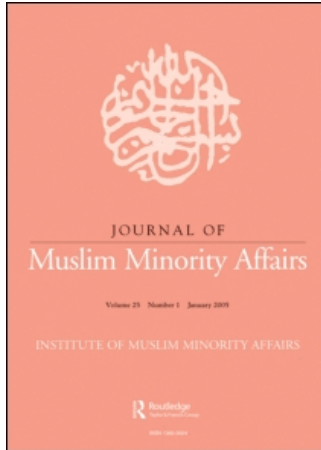


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## Islamic Organizations in Guyana: Seventy Years of History and Politics, 1936–2006

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RAYMOND S. CHICKRIE

### *Abstract*

*This paper is an exploratory attempt to document the history and politics of Islamic organizations in Guyana from the 1930s and, in doing so, it exposes the schism that exists among them. For a country with a small Muslim population, Guyana has a plethora of Islamic organizations. These organizations have had antagonistic relationships and it seems that competing for organizational supremacy supersedes the interests of Islam. Conflicts between these organizations stem from differences between “traditionalists” and “reformists” over so-called “ancestral practices” brought from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent (where their ancestors originated), and they have become the core issue of contention. Conflict exists over political allegiances, and as demonstrated, this dates back to the 1950s over the volatile issue of whether Muslims should support communism or not. While the divide between the traditionalists and the reformists is closing, Islamic organizations are far from uniting due to the egos of those in leadership positions, and they lay the blame on one another for the stalemate. The weakness of the Muslim leadership in achieving their organizations’ goals as well as their inability to effectively bargain with the secular state of Guyana could be attributed to the differences that exist among them.*

### **Introduction**

The myth of El Dorado, the Kingdom of Gold, lured the British, Dutch, and French to the Guianas. Disappointed at not finding gold, they began cultivating sugar using African slave labor. However, after the abolition of slavery in 1834, a new source of labor was needed and the British turned to India to fill that void. In addition, social, political, and economic circumstances in the motherland also impelled Indians to migrate mainly from the two Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar between 1838 and 1916. Under this historic trajectory, Islam made its way to Guyana and to South America (see Figure 1), and survived against European efforts to Christianize the Indians, both Hindus and Muslims. Guyana today has a population of about 850,000 and Muslims make up about 15% of its total population (see Figure 2). It is home to a plethora of Islamic organizations and mosques, all purporting to represent the Guyanese Muslims.

After monitoring the rhetoric in the media, and conducting field research for the past ten years, it is clearly apparent that enmity and ideological differences continue to divide Muslim organizations in Guyana. Jamiat-ul Ulama-E-Deen was the first Islamic organization established in Guyana. It was founded in 1934 by Maulvi Mohammad Ahmad Nasir. The Islamic Association of British Guiana (IABG) was formed in 1936 to mobilize and preserve Muslim identity in an evangelical community. In 1936 the IABG published the first Islamic journal in Guyana, which was called *Nur-E-Islam*. Jamiat and IABG were



FIGURE 1. Map of Guyana. Source: Map provided by: www.worldatlas.com

defunct by the late 1930s and the Sad'r Anjuman-E-Islam filled the void. Present day Guyana is home to a large number of Islamic organizations. Some that are well known include: Guyana United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman (GUSIA); Anjuman Hifazatul Islam (Hifaz); Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG); Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT); Muslim Youth League (MYL); and Hujjatul Ulama/Tablighi Jama'at.

Tensions exist between the CIOG, GUSIA, MYL, GIF, and the GIT. The oldest surviving organizations are the GUSIA and Hifaz. The GUSIA and MYL have had a strong relationship and have been cooperating on numerous programs. The GIT sees the practice of Islam by the traditionalists, who attach great importance to certain practices their Muslim ancestors brought from South Asia, as being corrupted with innovations (*bidah*). The CIOG, the largest Islamic organization in Guyana, claims that it represents the Muslims of Guyana and is at the forefront of *zakaat* (charity) distribution and other social welfare programs. This organization is also trying to accommodate South Asian Muslims of the Hanafi *madhab* (school of *fiqh*) who attached great importance to some of these "traditional practices." GIT, on the other hand, brands these practices as unorthodox or *bidah*, having no place in Islam. The GIT is a dynamic grassroots organization that has a robust *dawah* (outreach program) and Islamic education program in the country. Recently the conflicts over these practices have abated and

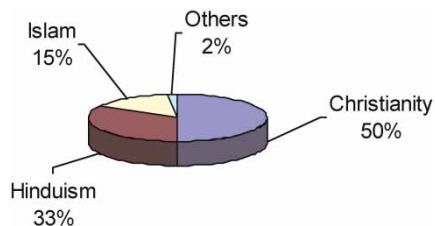


FIGURE 2. Religious affiliation in Guyana, 2004. Source: US State Department Post Report 2004, available online at <[http://foia.state.gov/MMS/postprt/pr\\_view\\_start.asp](http://foia.state.gov/MMS/postprt/pr_view_start.asp)>

many Islamic organizations have been speaking of tolerance and cooperation and are making efforts to unite.

