was not. On the day that Cheddi was released in September 1954, Janet was arrested. They were both now the targets of British and US intelligence; and that would continue for the rest of their lives.

In 2011, the UK National Archives released some of their files, and this was reported in the UK newspaper *The Guardian*. The Jagans were described by the British as a “headache” and by the Americans as “a potential Communist threat on America’s doorstep” (p. 184). Clearly, despite its diminutive territory and population, the intellectual impact of this small state was significant during this period. Indeed, various US administrations had to contend with the threat of the spread of communism in the Western hemisphere at the height of the Cold War because of the Jagans’ activism in British Guiana (Guyana after independence in 1966).

The machinations between Washington DC and London over what to do about independence for British Guiana is captured in riveting detail. 1964 was a turning point: the UK Government introduced proportional representation for that year’s general election: this would provide the systemic assurance that the PPP could not win a majority of seats in the Legislature. Burnham and the People’s National Congress (PNC) were preferred by the West, and he became Prime Minister in a coalition with Peter D’Aguiar, who had formed the United Force in 1960. He stayed in power until his death in 1985 as President of Guyana, having become Premier in 1964, Prime Minister in 1966, and President in 1980.

Mohammed takes us through Janet’s diary for 1964: we are able to glimpse her ability to multi-task between the simplicities and the strategies of her personal and political life. Her frustrations are exposed, and confirms that the PPP also had enemies within the party, apart from the international conspiracies, to keep her and Cheddi out of power.

In 1992, Cheddi and the PPP returned to power, and he would serve as President of Guyana until his death on 6 March 1997. Sam Hinds succeeded him and served out the rest of his term. In December 1997, Janet contested the election as the presidential candidate of the PPP. She faced the worst possible abuse of her whiteness, age, Jewish heritage, and foreign birth as part of a vicious campaign against her. In spite of this, on 19 December 1997, she was sworn into office as President of Guyana. Even after her election, the PNC continued its relentless campaign to block Ms Jagan from serving as President. The intervention of CARICOM and the signing of the 1998 Herdmanston Accord in St. Lucia brought an end to the civil disorder that was being used to dislodge and derail her. Janet had to agree to curtail her term of office to three years instead of five, in exchange for the end of civil unrest, under the watchful eyes of CARICOM.

In the small states of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the regional body can play a stabilising role to quell civil disturbances or the potential for civil disturbances in the aftermath of disputed elections. CARICOM played such a role again in Guyana after the March 2020 elections. Before the final result was accepted, a CARICOM team was brought in to verify the election results so that a new administration could be sworn into office in August 2020.

Janet's ill health eventually led to her resignation as President on 8 August 8 1999, and she was succeeded by Bharrat Jagdeo. She surmounted all the odds and Mohammed describes her ascension to the presidency as "...an exoneration of the choices she had taken in life..." (p. 457). She died at the age of eighty-eight on 28 March 2009.

In summary, this book will be of interest to researchers of Cold War politics in small states, as well as cross-disciplinary students in Caribbean history, political science, gender and ethnic studies. In reflecting upon her legacy, Mohammed locates Janet within a feminist movement in leadership positions regionally and globally at that time. Her life's story is a veritable trail of commitment and service that led many to describe her as the "blue-eyed bhowgie" (p. 312) of Guyana, and against all odds, this leader of one of the smallest states in South America had certainly shattered the proverbial glass ceiling throughout her extraordinary life.

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