Political Power Struggles in Suriname: A Gramscian Analysis of the 2020 Elections

Kirtie Algoe

Graduate Studies, Anton de Kom University

ABSTRACT: The lead up to the May 2020 elections in Suriname, a Dutch-speaking country in the Caribbean with a culturally diverse population of 550,000 people, was beset with several difficulties including the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Although Suriname has had seventeen universal suffrage elections since 1949, this election cycle was notable for the integral role of social media in political campaigning. Political parties adapted and implemented online campaign strategies with extensive politicking through platforms on issues such as corruption, economic crisis and ethnic political mobilization. Online campaign strategy raises questions about whether changes in political communication change the shape and nature of political struggle in a country characterized by consociational democracy and electoral instability. This article addresses these questions, with the broader goal of understanding political power struggles from a new lens that draws on e-politics and Gramsci's classical approaches. Combined with social media analyses, this article highlights how the ruling political party, the NDP, seeks to maintain its power and how the main opposition party, the VHP, challenges it. It also examines whether social media influenced the nature of political party interaction, the construction of networks and allies, the political framing of ethnicity or the formation of online public opinion.

KEYWORDS: Suriname, elections 2020, social media, ethnicity

Introduction

The lead up to the May 2020 elections in Suriname, a Dutch-speaking country in the Caribbean with a population of 550,000 people, was beset with several difficulties including the local effects of the global coronavirus pandemic. While Suriname has had seventeen elections with universal suffrage since 1949, this election cycle was notable because of the integral role of social media in political campaigning. Political parties adapted and undertook online campaigning strategies that incorporated extensive politicking via platforms about topics like corruption, economic crisis, and ethnic political mobilization. Given that Suriname is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the Caribbean, this online campaigning strategy raises questions about

whether changes in political communication alter the form and nature of political contest in a country that features consociational democracy as well as recent electoral instability (Menke 2016).

I draw upon Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony to deepen the understanding of Surinamese politics in the digital era and to update the understanding of the sociopolitical patterns in this culturally diverse country. I apply the concept of hegemony to examine how ruling political parties attempt to exert ideological control over the masses to maintain power. I address their use of online politics – what is known as e-politics in Suriname – to influence public opinion, diminish critical or threatening agencies of civil society and opposition politi-

cal parties, and promote their own political leadership.[1] Counterhegemony, on the contrary, involves critical thinking about ruling parties. It provides a counter to the ideological control of ruling groups. E-politics is relevant here due to its impact on the thoughts and beliefs of users. Online platforms have serious shortcomings, such as the mass spread of one-sided, false information, which does not necessarily comply with democratic principles (Sundaram 2017). However, these spaces offer useful avenues to study the struggle for hegemony between political power blocs (Fujiwara, Muller, and Schwarz 2010).

Suriname traditionally shares political power among the elites of major ethnic groups. These groups are represented by mono-ethnic political parties (refer to Lijphart 1977, Algoe 2022). However, this arrangement leads to a certain degree of "electoral instability," influenced by the demographics and social characteristics of voters, and social policies (Menke 2015). Addressing the positioning of issues on platforms can enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by consociational democracy. From 2015 to 2020, the National Democratic Party (NDP) was the ruling party in Suriname. This study examines how the NDP attempted to retain its political power by leveraging government and social media to highlight its social and political (even populist) policies, with a focus on culture/ethnicity. It explores whether the NDP's addition of platform political work to its tactical repository altered the nature of interaction between political parties, the construction of networks and allies, the political framing of ethnicity, or the formation of online public opinion. Finally, this study reports on how political parties built networks with sponsors and activists to consolidate or expand their power base. In this examination of e-politics strategies, I considered ethnic mobilization, connections with activists, and the role of diasporic networks.

Regarding data collection, research assistants created a database cataloging public engagement with political parties and their candidates' social media

posts from January 2020 to May 2020. As a complementary exercise, the research team coded and analyzed the beliefs, religious factors, and any ethnic undertones present in party leaders' public speeches. The focus was on how ruling groups attempted to forge alliances with critical groups, such as activists, nongovernmental organizations, cultural organizations, and opposition political parties. As this study discusses matters of comparative change, it is worthwhile to briefly review recent prior elections to establish a baseline. The few public studies of the 2010 election cycle showed that the reception of social policies and the demographic composition of voters greatly contributed to electoral instability (Menke, 2015). Understanding these issues is crucial to grasp the dynamics of the 2020 elections.

Hegemony, Counterhegemony and E-Politics

Gramsci argues that maintaining power in capitalist societies involves gaining ideological control of the population. Hegemony refers to how consent is attained from subordinate groups by rulers, a process at a relatively low cost for maintaining power. At different points within the process of gaining consent, alliances, bargains or pacts become useful tools to broaden the public's perception that the status quo is justifiable. Drawing upon, but innovating from, classical Marxism, Gramsci's writings direct attention towards the constitutive role of the belief in reproducing capitalist social relations. Put differently, beliefs or cultural practices are not simply the by-product of prior historical material conditions or political-economic relationships, but also a primary constitutive factor. For this reason, the concept helps explain how ideology can be a form of domination on par with coercive class repression (Fontana 2002; Gramsci 1999). Rulers aim to generate popular support in civil society to legitimate their exercise of power to maintain a repressive capitalist state (Scherrer 2001).

