

Venezuela: The only fair way out of the Essequibo Conflict

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On June 30, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) held a hearing on the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo territory. We have arrived to this after decades of failed mediation attempts by the UN, arranged under the 1966 Geneva Agreement signed a few months before Guyana's independence by Venezuela and the United Kingdom. In January 2018, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres terminated his mediation and entrusted the matter to the ICJ. Guyana requested the ICJ to validate the Paris Arbitration Award of 1899, under which the disputed territory was granted to the United Kingdom. This process will most likely end with a ruling favorable to Guyana, given the weakness of the Venezuelan claim.

The Venezuelan 'civic-military' government is carrying out an aggressive propaganda campaign, accusing Guyana of acting in the service of US imperialism, particularly in the interests of the oil company Exxon-Mobil. The revival in 2015 by the Maduro regime of the Venezuelan territorial claim coincided with the detection of oil fields off the coast of the Essequibo territory, the coming to power of a government in Guyana that was not allied with Chavismo, and the advanced decline of Chavismo, which would suffer its worst electoral defeat on that year.

The irony is that the Venezuelan claim to sovereignty over Essequibo was instrumentalized by the United States in the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. The demand for 159,000 square kilometers, 74% of the Guyanese territory, persists at this point only as an atavism of the reactionary maneuvers of the US and the Venezuelan bourgeois governments of the time. The only fair way out, and what we Venezuelans must demand of the government, is for the Venezuelan state to renounce a claim that originally had legitimacy against British imperialism but lost it completely afterwards, as it became an instrument of aggression against a Caribbean sister nation.

Another irony is that there were never more Venezuelans in the Essequibo territory than now. But the contrast with epic fantasies of expansionist nationalism could not be greater: [Venezuelan migrants heading eastwards are escaping from the greatest economic and social disaster in our history](#), in conditions of absolute misery. More than 3,000 Venezuelans have crossed in the last five years to a neighboring country virtually unknown to us, a country with which we've only shared an absurd conflict devised by colonial and imperialist powers. Those stripes on the official Venezuelan map, the so-called Zone in Reclamation, are but another lure for the unity of all social classes in Venezuela so that the oppressed and exploited forget their desperate situation and make common cause with their oppressors. Both the civic-military government and the pro-Yankee opposition led by Guaido participate in this operation of distraction.

This conflict has never been part of our concerns and our struggles; few Venezuelans even know how we arrived at the current situation. So it is important to recount its history, in order to destroy the nationalist and bourgeois mystification around it.

From victim to aggressor

The Essequibo was never Venezuelan, it was Spanish, by effect of the 1493 Papal Bull. In 1596, Spanish colonists founded San Tomás de Guayana, which was for a long time the eastern limit of the Spanish colony in the mainland. At the beginning of the 17th century, Dutch colonization began. The Munster Treaty with the Dutch established a border that recognized Spanish control up to the Essequibo River. But then English colonization began. In 1814 Holland ceded to the United Kingdom, the primary colonial power in the world, a part of the territory, with the Essequibo river as the western limit. By 1831 the British had completely displaced the Dutch and set their sights on the coveted delta of the Orinoco River.

As in the territory that would later become Venezuela, the Guyanese territory was the site of major anti-slavery rebellions in the 18th century. The independence of Gran Colombia and its Venezuelan secession occurred under the aegis of a slave-holding *criollo* white elite. Slavery was abolished in the English colonies two decades earlier than in Venezuela, where civil wars and a great precariousness after independence also persisted. The new Venezuelan independent republic therefore had nothing to offer to the indigenous people or ex-slaves of the English colony. The English took advantage of the weakness of their former colonial neighbor and tried to trace the border in order to incorporate the Cuyuní river basin. This was rejected by the Venezuelan authorities in 1841, initiating the territorial dispute. There was a border agreement in 1850 with the English, who nevertheless continued to colonize beyond what was agreed, as far as the Orinoco delta.

