

## **POPULAR MOBILIZATION AND SOCIAL UNREST IN GUYANA'S BAUXITE MINING TOWN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Social activism in Linden exploded when lethal violence by the police killed three unarmed protestors and injured several others. A mass collectivity of dissatisfied people took over the streets to protest the injustice and the harsh socioeconomic conditions made harder by the imposed electricity reform announced by the minority government amidst dire economic circumstances. This study explored the month long unrest in Linden in order to understand and describe its nature and dynamics. Phenomenological and unobtrusive designs were used to detect the underlying meanings of the unrest. Data was obtained from multiple sources and content analyzed to identify relationships, themes and patterns. The analysis points to economic plight, active resistance, popular support, political support, presidential malaise, police negligence, military occupation and resistant leadership, which emerged as important interconnected themes. It was found that unconventional action tilted in favor of a radical formation. The analysis also shows that resistance was conditioned by economic deprivation and residents' dissatisfaction with the electricity reform policy.*

**Keywords:** Unrest, protest, Linden, resistance, residents

### **INTRODUCTION**

The minority People's Progressive Party Civic (PPPC) government announced an increase in electricity tariff aimed at integrating Linden into the national grid. This reform policy was made at a time of dire economic

circumstances and exacerbated feelings of discontent. On July 18, 2012, mobilized residents proceeded on a “shut-the-town-down” protest march. Police intervention resulted in shooting and killing of three persons and gunshot injuries to several others. This changed the course of the event and unrest broke out and lasted for one month. Economic life came to a standstill, vehicles and buildings were burnt and roads and bridges were blocked. During that time the state coercive forces were challenged to maintain order as Lindeners stood in conflict with the government.

This study explores, describes and provides insights into the nature of the upheaval and its impact on the socioeconomic and political life in Linden. It identifies and examines the factors which influenced people’s resistance and how they constructed the unrest. Phenomenological and unobtrusive designs were employed to unearth the meanings attached to the unrest. Data was provided by multiple sources and content analysis was used to detect themes, patterns and relationships. The analysis points to economic plight, active resistance, popular support, political support, presidential malaise, police negligence, military occupation and resistant leadership, which emerged as important interconnected themes. It was found that unconventional action tilted in favor of radical formation. Active resistance by Linden residents attracted popular and political support alongside security operations. Also, the unrest which was conditioned by economic deprivation and dissatisfaction brought several related issues together.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Conceptualizing Unrest***

Unrest, planned or spontaneous, is an extreme form of popular protest and unconventional collective behavior. It is a phenomenon of ordinary people against the status quo to emancipate themselves from unfavorable conditions. Renn, Jovanovic and Schröter (2011) postulated that unrest “is an expression of collective dissatisfaction with the political system and manifests itself in unconventional forms of protest behavior” (p. 20). It is a

high risk behavior and a situation of disturbance and turmoil involving extreme actions with the potential for physical and psychological damage which includes; blocking of roads, destroying public and private property, rioting and bringing harm to human life. Unrest represents a class-based movement of poor people protesting against an undemocratic government and the lack of inclusion in economic development (Forsyth, 2010).

### ***Factors Influencing Participation in Unrest***

Individuals engage in protest when they perceive that a group with whom they identify has been treated unjustly and further believe that collective action will be effective in correcting the injustice (Klandermans, 1984 as cited in Kelloway, Francis, Catano, & Teed, 2007). Perceived injustice, identification with the group and perceived effectiveness of participation influences the decision to participate in protest action which increases loyalty and militancy (Kelloway, Francis, Catano and Teed, 2007). Unrest is driven by a willingness to participate, which is a function of the perceived costs and benefits of participation (Klandermans, 1984). Frajman (2009) contended that the main causes of protest are citizens' dissatisfaction with political leaders and the manner in which initiatives are negotiated and communicated. Structural deficiencies in the forms of rising cost of living, high levels of unemployment and scandals involving high ranking governmental officials are also sources of protest and unrest (Karamichas, 2009).

Mass demonstration opposing a government initiative to deregulate the electricity service erupted in Costa Rica in 2000 (Frajman, 2009). The inability of the policy-makers to articulate a position acceptable to the citizenry left public space under the dominant influence of social organisations that opposed the initiative (2009). Fatal police shooting of a teenager in Greece, in 2008 sparked a three week uprising, which brought together a myriad of issues that unleashed pent up anger (Karamichas, 2009). In 2010, nearly 90 citizens in Thailand were shot dead and more than 2,100 injured as protestors clashed with armed soldiers in resistance to an undemocratic government and the lack of inclusion in economic development (Forsyth, 2010).