A key term in Gramsci's hegemony is "common sense." Rulers spread their beliefs and values in such a way that they become "common sense" in the public's opinion (Billings 1990). Common sense can be identified in popular culture as well as consent to policy directives. Gramsci states that "everything that

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1 E-politics is a field of study that examines how digital political communication shapes the dynamic interactions between the political domain and the public realm (see Lillleker 2006).

directly or indirectly influences or could influence public opinion belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture, the layout of streets and their names" (Gramsci, cited in Stoddart 2007, 202). Common sense points to the naturalization of prevailing beliefs, giving them an unearned status or regard (Gramsci 1999). This makes subordinate groups less able to imagine, entertain, or evaluate different forms of living; the result is that by following "the law of the least effort," hegemony makes ideas that support subordination to appear like common sense (Buttigieg 1995).

An important part of maintaining power, according to Gramsci, is leadership. He perceives leadership as the ability to win the support of a particular group by connecting with its perceived interests (Billings 1990). It includes the way leaders show concerns for the interests of groups and make efforts to realize these. They present themselves as well-wishers who try to solve the problems of the subordinate groups. But dominant groups are subtly trying to change the worldview of the masses. This is not a straightforward process. In Gramsci's view, dominance is maintained by people who directly and indirectly are related to the ruling groups. Some present themselves as autonomous but are not (Burke 2020). They must prevent rebellion against the power structures. Ruling groups try to include the interests of subordinate groups in their agenda, but not at the cost of their own interests. They create "allies" by partially inserting their needs in "hegemonic" institutions to increase their support for the power relations in society (Scherrer 2001).

Counterhegemony refers to the development of an awareness of one's own position as a basis to take actions against political control. Gramsci believes that hegemony could be countered by political and cultural struggles rather than socialist revolutions. In the concept of counterhegemony, the ideological stances and real actions to diminish power are interwoven. It includes both the creation of critical awareness and the establishment of counterhegemonic institutions to diminish hegemony and domination (Billings 1990). Critical awareness is key to rejecting the so-called superiority of ruling groups. This depends on three sociopolitical factors: autonomous organizations, leadership, and interaction within the responding groups (Billings 1990).

The first factor, autonomous organizations, provides a space for self-reflection in the face of dominance. These organizations are expected to be free from the ideological dominance of ruling groups. They are part of a civil society that operates independently of the state's administrative and juridical apparatuses (Buttigieg 1995, 14). Autonomous organizations serve as a foundation for fostering and disseminating critical thinking against ideological dominance. Gramsci posits that this critical thinking originates in civil society and evolves into a revolutionary culture capable of challenging the state's coercive powers. He believes that a revolutionary culture does not incite rebellion, but rather promotes a critical understanding of societal status quo. According to Gramsci, such activities can only transpire within autonomous bodies of civil society (Buttigieg 1995).

The second sociopolitical factor involves the leadership of intellectuals. These individuals are pivotal in developing alternative perspectives that "challenge the status quo" and educate the wider population (Billings 1990, 27). According to Gramsci, intellectuals are key figures who assign meaning to their social groups and facilitate their functioning (Burke 2020). Gramsci categorizes intellectuals into two types: organic and traditional. Organic intellectuals have strong ties to the state and ruling groups. They are "produced" by the dominant education system and serve as a vital instrument for the ruling groups to exercise hegemony, exemplified by roles such as managers, civil servants, and lawyers. Traditional intellectuals have subtle connections to the dominant group. They portray themselves as individuals working independently from the ruling groups and are perceived as such by many. However, they align with the dominant groups. Traditional intellectuals include philosophers, clerks, and professors (Burke 2020).

In counterhegemony, subordinate groups produce their own organic intellectuals. They can come from a community, such as the neighborhood, and are necessary since they know their local people. They may have similarities with the residents. And more importantly, they can develop strong relationships with the local people in such a way that they can raise critical commitments to the community. In Gramsci's view, leadership of intellectuals should be

aimed at developing an education and culture of critical consciousness. He suggests that the leadership of intellectuals is best exercised in civil society.

The third sociopolitical factor, social interaction within the responding group, refers to the strategies to spread critical views against the superiority of dominant groups among the masses. According to Gramsci, the best strategy is to repeat these views (Billings 1990). Of all institutions, Gramsci considers civil society the most important in developing a revolutionary strategy against the hegemony of ruling groups. This group should disable "the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status" (Buttigieg 1995, 7). It involves prioritized practices. Since the focus of this study was on the political elections, this factor cannot be used as non-ruling parties do not have access to political power.

Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony provide valuable analytical frameworks for examining the political power struggles during Suriname's 2020 elections, particularly in the context of e-politics. Although discussions about the social and political impacts of such platforms are well-established in other national academic communities, these topics have yet to receive sustained scholarly attention in Suriname. In the Caribbean social media is a growing tool for politics, but there are few systematic analyses based on nationally representative data (Adugu and Broome 2018). Some recent studies have focused on the role of social media in Trinidad and Tobago (Sinanan 2017, Bachan-Persad 2022). In Suriname Facebook is the most used platform. The Organization of American States (2021) commended Suriname for its political parties' utilization of social media platforms to facilitate continuous political campaigning under the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the question is how these digital tools, given their technical design and the national context, contributed to democratic principles? Media platforms have the benefits of educating/informing the public, encouraging public debates, and allowing scrutiny to elections, but the position of social media is not that straightforward. Included

are challenges to interpret the relationship between online communities and the wide population (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). For this reason, e-politics is a useful starting point for exploratory research.

As it applies to elections, studies show that platform-based political campaigning can have an influential, constitutive but not determinative impact on outcomes (Kobayashi and Ichifuji 2015; Fujiwara, Muller, and Schwarz 2010). Additionally, some analyses have documented the different grammars that politicians and audiences use on platforms compared to mass media (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, and Strohmaier 2018). Certainly, these differences arise from the sociotechnical affordances of platforms. At a less abstract level, parties use platforms in three main ways during elections. These are to convey messages about the position regarding issues; promote personality traits such as trustworthiness; and improve name recognition (Kobayashi and Ichifuji 2015). These three factors are engaged in both hegemonic and counterhegemonic processes. For instance, the position of issues can include the spreading of messages justifying policies in the case of hegemony, and emphasizing critical views on these policies in the case of counterhegemony.

To analyze the nature of political power struggles in the Surinamese 2020 elections, I integrate the concepts of hegemony, counterhegemony and e-politics. Hegemony is used to understand the way the ruling party, NDP, is trying to retain its political power by using social media. To this end, analyses are made of the influence of leadership, creation of allies with critics and other parties, as well as social and populist policies to create "common sense" on supporting the NDP with emphasis on portrayal of culture/ethnicity. At a more empirical level social media posts, newspaper articles, and speeches during political campaigning are examined to identify the hegemonic nature of the NDP in terms of leadership praises, justification of policies, use of cultural diversity, and responses to critics. The concept of counterhegemony is applied to understand how the political power of the NDP was opposed. More specifically the role of the United Reformist Party (VHP), the major opposition political party, in challenging the power of the NDP particularly through social media is examined. Analyses are

also made of how critical awareness against the NDP is created through or by civil society organizations that support VHP, leadership especially at grassroots level, and social interaction within the VHP and supporting agents.

As this study discusses matters of comparative change, it is worthwhile to briefly review recent prior elections to establish a baseline. The few public studies of the 2010 election cycle showed that the reception of social policies and the demographic composition of voters greatly contributed to electoral instability (Menke 2015). Understanding these issues is crucial to grasp the dynamics of the 2020 elections.

Surinamese Politics between 2000 and 2020

Formerly known as Dutch Guiana, Suriname was a plantation colony of the Netherlands. Settler-colonialism was established by British planters bringing enslaved people in 1651; in 1667 Suriname was seized by a Dutch fleet and remained in Dutch control until the country attained political independence in November 1975. The post-independence period was beset by political violence over the spoils of Dutch foreign aid. For example, in 1980 the government refused to sanction trade union activity within the armed forces, an event that precipitated a military coup. From 1980 to 1987 the country was governed by a succession of military regimes. A coup took place in 1990, but the country returned to civilian rule

the following year. The last three decades have seen Suriname re-democratize, although progress has been difficult and uneven.

Between 2000 and 2020, four elections were held with a fluctuating influence of neoliberalism, and with political campaigning focused on face-to-face meetings. Political power-sharing practices were based on consociationalism, which in particularly applied to the traditional monoethnic political parties. For years the major political parties were the creole Nationale Partij Suriname (NPS), the East Indian VHP, the Javanese Pertjahah Luhur (PL), and the labour union-related Surinaamse Partij van de Arbeid (SPA). They participated in the elections as a political combination called Nieuw Front (NF). The NDP has been the major opposition party by featuring cultural diversity, which gradually increased its popularity and support.

