

# A Case for Accountability and Transparency in Guyana

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I have been tasked with providing my thoughts on accountability and its relationship to broader economic performance of the Guyanese economy. Accountability and transparency are intertwined, however. For the government or the State to be accountable its actions and motivations must also be transparent and credible. The Oxford Dictionary defines accountability as a state of being answerable, chargeable or responsible for a set of actions. Government policies are only credible when the public believes it will pursue a certain plan of action. It is in the interest of government officials to say it will implement one strategy, but pursue a completely different action at some other point in time. This is the time inconsistency problem as economists have defined it: the incentive of policy makers to say they will pursue a strategy for the social good, but implement strategies that enhance the welfare of senior government officials (Drazen 2000).

Furthermore, transparency requires that the government signals clearly to the population its intentions and willingness to implement socially beneficial strategies (Khemraj 2013). This is because the public assumes that leaders in government will pursue strategies that maximise their own personal welfare over the interest of the society as a whole. Transparent signalling, therefore, can be seen as well-functioning credibility mechanisms that minimises the rent-seeking strategies of political leaders in government. On paper Guyana has many laws that are meant for restricting the rent-seeking strategies of those in power. Yet, Guyana continues to rank below its Caribbean peers and other small open developing and emerging economies in the main transparency indices. In other words, Guyanese governance is yet to earn the credibility consistent with the laws that exist in theory.

This essay is organised as follows. Section 2 explains why accountability is needed in Guyana. The following section, Section 3, presents some data showing where Guyana stands relative to its peers in terms of transparency or corruption perception, development, polarisation and others. Section 4 outlines several structures in contemporary Guyana that retard transparency and accountability. Section 5 concludes by providing several suggestions of policies that might be helpful in enhancing accountability.

## 2. WHY ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY AND CREDIBILITY MATTER

Corruption perceptions are often significantly inflated when government policy lacks credibility and transparency. In the absence of transparency the government appears unaccountable to the society (Khemraj 2012). The government often blames the private media as being anti-government. It would however be better if government considers whether its actions are transparent and whether it has clearly outlined its vision. Furthermore, inflated perceptions of corruption – fuelled by limited accountability in governance – makes it difficult to find and prosecute actual corruption, as the present APNU-AFC administration is discovering.

The Marriott hotel investment provides an example of a government project that fuelled corruption charges. In this example, we cannot blame entirely the public and a few boisterous private media outlets for exaggeration. From the beginning the previous PPP government wished to utilise public funds for hotel investment. It claimed it has the backing of a secret private investor. To this day the private investor is nowhere to be found. The lack of transparency at National Industrial & Commercial Investments Ltd. (NICIL) as it executed this project further fuelled the speculation of corruption. Moreover, close friendship between senior members of the previous administration and “businessmen” who are now in jail gave critics of the government ample reasons to believe that any policy of the previous administration was corrupt. These associations and the visible expression of wealth of the ruling elite – compared with the pay of a Minister or senior public servant – made it hard for many public observers to believe the PPP had good intentions.

Limited accountability and transparency in a divided society would tend to exacerbate polarisation (see Figure 3 below). As noted above, Guyana can be characterised as a bi-communal society in which the masses of the two dominant ethnic groups vote for their respective ethnic political parties<sup>1</sup> This is the phenomenon of

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<sup>1</sup> A bi-communal society is divided into two dominant social, ethnic or religious groups (Milne 1988). This does not mean minority social groups are less important. The concept only implies that conflict largely involves the two dominant groups facing each other over matters of distribution. In the case of Guyana, there is emerging evidence that the other minority groups have become important swing voters (Khemraj 2015b).

strategic voting for the purpose of preventing the other side from gaining political power (Khemraj 2016). The motivation for this type of pro-ethnic strategic voting could have an economic underpinning such as the control of the State and the economic opportunities it brings to elites and eventually the masses who voted in favour of the winning group (Ibid). The process does not preclude the ethnic elites from buying support from across the ethnic divide. Lack of accountability often exacerbates the perceptions of discrimination and marginalisation, thereby making the achievement of social cohesion much less likely.

The structure of the two main political parties – when combined with pro-ethnic voting and mobilisation – often results in signalling problems as the party which wins the election forms the government. A sense of political patronage tends to be parcelled with governance as most close supporters tend to be drawn from primarily one ethnic group. Therefore, ethnic distrust tends to grow in the absence of credible signalling mechanisms. The ethnic group which loses the election tends to claim it is being marginalised and sometimes its leaders misuse the term “ethnic cleansing” for the loss of state control. Post-independence Guyana, of course, has never experienced anything close to ethnic cleansing; nevertheless the term was used extensively by the PNC just after it lost the 1992 election. Senior members of the PPP have also used the term out of context after losing the 2015 election. The use of the term “ethnic cleansing” is a form of pro-ethnic mobilisation intended to keep the flocks together.

