

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-16 Curacao, N.A.  
Insurrection in the Dutch Antilles

Willemstad  
Curacao  
Netherlands Antilles  
September 1, 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Executive Director  
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535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

On September 5 the people of Curacao numbering 116,000 will be going to the polls to vote their choice between four contending parties campaigning for control of the island's local government. These elections, a consequence of the insurrection of May 30 and the subsequent collapse of the island government, will determine just how much the papiamento-speaking people of the Dutch-controlled Caribbean want radical change.

A few months ago, no one would have thought that the Dutch government would be airlifting paratroopers to quell rioters in quiet, sun-soaked Curacao. But on May 30 what started as a small strike directed against Shell Oil of Curacao became an island-wide, \$40 million insurrection. The immediate cause, a group of plumbers demanding higher wages from a Shell Oil contractor (Wescar Inc.), was of course only a surfaced expression of the more serious economic and social woes in Curacao. For behind the facade of some of the Caribbean's most glamorous duty free shops, international hotels and tourist resorts lurk numerous pockets of poverty, vast numbers of unemployed and a growing resentment of Dutch control of the island.

The government tourist board will note that Curacao enjoys one



of the highest per-capita incomes in the western hemisphere (\$1,100 PCI), that only one-half of one percent of the population is illiterate and that there is one car for every six Curacaons. But as in so many government tourist offices, the statistics don't always tell the true story.

Fifteen to twenty thousand of the island's labour force is out of work. That means that one fifth of the adult male population is unemployed. On the outer edges of Willemstad, the island's capital, there are terrible slum conditions, delapidated tin-wood structures crammed together in the dry heat of the sun. Few of the shelters I visited had plumbing and some had no access to water at all. One poor section called Chaco had been featured in a Dutch magazine a few years ago but the publication had been banned by the Minister of Justice.

The population may be literate, but many parents do not know how to use the money they do make properly. Some children have only one meal a day, that one the lunch they are served at school. Other children do not have decent clothing.

On the other hand there are sleek housing developments circling Willemstad. These are generally owned by the white minority, the tall blond Dutchmen who, wearing shorts and knee-length white socks, have come to work for Royal Dutch Shell Oil. As one Dutch critic said, they "stride the streets of Willemstad in martial style."

Curacao has been Dutch since the 17th century when Peter Stuyvesant, as Director of a salt producing company, began establishing a system of dikes to extract salt from trapped sea water. Today, however, the economy of Curacao is based on refining crude Venezuelan oil (120 million barrels each year) and tourism (twelve hotels servicing 200,000 tourists last year). The principal customer of Curacao's refined oil is the United States which imports 31% of the total.

Royal Dutch Shell came to Curacao in 1918 and for fifty years it has dominated the economy. Its plant occupies three thousand acres in the middle of the island and company housing facilities spread over other central portions. Today Shell employs about 9,000 island laborers; but in recent years the company has begun to automate large segments of its factory and management has been forced to release nearly 2,000 workers. It was from among those workers released, a group of plumbers, that the initial leadership of the May 30 insurrection developed.

The dispute arose over the disparity of wages paid by a plumbing company contracted by Shell. In sympathy for the plumbers, other workers were called out and a demonstration of 5,000 workers assembled in front of Shell's main buildings early on the morning of May 30. By ten o'clock the leadership of the demonstration had passed to the President General of the Harbor Workers Union, "Papa" Godett, who directed that the mass of workers march on Willemstad.

En route, marchers selectively broke into white owned businesses and an expatriate-owned super market. The super market is owned by an Englishman who has been reluctant to employ locals in managerial positions - one of the reasons, strikers say, his store was hit. Another company, American-owned and managed Texan Instruments Incorporated, was also the object of the marchers' anger.



Texas Instruments, a Texas owned company, employs about 1,000 Curacao girls who wire semi-conductors which are then shipped back to the United State. Some of the company's products were used in the Command Module during the recent Apollo moon

flight. The company has sixteen branches in as many countries all over the world.

Ron Ritchie, Texas born manager of Texas Instruments Inc. and a former West Pointer, says that the company came to Curacao for three reasons: labor which is cheap and available and incidentally "quick to learn"; a chance to operate in the Common Market; and incentives which gave the company a ten year tax holiday. When asked about wage scales, Ritchie declined to comment saying only that in comparison to other island labor, Texas Instruments was paying its workers within range of the top 25%.