### **Traditionalists vs. Reformists**

The Guyanese *ulema* are divided into two factions, the reformist and the traditionalist. Both follow the orthodox practice with a literalistic reading of the Quran and the *Sunnah*, and like their ancestors, predominantly adhere to the Sunni Hanafi *madhab*. The traditionalists continued the promotion and observance of certain “orthodox practices,” while the reformists argued that there is no basis in the Quran and Sunnah for these practices. The salient point about this is that the reformists follow the *ulema* from the Arab countries. They see certain elements in Islam practiced by South Asian as *bidah* (innovation) that their ancestors were emotionally attached to. Some of these *bidahs* include the observance of *maulid* or *melad-un-nabi* (the Prophet’s birthday), the recitations of *ta’zeem* (sending *salaam* to the Prophet), the recitation of *qaseeda* or *naats* (poetry in praise of the Prophet), and the use of the Urdu language instead of Arabic. The majority of Guyanese Muslims are of South Asian descent. The traditionalists prefer Urdu, which is their mother tongue, over Arabic and most of the literature on Islam brought by their ancestors from the Indian subcontinent was in Urdu. The reformists insist that practices such as *ta’zeem* and *melad* are *bidah*. Also, they are against the recitation of *qaseeda* at religious gatherings. The traditionalists generally have the social capital to back their point of view. The reformists are more educated. They have been to the Middle East, and they can claim to know better than the traditionalists. So far the two co-exist peacefully, if awkwardly. In some villages reformists and traditionalists attend different mosques.

In Guyana, as elsewhere in the world where you find Muslims, the debate persists between the orthodox *ulema*, who insist that the religious text is final and irrevocable, and modern scholars who insist that there can be multiple understandings of the text. Also, in recent times, as in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad, the traditionalists have started to receive the support of qualified *ulema* from India and Pakistan (where their ancestors came from). As such, the social differences as well as the religious knowledge gap between these two groups have lessened considerably. In fact, in many cases, the traditionalists have been seen to become adamant in their pronouncements of their practices as being totally correct and in line with Islam, and they challenge the views of the reformists with equal “proofs” from the Quran and the Sunnah.

### **lashes over Religious and Cultural Practices**

Ideological differences over *fiqh* divide Islamic organizations in Guyana. They disagree over the observance of *melad*, the recitations of *ta’zeem* and *qaseeda*, and the use of the Urdu language instead of Arabic. Reformists see *melad* and *ta’zeem* as another form of iconoclasm which is *shirk*. On the other side of the spectrum, Hifaz and MYL assert that, “If we believe in the Hanafi *madhab*, *melad* and *ta’zeem*, the Islamic observances, the old values, then we must be respected for that.”<sup>1</sup> Hifaz and GUSIA claim that they are traditionalists who practice the Hanafi *madhab*. They have accused some organizations of trying to Arabize the local Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In the past five years there has been a serious effort by the latter two organizations to preserve the rituals of *melad-un-nabi*, *ta’zeem*, *ashura*, *muharram*, *shab-e-barrat*, and the recitation of *qaseeda*. The Urdu language is another bone of contention among these organizations. These organizations

are at the forefront in observing these traditions to promote the Urdu language. "Consistent efforts by some organizations over two decades to wipe *milad* off Muslim cultural activities received the biggest blow - Guyanese Muslims want to have the *milad* programs."<sup>3</sup> The Urdu language is also having a comeback due to its popularity among the locals.