Accountability is also necessary because Guyana faces acute market and coordination failures contingent on outcomes – such as small internal market, high cost of production associated with the coastal polder system and dispersed population – that were shaped by colonial policy choices going back to the 1700s (Khemraj 2015a). Market and coordination failures require a smart and committed developmental state that will help to solve some of these problems while working closely with private entrepreneurs<sup>2</sup>. But so far accountability and credibility are in very short supply since the mid-1970s. In recent months, however, there appears to be baby steps by the Granger Administration to establish some sense of credibility and accountability in governance. For instance, there is the return of local government elections and the administration seems responsive to public criticisms.

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<sup>2</sup> Evans (1995) defines a developmental state as one which is autonomous and embedded. A developmental state must be distinguished from the predatory type which is harmful to the process of economic development. There are also intermediate states that often result in harm and benefits. An autonomous state is one which cannot be easily captured by special interest groups. Recently President Granger mentioned the unbribable public service, which would be in the spirit of Evans’ classification. An embedded state is one which can effectively work with the private sector to build production capacity and produce economic growth. It is embedded in social networks of the land and can optimise these for the purpose of correcting coordination and market failures.

In a sense, the Jagdeo Administration experimented with private-public partnerships in order to solve some coordination failures. The Marriott hotel and single-sourced medicine procurement could be seen as efforts to enhance the domestic production structure. However, the planners of the Jagdeo Administration lacked a credible set of signals to the public. For example, very little, if any, drugs were sourced from domestic production. No performance target relating to national well-being was given to New GPC as would have been done in the South Korean or Mauritian context. The policies were implemented under a blanket of secrecy that allowed one part of the private media, in particular, to vilify the plans. In the end, the policies appeared as a system for enriching a small group of people. The ethnic dimension was never lost to the then opposition. A credible developmental state would have done a better job at executing these production transformation strategies and making sure there was a fairer distribution from production capacity gained. In the end, no Minister of government was able to provide a rationale why these plans were needed.

Since the State still dominates the Guyanese economy to the point where government spending is a major source of the ebbs and flows of the business cycle in Guyana, accountability, credibility and transparency are needed to provide a sense of fairness and assuage the charges of marginalisation. In a sense, social cohesion – a term made popular by President Granger – depends on accountability. Accountability, in turn, requires credible signals to the entire society.

### 3. STYLISED FACTS

Stylised facts are general patterns in the data that help us to draw certain conclusions and perform certain theoretical analyses. For the purpose of this essay, we will not be focused on theory, but will search the small data set for general patterns that support the case for greater accountability and transparency in Guyana. The data presented also position Guyana relative to ten peer economies: The Bahamas, Barbados, Botswana, Fiji, Jamaica, Mauritius, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. These are all small open economies that face the same exogenous global shocks. Data availability also determined the selection of these economies in order to mimic a kind of counterfactual scenario. They also obtained their independence around the same period, with some variation.

The countries are of different geography, locations, and susceptibility to tropical diseases and flooding. Guyana and Suriname have similar geography and tropical conditions. Sri Lanka, Guyana, Fiji, Singapore, Mauritius and Trinidad are considered bi-communal societies with two large ethnic groups and a minority of smaller groups. This fact is reflected in the high polarisation index of these countries (Table 1)<sup>3</sup>. Of these

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<sup>3</sup> This table was first presented in Khemraj (2015a) and the write up of this section draws partly from the same paper.

bi-communal societies, Sri Lanka experienced the worst civil war. Guyana experienced its worst fratricidal inter-communal conflict in the early 1960s. Another period of ethnic killings, extra-judicial murders and narco-related killings from 1997 to 2006 occurred (Kissoon 2007). Fiji has had its share of ethnic conflicts that resulted in several coups undermining democracy. Guyana's ethnic conflict is long-term and persistent. It is a persistent struggle between the African and East Indian population for economic resources. This conflict is reflected largely in strategic pro-ethnic voting whereby the East Indian and African masses tend to vote for their respective ethnic elites, even as there is some tentative evidence of an emerging class of swing voters (Khemraj 2015b).

