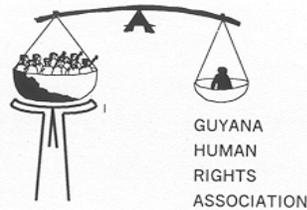


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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **CIVIL SOCIETY NEEDS TO BECOME MORE PRO-ACTIVE ON ELECTIONS**

National elections have polarized Guyanese society politically and ethnically for the past fifty years. Unfortunately on this occasion they are likely to do so precisely when the issues facing Guyana require as unified a national response as possible. Civil society energies, effectively mobilized, could make a positive impact on this challenge.

Normally elections in democratic countries seek to win votes by focusing on issues most likely to attract votes. In Guyana, by contrast, debating alternative visions of the future is marginalized when the major contending parties resort to maligning each other over electoral fraud and ethnic mischief-making. Re-asserting ethnic insecurity in this way tends to marginalize smaller as well as new parties.

Despite the fact that changing political demographics are gradually undermining traditional ethnic alignments, the race play-book continues to be a determining factor in national elections. While a widely criticized practice by Guyanese of all backgrounds, the traditional parties have too much vested in its continuance to desist. Most significantly, they also control the elections machinery through their dominance over GECOM.

Until the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) is replaced by a modern, politically impartial Elections Commission, Guyanese elections will retain its deserved reputation as the most dysfunctional in CARICOM. Since both major political formations have resisted ample opportunity to reform GECOM (23 years in the case of the PPP, and the past four years of Coalition Government), it is clear that a solution will not come before the next elections.

However, while reform of GECOM and other fundamental reforms are not feasible in the short-term, this does not rule out the possibility of raising the quality of the upcoming national elections on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020. For example, the parties listing names of candidates in the order that seats will be assigned is within their choice. A commitment to translate 50% of females on lists to 50% of seats won is another improvement within the parties' choice. More scrutiny can be exercised to force parties to select candidates of integrity, with a record of public service and other qualities necessary for political leadership.

Applying criteria of this nature in the run-up to elections allows voters to assert some measure of influence to improve their quality. Civil society can use the current election in this way to sharpen its own advocacy skills and capacity to influence the contending parties. The run-up to elections also provides an opportunity for civic society to review its own role in national politics.

A more robust civil society is an insurance policy to ensure any eventual successful reform of the formal political culture is likely to endure. The most significant example of civic action in Guyana to improve elections occurred in 1990-1992 when the Guyanese Action for Reform and Democracy (GUARD) effectively put a stop to the history of rigged elections. Combined activism that included human rights, professional, faith-based, business and trade union activism produced the first clean national elections since Independence. Unfortunately, GUARD followed a familiar path with respect to civic action, namely, allowing the momentum to drain away once a short-term goal is achieved.

Civic organizations are encouraged to express themselves in ways that build citizenship. Civic influence could be asserted on electoral debates, which need to be rescued from the bi-partisan bullying which debased them in the recent past. Moreover, even when civic bodies are not inclined to take action as a body, their membership should be encouraged individually to educate themselves on issues and take some elementary steps such as making full use of the Claims & Objections period to check the accuracy of their names and other details on the Voters List to guard against allegations of fraud surfacing on elections day.

While national elections in Guyana often appear to be exercises in mass frustration, they also serve as opportunities for re-invigorating public life in positive ways. The essential lesson to be learnt is that civic interventions need to become a continuous part of the political landscape in a more systematic manner, and cannot be reduced solely to casting votes.

**Executive Committee  
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October 10, 2019**

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