Today the MYL, GUSIA, and the CIOG continue to observe *melad* and *ta'zeem*, and sponsor *qaseeda* gatherings, while other organizations such as the GIT have ceased to do so. In the past ten years, disagreements among these organizations regarding these practices have been lessening. The MYL and GUSIA are at the forefront in promoting *qaseeda* competitions and the teaching of the Urdu language. Most recently, the CIOG held a *qaseeda* competition as well. An annual national Eid Milad-un-Nabi celebration takes place at Anna Catherina, the headquarters of the MYL.<sup>4</sup> In July 1998 the CIOG held its first *qaseeda* competition. Preliminaries were held in different parts of Guyana and the finals were held at the National Cultural Center in the capital, Georgetown. There has been pressure to resurrect these practices and it is now a yearly event in Guyana. It has resurfaced in the past five years, and efforts are now underway to fully revive the practice, and concerted efforts are being made to link up with the South Asian Muslim communities in Suriname and Trinidad which have similar traditions. The arrival of Maulana Noorul Hadi, a Pakistani, in 2003, was expected to boost Urdu in Guyana, and, according to the MYL, he was assigned to concentrate on teaching the Urdu language. He has also helped to coordinate the international *qaseeda* competition.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of the Urdu language is an emotional issue these days, especially since the majority of Guyanese Muslims are of Indo-Pakistani origin. Up until the 1950s, *khutbahs* (sermons) and *duas* (supplications) were delivered in Urdu; in many mosques today, the *duas* are still recited in Urdu but not the *khutbahs* since the Muslims have lost their mother tongue. As early as 1941, when Urdu was threatened, during a special Muslim conference the Urdu Secretary of the Islamic Association of British Guiana (IABG) passed a resolution in which the organization criticized the Colonial Government for not funding "Indian Languages," when it had promised to do so. "Although several applications have been made in the past by interested Muslims to get government's assistance to encourage Urdu and Arabic Education in the *madarsahs*, the applications have not been entertained by Government, perhaps for some obvious reasons, and no further effort has since been made."<sup>6</sup> The Muslims alleged that without government funding a high standard of education could not be maintained and that Muslim religious education remained at a level of mediocrity.<sup>7</sup> Again in 1950 the Muslims accused the Colonial Government of paying them lip service. A resolution adopted in 1950 by the Sad'r Anjuman stated:

Whereas the question of Government's subsidy for the teaching of the Urdu Language has been pending for a considerable time. Be it resolved that conference authorises the United Sad'r Anjuman-I-Islam and Islamic Association to press the claims of the Muslim Community in this respect.<sup>8</sup>

The sighting of the moon to determine the onset of the Islamic months is another major issue that has caused great conflict among Guyanese Islamic organizations. Some have advocated sighting locally, while others want to follow the Saudi Arabian calendar. Most of these organizations met in 1998 to address this issue but no resolution came out of the meeting.<sup>9</sup> In the 1998 caucus to settle the issue of moon sighting some blamed the CIOG for preventing the meeting from arriving at a

consensus. It was understood that the CIOG would have been the coordinator of the project.<sup>10</sup> Finally, they all came together during the past few years in order to make a united front to present a united position on moon sighting. The moon sighting committee is still working and hopes to have a regional moonsighting arrangement with Suriname. Cooperation was also evident when in 1999 the GUSIA, CIOG, GIT and Hifaz collaborated in researching and locating the site of the first mosque in Philadelphia, Guyana, and they were all present at the dedication ceremony.

Certification of organizations that have the authority to authenticate *halaal* (Islamically permissible) products is another area of contention.<sup>11</sup> Initiated by the GIT in 1999, a meeting was held at the Diamond Islamic Complex, and was attended by representatives of the CIOG, GIT, GUSIA, and Hifaz in an effort to form the National Halaal Committee which would overlook the implementation of *halaal* standards. The CIOG is at the forefront of monitoring the *halaal* program to ensure that the current procedures are adhered to. The CIOG has also issued advisories to the Muslim community to be wary of food and meat vendors claiming to sell *halaal* products. According to the CIOG, it is working towards the legislation of the proper usage of the word "*halaal*."<sup>12</sup> In January of 2003 the CIOG discredited the Didco claims that the meat it was supplying was *halaal*. The organization did not endorse the machine slaughtering of Didco's birds, however another Islamic organization, the Guyana Islamic Forum, certified Didco as *halaal*.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to the press, a citizen wrote that as a practicing Muslim he wished to inform the public that the majority of Muslims in Guyana support the CIOG and have confidence in the leadership of the CIOG. He justified this by stating that the CIOG was formed with the approval of more than 80 mosques and therefore has a mandate to pronounce what is *halaal* and that Muslims should only accept *halaal* meat as certified by the CIOG.<sup>14</sup>

