



**Fighting talk: speaking for the opposition, David Granger said President Ramotar walks like a dictator**

#### LETTER FROM GUYANA

## The dictator as sitting duck

Girish Gupta

They've started calling him Donald de Duck. "If it look like a duck, if it quack like a duck, if it walk like a duck, it a duck," Guyana's opposition leader David Granger said of the country's president, Donald Ramotar. Speaking to a crowd of 2,000 people gathered at the Square of the Revolution in Georgetown on a warm November evening, Granger said he was applying what he called the duck test. Ramotar, he added, "look like a dictator, he walk like a dictator, he talk like a dictator".

Sitting on the shoulder of South America, nestled between Venezuela and Brazil, the former British colony of Guyana is in crisis. On 10 November, using a constitutional provision known as prorogation, Ramotar suspended parliament but did not dissolve it. He declared that under the rules of the constitution, he could suspend parliament for up to six months. The president's move came in response to a planned no-confidence vote by the opposition, which

holds a slight majority in the country's legislature.

Since Guyana became independent from Britain in 1966, its politics have been driven by ethnicity. Descendants of African slaves – brought in by the Dutch in the 17th century to work on tobacco and sugar plantations – governed the country for nearly three decades, until 1992. After that, the descendants of indentured Indian servants – brought over by the British in the 19th century – came to power, where they have remained ever since. The divide marks the lives of the 800,000 people living in the country.

Much of the population resides on the Caribbean coast. Guyana is an English-speaking country, and although there are Indian and African influences, too, it feels culturally close to Britain. This makes Guyana more like Trinidad than its Latin American neighbours.

Ramotar, who was elected to power in 2011, leads the primarily Indo-Guyanese People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C). The opposition bands together largely under A Partnership for National Unity (APNU), an umbrella group of Afro-Guyanese parties that is led by Granger, a former soldier. Many in Guyana vote along ethnic lines, and as a result parties' policies often

receive less attention. This has done little to benefit Guyana's economic development: it is one of the poorest nations in South America, with roughly a third of the population living below the poverty line. It has failed to maximise on the gold, diamond and bauxite in its Amazon interior, most of which is now mined illegally, and widespread corruption and weak infrastructure have led to little foreign investment. At the same time, the ethnic divide affects all areas of life. The Afro-Guyanese are slightly in a minority, compared to those of Indian ancestry, and

## The president told Ramjattan to "haul his ass"

often feel held back in politics and business.

At his Georgetown office, Ramotar, 64, a bald man with a trimmed white beard, insisted he was no dictator. "I have no new powers," he said. "Our parliament is not dissolved and I can't rule by decree." He maintains he would like to talk to the opposition, rather than hold a snap election. "I have given democracy a better opportunity to be exercised," Ramotar added.

The opposition isn't

impressed. In 2005, a new party called the Alliance for Change (AFC) was formed. It was founded by major players from the two main parties who hoped to bridge the racial divide in politics, and now has MPs drawn from the principal ethnic groups. The AFC achieved a breakthrough in 2011, winning seven seats in parliament and squeezing Ramotar's party into forming Guyana's first minority government.

"The aim of the AFC was to largely stop this racial polarised politics," says Khemraj Ramjattan, a lawyer of Indian descent who helped found the party. He rejects the idea that Ramotar is now keen to talk, and describes prorogation as "breaking a pillar of democracy".

It was Ramjattan's party that put forward the no-confidence motion in November, prompted by news that the government had spent £14m without seeking proper parliamentary approval. Ramjattan says he wrote to Ramotar expressing his anger but was told to "haul my ass".

The president is not popular. He lacks charisma and has been accused of cronyism and corruption. This is good for the AFC, which hopes to attract support from disillusioned voters. "The bad leadership of Ramotar is going to cause much more Indians to come the AFC way," Ramjattan told me.

David Granger's party led the rally at which he applied the duck test to Ramotar. APNU gets its support primarily from Afro-Guyanese but has now found common cause with the AFC.

The most likely outcome of the president's suspension of parliament is that a snap election will be called in the next five months. If the opposition is able to organise in time, it may end the PPP/C's more-than-two-decade rule. More importantly, it may take the first steps towards ending the politics of stagnation and division in Guyana. ■