

North Korea-Guyana Relations in the Burnham Era

By Dr. Moe Taylor

Dr. Moe Taylor, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Fellow, explains that during the reign of Forbes Burnham, "Guyana perhaps did more than any other single actor to help North Korea become viewed as an economic model for developing countries."

During the reign of Forbes Burnham (1923-85), the South American republic of Guyana (formerly British Guiana) became one of North Korea's greatest foreign policy success stories. Pyongyang not only acquired a new trading partner in the Americas but also gained a vocal advocate for its position on Korean unification on the international stage. These close ties grew in large part from Burnham's admiration for North Korea, where he saw a highly disciplined citizenry united around the Great Leader, willing to work hard and sacrifice for the collective good. Guyana perhaps did more than any other single actor to help North Korea become viewed as an economic model for developing countries.

First elected Premier of the colony of British Guiana in 1964, Burnham became Prime Minister upon independence in 1966 and ruled until his death in 1985. A lawyer and trade unionist from the capital's Afro-Guyanese middle class, his rise to power was backed by the United States, which viewed him as the only realistic alternative to the communists. While Burnham veered to the Left once in power and frequently irritated Washington, he was more or less tolerated because his pro-Soviet opposition would almost certainly fill his absence.

Burnham's doctrine of "co-operative socialism," not unlike Chuch'e in North Korea, was presented as a uniquely Guyanese road to socialism. Also, like Chuch'e, the concept of "self-reliance" was at its core. Burnham's vision of a self-sufficient economy based on co-operatives was paired with a stridently non-aligned foreign policy. Souring relations with the West, the economic impact of the 1973 oil crisis, and the threat posed by neighboring Venezuela—which has historically claimed two-thirds of Guyana's territory—motivated Burnham to expand relations with socialist countries. Yet Burnham did not fully trust the Soviets or the Cubans, who had close ties to his communist opposition. China was scaling back its support for the Third World in the 1970s, and Latin America was of particularly low priority.

As Guyana was searching for new allies, so was North Korea. Global decolonization had significantly increased the collective voting power of developing countries in the UN General Assembly. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) represented this growing coalition of Third World states critical of Western hegemony. Pyongyang was inspired by the apparent leverage of a united Third World, identifying a new vehicle through which it could pursue its geopolitical interests. North Korea promoted itself as a model for the developing world, a narrative reinforced by trade agreements and generous economic and military aid. In expanding cooperation with countries in the global South, Pyongyang was lessening its dependency on the socialist countries and bartering for support on "the Korean question" within the annual UN General Assembly.

North Korea and Guyana established diplomatic relations in May 1974, followed by the first trade agreement in October 1975. Guyana received financial aid as early as 1976, and US intelligence estimated Pyongyang granted Guyana at least 23.6 million USD in grants and credit between 1978 and 1985. North Korea constructed a glass factory in Guyana, gifted 100 of its Ch'ollima 28 tractors, and began, but never completed, building a small hydropower station. This was part of a broader flow of assistance in the areas of farming, fishing, irrigation, mining, pharmaceuticals, and construction. North Korea also provided artillery, ammunition, patrol boats, and

military training officers in response to the threat posed by Venezuela. In addition, North Korean doctors and surgeons staffed the Georgetown Public Hospital and created the country's first acupuncture clinic.

In return, Guyana supplied North Korea with bauxite, timber, and hosted an English-language program for North Korean students at the University of Guyana, making it the only country outside the socialist camp where North Koreans were sent in large numbers to study. Possibly of greater value to Pyongyang, Guyana became one of the most outspoken supporters of North Korea's stance on unification in international fora and helped proselytize Chuch'e throughout the global South. Guyana served to justify Pyongyang's claims to a leadership role in the Third World, providing the image of a foreign country supposedly following the Chuch'e road illuminated by Kim Il Sung.

The multi-faceted nature of Guyana's cooperation with North Korea reflected that there was more than mere realpolitik at play. Beyond a shared belief in self-reliance, Burnham argued that Guyana was held back by a culture of individualism and indiscipline, an unfortunate hangover from the colonial era. Successful economic development, therefore, required a transformation of attitudes and values. North Korea, which Burnham visited in 1978 and 1983, purported to validate this theory: it had escaped backwardness and rapidly industrialized by elevating the "consciousness" of the masses through "ideological education." Chuch'e proved compatible with an Afro-Caribbean intellectual tradition, which holds psychological and cultural de-colonization as the first step towards true freedom.

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This explains why Burnham attempted to emulate North Korean approaches to education and culture. This included the President's College, modeled on the Man'gyöngdae Revolutionary School in Pyongyang, an unrealized plan to build a "Students and Children's Palace," and crafting a Burnham personality cult. Of greatest significance, however, was Mass Games: grandiose gymnastics spectacles involving several thousand children and teenagers performing in unison. A major facet of Guyana's public sphere from 1980 to 1992, the government justified the costly and time-consuming Mass Games with the argument that it was installing in the youth the values and qualities needed for the country to advance: discipline, patriotism, and collectivism.

Guyana's experiment in "co-operative socialism" was plagued by economic difficulties, corruption, and state repression. When Burnham died in August 1985, his successors believed Guyana's interests were better served by repairing its relationship with the West. Relations with Pyongyang declined precipitously. Nevertheless, the two states still maintain formal diplomatic relations today, and one can still meet in Guyana a certain generation of Burnhamites who wax nostalgic for the North Korea they once knew. Likewise, among some North Korean diplomats of a certain age, Guyana also holds a special status, a symbol of an era in which North Korea's prospects seemed brighter, and the "Third World" a more hospitable terrain.

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