Bolívar was one of the first to propose the resolution of the limits of the new independent nations by applying the international law principle of *Uti Possidetis*: the independent nation inherits the territories that constituted the colony. Venezuela required the English to respect the limits it had with the Spanish colony. The problem is that these limits were not precise and were drawn over mostly uninhabited territories, whose indigenous populations had no loyalties to any State.

In 1887, the English advance led to the breakdown of diplomatic relations and to fears of an invasion against Venezuela. In 1895, US President Grover Cleveland supported Venezuela on the basis of the Monroe Doctrine, which claimed the American continent as its sphere of influence. After military threats by Cleveland, in 1897 the two powers agreed to an arbitration mechanism. Such was the Venezuelan subordination, that it accepted for its interests to be represented by the United States in arbitration. In 1899, the Paris Arbitration Award granted the English a territory twice as large as that which they had acquired from the Dutch, although the Orinoco delta was recognized as Venezuela's.

For a rising US imperialism, it was considered a victory to have the English recognize the arbitration. A binational commission established the border applying the criteria of the arbitration ruling and the Juan Vicente Gómez military dictatorship in Venezuela accepted a definitive demarcation in the first decade of the 20th century. In 1932 the demarcation of the border between Brazil, British Guyana and Venezuela was completed.

Almost a decade passed since Gómez's death, when in 1944 the Venezuelan parliament questioned the arbitration award. Mallet Prevost, one of the US lawyers who had represented Venezuela in Paris, denounced in the will published after his death in 1949 the irregularities of the process and the existence of a pact between English and Russian imperialism. In 1951, given increasing findings of mineral deposits in the Guayana region on the Venezuelan side, the Pérez Jiménez military dictatorship in Venezuela, questioned the arbitration award at a meeting of foreign ministers of the Americas. Beyond the desires of the Venezuelan military right, the international situation fueled Venezuelan irredentism. At this point, it was no longer a challenge to British imperialism, but rather

its opposite, a reactionary instrument at the service of imperialism against the just fight of the Guyanese people for their liberation.

The weakening of English imperialism presented an opportunity for the Venezuelan bourgeoisie to act as auxiliary to the capitalist and imperialist order at the regional level. In 1950, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) led by Cheddi Jagan emerged in Guyana, and in 1953 had won the first elections for limited self-government under British sovereignty. English imperialism quickly dissolved the elected government, to prevent an anti-imperialist leadership from achieving independence. Under British and American auspices, a right-wing split in the PPP took place in 1955 led by Forbes Burnham, who went on to found the People's National Congress (PNC). In 1961, Jagan again won the elections under an openly independentist program, although his leftism never exceeded the horizon of class collaboration.

In 1962, Venezuela repudiated the 1899 arbitration before the UN. In a reactionary move, it brought its territorial claims to the decolonization committee that discussed Guyana's independence. The Romulo Betancourt government saw an opportunity to kill several birds with one stone: to show himself as a nationalist, divert attention from internal problems as the guerrilla struggle inspired by the Cuban Revolution developed, and to serve the strategic interests of the United States in Guyana. Betancourt unsuccessfully proposed to the English government a joint management of the Essequibo area, excluding the government with limited autonomy of British Guyana.

The territorial claims served the United States -determined not to allow "another Cuba"- to extort the Guyanese people into choosing a government that did not leave the capitalist margins. The English recognized Guyanese independence only when they succeeded in imposing a proimperialist government, led by Burnham. Venezuelan interfered in the 1964 elections in favor of Burnham and the PNC, going as far as delivering arms under CIA coordination. United Force (UF), the minor partner in the ruling PNC coalition, was clearly right-wing and pro-Yankee, supporting the invasions of Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.

In 1964, the year of Burnham's election, the Venezuelan government participated in a coup plot against Cheddi Jagan, planning to kidnap and imprison him in Venezuela, as [recorded in documents by the US Department of State's Office of the Historian](#). Venezuelan foreign minister Ignacio Iribarren asked for Yankee support for the move and offered to train Guyanese mercenaries in Venezuelan territory. The gringos rejected the plan, as they were applying pressure for the establishing of a proportional representation system that would ensure that Jagan did not come to power, a formula that ended up being imposed.