### ***Patterns of Social Protest in Guyana***

Protest and unrest in Guyana can be traced to slave rebellions, anti-colonial struggles, and labor resistance. Poor working conditions united sugar workers against the colonial system, which unleashed lethal violence that claimed many lives (Carpen, 2008). The period 1961–1964 was characterized by racial conflict as the most extreme form of unrest (Scott, 2012; Scott, 2004). Between 1969 and 1979 a series of strikes occurred in Linden (Scott, 2004; Hinds, 2002). In 1969, protesting Lindeners blocked the Wismar/Mackenzie Bridge for a fortnight and a similar protest was held there in 2004 (Lewis, 2012 as cited in Jordan, 2012). Protests heightened during the latter half of the tenure of Burnham and the People's National Congress (PNC). Mass demonstrations, civil rebellion and protests evolved into a leftist People's Power Movement shaped by Walter Rodney and the Working People's Alliance (WPA) (Cummings, 2000; Kwayana, 1988 & Lewis, 1998). This pressure group later became a political party and the victim of state violence.

Political tension in Guyana skyrocketed during and after elections and often descended to violent protest and demonstrations. After PPPC won elections in 1992, 1997 and 2001 popular demonstrations rocked the capital city of Georgetown (Ishmael, 2005; Asselin, Arnusch, Graham & Ticas, n.d.). Following the 2011 elections, opposition protestors were shot by the police using rubber bullets (Granger warns police, 2001 & Wilkinson, 2001). These post electoral demonstrations symbolized the opposition's dissatisfaction with the outcome of the elections.

### ***Conceptual Issues of Unrest***

Unrest encompasses the closely related features of collective behavior, mass mobilization and mass participation. Tilly (1978) argued that collective behavior involves contentious gatherings, publicly visible assemblies in which conflicting interest are clearly in play and based on shared interest which binds people together for a common cause. Collective action is about power and politics and it inevitably raises questions of right and wrong, justice and in justice, hope and hopelessness (Tilly, 1978).

Tilly (1978) linked collective action with mobilization which is a process by which collective control over resources is acquired for collective action. Those resources may be labor power, goods, weapons, votes and any number of other things that are usable in acting on shared interests (Tilly, 1978). People are an important resource for mass mobilization which is "... organically driven and part of contentious politics involving the coming together of lower class people in a struggle with the political administration" (Wikipedia, n.d.). Mass mobilization is a social movement activity facilitating change through mass gatherings, rallies, meetings and parades as part of participatory democracy grounded in contentious politics (Wikipedia, n. d.). These tenets provided a framework for examining the unrest which occurred in Linden.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

People participate in unrest when they perceive that there is injustice. Recognizing that injustice is a potent force which unites people for participation in unconventional behavior, this study answered the following questions: What were the underlying factors of the unrest? What impact did the unrest have on the socioeconomic state of Linden?

## **METHOD**

### ***Study Design and Data Sources***

The phenomenological and unobtrusive designs were employed to uncover the meanings attached to the unrest. This study utilized multiple data sources which included; interviews, observation and media reports.

Arising out of several casual conversations the first interviewee was selected using a purposive judgmental technique and the other six (6) by a system of referral. The result of which were four (4) males and two (2) females. Additionally, four (4) newspapers (Guyana Chronicle, Stabroek news, Guyana Times and Kaieteur news) were subjected to a simple random

sampling. This process was conducted by assigning a reference number to each newspaper using the year and their order of existence. Guyana Chronicle = 2014 – 01, Stabroek News = 2014 – 02, Kaieteur News 2014 – 03 and Guyana Times = 2014 – 04. These numbers were placed in a bag and two (2) were chosen by a blind folded individual. The process resulted in the selection of the Stabroek News and Kaieteur newspapers. The dates of each of the papers spanning the period July 19 to August 20, 2012 resulted in a sample frame of sixty six (66) newspapers. From this, forty six (46) newspapers (31 Kaieteur News and 15 Stabroek News) were selected by a random process. The units of analysis (articles) were selected on the basis of title and content resulting in seventy (70) articles from the Stabroek Newspapers and one hundred and forty four (144) articles from the Kaieteur Newspapers.

