

Linden Lewis (2024). *Forbes Burnham: The life and times of the Comrade Leader*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press. 238pp. ISBN: 1-9788-3751-8. Hbk. US\$ 43.39.

Substantively, *Forbes Burnham: The life and times of the Comrade Leader* is a political biography of Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, one of the two founding leaders of the anti-colonial nationalist party and the first post-independence leader of the former British colony of Guyana, South America. Using archival research and recent interviews, Linden Lewis provides an exegesis of the complexities and contradictions of Burnham's leadership of the nationalist People's Progressive Party and, subsequently, of his role as the first Prime Minister and first President of the country. The narration is imbricated, relatively seamlessly, with the well-ploughed historiography of the country's nationalist movement and its postcolonial governance under Burnham's quasi-dictatorial rule. Lewis documents Burnham's eventual consolidation of near exclusive power through shifting allegiances and conflicting ideologically-rooted alliances, his mobilisation of black racial sentiment, his deployment of fear and intimidation, and his effective use of electoral rigging over the period beginning in 1950 until 1985, when he died in office.

The book contributes understanding to the genealogy of West Indian Afro-Creole post-colonial leadership, with Burnham, arguably, as its ideal type. Lewis traces the trajectory of Burnham's leadership from its rootedness in multi-racial anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, radical popular mobilisation, through its shift to mobilisation of black ethno-cultural sentiment, then to complicity and collaboration with the forces of neo-colonialism, and finally to post-colonial governance, secured through deployment of fear and violence that were underwritten by international alliances with the global socialist bloc. As technologies of power, these political and ideological contradictions and ambivalences instrumentalised a form of state domination aimed exclusively at regime survival.

The importance of the volume rests in the precise details of the transitions in Burnham's tactics of power, as he moved from anti-colonial challenge to radical postcolonial rule. The context is confined, almost exclusively, to Burnham's location within the political historiography of anti-colonial and postcolonial Guyana. This leaves very little room for examination of the global forces out of which Burnham's leadership was produced and partly maintained. The recounting in the first chapter of the networks of connections and linkages in which he was inserted while a student in the United Kingdom merely hints of the critical explanatory import of these forces, which rendered his political emergence a virtual inevitability.

Burnham's anticolonialism was forged out of black trade union radicalism and black middle-class challenges to white rule. His father was an early convert to anti-capitalist trade union mobilisation, which began in earnest during the first decade of the nineteenth century. The seamless absorption and adoption of opposition to colonial global capitalism by the early trade union movement became the fulcrum for radical rejection of colonial rule. The nationalist party that Burnham co-founded transformed this radicalism into an organized political movement. These critically important details are quite muted in the volume. But they underscore the pre-determinative nature of Burnham's insertion, from the circumstances of birth, into the networks of anti-capitalist radicalism; forged, as in most British colonies, out of the influence of British Marxism and English working-class radicalism on trade union organisation in its colonies.

Burnham was catapulted into national prominence as the embodied figure of black working class struggles against the colonial order. The first chapter of the book documents the processes that prefigured the consolidation of his political power. The centrality of Afro-Creole nationalism, forged out of the global circuits of black anticolonial thought, is given short shrift, even though it explains the ideological underpinnings of his rule and the networks of influence that were the predicates to his power.

The book documents the trajectory of Burnham's emergence from a black upper working-class family in colonial multi-racial British Guiana. His charismatic status as "hero" to the predominantly black urban radicalised proletariat was cemented after winning the most prestigious scholarship awarded to a high school graduate. It sent him to the University of London and to admission to the English bar as an attorney. This catapulted him into the upper echelons of a colonised creole petit bourgeoisie. Burnham's eventual power rested in his tactics of consolidation of support from the Afro-Creole segment of this group, as well as from the mobilised black working class. The former was strategically positioned for postcolonial governance, while the latter supplied him with the mass base of popular support. This represented a departure from the multi-racialism of the radical nationalist party that Burnham co-founded, which was forged as an ideologically-rooted alliance between the black urban proletariat and an Asian Indian rural agro-proletariat and peasantry.

There was a certain inevitability in Burnham's decision to leave the multi-racial nationalist movement. Global networks of black anti-colonialism pervaded the political imagination of Black and Afro-Creole Guyanese across their class and ideological differences. This opened the way for the consolidation of black unified political support for Burnham. The version of African socialism that he adopted was underwritten by relations he established with black governments in the Caribbean and Africa. The quixotic challenge he mounted against the global forces of Western capitalism, once his power was consolidated, was underwritten by the material support he received and ideological alliances he developed with the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact countries, Cuba, the People's Republic of China, and progressive socialist countries. His rejection of democratic governance and his turn to semi-dictatorial rule were justified on the grounds of anti-capitalism, anti-Westernism, and black rejection of white imperialism, formed and fashioned in the global networks in which he was inserted. These details are all documented in the book.

This volume makes a significant and substantive contribution to the analysis of another 'Big Man' in the colonial and post-colonial politics of the Caribbean. Its missed opportunity, however, is Lewis' failure to contextualize Burnham's ideologies and predispositions that shaped and defined his politics within the framework of the global forces of black radical anti-colonial transnationalism. This would have positioned the volume squarely within the ranks of postcolonial scholarship and of contributions to analysis of the global scale of the black challenge to coloniality. This is notwithstanding its stellar contribution to the literature on creole nationalism. For this alone, it is a very worthwhile volume.

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