One of the problems, however, is the fact that Texas Instruments does not recognize any union and will not allow one to organize. "We believe," says Ritchie, "that the answer to unions is the new motivational theory now practiced by many major corporations ... We want to eliminate the gap between labor and management in terms of communication ... After all, when personal goals are satisfied, there is no need for unions." When asked who determines when "personal goals" are satisfied, Ritchie suggested that it was "a communications problem."

Today, Texas Instruments has a high barbed-wire fence surrounding its grounds; and while walking about the plant itself, one must have a particular sort of plastic badge which designates whether one is visitor, worker or management. Each badge has a particular color with photo attached. "These are for security purposes," Ritchie explains.

From Texas Instruments Incorporated, the marchers moved on toward Willemstad where the police were waiting for them. Shooting broke out and several men were shot, including Godett himself. By the time night came and the streets cleared, commercial sections of the capital were ablaze, particularly those shops or businesses owned by Jewish whites. One observer explained what he saw:

"In street after street ... I saw shops with Jewish names over the doors ablaze, while those run by colored people were left unharmed ... at the height of the (riot) Willemstad looked like London during the blitz. Almost the whole main shopping area was burned down, besides hotels and restaurants. Gangs of Negroes roamed the streets for some hours before the rioting began, warning shops to close and tourists to go back to their hotels."



Windmills in the Caribbean: The Netherlands Antilles consists of two main island groups: Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire, 45 miles off the coast of Venezuela, and St. Eustatius, Saba and half of St. Maarten 500 miles north in the Leewards. Total population is 211,000 in a total area of 394 sq. mile Curacao is the largest and most important of the six with a population of 133,000.

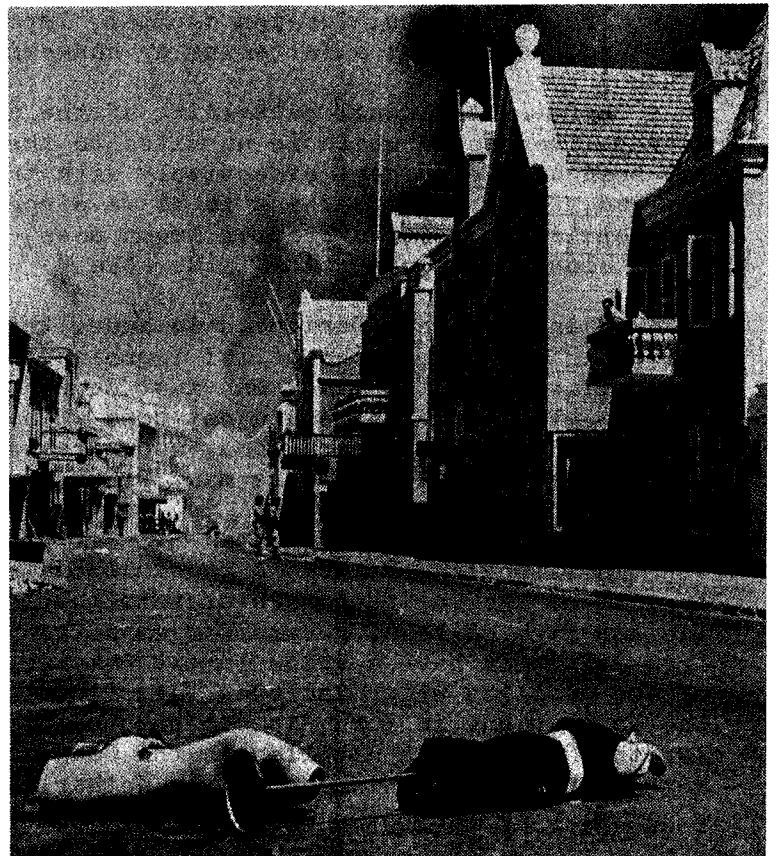
Below: One of the 150 injured during the May insurrection being shifted into a waiting ambulance.





Gutted remains of a large store owned by Jewish merchant, J. Tauber. Some claim there was anti-semitic feeling among the May rioters. Others claim that Tauber was disliked because he refused to buy anything locally produced.

A view of Willemstad's streets the morning of June 1.



The police could not cope with the situation and so the Premier, Ciro Kroon, called on the Dutch government to send troops to the island. Paratroopers landed and sealed off the city. Inside the town, the looting continued.

"By evening the streets were littered with thick slabs of plate glass, discarded velvet jewel cases, Japanese cameras, coral necklaces, transistors, even plaster shop-window mannequins from which dresses had been stripped."