### ***Data Extraction and Analysis***

Five (5) in-depth face-to-face interviews and two (2) telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. The schedule asked respondents for their opinion on; the circumstances surrounding the unrest, why bridges and roads were blocked, role of government and the opposition and how the delayed visit of the President of Guyana impacted the unrest. Data was also obtained from media reports by a process of content analysis.

Repetition of ideas and inductive reasoning resulted in the identification of coding categories. Coding categories were used to reduce and organize the data into a manageable format to allow for thematic, pattern and relational analyses. A process of constant comparison resulted in higher order themes and categories. They were compared with independently derived coding schema and codes and categories were refined through a consensual process. Several higher order categories were grouped into the following themes; economic plight, active resistance, popular support, political support, presidential malaise, police negligence, military occupation and resistant leadership. These delineate significant aspects of the unrest and were used as organizing context to narrate the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Active Resistance***

On July 18, 2012 residents of Linden embarked on a protest march following widespread consultations, a protest in April, 2012, and an awareness meeting conducted by religious leaders in early July, 2012. The march was the beginning of a planned five day “shut-the-town-down” protest to call attention to the prevailing socioeconomic conditions and a perceived worsening of such by the electricity reform policy of the minority Peoples Progressive Party Civic (PPPC) government. The tariff increase came at a time when there were concerns about the general socioeconomic conditions, unemployment, absence of a land selection committee and absence of a television (TV) station.

The idea of integrating Linden into the national electricity grid was articulated in 1976 by the late President Forbes Burnham (Guybau News, 1976). At that time conditions were different and more favorable and protected against resistance. Respondent five (R5) in a telephone interview pointed out that there was no problem becoming part of the national grid, but economically people lacked the means to respond favorably. This view was substantiated by a protestor who expressed frustration and economic plight in these words:

This bill we cannot pay that, we don't have jobs. How much people like me and others are going to be on the street begging? We cannot go to the President to beg for a plate of rice, we cannot go to [Prime Minister] Sam Hinds and ask for nothing. We are here struggling fighting for our lives (Bhagirat, 2012, p.13).

The reference to unemployment and the inability to satisfy basic needs highlight the economic woes of the people. With regards to the March respondent five (R5) had this to say:

People were marching from Wismar to the Call Center in McKenzie for a protest rally and when they got to the

Wismar/McKenzie Bridge they stopped for a moment to rest. This was entirely a decision by the people.

(Male Interviewee, 2012)

When asked why the Bridge was used as a stop point, Respondent five (R5) stated:

It was the only place the march could have stopped and get (sic) the necessary attention ... the intent was being heard and given the necessary attention... there was no consultation with the people in this process. This was the people's way of saying, we're not happy with your decision, you haven't even looked at whether we could make this ... increase.

(Male Interviewee, 2012)

It is evident that the Wismar/McKenzie Bridge, which spans the Demerara River and provides an important vehicular link to the hinterland, became a location for the protestors to make a statement that "enough is enough." According to a protestor "only when we go on the bridge then we does (sic) get attention" (Kaieteur News, 2012). Their presence on the bridge rendered it impassable and raised concerns regarding the nature of the protest. Police intervention to remove the protestors was met with resistance as explained by Respondent four (R4):

The intervention of the police with a loudhailer to disperse the crowd failed resulting in armed police advancing towards unarmed protestors who also began advancing towards the police. This caused the police to back off and leave but the people remained on the Bridge.

(Female interviewee, 2012)

In spite of this show of defiance the police returned in the early hours of the evening of July 18, 2012. While in the process of removing protestors shots were fired. According to Bhagirat (2012) a protester reported:



... no one fired or created unrest when the police arrived... earlier during the day, members of the riot squad were there with a loud speaker pleading with the protesters to go home but no one heeded their call, resulting in them leaving and returning armed (, p. 25)

Respondent three (R3) recapped the incident in these words:

The police returned and started shooting. It was unclear if a megaphone was used to warn people and if it was it could not be heard. What was heard was shooting and people screaming and shouting. This was unnecessary because People were not attacking the police; we were playing music, praying and singing.