Table 1: Selected indicators

	Per capita income Current US\$		Life expectancy		Polarisation index	HDI
	1970	2013	1960	2013	2014	2013
The Bahamas	3,356	22,313	62.7	75.0	0.3012 *	0.789
Barbados	905	14,854	60.8	75.0	0.3116 *	0.776
Botswana	96	7,312	50.5	47.0	0.605 **	0.683
Fiji	428	4,578	60.0	70.0	0.9298 **	0.724
Guyana	592	3,739	58.2	66.1	0.8144 *	0.638
Jamaica	851	5,126	64.2	73.3	0.6002 **	0.715
Mauritius	238	9,593	58.7	73.7	0.8031 **	0.771
Singapore	925	54,649	65.6	82.4	0.6663 **	0.901
Sri Lanka	197	3,159	59.7	74.1	0.7493 **	0.750
Suriname	957	9,826	59.9	71.0	0.6132 *	0.705
Trinidad & Tobago	869	18,240	62.7	70.0	0.8417 **	0.766

*Source:* World Development Indicators, UN National Accounts Statistics, Gören (2014), Human Development Report (2013) and author's calculation.

*Notes:*

\* Author's calculation using polarisation equation of Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005).

\*\* Taken from Gören (2014).

Per capita income is obviously not the best indicator of development, but it certainly correlates closely with the different components of the Human Development Index (HDI). Table 1 shows per capita income for two periods. It is also known that life expectancy and education attainment are highly correlated with per capita income.

Hence, the latter variable is useful as a broad indicator of relative development among the set of small open economies. In 1970 The Bahamas had the highest average income (US\$3,356) and land-locked Botswana had the lowest (US\$96). Guyana's average income in 1970 – four years after independence – was US\$592. This number was higher than that of Fiji, Sri Lanka and Botswana.

A recurring misconception is Guyana was on a similar average income level as Singapore around or just after independence. The data indicate that Singapore's income was significantly higher at US\$925. Although Singapore's development can be attributed to smart unorthodox economic policies, Huff (1987) points out the pivotal role that country's geography and location played in its rapid progress. Suriname also had a significantly higher per capita income in spite of similar geography to Guyana. Suriname, however, is not a classic bi-communal society. This is reflected in the lower polarisation score for Suriname (0.613) relative to Guyana (0.814). One key difference between Suriname and Guyana since 1965 has been the former's relative success in allowing foreign multinationals to develop crucial energy infrastructure.

By 2013 only Sri Lanka has a lower average income. Mauritius, Botswana and Fiji – all with lower per capita income in 1970 – are higher income countries. In spite of the severe civil war in Sri Lanka its average income of US\$3,159 is only slightly below that of Guyana's, US\$3,739. Only Botswana has a lower life expectancy than Guyana. All the counterfactual economies perform better than Guyana on the human development index. As expected, The Bahamas and Barbados have the lowest polarisation index of 0.301 and 0.311, respectively. Guyana has the third highest measure of polarisation behind Fiji and Trinidad and Tobago (TT). Fiji and TT are island economies that rely on high income elasticity tourism for foreign exchange earnings. In addition, TT has a relative abundance of oil and natural gas that can be easily extracted. Guyana's difficult topography makes large scale tourism more difficult and oil deposits can only be exploited if world price is sufficiently high to cover the relatively higher expected marginal cost of extraction.

Table 2 presents the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International. It shows the index for nine peer economies, except Fiji for which there is not a survey. The table shows the three years index – 2012, 2013 and 2014. It also gives the average for the three years. Here Guyana has the lowest value of CPI (3-year average of 28), indicating limited perception of transparency or higher perception of corruption. Transparency International usually surveys business owners, academics and social activists familiar with the conditions of the country of interest. Singapore scores the highest for transparency with a 3-year average of 86, followed by Barbados and The Bahamas.

Let us observe how corruption perception correlates with foreign direct investment, ease of doing business and ethnic polarisation. The polarisation numbers are the same as presented in Table 1. The statistics on ease of doing business were sourced from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators* (WDI). Foreign direct investment (FDI) as a percent of GDP was also obtained from WDI. As the index measuring ease of doing business approaches 1, it indicates the most business friendly environment. Singapore leads the list (with a score of 1), followed by Mauritius (31) and Jamaica (71). Guyana comes in three places from the bottom with a three-year average score of 132. Sri Lanka with a score of 133 is one place above Suriname with a three-year average of 155.