In February 1966, the [Geneva Agreement](#) was established, leaving the dispute indefinitely open. In October of that year, Guyana achieved independence. Shortly before, the US and Venezuela supported the formation of the ephemeral Amerindian opposition party, led by Anthony Chaves. That same month the Venezuelan army occupied the river island of Anacoco on the border. In April 1967, a conference of indigenous leaders was held in Kabakaburi, under Venezuelan instigation, which declared its support for a binational development of the Essequibo territory. This all marked a clear intensification of the aggressions of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie against the recently acquired guyanese independence.

Burnham red-baited the PPP, claiming that it was linked to the Venezuelan MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement) through the Cuba-based OLAS (Latin American Solidarity Organization) to promote socialist revolutions through armed struggle. At the same time, it used Venezuelan threats and aggressions to unite the population under nationalist flags and prevent any popular rebellion. In 1968 the Venezuelan government unilaterally fixed maritime limits and in January 1969 promoted the [secessionist Rupununi uprising](#), in which large landowners and their indigenous employees,

armed and trained by the Venezuelan government, rose up against Burnham.

As the movement was defeated militarily, the Venezuelan government granted Venezuelan IDs and asylum to its members, linked to the right-wing UF party. The movement's spokesperson, Valerie Hart, having failed to obtain direct Venezuelan military support, compared the matter to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Emilio Máspero, social-christian trade union leader affiliated with the COPEI party, expressed support for Rupununi's rightists. It is estimated that seventy people were killed in the repression. The adventure had been carried out by the outgoing Acción Democrática (AD) government of Raúl Leoni. Rafael Caldera from COPEI had been elected in December 1968 but had not yet taken office. But the *copeyanos* would maintain the line as auxiliaries of imperialism in the Caribbean. In 1970 the Venezuelan government sent arms to the Trinidad and Tobago regime and mobilized troops to the east coast during the April [Black Power rebellion](#) in that country.

After years of extreme tension due to Venezuelan aggressions, under the Protocol of Port of Spain both countries froze the territorial dispute from 1970 to 1982. It is in this period that the Zone in Reclamation marked by stripes is incorporated into official propaganda in Venezuelan maps. By 1974 the Burnham government had turned left. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez improved bilateral relations in the framework of oil nationalization in Venezuela and bauxite nationalization in Guyana.

The *copeyano* President Luis Herrera Campins used the nationalist wild card to mobilize the youth wing of his 'social-Christian' party in February of 1982 under the slogan of "El Essequibo Is Ours", denouncing Guyana's relationship with Cuba. The Malvinas Islands War encouraged sectors of the right to demand the invasion of Guyana. In April 1982, there were indeed movements of Venezuelan troops along the border, and an invasion of Guyana was considered imminent by Brazilian intelligence. In October of that year, Herrera Campins would carry out the [Cantaura Massacre](#) against militants of the Red Flag party. The expansionist fury of the bourgeoisie has always been linked to repressive situations internally.

The inconsistency of Chavismo

Chávez had a rapprochement with the Caribbean Community organization (CARICOM) and Guyana, whom he included in the PetroCaribe oil subsidies program in 2005. Guyana also joined the Venezuelan-sponsored CELAC and UNASUR international organizations. In 2004, Chávez visited Georgetown, 6 months before the presidential recall referendum, and declared that he would not hinder any infrastructure development that directly benefited the population of the claimed area. "The Essequibo issue will be removed from the framework of the social, political and economic relations of the two countries," he announced, implying that not reaching an agreement should not hinder the development of bilateral relations. The right-wing opposition, through spokesmen such as Pompeyo Márquez, Jorge Olavarria, Ramón Escovar Salóm and Hermán Escarrá, among others, accused him of betraying the national interest and abandoning the Essequibo cause.

Significantly, the debate never became central to Venezuelan politics nor did it mean any political cost for Chávez, who won the referendum by a wide margin, showing that he had the opportunity to have liquidated that historical and political problem with minimal political cost. As in everything else, Chavismo was inconsistent. A final agreement was never formalized. As soon as the political tide turned, the chauvinistic reaction returned.