(Male Interviewee, 2012)

According to Kaieteur News (2012) one protestor recalled that the police “went with the intention to kill. They released teargas, then shoot pellets at the crowd and lastly, fired live rounds. The crowd got angry when the police start shooting” (p. 11). Three Afro-Guyanese males were shot and killed and several persons injured from subsequent shooting incidents. The killings sparked outrage resulting in blockades to the town’s primary and secondary roads and bridges and millions of dollars in destruction to equipment and infrastructure.

The President of Guyana announced an investigation while calls were made for him to visit Linden. The Head of State demanded that the blockades be removed and that the situation be normalized. According to Respondent One (R1) “the police was informed of the planned protest but their reaction is (sic) nothing but poor preparation.” This was noted by the absence of shields, baton, and other critical riot gears. The inability of the police to engage in effective crowd control led to the deployment of a military contingent and several military camps dotted the landscape of Linden. The presence of the police and the military added to the tension but did not stimulate fear among the protesters. An intense social crisis ensued when

unarmed residents clashed with armed uniformed ranks. The Regional 10 Chairman captured one incident in the following words:

... at 2 am that day the armed forces invaded Linden firing tear gas and forced men, women and children and the elderly onto the streets...the armed forces declared the area a war zone as they proceeded to antagonise and brutalise the residents and buildings were again destroyed.

(Fraser, 2012, p. 13)

As the unrest gained momentum residents resisted appeals by the security forces to disperse and discontinue the blocking of roads. As fast as blockades were cleared other parts were made impassable. The struggle by the Joint Forces to gain control of the situation was further complicated when the President cancelled a visit to meet with protesters.

A scene at the Kara Kara Bridge (another main access and exit), was captured in these words:

Amidst shouts of 'no retreat no surrender' residents insisted that they would not be removed. They then formed themselves into human barriers, backing the soldiers and rolled several lengths of lumber onto the bridge where they remained.

The joint services then advanced again on the bridge and attempted to clear the blockade. As the loader lifted a piece of lumber, angry residents ran under the bucket and insisted that they would not be moved. There was wailing and weeping as some cried (Richards and Abraham, 2012, p. 9)

This act of civil disobedience is indicative of the courage of the protesters but the security ranks eventually took control of the Kara Kara Bridge in an early morning operation on July 29, 2012.