Table 2: Corruption perception, EOB and FDI

	Corruption perception index (CPI)				EOB, 3-year average	FDI as % of GDP, 3-year average
	2012	2013	2014	CPI, 3-year average		
The Bahamas	71	71	71	71	108	4.7
Barbados	76	75	74	75	116	5.4
Botswana	65	64	63	64	72	1.6
Guyana	28	27	30	28	132	8.1
Fiji	NA	NA	NA	NA	86	5.6
Jamaica	38	38	38	38	71	3.8
Mauritius	57	52	54	54	31	3.5
Singapore	87	86	84	86	1	21.0
Sri Lanka	40	37	38	38	133	1.3
Suriname	37	36	37	37	154	0.4
Trinidad & Tobago	39	38	38	38	85	8.6

*Data source:* World Development Indicators; Transparency International

*Note:* CPI means corruption perception index (higher value indicates greater transparency); EOB means ease of doing business index (value closer to 1 indicates more business friendly regulations).

Figure 1 presents a scatter plot between ease of doing business (EOB) on the vertical axis and corruption perception on the horizontal axis. The chart suggests a clear negative pattern (as shown by the downward sloping trend line); as transparency improves the restrictions to doing business declines. The position of each country on the chart is indicated next to its coordinate point. Singapore is in a favourable position of lower right, indicating high transparency and limited restriction to doing business (a number closer to 1 indicates most favourable business climate). On the other hand, Guyana is on a less auspicious point of upper left, indicating low transparency and low ease of doing business. It should be noted, however, that these scatter plots are mere

correlations which cannot say anything about causation. This diagram and the ones that follow are suggestive instead of causative.

Figure 1: Corruption perception and ease of doing business (EOB)

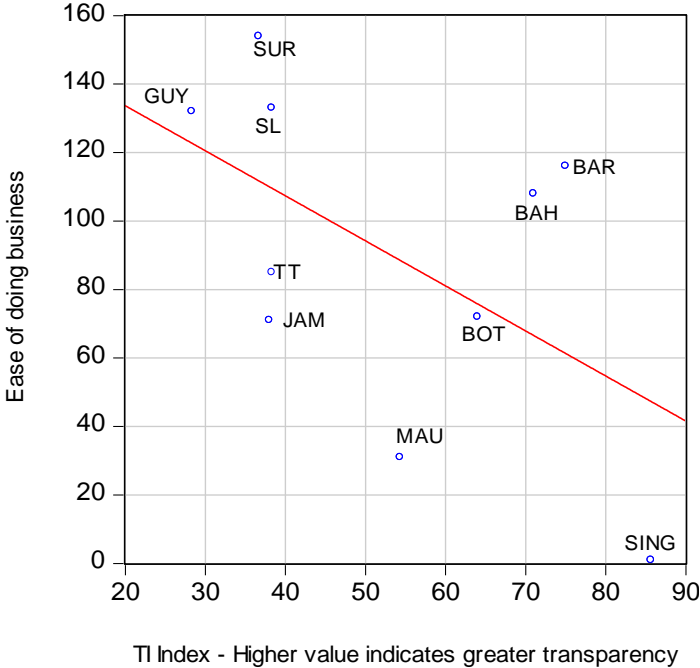


Figure 2 shows a scatter plot between the measure of corruption perception and FDI as a per cent of GDP. Compared with its peers, Guyana is only below Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago in attracting FDIs over the review period 2012, 2013 and 2014. The scatter plot indicates a positive slope, suggesting that higher FDI inflows are associated with greater transparency. It should be noted that Guyana’s FDI inflows are almost all associated with mining and extraction. Singapore has both high transparency and the highest FDI percentage relative to GDP.

Figure 3 shows the relationship between ethnic polarisation and perception of corruption. This relation underscores why greater transparency is needed in an ethnically divided society. Ethnic polarisation would tend to increase when there is higher perception of corruption (likely resulting from limited transparency) in the way resources are allocated in the society – whether it is public sector jobs, land distribution, radio frequency, mineral rights, public procurement and so on. There would be intensified ethnic polarisation if there is a sense of unfair distribution of opportunities and resources. This fact is evident in the data, which suggest that ethnic polarisation falls as corruption perception declines (the transparency score gets higher). We can observe that Guyana is in the upper left with high polarisation measure and low transparency. On the other hand, Barbados and The Bahamas are on the lower right, indicating relatively higher transparency and low polarisation.