Who represents the Guyanese Muslims is another contentious issue that has led to many verbal and even physical exchanges. In the 1930s to 1950s it was the Sad'r Anjuman, and today the CIOG claims that it represents the Muslims of Guyana. It seems that the government of Guyana has accorded them that status. Prior to 1979, some claim that it was the GUSIA which had the most clout and was the unofficial representative of Guyanese Muslims. Bitter politicking since the 1960s was disastrous for Muslims and saw the decline of the GUSIA's national status.<sup>15</sup> Since its formation, the government of Guyana has invited the CIOG to sit on various issues. The CIOG was invited to take part in the 1993 tour of the late President Cheddi Jagan to the Middle East. All inquires regarding Guyana's political, cultural and economic ties with the Islamic world are sent to the CIOG's secretariat by the government of Guyana. In the past decade, all ambassadors from Islamic nations to Guyana have visited the CIOG's secretariat. Without a doubt, it is the government of Guyana and the Islamic world that recognize the CIOG as the official representative of Guyanese Muslims and this has caused serious rifts with other organizations. It would be unfair to say that the aims and objectives of the other organizations are not the same, but the CIOG has been recognized by the government of Guyana as the representative of the local Muslims. However, the president of the CIOG, Fazeel M. Ferouz, was quoted as saying, "We need to find a solution to all of the differences and work together. I told them we have to be tolerant and respect each other's views. This has to be inculcated at all levels or else we would always be competing, when the only way out is for us to cooperate."<sup>16</sup> It is the perception that due to the CIOG's close relationship with the Islamic world—politically, financially, and diplomatically—others have envied it. The

government of Guyana's unofficial recognition of the CIOG as the voice of Muslim Guyanese has also caused enmity among these organizations.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Guyana United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman (GUSIA)**

The Sad'r Anjuman-E-Islam of British Guiana (now The Guyana United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman—GUSIA) was founded on 10 June 1937 by Maulana Sayed Shamsuddin Al Qaderi of Bombay, India.<sup>18</sup> The Maulana traveled to Guyana and persuaded the Muslims to unite. Members of the Queenstown Jama Masjid primarily attended the inaugural meeting. This was a milestone in the history of the Guyanese Muslims because it was the first time that the local Muslim population of Guyana emerged on the national and international stage. It was basically the Muslims from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, during this early period and up to the sixties, who made efforts to reach out to the Guyanese Muslim community in order to preserve Islam in the region.<sup>19</sup>

At the first meeting in 1937, a committee was formed which selected S. A. Sattaur as President, M. Azeem Khan and Abdool Hack as Vice Presidents, Abdool Gafoor as Treasurer, and Mr J. M. Khan as Secretary. In addition, M. Ishmail, M Sheriff, M. Rohoman, Pach Korie, A. H Mondol, R. Bacchus, K. B. Hoosein, A. R. Mondol, M. Mohamed, Abdool Rahman, Madar Baksh, M. Hoosein, Gul Mohamed, and A. A. Gafoor formed the governing committee and were responsible for propagating Islamic works and controlling the 12 other *Anjumans* also founded by Maulana Shamsuddin. During the first year of operation, 14 meetings were held and it became necessary to elect an assistant secretary. F. Dad Khan was chosen for this position, and also a constitution was drawn up.<sup>20</sup>

The constitution envisioned that the Muslims live peacefully and encourage coexistence with other members of the community and safeguard the interests of the Sunnat-wal-Jamaat, which represents the Hanafi or orthodox teachings of Islam. The founders pledged to work diligently for the general welfare and rights of the Muslim community, and to safeguard the education of Muslims. They also pledged to work towards community actions program such as burial for the poor and charity for orphans and widows, and, most importantly, to protect destitute Muslims. Prior to this the destitute were buried without religious rights.<sup>21</sup> The Sad'r Anjuman opened one of the first homes for orphans, the Shaheed boys and girls orphanages. Over the years, the orphanages have saved many lives, and have offered abandoned children new hope and rehabilitation. These children are raised in an Islamic atmosphere, and most likely will accept Islam for life. The GUSIA also constructed the Muslim School in Brickdam.

Three months after the visit of Maulana Shamsuddin, members gave various lectures and educated the locals in order to settle various disputes that existed. Soon a subgroup of the Anjuman was established at Tuschen for the purpose of educating adults and children. A library was also attached to the Anjuman, and a school was established in Kitty, Georgetown. More than 50 children were taught Urdu. A special class was started and members' friends were also welcomed. As the years progressed, the administration of the Anjuman naturally changed hands, but the basic and fundamental work of the organization has continued.<sup>22</sup>