### ***Contentious Issues of Protest March and Unrest***

Figure 1- Contentious issues of Protest March and Unrest

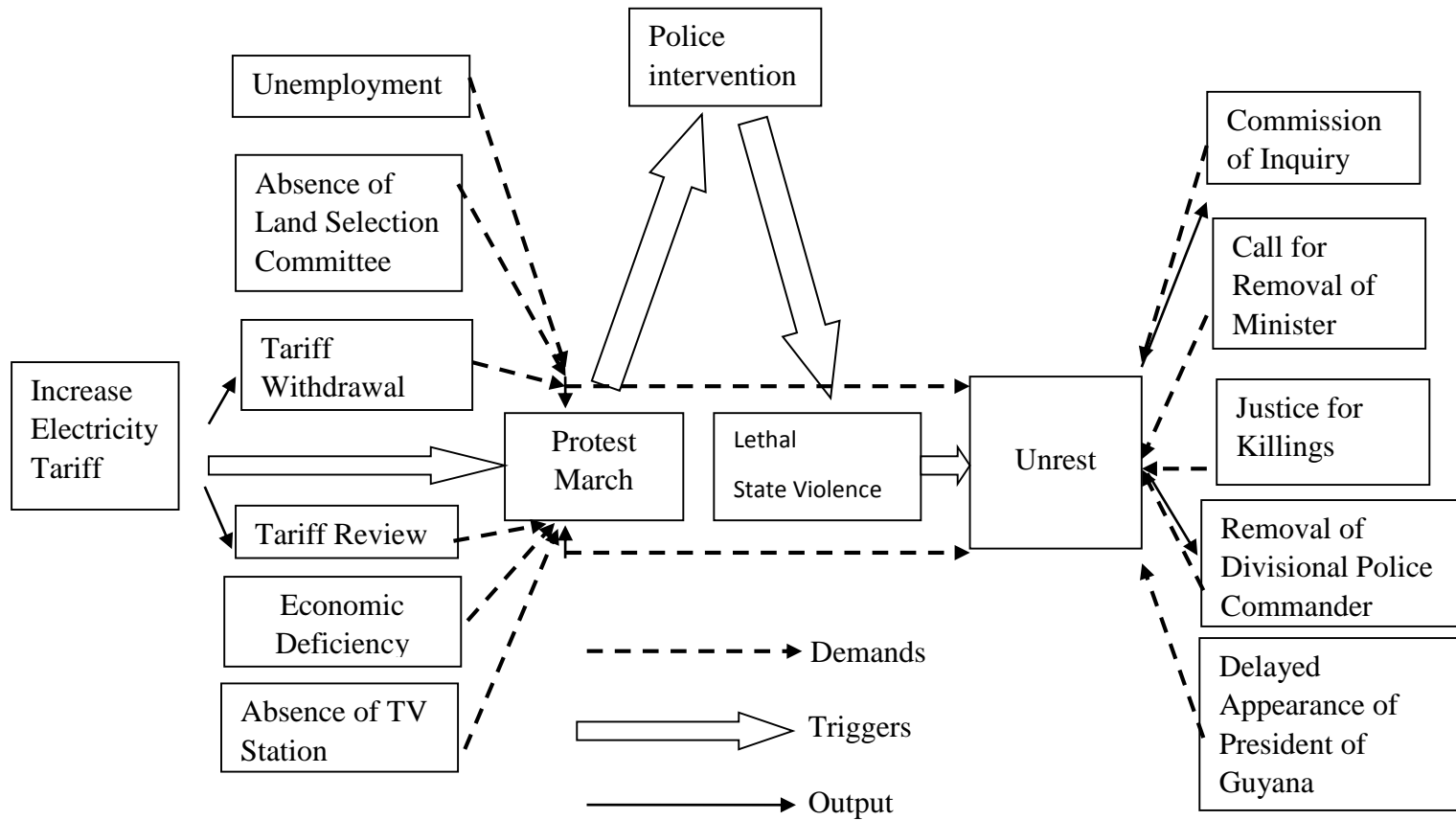
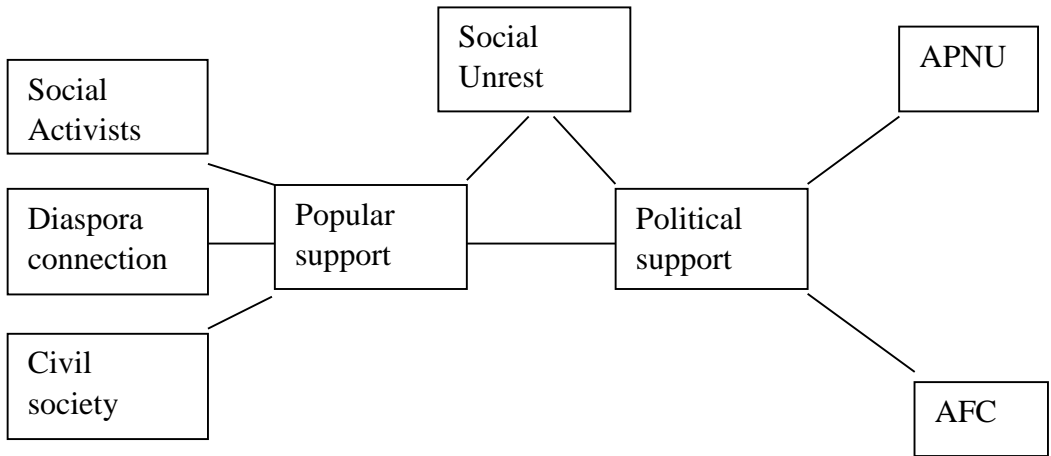


Figure 1 above depicts that increase electricity tariff triggered the protest march which was shaped by preexisting concerns. These are unemployment, absence of a land selection committee, economic deficiency, absence of a television (TV) station, withdrawal and review of tariff. Withdrawal and review of tariff came out of the proposed increase. People considered these issues to be fundamental to their livelihood and used them as boosters for the unrest which erupted after police unleashed lethal violence. Figure 1 also depicts that the unrest widened the scope of the people's demands to include interrelated issues such as; a call for a commission of inquiry, a call for the removal of the Home Affairs Minister, justice for the killings, removal of the Police Divisional Commander and delayed appearance of the President of Guyana. The call for the removal of the Minister of Home Affairs and the Police Divisional Commander calls attention to the failure of the leadership to protect the safety of citizens. Justice for the killings assumes importance because people were concern that the perpetrators would not be held accountable for their actions. This underscores the call for a commission of inquiry to investigate into the cause of the unrest. The delayed appearance of the President exacerbated the tension which residents felt worsened the situation and fanned the flames of the unrest. Figure 1 also depicts that the commission of inquiry and removal of the Police Divisional Commander were outputs of the unrest.