Figure 2: Corruption perception and foreign direct investment

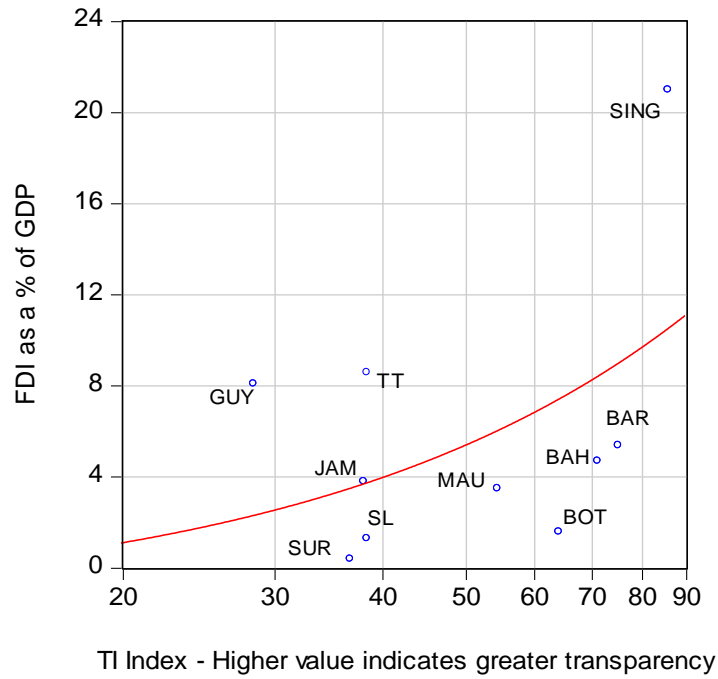
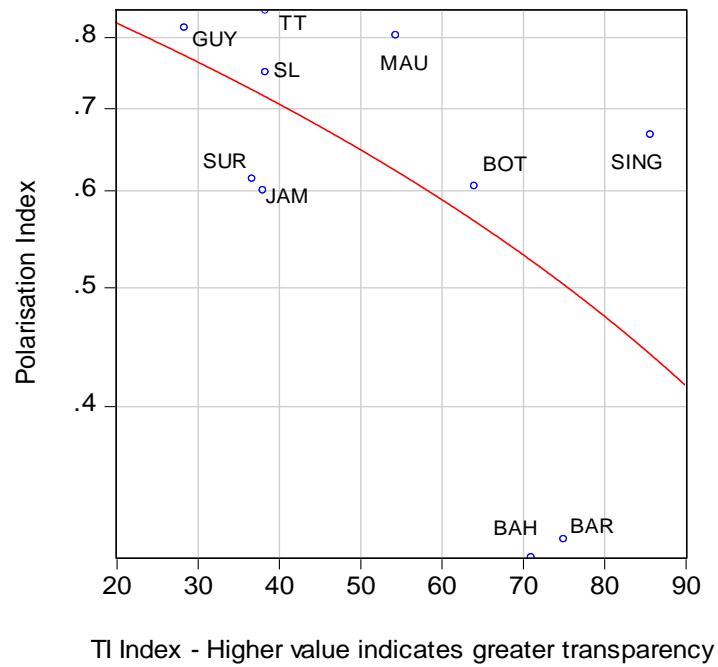


Figure 3: Corruption perception and ethnic polarisation



#### 4. FACTORS RESTRICTING ACCOUNTABILITY

Why has Guyana done so poorly in the international ranking of corruption perception? This section outlines several possible explanations for the poor placement. Overall, if there is limited transparency there will be more speculation over the existence of corruption. Firstly, the culture of true competitive primary elections within the two main political parties does not exist. There is curtailed transparency in the manner in which the Presidential candidate is selected. If the culture of democracy and transparency do not exist within the two main political parties the one which wins the General Election would be less inclined to promote a culture of accountability and credible announcements at the national level. In recent times, the PPP relied on the method of show-of-hands when selecting its Presidential candidate. Observers have noted that this approach is intended to threaten those who do not agree with the decision of a powerful few. The PNC had secret ballot at its recent internal election; however, the party's most recent Congress broke down into pandemonium, shots were fired, and accusations of vote tampering were rife. Very little effort was extended at the leadership level to correct the negative perceptions of vote tampering. From the beginning, the PNC should have used a reputable auditing company to manage the election in order to signal the credibility of its internal election.

