Nina Jurna

Desi Bouterse: Een Surinaamse realiteit. Schoorl, the Netherlands: Conserve, 2015. 223 pp. (Paper €22.50)

Pepijn Reeser

Desi Bouterse: Een Surinaamse tragedie. Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2015. 360 pp. (Paper €24.95)

In 1980 Desiré Delano Bouterse led the military coup of 25 February in Suriname. Under his military regime, 1980–87, the country developed into a repressive state, with at its nadir the summary execution of 15 opponents (journalists, trade union leaders, lawyers, and scientists) on December 8, 1982. During the 1980s and 1990s, Bouterse (“Desi” or “Bouta” in popular speech) became the most despised person in Suriname—the personification of repression, dictatorship, and executions. In 1992, five years after Suriname’s “re-democratization,” he had to resign as military leader, forced out by the government of Ronald Venetiaan. In 1995, the Dutch government claimed to have “hard” evidence that Bouterse had been involved in drug trafficking and that he maintained contacts with the Colombian drug cartel. In July 1997, a Dutch court sentenced him in absentia to 16 years in prison, and in June 2000 this sentence was reduced to 11 years. Then, in 2010, he was elected president of Suriname ... and re-elected in 2015. His Nationale Democratische Partij (NDP) gained a majority in the 2015 elections and even an absolute majority in parliament, a novum in the political history of Suriname.

Three decades after the military coup Bouterse had become one of the most popular politicians in Suriname. Meanwhile, countless biographies have been published about him, most recently by Nina Jurna and Pepijn Reeser.

Nina Jurna’s *Desi Bouterse* is a journalistic report of the controversial, hated, maligned, but also immensely popular, even loved, politician. In her capacity as a correspondent for a Dutch television broadcasting company in Suriname from 2000 to 2010, Jurna interviewed Bouterse numerous times. Central in her book is the question of why he has succeeded in being elected as president despite his controversial past and why it is so difficult for the Dutch government to accept that Bouterse is a Surinamese reality. To answer the first question, Jurna refers to a blind spot in Surinamese education. In history books, still dating from the period of the military dictatorship, there is almost no mention of the military dictatorship or the December murders. These books have not been adapted in the period after redemocratization. Nothing has been done to remind the people of this past, and consecutive post-1987 governments have neglected to hold Bouterse to account for the December murders.

Jurna attributes the Dutch sensitivity regarding Bouterse as president to the fact that public opinion in the Netherlands is strongly determined by Surinamers who arrived in the Netherlands as political refugees during the military period. In Jurna's (ill-founded) view, the trauma they lived through has influenced the way the Dutch government thinks about Bouterse. She also pays overly cursory attention to Bouterse's central role in the December murders, his involvement in drug trafficking, and his conviction in the Netherlands—matters that have determined the Dutch position to a large degree. What is particularly striking in this book is Jurna's admiration for Bouterse. For example, she writes that she considers him to be one of the few politicians in Suriname who have a clear vision, who envision a plan, a direction for the country whereby a goal is set. She also argues that Bouterse has become one of the better presidents Suriname has had since its independence in 1975. However, readers are left in the dark about what Bouterse's vision actually is and why he should be considered one of the country's better presidents. It is evident that in the past five years of Bouterse's presidency corruption has hardly been tackled; in fact, there has been widespread corruption. Populism characterizes the policy of the Bouterse government in the period 2010–15.

Jurna's book is first and foremost a journalistic, impressionistic sketch of Bouterse the politician—a rather superficial report without critical distance. Its value lies in the explanation of Bouterse's popularity among young people, who felt a need for a change in pre-2010 Suriname politics which had been dominated by politicians who had been running the show for over 40 years. With his charisma and flamboyant political leadership style, Bouterse met those needs. Included in this book is a DVD with a commentary Jurna made about Bouterse in 2005.

Unlike Jurna's book, Reeser's is a serious attempt to fathom Bouterse psychologically. The first of its two parts begins by focusing on his genealogical background, dating back to 1841. Reeser then discusses his younger years, his departure to the Netherlands in 1968 (seeking adventure and following a girlfriend), his application to be trained as a noncommissioned officer in the Dutch army, his return to Suriname in 1975 to join the Surinamese army which was established that same year, and the *coup d'état* under his leadership on February 25, 1980. The second part describes Bouterse as revolutionary, dictator, opportunist, godfather, commander, politician, suspect (of drug trafficking), and statesman.

In a closing section Reeser argues that Bouterse is neither the psychopathic killer his opponents see in him nor the savior that his supporters have placed their hopes in. He sets him against a Caribbean and South American background full of changing identities, loyalties, and interests in which ideals can

degenerate into crimes, and a casualty more or less is not always considered important. Bouterse knew well what was wrong in Suriname, and he tried several recipes—a conciliatory line, an ideological line, and cooperation with the “old” parties. In conflicts, he showed himself to be a street fighter reverting to what he knew—survival, military means, and the (physical) elimination of opponents. According to Reeser, Bouterse never made decisions based on morality, and he became a Surinamese tragedy—a person with a colonial background who tried to shape a society undeniably marked by colonialism but failed because in the end he became a part of the (political) system he set out to fight. This system is characterized by corruption, patronage, and clientelism. Reeser does not get stuck in the current framing of Bouterse (as a murderer and drug criminal), but adjusts this image and sharpens insights about the man. His book is one of the more serious and unprejudiced studies of Bouterse. For anyone interested in the thoughts and actions of Desi Bouterse as putchist and politician, Reeser’s study is a must-read.

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