Rosemarijn Hoefte

*Suriname in the Long Twentieth Century: Domination, Contestation, Globalization.*

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If the twentieth century in Suriname was marked by colonial paternalism, ethnic conflict, boom and bust economics, and social hardships, capped by a repressive military dictatorship, then the twenty-first century, so far, has been quite the opposite. The colonial relationship has waned, ethnic harmony is notable, and the newly diversified economy is buoyant. All this, in a democratic system dominated by the former military leaders. How did this come to pass? Rosemarijn Hoefte and her collaborators at the Caribbean Expert Center of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden, take us through this long, and extended, century with careful objectivity and attention to the late colonial period, the trials of consociational (i.e. multi-ethnic) democracy, the collapse (“lost decades”) of the 1980s and 1990s, and the dramatic recoveries of the present.

Norms of domination and contestation within an authoritarian culture characterized the society’s troubled development from its plantation beginning to the emergence of ethnic (and especially gender) emancipation in the 1920s and 1930s. Unrest among Asian contract workers and working-class Creoles led to disturbances in the 1930s. Compared with other lands in the Caribbean, the late 1930s were relatively quiet due to an abiding respect for the Dutch monarchy and fear of Marxist radicalism. The war period witnessed a boom in the mining of bauxite, while growing union activity spilled over into political party mobilization. Because of society’s divisions, ethnic parties were forced to form a consociational alliance. After autonomy was achieved from the Dutch in the 1950s, this alliance was able to rule from the 1950s to the late 1960s. In *Suriname: Neokolonie in Rijksverband* (1973), G.J. Kruijer described the ferment of national ideology among young Creoles that led to the alliance’s breakup and the drive for independence (over the heated opposition of the Hindustanis and Javanese).

Independence in 1975 was followed by ethnic/party deadlock and a military coup that, while initially welcomed, soon deteriorated into a repressive dictatorship with unprecedented loss of life. From the beginning the military regime was widely known for drug-running, at times complicit with the drug cartel in Colombia. The most alarming event was the execution of 15 civilians demanding a return to democracy. Suriname’s viability was further shattered in the late 1980s by a brutal “interior war” with the Maroon inhabitants—a war that continued unabated for a decade, accounting for the “lost decades” of the 1980s and 1990s. A partial restoration of democracy in 1987 revived the old coalition of eth-
nic parties, called the Front, with the Creole-Hindustani breach now repaired. Without giving up his role as the military’s leader, Desi Bouterse organized his own party, the New Democratic Party (NDP). The new Constitution (negotiated between the Front and the military) gave the military a potential veto on policies, weakening the launch of the new government. The economy remained in crisis, alleviated only by a rampant black market and continued corrupt mismanagement, this time by the Front’s own officials.

The most interesting part of Hoefte’s book focuses on the new “nation-creating” hybridity of the country’s political culture, the continuing mix of democratic form and autocratic substance. Gold, oil, timber, bauxite, and rice have lifted Suriname’s economy to an unprecedented high. In 1996, the “New Front” broadened its base with additional ethnic party alliances. Since then, its leaders gradually lost out to the dynamic Bouterse and his well-financed NDP. In 2010 the NDP edged out the New Front with an electoral plurality in national elections. To obtain a governing majority, Bouterse had to call on parties of the Maroons and Javanese to take several of the government’s ministries. The horse-trading that followed is described in detail by Ivo Evers and Pieter van Maelle in Bouterse aan de Macht (2012). At the end of the New Front’s term of office, charges of murder were finally brought for Bouterse and his radical partners. The trial began in 2009 but was suspended after Bouterse’s election to the presidency in 2010. The new NDP-dominated National Assembly quickly voted an amnesty for those so charged, and an outcome of the trial—and the amnesty—is still uncertain. These events seem to have little domestic impact, as Bouterse’s public charisma holds steady. With gold revenues and good prospects for Suriname’s other resources, Bouterse has amassed substantial wealth and his party won a majority in the May 2015 elections.

With continuing problems of clientelism, corruption, and mismanagement, Suriname’s system is compared by Hoefte with the path laid down by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, where the executive disregards parliament, undermines the autonomy of civic institutions, demands unquestioned loyalty, and prefers unorthodox international friendships.

Hoefte’s text follows the general outline of Suriname’s history as recounted by R.A.J. van Lier, G.J. Kruijer, Edward Dew, and Hans Buddingh’. What makes her book so valuable is the vast armory of footnotes (42 pages of mini-essays in small print), confirming and elaborating the more general texts. Hoefte takes great pains to explain, define, and elucidate her data. She sorts out conflicting analyses in the literature, deepens the historical record, and makes useful comparisons with developments elsewhere in the Caribbean. The footnotes alone warrant a separate reading of this ambitious study. Stu-
dents interested in a review and upgrade of events in Suriname will be amply rewarded.

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