Secondly, strategic pro-ethnic voting which results in the logic of patronage often is bad for transparency and accountability. Indeed, political patronage exists in advanced democracies and in relatively homogeneous societies. What makes patronage problematic in bi-communal Guyana is it tends to aggravate feelings of alienation and marginalisation – the disintegration of social cohesion<sup>4</sup>. The term “logic of patronage” is used here to emphasise the idea that supporters of the winning party tend to come almost entirely from one ethnic group. After voting strategically they expect to be rewarded with senior public sector jobs once their party wins (Hintzen 1983). This breeds resentments from the group which loses the election and accountability also falls by the wayside as has been the experience over the past four decades. Accountability also takes a beating because clientelistic relationships have to be formed with elites for regime survival (Hintzen 1983, 1989).

Thirdly, successive governments have failed to specify clearly a logical economic and social vision for the future. Perhaps the cloudy policy prescriptions have to do with the pre-eminence that ethnic patronage and buying cross-ethnic support play in public policy decisions. Clear specification of development policy framework would add transparency and credibility. It allows the public to better comprehend when policy makers might have to renege on stated goals, as would be the case when there is global

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<sup>4</sup> The seminal study of Guyanese patronage was done by Hintzen (1989), who demonstrated convincingly that the regime of Party Paramourncy of the PNC was not only a system of political domination by the State, but also an expansive patronage system.

commodity price shock. This is particularly important in a country like Guyana since it is likely to pull the rug from under the feet of those who may claim marginalisation while in opposition.

Fourthly, several important data sets are unavailable in Guyana. Data are essential for allowing a culture of fact-checking and accountability. For instance, monthly unemployment data are unavailable. We also do not know what the labour force participation is. The lack of monthly data implies we cannot figure out the cyclical, seasonal, structural and frictional aspects of unemployment. Household income and expenditure surveys have not been done since the early 1990s and the 2012 census has not been released in full. The Gini coefficient, a popular measure of inequality, has never been computed. Data necessary to calculate poverty rates and depth of poverty are never collected. Finally, the previous administration kept no data on its allocations of house lots, the degree of diversity of the new housing areas created and the distribution of mortgage loans. Data analysis is needed to address objectively the claims of marginalisation.

Fifthly, there is also much unaccountability in the private sector mainly because of the thin listings of publicly traded companies. Many sole proprietor and partnership businesses refuse to go public. Public companies not only are able to mobilise more investment capital, but also must transmit information to the markets. The publicly traded company has to be more transparent so that the markets can accurately price its value. In addition, these efforts promote an ethos of data analysis and the cultivation of skills and professions needed in this regard. The private sector can also do a lot more to self-police its members involved in the underground economy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This essay made the point that government has to earn credibility by being transparent and accountable. Since elected governments may have an incentive to renege on promises made, they should signal clearly to the population that they intend to follow certain course of action. If results are not met government should explain why this is so and what can be done to bring its objectives back on track.

It turns out creditability and favourable signalling are not often deployed because of certain structures of the Guyanese society and economy. These include the ethno-political mobilisation, limited democracy within the main political parties, strategic pro-ethnic voting, the logic of patronage, the failure of government to signal clearly its vision and a sense of fairness, and the very large underground economy. The signalling of transparency and accountability is needed so as to prevent government policy from being interpreted as being motivated by the intention to marginalise any particular group.

Exactly what can be done to promote accountability? We would need to start by looking at the reasons for unaccountability outlined in the previous section. The political parties should promote a culture of in-house democracy. Secret ballot supervised by a credible neutral organisation instead of show-of-hands should be used to signal the credibility of internal elections to select leaders and the Presidential candidate. Government should increase spending on data collection. Incentives should be in place to reward students who studied quantitative subjects like applied statistics, applied mathematics, and economics and other quantitative social sciences. The private sector should also do its part by being more willing to create publicly traded companies.

Government should be more transparent when outlining its economic vision. It has to take into consideration the ethnic dimension of patronage. It has to implement policies to minimise the feeling of exclusion and marginalisation by the group losing the election. Public procurement and employment must be seen as fair. Major ethnic imbalance in public institutions must be addressed.

Finally, the constitution should be amended so as to allow for post-election alliance instead of pre-election alliance as is the present case. Pre-election alliance puts the independent third party in a difficult position to show its hands before the election. It allows the incumbent party – the PPP in the just concluded General Election of May 2015 – to spread racial insecurities and accuse the third party, or its East Indian leaders to be specific, of being traitors to their ethnicity. Importantly, also, post-election alliance allows for a greater degree of randomness in the election result. Randomness is needed so as to get the main parties to focus on a progressive message instead of race-baiting. If the incumbent or largest opposition does not know for certain whether it will win an election, it is more likely to reach out to other groups and spend more time on positive messaging. It also allows the third party to focus on its core message instead of fending off racial accusations.

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