

Engaging Citizens and Communities to Create Peace and Security: The Case of Guyana.

Guyana's 2006 general and regional elections were the first in recent history un-marred by post-election violence. The polls of 1992, 1997 and 2001 were each followed by several months of heightened insecurity, injuries and deaths from public violence and ethnically motivated attacks on citizens, and loss of property to arson, provoking fears of a return to the ethnic rioting that killed hundreds in the 1960s. The non-violent response to the 2006 outcome was generally unexpected and some believe it could herald more peaceful coexistence in a country long divided by ethnicity and politics. International actors and the behavior of the major political parties played important roles in this historic outcome, but the rejection of violence by ordinary Guyanese was critical.

The period leading up to the elections was marked by deep political polarization, growing criminal violence, breakdown of law and order, and increasing tensions and inter-communal violence between Guyanese of East Indian and African descent. The government, opposition parties and international community were involved in several high-level attempts to defuse tensions. In addition, several peacebuilding interventions at the grassroots and civil society levels were launched, many in the context of the newly-formed Ethnic Relations Commission and the UN Social Cohesion Program. These efforts were diverse, extensive and sustained for three years leading up to the election and are believed to have had an important impact.

How did the various citizen-based peacebuilding initiatives before, during, and after the elections contribute to the non-violent electoral outcome? What were the dynamics within groups and communities faced with the option of violent action? How were government officials and political parties influenced by the peacebuilding initiatives? Are Guyanese sustaining and consolidating the gains of the 2006 elections? This research is intended to shed some light on these questions using key informant interviews and focus groups in several communities around the country.

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