Later the GUSIA initiated several publications; among them was its official organ, the *Voice of Islam*. This was an educational publication, which outlined the basic and important teachings of Islam. Radio programs were also launched. Pamphlets and booklets on Islamic topics were printed along with useful advice on Ramadhan and *eid*, which was

published in local newspapers when necessary. The GUSIA was founded at a difficult time for Muslims in Guyana. Muslim religious leaders were fearful that eventually Islam would fade under pressure from the British colonial rule, similar to the way in which the African slaves had lost their religions. Many Christian missionaries were in Guyana proselytizing and there was tremendous pressure to convert. Hindu and Islamic marriages were not recognized, and to be a teacher or to hold a decent job one had to be a Christian. Many Hindus had converted to Christianity, and there was concern that Muslims would follow suit.<sup>23</sup>

It was this situation that motivated Maulana Shamshuddin to establish the Sad'r Islamic Anjuman. The Anjuman has given full credit to Maulana Shamshuddin for taking the initiative to start this organization. "He visualized that such an organization would be responsible for the maintenance, upholding and perpetuation of Islam. He felt that a single organization would be heard more effectively than the voice of a single man."<sup>24</sup> In 1961, the Anjuman gained governmental recognition when it was incorporated under the laws of Guyana, thus strengthening its position as representative of Muslim interests in Guyana.<sup>25</sup>

From the 1940s to 1950, the Sad'r Anjuman was headed under the brilliant leadership of Rahman Baksh Gajraj, President, and Gool Mohamed Khan, Vice President. It was a dramatic period in Muslim history when many Islamic nations waged nationalist struggles against imperialism. Global events had ramifications on the local Muslim population in Guyana and more precisely the call for a Muslim homeland in the Indian subcontinent received a sympathetic ear in Guyana among the Muslims. Commenting on the creation of Pakistan, the *Voice of Islam* wrote, "Pakistan is a creation of Man, but it came with approbation of God and no matter what evil acts may be committed against it Pakistan will live on, unconquered."<sup>26</sup> Celebrations were held all over Guyana and at the Jama Masjid in Queenstown after the *Jumma namaz* (Friday prayer), "the whole day was observed as a holiday. Greetings and congratulations were cabled to Mr Jinnah, Governor-General."<sup>27</sup> At mosques, the flag of Pakistan was hoisted. In 1949 the IABG and the Sad'r merged which was reflected in the editorial of its publication, *Islam and Nur-E-Islam*, which declared: "together we stand."<sup>28</sup> It was a rare moment of Muslim unity in the history of Guyana.

The cry for Pakistan was raised at every mosque in Guyana. The editorial of the Anjuman's journal issue of March 1948 welcomed with euphoria the birth of Pakistan and called for a Pakistani representative in British Guyana.<sup>29</sup> Events in Jordan and Palestine and the independence of Indonesia were well covered in the pages of *Islam and Nur-E-Islam*, the new name for the publication of the united organization that gave prominence to news from Pakistan. Journals from 1948 to 1950 filled their pages with news about Pakistan and, in particular, Kashmir: in fact, a section of the journal was titled "Pakistan affairs." Other pro-Pakistan headlines appeared in the *Islam and Nur-E-Islam* in April 1950: "India's lust for conquest of Kashmir may lead to World War"<sup>30</sup> and "Kashmir India is obstructing holding of plebiscite."<sup>31</sup> Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's speech, "The truth about Kashmir," was carried by the journal.<sup>32</sup> Muslims throughout Guyana in 1948 contributed to the "Qaid-E-Azam's Refugee Relief Fund," and the sum of about 936.62 British Guiana dollars was collected and delivered in 1948 when R. B. Gajraj traveled to Pakistan and met with Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan and his government.<sup>33</sup> The relationship was further consolidated in 1949 when Gajraj traveled to the UN and met Pakistan's first Ambassador to the UN, M. A. H. Ishpahani, and he referred to him as "our Ambassador."<sup>34</sup> Ambassador Ishpahani also reciprocated with a visit to the Muslims of British Guiana.

Muslims spoke in one voice in 1949 when they called for the abolition of the *tazia* (a procession commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, observed by *shias* on the 10th of Muharram (first month of the Islamic calendar) each year). On December 4 1949, during the second All-Guyana Muslim Conference, the Sad'r Anjuman and IABG adopted a resolution that called on the Colonial Government of British Guiana to outlaw the observance of *tazia*. This historical resolution read:

Whereas the observance of the martyrdom of Imam Hoosein and his family has lost entirely its religious significance, and whereas in this colony persons of other religions take an active part in promoting *tazia*, for the sole purpose of entertainment, debauchery and personal gain, all of which are contrary to the spirit and letter of Islamic Laws and regulations, and whereas such practices constitute a gross insult to the revered memory of the grandson of the Holy Prophet [ . . . ], and are a flagrant distortion of these religious rites, be it resolved by this second All Guiana Muslim Conference that Government be requested to pass legislation prohibiting the construction of such symbols, both actual and implied, and such other indulgences falsely associated with the observance of *tazia*.<sup>35</sup>

This marked the beginning of the end of the *tazia* observance and, later, Muslims were granted the two *eids* as holidays. *Tazia* is no longer observed in Guyana.