The next morning the cruise ships were on their way, gliding past the old Americano Hotel now gutted by flames. Willemstad was under a pall of thin, ashen smoke. Other tourists flocked to the airport and were on the next outbound KLM flight. Today the hotels, except for the PANAM owned Intercontinental Hotel which has had nearly full capacity all summer, are just now recovering and accepting reservations for next season. (As one islander explained, by next season "the ancient and over-fed bodies will be back clustered around the pool bar in a haze of sun-oil once again.")

In fact, the tourist on his return will hardly realize that anything unusual had occurred the summer before. The streets are Dutch clean once again, Willemstad is quiet and the people appear friendly enough. The duty-free shops will be re-opened: watches at half the U.S. prices; whisky at \$2.25 a fifth; Japanese tape recorders; Givenchy perfumes at bargain prices. A few gutted ruins will be the only external reminder of those two days at the end of May.

Curacao's woes are the same, to lesser or greater degree, as most of the other island states of the Caribbean. There is vast unemployment; a widening gap between those who have high incomes and those who have little or nothing at all; dependency upon foreign markets, foreign capital, imported foodstuffs, raw materials, management and technology; a faltering or non-existent agricultural sector.

There is the usual patterning of the domestic political system based on a metropolitan model which is unsuited to the small island polity and which has thus far been unable to deal effectively with the economic problems demanding solutions. Instead, there is a tendency to blame discontent on irresponsible elements within the population, or, as Premier Kroon does, to blame "outsiders who used the strike to bring about an insurrection in Curacao."

As in the other Caribbean islands, there is also the problem of race and cultural alienation, the belief ingrained over three centuries of slavery and colonialism that the black man must depend upon the white man and that left to his own the black islander could not cope with the problems, that his own resources are not enough. Thus, the radical Godett realizes that before there is to be a political change in Curacao, there must first be a cultural revolution of the people's conception of themselves.

Additionally, Curacao's international relationships are very cumbersome and typical of the Caribbean-ministate's complex associations. The island has its own limited form of local government embodied in the Island Council. Representatives from this body have a voice in the Stanten, the governing body of the Federation of the Antilles which includes the six Dutch-controlled islands in the Caribbean. The Federation, in turn, is represented by a Plenipotentiary Minister who speaks for the Netherlands Antilles in the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. (The Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of Holland, Surinam and the Federation of the Dutch Antilles).

Thus, Curacao has a government within a Federation within a Kingdom, with each of these levels of authority carrying its own fiscal obligations, having its own political rights or duties and requiring its own social identifications. In fact, the bewildered islander is not certain whether he is Dutch, Antillian or Curacaon. Moreover, these international associations have left the islander without any knowledge of the other islands of the Caribbean and it is remarkable to find any references to events taking place in the British or French speaking islands in the daily press. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the schools which prescribe Dutch history and language while failing to offer any courses in regional history or politics. Consequently, the islanders learn more about a nation five thousand miles away than they do of the islands and peoples which surround them.

Nevertheless, Curacao's politicians have been shaken by those few days three months ago. The immediate result of May 30 was the recall of the governing Democratic Party headed by Ciro D. Kroon. The Democrats had held the majority of seats in the island Council for ten years. Before that the party had been in opposition for fifteen years. Following the riots Kroon, pressed by a coalition of unions to step down, finally decided that "the voters should have a chance to express themselves." He dissolved the Council and appointed an Interim Government to carry on until the September 5 elections.

Of the four campaigns, Kroon's is the most conservative. Kroon himself is a very tall, light-skinned man who is campaigning on what can best be characterized as a law and order platform. Reacting to the events of May, he chances the thought that "the people should not be taken for granted anymore." Then he discusses the need for re-organizing Curacao's police force. "The police need better equipment and the people must make a choice, a choice between law and tranquility on the one hand or chaos and insurrection on the other." Kroon's campaign posters carry a large photograph of Kroon smiling centred into a background of gutted Willemstad buildings.

Kroon describes the major opposition party, the National Democrats headed by Jauncho Everts, as having "pretty much the same programme we have but supported by a different constituency." This is accurate. The Nationals were organized twenty five years ago by a Catholic politician, M. F. da Costa Gomez. His constituency was the lower class Catholic Antillian who was black and rural. Kroon has been popular with the urban workers and the upper or middle class whites.



Ciro D. Kroon



Frente Obrero party leaders Nita and Godett stand before their party headquarters holding a campaign poster depicting former Premier Kroon shooting May rioters--one of them Godett himself.