### Popular and Political Support

Figure 2

#### Supportive Network



**Figure 2** depicts that popular support (popsup) and political support (polsup) were the two main sources of support constructed from initiatives of social activists, Diaspora connections, civil society, and the two parliamentary opposition political organizations, APNU (A Partnership for National Unity) and AFC (Alliance for Change). Figure 2 also depicts that while popsup reflected broad base involvement, polsup was limited to the role of APNU and AFC.

It was observed that opposition political leaders and their representatives along with social activists were on site “grounding” (a term used by Walter Rodney to mean reasoning) with Lindeners in a time of crisis. The APNU and the AFC pushed for an independent commission of inquiry (Kaieteur News, 2012) while the APNU moved a no-confident motion in parliament against the Home Affairs Minister (Eleazar, 2012) with ministerial oversight for the Guyana Police Force. The motion was met with strong objections from the minority PPPC government (2012) but was eventually passed by the opposition controlled national assembly (2012). The APNU and the AFC were part of the negotiating team but played a secondary role

to the Linden leadership. The APNU was also part of the team that drafted the terms of reference for the Commission of Inquiry.

Internal to Linden, some women manned makeshift kitchens and prepared meals for the protestors while others occupied positions on the frontline. The church presence cannot be denied as mentioned by Respondent five (R5):

The church helped to preserve the struggle by soliciting and distributing food items to sustain food camps and by extension the unrest while offering hope and direction. Religious leaders sought a divine intervention into the crisis through prayer services and encouraged people to look to the supernatural power for a solution. The religious community was a critical force in restraining the people from descending to revenge behavior.

(Male interviewee, 2012)

In the capital city, 65 miles away from the unrest, supportive events were held in the vicinity of power centers mainly; Parliament Building, Office of the President, State House, Passport and Immigration Office and Freedom House (headquarters of the PPPC). An all-night vigil and a people's parliament, which was disbanded by the law enforcement agency, also occupied the vicinity of Parliament Building. A march led by political opposition forces from the Square of the Revolution to Parliament Building to recognize a day of mourning also added to the many solidarity initiatives.

Internationally, demonstrations were held by the Guyanese Diaspora in London; Toronto Canada; New York (Trotz, 2012) and at the United Nations. Alongside these unconventional initiatives, concerned individuals (locally and international) adopted conventional behavior and contributed letters to the editors of the local newspapers expressing opinions regarding the unrest.

**Table 1: Distribution of Opinion Letters to the Editor by Newspapers**

NEWSPAPERS	LETTERS TO THE EDITOR			Total
	Support	Neutral	Nonsupport	
STABROEK NEWS	15	2	2	19
KAIETEUR NEWS	31	3	0	34
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	5	2	53

Table 1 show that of the fifty three (53) letters, forty six (46) or 87% expressed support for the unrest. Of the forty six (46) supportive opinions, thirty one (31) or 67% were reported in the Kaieteur News and fifteen (15) or 33% in Stabroek News. The high level of conventional support draws attention to the fact that participation in collective action goes beyond unconventional involvement.

### **Contrasting Leadership**

Resistant leadership was demonstrated by the then Chairman of Region Ten (10) whose position facilitated his role of chief negotiator for Linden in talks with the government. Contrary, malaise was evident from the tone of an extract of the letter issued by the then President of Guyana. The extract of the letter states:

We proposed a phased programmed of reductions of the subsidy. This phased reduction would have resulted in gradual increases in tariffs in a way that would have avoided hardships. We also suggested other models to minimize the impact of the increases on the vulnerable, such as bauxite pensioners. At the same time we encourage conservation. All these things were not told to you because desperate ‘extremist’ wanted to use this issue to promote their personal agenda for power (Ramotar, 2012, para. 6).

Here the then President of Guyana highlighted strategies to mitigate discomfort but also blamed others for the unrest. Labeling others as “extremist” was rejected by a protestor in these words “... if they want to label us they can call us revolutionaries cause that is what we are” (Ramsaroop, 2012). The eventual visit by the then President of Guyana, was

made at a time when the sitting Regional Ten (10) Chairman was in the city meeting with governmental officials and advancing the people's cause, vowing that the unrest will only end when government respond responsibly to the issues affecting Linden.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored and described the unrest, which erupted in Linden, Guyana's bauxite mining town, on July 18, 2012 and ended August 17, 2012. Content analysis unearthed important themes which provided insights into the unrest. Consistent with findings by Karamichas (2009) the relationship between Lindeners and the government became polarized and defined by multiple socioeconomic issues.