Political campaigning during the four elections between 2000 and 2020 focused on face-to-face meetings. In doing so, political parties adhered to forms of neoliberal and progressive approaches albeit with some modifications. The founding ideology of NPS, which led the NF coalition between 2000 and 2010, primarily followed principles of nationalism and neoliberalism. The party's emphasis on the importance of economic growth is described in their 1966 book, *Groei te midden van beroering* [Growth in the midst of turmoil] (Eersteling 2017). This was in contrast to the NDP, a social-democratic political party. During

Election	Coalition	Opposition
2000	Nieuw Front voor Democratie en Ontwikkeling (NPS, VHP, PL, SPA)	Millennium Combinatie (NDP, DA, KTPI)
2005	Nieuw Front (NPS, VHP, PL, SPA), BEP, ABOP, DA'91	NDP, VVV
2010	Megacombinatie (NDP, PALU, KTPI, DNP 2000, BVD, A-combinatie, PL)	NPS, VHP
2015	NDP	V7
2020	VHP, ABOP, PL, NPS	NDP, BEP

Table 1. *Overview of Suriname political parties in opposition and coalition, 2000–2020.*

Note: The NDP, for the 2010 elections, was to participate in a partnership with the PALU, KTPI, DNP 2000, and the BVD. This collaboration was called the Megacombinatie (Mega Combination) (twenty-three seats) and Bouterse became the chairman. The Mega Combination formed a coalition with the A-Combination (seven seats) and the Pertjajah Luhur (six seats).

2010 and 2015, the Megacombinatie coalitie, led by the NDP, implemented a range of social reforms. These include increasing pensions, the introduction of a minimum wage, the removal of school fees, and investment in infrastructure and affordable houses. The Nieuw Front bloc accused the NDP coalition of spending too much money (Milanovi 2015).

Let us now take a closer look at each election. At the turn of the twentieth century, the NDP-led coalition government under President Jules Wijdenbosch was embroiled in corruption and mismanagement scandals; scandals that were associated with ministers from two smaller parties, the Javanese party KTPI, and the BVD (Trouw 1999). By December 1999, Wijdenbosch's government resigned and early elections were scheduled for 2000. Owing to internal disagreement, Wijdenbosch's fraction broke away to form a new political party. With the NDP affected by diluted support, NPS was elected to power under the leadership of Ronald Venetiaan in 2000. André Telting was placed at the head of the Central Bank of Suriname and a monetary policy that placed reserve requirements on domestic currency liabilities. In 2004, the Surinamese dollar was introduced due to the increase of raw materials prices that strengthened the economy (Evers and Stam 2012).

In the realm of party politics, major political blocs began to form. Comprising both large and small political parties, the two most notable were the Millennium Combinatie (MC) and the Nieuw Front (NF). The parties that associated with the NF bloc were the NPS, the VHP, the PL, and the SPA. The MC block consisted of the NDP, DA, and KTPI. The NF's manifesto sought to control government spending, bring transparency to the policy formation process, create economic resiliency, strengthen anti-narcotic policy, and generally improving diplomatic relations with the Netherlands (NRC Handelsblad, 2000).

During the 2005 election cycle, the NF's campaign focused on its role in achieving economic and monetary stability, and the recovery of foreign relations during its five years' rule. By contrast, the NDP led by Desi Bouterse campaigned in 2005 on a left-leaning agenda that concentrated on the "Four Renewals of the Revolution of 1980," namely: political-administrative order, social order, economic

order, and educational order. This agenda was appealing to the younger generation of voters. Due to populist messaging, the NDP grew support among the poor. Ultimately the NF bloc lost eight seats and were not able to form a majority government (Vander Weyden 2006). Venetiaan retained the presidency. Between 2000 and 2009, foreign debt fell from 54% to 13% of the country's gross domestic product (for an analysis of state fiscal policy between 2004 and 2007, see Fritz-Krockow, et al. 2009).

As the 2010 elections neared, there was an increasing fear from the burgeoning middle-class that the economy could suffer at the hands of a Wijdenbosch or Bouterse government (Buddingh 2009). Accordingly, the NF's strategy focused on their administrative track record which heralded economic stability for the previous decade. The NF government received a lot of criticism for their stability approach during their last years in office, such as being "blinded by the dogma of stability" (van Maele 2013). Venetiaan was depicted as a competent head of state who brought financial stability, but these technocratic tendencies made him an elitist who could not connect with the citizenry. Venetiaan was also accused of tacitly accepting corruption by coalition partners to preserve the government (van Maele 2013). In summary, the critique was that the NF lacked the courage necessary for making much-needed policy choices; in effect what appeared as good governance was not (Johannes 2017). Repeatedly one found the theme of calculation over compassion.

The dissatisfaction with performance of the NF during their 2005–2010 term in office, when combined with the strong populist backlash by the young and poor who favor the NDP, placed the MC bloc in a favorable position for the 2010 elections. The focus of the MC's election campaign was "the formation of one nation and stimulating Suriname's own development" (de Overheid van de Republiek Suriname 2019). The MC bloc won the general elections while the NF lost nine seats. After the general elections, the MC bloc approached the NF to form a coalition government, but the NF refused. To remain in power, the NF strategically formed a cooperation with the smaller parties – A-Combinatie and PL – that was named a "fourth NF coalition." Their plan, however, failed.