### *The Struggle for Independence*

With the intensification of the independence struggle, the Guyanese masses became totally involved, and so too were the Muslim populace. Two of Guyana's young nationalists who returned from abroad, Cheddi Jagan, an Indian, and Forbes Burnham, an African, were united to achieve independence for British Guiana, but that alliance quickly crumbled as the colony geared for independence from Britain in the 1960s. Hysteria over communism brought Guyana under Washington's radar. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations feared it would become a communist nation under the leadership of Cheddi Jagan, a Marxist who was very popular among the Indo-Guyanese majority.

The political split of the independence movement resulted in the division of the Muslim citizenry. In the 1960s, even the GUSIA was divided along nationalist political lines. There was one faction under Moneer A. Khan and Yakoob Ali, which supported the PPP government of Dr Cheddi Jagan, whilst the other, under Mohamed Nisar, supported the PNC. This situation continued until the late 1970s. During this period there were bitter battles between these two rival factions and Muslims once again lost their leadership and prestigious status in the wider community. The President of the GUSIA, Abdool Majeed, accepted the chairmanship of the United Force party and was replaced by PPP Parliamentarian Yakoob Ally. This caused great tension since the PPP was known to be a communist party. Moneer Khan held a secret meeting in September of 1963 to muster support for the Premier of British Guiana, Dr Cheddi Jagan. A member who was present at that "unconstitutional" meeting wrote in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, "This meeting did not represent the Muslims because only the PPP supporters were present. I was not allowed to speak ... there were non-Muslims at the meeting and I was offended when Maccie Hamid used the word comrade."<sup>36</sup> The Anjuman sent a cable to Governor Grey telling him that "communism and Islam do not go together."<sup>37</sup> On October 21 1963, a meeting of the Anjuman was held at the

Muslim College Trust. The meeting was filled with tension, and arguments became fights. The Anjuman's President, Abdool Majeed, was attacked and the police had to escort him home. "Sad'r's executives were manhandled and had to be helped by supporters and the police."<sup>38</sup> It was alleged that the Jagan supporters rigged the Sad'r's election in favor of the Jagan faction which further fermented the violence. This division over support for the PPP destroyed the unity of the Muslims.

This division was obvious on several occasions. Eminent Muslims from Pakistan who called on Guyanese Muslims to not support a communist party were not welcomed in Guyana by the pro-Jagan camp. "On one such occasion in 1967, when Maulana Noorani was coming to Guyana from Suriname, the GUSIA, Hifaz and Ulama-E-Deen sent him a joint cable which read: 'Your visit is most unwelcome.'<sup>39</sup> When Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari visited Guyana in 1968 he failed to get any support from the GUSIA, Hifaz, and Ulama-E-Deen when he stated publicly, at the Town Hall, the Islamic position with regard to socialism and communism. The GUSIA, Hifaz, and Ulama-E-Deen publicly supported the PNC. From this period in history the popularity and prestige of the Sad'r Anjuman eroded and the organization has since kept a low profile as a result of inactivity.<sup>40</sup>

Former President of Guyana, Dr Cheddi Jagan, who was also Premier of British Guiana (Guyana), documented the division. In his book, *The West on Trial*, he assailed some Muslim leaders for not supporting his fight for Guyana's freedom.<sup>41</sup> However, he ignored noting that it was his Marxist orientation that divided the Muslim support for him. He writes, "the organised Hindu and Muslim groups . . . the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman and the Muslim League—also attacked us."<sup>42</sup> Dr Jagan thought that naturally the Indians should have supported him completely. He attacked Hossein Ghanie's Guiana United Muslim Party (GUMP) as "racist" and the "wealthy Indian merchant who was then president of the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman, Abdool Majeed" for the organization's anti-communist rhetoric and especially the GUMP for accepting money from the United States (CIA).<sup>43</sup> Under Dr Jagan's leadership in 1955, Guyana, for the first time, recognized Muslim marriages performed by a Muslim religious leader. Yet he was attacked by Hindus and Muslims when he nationalized over 51 primary schools in the early 1960s because he saw those schools as a "mouthpiece of the Christian denomination,"<sup>44</sup> who were seen as keen to Christianize the Hindus and Muslims. To Dr Jagan, the control of education in British Guiana by the Church appeared as a grave injustice to non-Christians. Dr Jagan asserted that Indians were "not accommodated within the social hierarchy. They were regarded as outcasts . . . but they stuck to Hinduism and Islam despite efforts of Christian missionaries to proselytize them."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, communist hysteria blinded many of his countrymen from seeing that he was not anti-religion, and that he was especially sympathetic to Hindus and Muslims.

