

RAMSOEDH, HANS. *Surinaams onbehagen. Een sociale en politieke geschiedenis van Suriname 1865–2015*. Verloren, Hilversum 2018. 368 pp. Ill. € 29.00.

Surinaams onbehagen (“Surinamese Unease”) completely justifies its subtitle: *A Social and Political History of Suriname, 1865–2015*. Suriname became a Dutch possession in 1667. The country was formally controlled by the Dutch West India Company and, after 1816, by the newly appointed king, who governed the overseas territory through royal decrees. This book covers a later period in the history of Suriname and comprises three parts: unease during the colonial period (1865–1945); unease in the postcolonial period (1945–1975); and unease during independence (1975–2015). In 1865, Suriname became a colony governed by laws under restricted self-rule by a governor responsible to the Minister of Colonial Affairs. The process towards autonomy was initiated in 1945, and the colony was finally granted autonomy in 1954 but with a decisive voice in The Hague. Eventually, independence followed in 1975, after a process that had started in 1969. Dutch remained the administrative language; Sranan serves as a lingua franca. As with all colonies and former colonies, relations with the (former) colonizer are tense or at least periodically uneasy. Relations between Suriname and the Netherlands are characterized by an undercurrent of mutual unease.

Suriname’s society is a multi-ethnic and half-segmented society formed in colonial times. The indigenous population was reduced to a small percentage. The postcolonial population is a mosaic of descendants of the (thin) white colonial elite, of the imported slaves and Maroons, and of the indentured contract labourers from India, Java, and China. This Surinamese ethnic-religious mosaic was transformed by new Asian, Brazilian, and Caribbean immigrants after independence. After 1975, migration waves drained the national population. In 1975, Suriname’s population was approximately 450,000; the Dutch-Surinamese population segment in the Netherlands is currently 350,000.

Had their consequences not been so tragic, some of the colonial policies might be considered hilarious or nonsensical. Until 1825, religious conversion of the plantation slaves was forbidden: they were excluded from “the honour to be Christians” (pp. 25–26). In 1869 (when slavery was abolished), they could formally marry. When, after 1895, the colonial authorities tried to promote a permanent residency for the Asian contract labourers, they assumed that “Asian culture” was superior to the “inferior and barbaric African culture” (p. 31). Even stranger was the “Java” policy of Governor Kielstra between 1933 and 1944. Kielstra, a former administrator in the Dutch East Indies, tried to “Javanize” the colony with Javanese adat rights and native “Indian” communities (pp. 34–37). Why not: is a colony not a colony and are they not all alike? In 1943, he incarcerated progressive parliamentarian Bos Verschuur, who favoured autonomy and was the mentor of the next generation of Surinamese nationalists (pp. 70–72). Already in 1933, Anton de Kom, now a Surinamese iconic hero but then considered a dangerous rebel, had been deported to the Netherlands, where he participated in the resistance press and died in a German concentration camp.

The postcolonial period (1945–1975) comprised three decades of hesitant autonomy and preparing for possible independence. Ramsoedh exhaustively describes the emergence of ethnic-religious coalition governments, the politics of “fraternization” between the Creole (in all its varieties), the Hindustani, and the Javanese population, and the growing resistance of the Hindustani community to formal independence. The year 1969 was a watershed. Frontier disputes with (former British) Guyana and French Guyana could imply Dutch military involvement, not exactly an option in The Hague. In 1969, Dutch marines had been deployed in Curaçao in a labour conflict that left several dead and wounded. In terms of international prestige, it meant a setback. In Suriname, the younger and more

“radical” Creole generation promoted independence. Dutch political parties also discussed Suriname’s independence in hope. In 1972, a social democratic parliamentarian suggested sending the act of independence by registered mail. A Surinamese Creole minority cabinet declared independence, and this was ultimately achieved in 1975. A Dutch centre-leftist cabinet happily acquiesced. But the Hindustani population and political grouping (the largest) had serious doubts, basically about the risk of ethnic conflicts of the type seen in neighbouring Guyana. A strange negotiation process began concerning an internally contested route to independence. With a reluctant faction, but also with the Dutch offer of abundant development aid, the explicit wish of the Suriname government was to maximize the funding, and eventually Suriname’s parliament agreed by a majority of one vote. The Dutch were happy to sign a treaty of shared responsibility for Suriname’s post-independence development, a kind of “living-apart-together relationship”, as Ramssoedh terms it (p. 141).