After the MC candidate, Jennifer Geerlings-Simons, won the presidency of the National Assembly (with twenty-six out of fifty parliamentary votes), it turned out that two members of the so-called "fourth New Front coalition" had not voted along party lines and were rumored to have been bribed (Starnieuws 2010). After this incident the ABOP and PL parties lost trust in the cooperation agreement with the NF and thereafter decided to join the MC in forming a coalition government.

At the time of the 2015 elections, the NF – led by the NPS – had transformed into V7, led by the VHP. The NF consisted mostly of monoethnic political parties. Within this transformed party bloc, however, all parties wanted to get rid of their ethnic stamp, and profiled themselves on themes such as security, the fight against corruption, and the economy. Their primary focus was to "get rid" of Bouterse. He was seen as a man of the people, who had helped the country economically and fought poverty. The NDP's multiethnic profiling had also contributed to its popularity. During this election campaign, the ABOP had formed a Maroon political block, named A-Combinatie, together with the Seeka party. The MC with the NDP as its leading party gained three seats in the National Assembly, and Desi Bouterse was re-elected in 2015. Both the V7 and A-Combination party blocs were dissolved shortly after the 2015 elections.

The general elections were won by the political block lead by Bouterse and the leadership of the Central Bank was placed in the hands of a former IMF official, Gillmore Hoefdraad. Due to a worldwide fall in commodity prices, the Surinamese economy once again entered a crisis. In 2011, the Surinamese dollar devalued by 20% and, between 2012 and 2016, the economy declined from a 5% growth to a 10.4% year-on-year contraction. In 2016 there was hyperinflation of 55%, which followed the general elections of 2015. The government was criticized before the 2015 elections for being "the most expensive government Suriname has ever had, with at the same time the lowest productivity" (Parbode Surinaams Magazine 2014). The incumbent cabinet was re-elected despite the criticism. With a spike in gold prices and a rise in gold production in combination with sound monetary policy, the new governor of the Central Bank,

Glenn Gersie, promised that the Surinamese dollar would recover in 2017 and 2018 (Ramdharie 2013). Gersie was fired in February of 2019. A political appointee, Robert-Gray van Trikt, was placed at the head of the Surinamese Central (Reformatorisch dagblad, 2019). The last months of the Bouterse cabinet were characterized by a large increase in foreign debt. The exchange rate of the Surinamese dollar was again under pressure four months after his appointment. In November 2019, the credit ceiling of the government's debt increased from 60 to 95% (De Ware Tijd 2019). The exchange rate of the Surinamese dollar was again under pressure four months after his appointment and Suriname's credit rating was lowered (Starnieuws 2019).

In summary, during the period between 2000 and 2020, the major traditional mono-ethnic parties gradually lost their influence, with the NPS experiencing a more significant decline than the VHP. Concurrently, the NDP's popularity surged. Simultaneously, the political power of Maroon communities grew, leading to the establishment of their own political parties. Ethnicity and religion remained strong mobilization instruments, albeit with diminishing influence among the younger generation. While the traditional parties prioritized economic stability and bilateral relations with the Netherlands, and maintained a more elitist character, the NDP concentrated on populist measures, addressing the needs of impoverished communities, exhibiting little to no interest in bilateral relations with the Dutch, and being more accessible to lower socioeconomic groups.

As the 2020 elections approached, Suriname grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, curfews, and full lockdowns. Numerous corruption scandals, including allegations of involvement by the Central Bank governor and the Minister of Finance, were exposed, while the economic crisis had worsened. The inflation rate skyrocketed under the NDP's rule between 2010–2020, with further increases highly likely. The Association of Economists frequently voiced their concerns about governmental mismanagement in the media. Concurrently, many government employees did not receive their salaries on time, while contractors remained unpaid. The list of creditors continued to grow. Bilateral relations

with the Netherlands, the former colonizer, had deteriorated. At one point, Suriname had no Dutch ambassador, a consequence of the NDP's outspoken "anti-colonial policy."

The 2020 Elections: Creating Hegemony Through E-politics

To understand the role of hegemony and counterhegemony in e-politics during the 2020 election, particularly the utilization of social media, it is necessary to outline the resources of political parties. The ruling party, the NDP, had access to government communication channels, including the Parliament TV station, GOV TV, and another channel called Purple TV. The government media chief, openly aligned with the NDP, designed programs for TV and oversaw the government radio station, SRS. On SRS, he hosted an immensely popular program called *Bakana Tori*, meaning "afternoon chat," where he discussed daily and current issues in a common and simple language. The NDP maintained various social media pages.

The major opposition party, the VHP, had a TV station called Orange TV. It also had airtime on other television and radio stations. The same applies for the PL party. Other political parties bought airtime on the TV stations. All major opposition parties had Facebook pages, although I shall focus on the VHP in this paper. By June 2020, my research team identified 38 Facebook pages related to the NDP and another 34 for the VHP, although there were fewer active pages (at 24 and 28 respectively).