### **Anjuman Hifazatul Islam (Hifaz)**

The Anjuman Hifazatul Islam was established in the 1950s. However, there has been some confusion as to the actual year that Hifaz, as it is popularly known, was founded. Around that same time its youth arm, the Muslim Youth League (MYL), was established in Georgetown. Its establishment is believed to be between 1950–1955, even though the actual date is an enigma, but most certainly Hifaz is the second oldest Islamic organization in the history of Guyana. Hifaz was founded in order to assist the mosques within the West Demerara/East Bank Essequibo region. However, according to Hifaz,

its activities have been broadened to include the rest of Guyana; though its concentration is still in the Demerara/East Bank Essequibo region.<sup>46</sup>

Hifaz is an affiliate of the GUSIA, and this is provided for in the constitution of the GUSIA; however these two groups today are back together after a long period of division. Hifaz is a Sunni organization that follows the Hanafi *madhab*. The organization has maintained some aspects of “cultural Islam” that have been inherited from South Asia. According to Hakeem Khan, this at times has caused friction because of the *wahabis* and *salafis* who have been trying to penetrate the *sunni hanafis* of Guyana.<sup>47</sup> There is little evidence to suggest that the *wahabis/salafis* have made any major inroads in Guyana.

From its formation up to the 1960s, Hifaz was very vibrant in realizing its aims and objectives. In 1967, Maulana Noorani of Pakistan came to Guyana and laid the cornerstone for the construction of the “Norrani College” at Meten-Meer-Zorg. “Br. Moneer Khan gave materials for a dormitory.”<sup>48</sup> Mr. Hakim Khan said that the building was constructed on a six-acre plot of land owned by Hifaz. However, the entire building disappeared with no account being given.<sup>49</sup> It is the opinion of some that the material was used in the construction of some mosques but this is mere speculation. Mr Hamid Khan writes, “This project never really got started and ended in disaster.”<sup>50</sup> Hifaz remained a service organization after that until 1997 when the entire setup of Muslims in Guyana was changed.

With the intention of reattaching importance to Islamic events, Hifaz started to organize activities for all occasions which have had quite an impact. Hifaz and the West Demerara Muslim Youth Organization have recently been in the forefront promoting *melad-un-nabi*, *meraj-un-nabi* (ascension of the prophet) and *muharram* programs. The *Muslim Journal* (Islam Guyana), the voice of Hifaz and the West Demerara Muslim Youth Organization (MYO), expressed concern that concerted efforts have been made to eradicate *melad-un-nabi* observance in Guyana. “For over twenty years, continuous efforts have been made to destroy *milad* program from our community, and after all these efforts and years, two thousand persons have still turned out to support *qaseeda*.”<sup>51</sup>

In 1999 Hifaz began focusing on the promotion of some Islamic and cultural activities associated with Guyanese Muslims, and, in conjunction with the MYL, GUSIA, and the CIOG, held a national *qaseeda* competition. County-level competitions were held in Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara. Some attacked this event as being un-Islamic, and in a reaction in its editorial, the *Muslim Journal* writes, “Then it was announced on television that *qaseeda* and *melad* is an Indian something and therefore has nothing to do with Islam.”<sup>52</sup> With 2,000 people attending the final *qaseeda* competition, the *Journal* continues in its editorial, “The people have spoken, and no *sheikh*, *maulana*, *qari*, *hafiz* or self proclaimed Islamic scholar can deny the voice of the people.”<sup>53</sup> The GUSIA, GIF, and MYL hosted an international *jalsa* (gathering) at the Anna Catherina Islamic Complex in March of 2004. Muslim leaders from Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and the US met in Guyana. The Anjuman Sunnatul Jamaat Association (ASJA) which was representing Trinidad and Tobago, Khilafat Anjuman, Hedayatul Islam which were representing Suriname, and Masjid Al Abdin of New York in the US, met to plan and establish areas of cooperation between the Muslims of these countries, to specifically plan other activities, and decided to meet regularly henceforth.

In an effort to establish prominence in the country and to promote “Islamic traditions,” Hifaz and the MYL have been building the necessary physical infrastructure.