In 2015, the midst of economic, political and social decadence, Chavismo adopts military slogans such as "The sun of Venezuela is born in the Essequibo." After the right-wing Opposition won a parliamentary majority in December of that year, the National Assembly appointed a "Parliamentary Commission for the Defense of the Essequibo". According to Julio Borges, "interim chancellor" of the

Guaidó pseudo-government supported by the US, Chavismo delivered the Essequibo to “Cuba” (?). In September of 2019, the civic-military government denounced the president of the National Assembly, Guaidó, before the Prosecutor’s Office, accusing him of conspiring to deliver the Essequibo to transnational companies, based on intercepted communications between two Opposition officials who discussed abandoning the claim to secure British support.

Sectors of the left, both Chavista and independent, unfortunately capitulate to the government position. The Communist Party of Venezuela, one of the parties that support Chavismo, fully aligned with Maduro, [repudiating the intervention of the ICJ and describing it as an imperialist aggression to seize Venezuelan oil and calling for national cohesion](#). Other expressions of nationalist expansionism endow themselves with an ecological coating, celebrating that the current *statu quo* slows economic development in the Essequibo, or endowing the Venezuelan bourgeois state with a messianic and environmental role, as a protector of natural resources -disregarding the deplorable record of the Venezuelan State in the administration of its own territory- including calling for a repeat of the unsuccessful Rupununi movement through an instrumentalization of the indigenous peoples of the area. All of these arguments must be repudiated. The annexation of Guyanese territory by any of the two political fractions of the Venezuelan capitalist class would not result in any benefit for the Venezuelan or Guyanese working people.

Let us examine the comparison made in another era between the Argentinean claim over the Malvinas and the Essequibo dispute. It is a wrong analogy: The Malvinas were usurped by the English from Argentina, not from Spanish colonialism, and the islands are still under English occupation today. In fact, the Venezuelan claim over the Essequibo is more similar to an attempt at “recovering” the island of Trinidad, which was for a period a Spanish colony under the same administrative unit as what would become Venezuela after independence. Since Venezuela has no cultural, social or economic ties to that territory, the invocation of the principle of *Uti Possidetis* by Trinidad for the whole of its territory at the time of its independence from the British colonial power would prevail.

The same is true in the case of Guyana. The just claim against an aggressive and expansionist British colonial power, that Venezuela was unable to sustain on its own without resorting to self-interested US aid, lost all its legitimacy when Guyana gained its independence in 1966. The territories that the English usurped from the Spanish and that Venezuela could not recover in over a century rightfully correspond to Guyana. During the Guyanese independence process in the 1960s, the Venezuelan territorial claims played a reactionary role within a strategy of aggression by the United States and the United Kingdom against that people.

The annexation of a territory with which we have no cultural or historical ties, that does not have a population claiming to be Venezuelan, could only be carried out militarily. A diplomatic or judicial resolution favorable to Venezuela is impossible. Thus, nationalist delusions meet the limits imposed by reality. It is preferable to recognize that Venezuela was defeated, not now but in the 19th century, and can no longer settle accounts with the aggressive British Empire. Revanchism calling for an attack against a much smaller and poorer country, whose population does not reach 800,000 people, has to be absolutely rejected by the true revolutionaries and democrats of Venezuela. At the service of the interests of the peoples of Venezuela and Guyana, the only exit lies in the unilateral withdrawal of the Venezuelan claim, and a bilateral negotiation of maritime limits. Maduro’s civic-military government does not have the dignity or the courage to take that step.

For the Venezuelan working people it is evident today, more than ever, that our liberation can only mean one thing: to take our destiny into our hands by overthrowing the Bolibourgeoisie ourselves, and at the same time defeating the Trumpist mafia of the parliamentary opposition. Anything that distracts us from that task is criminal. Once freed from the chains of this infamous civil-military

regime, we will have a lot to deal with in our own territory, destroyed and looted by transnational corporations and organized crime. We are not guilty of the crimes that the Venezuelan capitalist class committed, whether in the Puntofijista or Bolibourgeois eras, but freed from expansionist illusions we can fully embrace our true and pressing pending task.

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