The largest (and in my opinion most important) part of the book analyses the post-1975 period. The generous exit grant of 3.5 billion guilders triggered a process of corruption and white elephants or nonsense projects. It also contributed to an enormously bloated public sector (approximately forty per cent of the entire economically active population), a patronage instrument. At the request of Suriname, the Dutch had paid for a new army. Returned NCOs with supplemented salaries and used to the Dutch culture of military unionism were engaged in a serious labour conflict with their commander, a politically appointed colonel who did not speak Sranan. In 1979, the conflict escalated, the government supported the commander, and the NCOs staged a coup in 1980, encouraged by the head of the Dutch military support mission. The military, headed by sergeant major Bouterse (later major and thereafter colonel), appointed a civilian government, but the presence of several military in the cabinet and the co-governance by the new “Military Authority” (later “Military Council” and “Military Policy Centre”), i.e. army leader Bouterse, demonstrates that the military effectively controlled the government. Internal palace coups, zig-zag manoeuvring, and growing military authoritarianism alienated the military from the population, which organized strikes and protests. In December 1982, in a night of drink and drugs, the military leaders arrested, tortured, and assassinated the civilian opposition leadership in December 1982 (the “December murders”).

In social and political terms, it caused a total divide. A flirt to the left (with visits to Cuba and Libya) aroused the concern of the United States and Brazil. Eventually, the visit by the chief of Brazilian intelligence ended in a cohabitation pact; Suriname broke off relations with revolutionary governments. As Bouterse explained: “We military march right, left, right, left [...]”. Economic malaise (supplemented by investments by “Colombian entrepreneurs”), a boycott of development aid, and an alarming popular antipathy ended, seven cabinet changes later, in general elections in 1987, which were won by the old ethnic coalition parties. But it was, as Ramssoedh remarks, a “redemocratization under military tutelage” (p. 177). A kind of civil war emerged in the Maroon region of Suriname, with massacres and 10,000 refugees fleeing to French Guyana due to Bouterse’s paramilitary-led counter-insurgency. At the end of 1992, and with the assistance of the younger officers’ corps, Bouterse was dismissed.

The last part of the book is dedicated to the political rebirth of former dictator Bouterse as a twice-elected civilian president. After a period as formal and informal entrepreneur, Bouterse re-emerged as a civilian politician and founded a pluri-ethnic party, attracting a young electorate bored by the closed ethnic alliances, periodic corruption, and patronage politics of old, tired, and cranky President Venetian, who apparently had “clean hands” but did not use them to improve the situation of mass poverty, deficient popular housing,

and inadequate education. In 2010, Bouterse, charming, eloquent, and witty with spicy one-liners, returned as an attractive speaker at political rallies. He won the election but failed to acquire an absolutely majority. Presidential elections are indirect and, by allying with two former bitter enemies (all three had a criminal history and new criminal investigations pending), he won a majority of the vote. In 2015, he won a parliamentary majority and forty-five per cent of the vote, an easy start with which to negotiate his second presidential term (p. 212). Navigating the waves of the Pink Tide in Latin America, he became an admirer of Chávez, tightening ties with Cuba, Venezuela, China, India, and France. A long, meandering trial concerning his alleged involvement in the December 1982 murders failed to reach a clear conclusion. After spending on social “presents” such as improved salaries, employment in the public sector, and pension top-ups during his first term, his popularity declined in his second owing to an economic downturn.

Ramssoedh’s writing style is dense, but very factual and always balanced; the 289 pages of text are supported by 1,150 notes. His book is an important one, and may well become a classic on Suriname, alongside those by van Lier, Buddingh’, and Oostindie and Klinkers.¹

And the Dutch unease? The fascination of the Dutch government and mass media with the former colony of Suriname and especially President Bouterse resembles the sixty-year Pavlovian concern in the United States about its former dominion Cuba, and especially the Castro brothers. Ramssoedh does not mention it, but until very recently the Dutch diplomatic mission in Paramaribo was disproportionately large. In 2011, it comprised seventeen people; in India (with then a population of 1.2 billion) the corresponding figure was sixteen, in Brazil ten, and in Mexico seven.

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1. R.J.A. van Lier, *Samenleving in een grensgebied. Een sociaal-historische studie van Suriname* (Amsterdam, [1949] 1977); H. Buddingh’, *De geschiedenis van Suriname* (Amsterdam, [1997] 2017); G. Oostindie and I. Klinkers, *Knellende Koninkrijksbanden. Het Nederlands dekolonisatiebeleid in de Caraïben, 1940–2000*, 3 vols (Amsterdam, 2001).