The NDP's growing challenge to retain power was influencing the public opinion in its own favor amidst the increasing number of corruption scandals and the worsened economic crisis. The NDP's campaign responded in kind, although it maintained focus on the themes of political leadership, ethnic diversity, decolonization, and populist measures. Its hegemonic institutions – both government and private resources, particularly the media – were the target of public scrutiny. Nevertheless, I noticed a pattern in political campaigning that corresponds with hegemonic strategies to influence public opinion. The first and foremost was the promotion of the NDP's leadership.

Leadership

The promotion of NDP leader, Bouterse, is central in the political campaigns, both in-person as well as online. Prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic the NDP had held several large political meetings where speakers from different ethnicity and ages, male and female, spoke in favor of its leader. Typically, the NDP's in-person political campaigning events had sought to emphasize Bouterse's charisma and affiliation with working people.[2] But during the pandemic most events shifted online.

A critical influence on the NDP's hegemonic strategies came from, what Gramsci called, organic and traditional leaders; in empirical terms the former being openly aligned to the NDP while the latter in a subtle way. One of the openly NDP-aligned, thus organic leaders, was media chief Clifton Limburg. He hosted Bakana Tori, a popular program on the government radio station, SRS, regularly praising Bouterse for his skills in addressing people's needs and concerns. Arguably some of these messages eroded the boundaries between state and party. Limburg frequently interviewed NDP members and adopted an uncritical pro-government and pro-NDP framing perspective, exercises that were not extended to other parties. At the same time, Bouterse was often absent in the parliament and so was not present to answer questions from the opposition. However, he would go to SRS to broadcast his messages, portions of which were then circulated via platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. With little opportunity to exercise critique, the NDP's messaging took the form of common sense.

Illustrative for the working of a traditional leader in hegemony, thus subtly aligned to the NDP, was the role of a Christian leader called Kenneth Donk. He was a Christian religious figure who praised Bouterse openly. Invoking from the Christian Bible, Donk paralleled the sacrifice of one man who died for humankind with the need for, in Suriname, for the people to die for one man to thrive, referring to Bouterse. Donk's

2 See for instance, recording of the meeting on 7 December 2019. "NDP wil 34 zetels halen," published by Starnieuws on Youtube video at 8:52. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjNDzdzqzik.

strained imaginary was applauded and cheered by the attendant audience.

From the perspective of e-politics, one could argue that the features of social media platforms aligned well with the NDP's hegemonic trajectory by enabling the avoidance of public discussion and criticism, a typical strategy in the creation of common sense. To elaborate, the portrayal of Bouterse as a charismatic and caring leader was crafted for dissemination on these platforms, as their affordances allowed partisans to overshadow critical discussions. For instance, the NDP's Facebook page regularly posted political messages propagating the leader, such as a picture of Limburg and Bouterse in the studio. While the post received both positive and negative comments, the positive ones included praises for the leader and his leadership, while negative comments criticized Bouterse for addressing issues on Bakana Tori instead of answering questions in parliament. This type of engagement meant that the platform boosted the visibility of posts where intense exercises of political identification took place, but at the expense of clarifying issues, policy agendas, or dialogues about the merits or trade-offs between different policy agendas. Again, elements of hegemony were present – supporters regarded their party's policy agenda as natural common sense, while there was little incentive to reason with those who failed to appreciate this perceived obvious fact.

Whenever corruption scandals were reported, the NDP propaganda machine made sure that its leader's character was not questioned. Critics would call this an "*a no mi*" syndrome, which in the lingua franca Sranan Tongo means "it is not my fault." This reference builds on the talking point where Bouterse repeatedly blames imperialists and foreigners for local economic problems (De West 2017). In 2020, virtual platforms were a core instrument in protecting the image of Bouterse. For example, party supporters frequently distributed WhatsApp images and audio that sought to "wall off" and otherwise disconnect evident corruption scandals from Bouterse. More generally, corruption was individuated and attributed to morally flawed persons or to conspiratorial courtiers whose goals were adjacent to Bouterse's

agenda. These tropes sought to grant indemnity to the NDP leadership ranks.

These messaging strategies that I have described here broadly conform to Gramsci's approach to common sense. Popular beliefs are propagated in such a way to gain support for the status quo, while critical thinking is paralyzed. In the case of Suriname, the common sense is that the public is to view leaders as fighting corruption rather than being the source thereof. The disempowering effect of these processes are also reflected in the politics of ethnic diversity.

Cultural diversity, including ethnicity, was not only a central theme in traditional politicking and consociationalism. It was also a core element in the NDP's political campaigning. For several years now, the NDP has successfully presented itself as a multiethnic party, challenging traditional monoethnic parties. Its multiethnic outlook has been appealing to younger voters who are more ambivalent about traditional parties, which in practice exist to promote narrow ethnic identity. The same trends continued during the 2020 election. At both online and face-to-face meetings, the NDP's political propaganda was ethnically diverse. For example, social media posts intentionally included pictures of the major ethnic groups, while propaganda songs were sung by artists of various ethnicities. This diversity was also propagated in a positivity of the party's motto "*soso lobi*" which means "only love." It meant to illustrate the warmth, down-to-earth, and all-embracing nature of the political party. This slogan was used in many Facebook posts and political speeches. "*Soso lobi*" was repeated at various platforms, which is essential for creating an order to be considered "natural." Combined with the harmonious representation of various ethnic groups, narratives about colonization, praiseworthy leadership of the political party, and populist policies, the NDP followed a communication strategy on social media to justify its status quo and to prevent being overthrown politically.