Insignia of Papy Jesurun's U.R.A.





For the most part, however, both parties are moderately socialist and have both been in and out of political power over the past twenty five years. In the last elections held in 1967, Kroon's Democrats polled 30,000 votes to the Nationals' 15,000.

The other two parties contesting this week's elections have been recently organized. Both are to the left of the two major parties, more issue-oriented and hoping to capitalize on the recent shake-up of Kroon's government. The first, Union Reformista Antillano (U.R.A.), was formed two years ago by a former National party official who bolted his own party, relinquished his seat in the Council and contested the elections held in 1967. The second, Frente Obrero Y Liberacion 30 Di Mei (better known as the 30th of May Movement) is a political extension of the May insurrection and founded by those who marched on Willemstad.

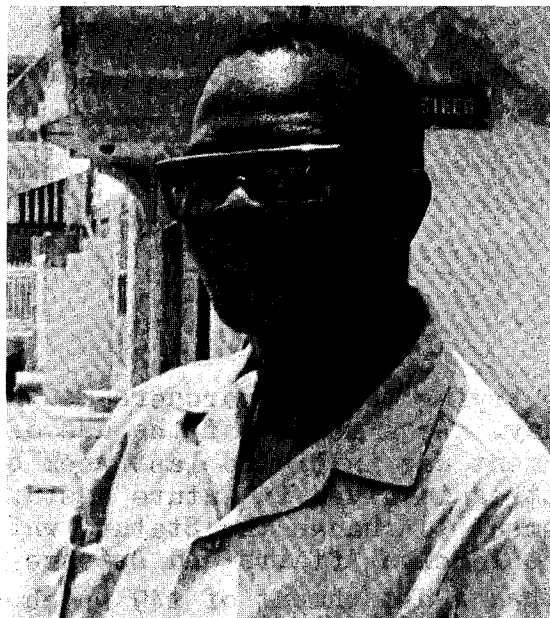


Papy Jesurun

U.R.A. is led by the likable head of the tourist board, "Papy" Jesurun. Frustrated by the lack of progress made by the Nationals when in opposition, Jesurun decided to quit the party and went back to the hustings to contest the last elections with a new, more progressive organization. He gathered a great many young people into his party and in six months organized enough support to gain 6,000 votes in the election of 1967. U.R.A. is best described as a reformist party, committed to greater degrees of socialism but still within the framework already established by the more conservative parties. Jesurun has had some defection from his ranks, however, particularly among the younger elements who say that he is pursuing the same old line, that he will not attack the system itself (Dutch control of the economy, reliance upon tourism, no programmes for radical re-distribution of wealth). In response, the thirty nine-year-old politician claims that his party is "a responsible party" and that he has left a Christian Democratic Party (Nationals) to form a Socialist Democratic Party (U.R.A.). After all, he says, "politics is compromise."

The Frente Obrero was formed only two months ago. It is led by Papa Godett, one of the leaders of the May march on Willemstad who was shot in the neck by an unknown policeman. Godett, who wears green fatigues and a para-military cap, has just been released from the hospital and has begun to hold a series of meetings throughout the island.

Godett's party is the most radical of the four, clearly influenced indirectly by Castro's Cuba. Talking to him, a smile flicked across his face when he was asked if he had been to Cuba.



Papa Godett



Police trying to halt marchers as they move on Willemstad during riots last May. As a result of the use of Dutch troops, a debate in the Dutch Parliament was initiated last week by Socialist Opposition who voiced fear of getting involved in future disturbances in the Caribbean. There is a movement to change the Statute which makes the Netherlands responsible for the Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Antilles. The revelation last week that a detachment of 149 Dutch police had been inoculated for tropical duty has brought increased pressure for such a change.

"No, but I think Castro's fight is our fight too." His aim, he points out, "is to make the people more aware of their poverty ... the people don't realize that they could be more human."

From the side of an old truck, usually at night, Papa and his party's candidates are trying to radicalize the people of Curacao. The meetings, at least those I attended, were a mixture of stiff radical rhetoric; crowd comedians; gentle people listening, and sometimes laughing when one of the speakers stumbled over a word. The message is anti-Dutch, pride in being black, the need for developing a mass political party which will take control of the Island Council in the name of the people. Whether the crowd is really listening, however, is difficult to say. Only this week's elections will determine that.

Yours,

*Frank Mc Donald*

Frank McDonald

Received in New York on September 11, 1969.