The plethora of issues impacting the well-being of people suggests that the unrest was not shaped by one issue only. Similar to the Costa Rica upheaval in 2001 (Frajman, 2009) the reform brought the grievances together and caused an already combustible situation to ignite and an imminent resistance that was in the making was hastened by irresponsible police actions. This being so the cause of the unrest can be found beyond the immediate obvious catalyst of police brutality (Karmichas, 2009). Therefore, the unrest called attention to the problems of Linden, which has to be understood in terms of how people felt and responded to what became significant for them. Basically, Lindeners had an awareness of where they stood in the developmental trajectory and should the trend of economic decline continue the impact on their well-being and identity of a prosperous town would be affected. As such, Lindeners found themselves resisting a further decline in their standard of living.

After several attempts to attract the government's attention, residents were left with the options of either protesting or accepting the tariff increase. Faced with economic challenges emanating from both situations discontented people rejected political politeness and transformed Linden



into a contested space for the realization of radical possibilities. An organic struggle took shape and deepened the unity and consciousness of people engaged in sowing a revolutionary seed, which was not fertilized and nurtured to maturity.

At the time of the unrest, socioeconomic conditions in Linden tilted in favor of radicalized formation involving ordinary people who put aside their differences to confront the state. People were demonstrating the capacity to reject the present in order to redefine their future. Klandermans (1984) finding that there is a willingness to engage in collective action was supported by the activism which represented the collective will of Lindeners. In this atmosphere Presidential malaise characterized by delay became evident and resistant leadership emerged in the role of representative of a class who by their own self activity and discipline were beginning the process of becoming self-emancipated.

The unrest took on an unpredictable life of its own and with its own energy rendered the town socially and economically lifeless and a fragile socioeconomic culture tilted on the verge of collapsing. Also threatened were the fledging economies of small surrounding communities. These became collateral damages, as unconventional collective behavior produced ripple effects which were manifested in shortages of essential commodities.

The struggle evolved in a politically charged environment and could not avoid such influence. This was deepened by parliamentary debates on the terms of reference for the Commission of Inquiry and the no confidence motion against the Minister of Home Affairs. Given the strategic advantage arising out of a new dispensation after the 2011 elections, the unrest presented the parliamentary oppositions (APNU and AFC) with plausible political opportunities which were not fully exploited. The supportive role of the political oppositions must be understood in terms of concern for their image and how they can affect the organic process and nature of a community action. Popular and political support expanded the struggle beyond Linden but did not go beyond peaceful picketing exercises to engage in similar popular demonstration.

As negotiations continued with government, residents stood firm and displayed courage against the coercive lethal force of the state. This does not suggest that the coercive machinery had lost control but that another force was at work, one which sought to break the absolute dominance of the minority government. In contrast to the state's lethality, people's only weapons were the combined use of their bodies and the physical infrastructure. The heavy presence of the military suggested that the police had failed to return the community to normalcy and as a result failed to execute its mandate of service and protection.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Linden struggle revealed that people in oppressive situations are a potent revolutionary force. They are likely to challenge the status quo when; (1) pushed to a point of discontent and (2) alienated from political decisions that impact their social and economic well-being. In going forward, it is wise for government to: (1) consult with the masses and articulate a position consistent with their needs. (2) Reform police training to include courses in behavioral sciences such as sociology of collective behavior, crowd control and emotional intelligence. Riot training needs to be upscale to include the use of humane tactics. Language such as "this is your final warning, disperse and go to your homes" only serve to incite rather than quell and should be avoided. Therefore, the need to be more engaging when dealing with protesting crowds is paramount.

This study opens doors for further research particularly in accounting for and analyzing; (1) the political dynamics of the struggle, (2) the impact of policy reform on human reaction, (3) the failure of protest by civil society and the unrest to erupt into comparable events countrywide, (4) the role of women in the struggle (5), the role of the private sector (6), the role of the church as a conservative stakeholder in a radical formation and (7) psychosocial impact assessment to determine how residents cope with the traumatic experience as they picked up the pieces.

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