One striking aspect of the 2020 elections was the political framing of ethnicity on social media. While ethnic diversity was positively portrayed by the NDP on their Facebook page, the same diversity was ridiculed by individuals identifying themselves as NDP supporters on social media by using outdated, preju-

dicial stereotypes. Anti-colonialism, another theme of the NDP's political campaigning, was reflected in fierce opposition to those who created links with the Dutch. In general, government critics were considered state enemies. This was the case for years, not only during the political campaigning (Starnieuws 2012). But opposition parties like the VHP were accused of being a traitor and favoring Dutch rule over Suriname again. On Facebook, this image of the VHP was constantly reinforced. In 2020 prior to the elections, a person replied to a post of a picture of Bouterse and Limburg that East Indians were responsible for creating a mess in the country. It was implied they would enrich themselves, create links with the Dutch to take over Suriname again, and keep Black people subordinated.

Policies

Policy directives can be used for maintaining political power. The ruling party followed various populist measures during political campaigning, such as distribution of packages to the poor people. There were also special community shops where locals could purchase items for a lower price. These measures were aimed at gaining popular support from the poor communities who were hit hard by the economic crisis. At the same time, the NDP usually openly blamed imperialists and foreigners for local economic problems. Frequently, opposition parties, including the VHP, were accused of being their allies. Some major infrastructural projects were also implemented (or at least scheduled) to win approval from the masses. The NDP announced projects like a railway from the capital city to Onverwacht, district Para, and building flyovers.

Creating Allies

To retain the political power, the NDP tried to develop ties with people who were increasingly popular and hence advantageous for getting votes. Among these persons were also activists who criticized the NDP's rule, such as Maisha Neus, who later founded her own political party STREI! Prior to the establishment of her party, she and other young people organized large protests. A popular one was called "*We zijn Moe*," which in Dutch means "we are tired." The protests started small with lots of criticism by both

common people as well as the government. The president called the leader of the *We zijn Moe* protests, Curtis Hofwijks, to talk about issues. But this did not change the strategy of activists. In the course of time the leaders of the protests decided to establish a political party, and this made people frown. Acquiring political power in public opinion was perceived as a naïve and even opportunistic move. We can say that the protesting people were part of civil society who were not able to join forces. And this in the Gramscian approach is critical for challenging power relations.

The political strategy of the NDP to ask Neus to join the party can be interpreted as hegemonic; for it is trying to build partnership with those who rebel against the system and can have benefits as allies for the existing power relations. The NDP also approached exponents of the VHP and NPS (Fatehmahomed 2018). Not all were successful. But the NDP's allies also consisted of influential churches and private sector agencies. The main church supporting the NDP was God's Bazuin, led by Steve Meye, who was also the spiritual advisor of the president for ten years. Among the private companies that the NDP had strong links with, were Combe Markt and Chotelal Supermarket, which are popular for their cheaper products for grassroot groups. In this way the NDP attempted to keep the support of grassroot groups. In the Gramscian register, hegemonic allies ensure that rebellion against ruling powers is prevented. This was largely the case. A few months before the elections, polls showed that the NDP was losing seats in Parliament; however, it remained influential while the number of undecided voters was growing (Suriname Herald, May 23, 2020, May 23).

Counterhegemony and E-politics

How did the opposition parties, particularly the VHP, contest the NDP's strategy to exert ideological control over the public? From a Gramscian perspective, counterhegemonic initiatives necessitate their own organic leaders, rooted in the community and independent from the ruling ones. Moreover, autonomous organizations are required to reflect on the hegemonic powers, develop critical awareness, and ultimately reinforce this awareness among the counterhegemonic parties. Let us examine how these con-

cepts manifested in the VHP's role during the power struggles of the elections.

Leadership

A strict Gramscian interpretation of organic leaders for counterhegemonic actions cannot be used in the case of the Suriname elections 2020, as this political organization had exponents who used to be linked to the NDP (Dagblad Suriname 2019). This is not unique. The swinging of candidates from one political party to another is a familiar phenomenon in the historical political landscape of Suriname. However, VHP leadership did set an agenda for developing critical awareness about the NDP. The main themes the VHP campaigned on were: 1. Change; 2. zero corruption; 3. getting the economy back on the right track through honest, decisive and professional management; 4. the improvement of the living standard of the Surinamese people, especially the youth; and, lastly, 5. making Suriname globally respected again as a real democracy were the rule of law stands central (Starnieuws 2020. The motto of the VHP was "*W'o set' en*," in the lingua franca meaning "we will make it better, we will solve it."

The VHP was the largest opposition party to enter the 2020 elections. Their political strategy was diversifying the gender, age, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their candidates. The VHP campaigned in two ways, focusing firstly on national issues and, secondly, on local campaigns. A strategy calculated down to the street level. Its leader, Chandrikapersad Santokhi, further indicated that several things have been included in the work plan, such as the transformation of the party (Suriname Herald 2020a). According to Santokhi, the VHP had to enter national elections and had to ensure that it was given government responsibility after the 2020 elections. The party's target was twenty-eight seats. "We need a campaign to get those 28 seats. In all districts we have all the addresses of everyone. With 'Meet the People' we take people's problems to the streets" (Awana, 2019).

Social Interaction

Social media was an important tool, used by the VHP, to enhance the critical awareness about the NDP. The VHP regularly emphasized the NDP's corruption scandals and its responsibility for causing the national economic crisis. In doing so, the social media "war" between coalition and opposition was evident. Various pages affiliated to the VHP, such as *San we Ley So*, *Weg met Bouta*, and *Red Suriname* regularly published anti-NDP posts. In addition to these pages, there were individual accounts of persons with many followers who were hired to just post anti-government or anti-NDP messages. There were breaking news items, revealing corruption cases which caused lots of irritation among the public. It was challenging for the government to explain these Facebook "reports" which at times were fake or taken out of context. I often had discussions about the socioeconomic situation and political campaigning themes with a small entrepreneur, who had links with influential persons in both the NDP and the VHP. This entrepreneur regularly underlined that it was critical to save the country from the NDP's rule or the economy would be doomed for generations. He admitted that it was hardly impossible to campaign against the appealing multiethnic profile of the NDP, and therefore various entrepreneurs spontaneously sponsored the VHP's social media campaigning on corruption.

At the same time, the VHP strived to present itself as a multiethnic party. This image was cultivated through various measures, including the promotion of candidates from diverse ethnic backgrounds to high-profile positions. The media widely publicized their membership and candidate list. The party also employed strategies such as creating videos and images that represented different ethnic groups. In the run-up to the election, VHP supporters frequently shared political messages, often daily, to the point of appearing populist, which made unbiased discussions nearly unattainable. Election debates gradually became polarized along ethnic lines. From the NDP's perspective, they accused the VHP through Facebook posts of being a counterfeit multiethnic party, branding it as a racist and elitist East Indian party that considers other ethnic groups as inferior. Creoles who aligned with this party were labeled as traitors and opportunists. The intense campaign debates between the NDP and the VHP also impacted professional circles.

Autonomous Organizations

In Gramscian terms, autonomous organizations provide the space for developing critical awareness, ideally rooted in civil society. As with leadership, autonomous organizations cannot be applied in strict Gramscian sense to this paper as the VHP cannot be perceived as civil society agent. However, its links with civil society and other stakeholders should be considered in developing counterhegemonic power. The VHP had allies including sponsors, civil society groups, business circles, cultural groups, diaspora communities. But among them one group, which was related to civil society, was highly influential in convincing the undecided voters to vote: the Next Generation. This group promoted the motto "*Stem Slim*," literally meaning vote smart in Dutch. "*Stem Slim*" was meant to encourage citizens to vote on the largest opposition party in the own district, with the sole purpose of keeping the NDP out of political office. It was openly an anti-NDP movement that used social and mainstream media to encourage voting for large opposition political parties. One of the strengths of this group was its communication through social media. On Facebook, for instance, the administrator replied to comments of individuals. The *Stem Slim* movement contributed to convincing people, who were disillusioned about the economic situation in the country, to vote. However, it discouraged smaller political parties, including those who were established by the activists.

Concluding Remarks

E-politics, in particular social media campaigning, has changed the nature of power struggles during the Suriname elections of 2020. Political parties, but the largest competing ones in particular – the NDP and the VHP – had to shift from traditional campaigning to virtual campaigning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony and e-politics, this paper analyzed how ideological control was exercised and contested during political power struggles. To recap, the NDP tried to secure its power by focusing on the following themes in the political campaigning: political leadership, ethnic diversity, decolonization, populist measures. The propaganda mechanisms worked in such a way to prevent questioning the leadership of NDP and accept his rule, which can be interpreted as a strategy to ideologically control the masses.

Another strategy to retain political control was to create allies in particular civil society groups that challenged the government. The major opposition party, the VHP, contested the political strategies of the NDP by focusing on anti-corruption, including rule of law and ethnic diversity. It was supported by various groups, but significant support was from a civil society group that promoted smart voting. In the entire political competition, the most remarkable was the polarized interethnic discussions online. While ethnic diversity was promoted in a positive way by both parties, the engagements on social media emphasized stereotypes, which was not common on such a wide scale during previous elections. Virtual campaigning was characterized by one-sided and even fake news.

Acknowledgements

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