In 2003, the Madrasa Naqshbandiyya, located at the Anna Catherina Islamic Complex, West Coast Demerara, opened under the tutorship of Maulana Noorul Hadi Haleem, a Pakistani. According to the President of the center, there will be lessons in *hifzul* Quran (memorization of the Quran), *tajweedul* Quran (rules for the recitation of the Quran), Urdu language, basic Islamic foundation courses and *imam* training programs. The classes are all based on the Ahle Sunnatwal Jamaat, Hanafi *madhab*, and are for both males and females with limited live-in facilities for male students. Teachers from the Khilafat Anjuman in Suriname and the Anjuman Sunnatul Jamaat Association of Trinidad will boost the Madrasa from time to time. In January of 2000 the Anna Catherina Islamic Complex at West Coast Demerara (as headquarters of both Hifaz and the Muslim Youth League), was formally opened after 12 years of construction. The multi-million-dollar building boasts a large lecture hall, which will be used as a venue for indoor games for the MYL, and offices for Hifaz and the MYL. Mr Hakeem Khan declared, "this complex offers support to the government of this country, to assist in the molding of healthy people, especially our youths." Khan continued, "We do not expect the government to be the only one to provide facilities for our people, and we have tried successfully to create our vision."<sup>54</sup>

Hifaz and the MYL merged in the 1990s until the year 2001 to promote these "traditional practices." Their official organ, the *Muslim Journal*, which features the activities of the organizations and their ideals, was established in the year 1997. The objective of the *Muslim Journal*, which is now called *Islam Guyana*, is to propagate and validate traditional practices such as *melad*, *meraj*, *ta'zeem*, the recitation of *qaseeda* and to propagate the reintroduction of Urdu in Guyana. Hakeem Khan, who is an advocate of these practices, is editor of *Islam Guyana*, and, in an interview, he related the history of the journal. The former secretary of Hifaz initiated the journal and asked Hakeem to come on board Hifaz in order to produce a newsletter to distribute at a *melad-un-nabi* program. It was done on two pages for the 1999 issue. Then to celebrate *miraj*, Hifaz planned a public program at the Cornelia Ida School. According to Khan, these religious observances were in danger of becoming extinct; young Muslims knew nothing of them and non-Muslims knew even less. The idea behind these programs was to reattach importance to these events and to encourage mosques to observe them. By then, very few mosques were observing them, Mr. Khan revealed.<sup>55</sup>

The first issue of the *Muslim Journal* was launched in 1997. It was a very humble effort, and the journal was in black and white. It was then decided to be produced quarterly for *eid-ul-fitr*, *eid-ul-adha*, *melad-un-nabi*, and *meraj-un-nabi*. Initially the magazine featured news from Hifaz/MYL, but with the alliance with the GUSIA, it was decided to make it national because of the fact that there was no other Islamic magazine in the country. The journal then decided to include news and events from all other *jamaats* and mosques.<sup>56</sup> The *Muslim Journal* reports news and events from across Guyana, and the magazine is being issued regularly. The journal is very critical of the CIOG, and some have accused Khan of launching his vendetta against the CIOG via this journal. Hifaz claims that it reaches "every *masjid* and organization in Guyana, every government and civil organization, Muslims and organizations in over thirty eight countries. The Saudi based network, International Islamic News Agency, beaming to over 120 countries worldwide, features it."<sup>57</sup> The magazine is now a regular feature in Guyana but its editor claims that there are those who are keen to destroy it.<sup>58</sup> This seems to be the politics of the Muslim organizations of Guyana.

Divisions between the MYL and Hifaz became obvious in March of 2003 when the *Guyana Muslim Journal* changed its name due to conflict with Hifaz. Tension grew

because Hifaz supported the CIOG move to take the Sad'r to court. The journal was very critical of two members of Hifaz who supported the CIOG. The MYL alliance with Hifaz quickly eroded. "Where is Hifaz in defence of the Sad'r when the CIOG was attempting to take it over?"<sup>59</sup> Members of Hifaz supported the CIOG, and the Sad'r, Hifaz, and MYL alliance has crumbled down since 2001. There has been a call by the CIOG for a merger, but the fact is that there is rivalry between these organizations and lack of cooperation, much less unity. The dispute became obvious when Hifaz laid claims to the magazine. Mr Hakim Khan claimed that the magazine was always independent of Hifaz and the MYL. Mr Khan has challenged Hifaz to produce a magazine and he willingly changed the name of the joint MYL/Hifaz publication, the *Muslim Journal*, to *Islam Guyana*.<sup>60</sup> Again, this demonstrates the many petty conflicts that exist among these organizations and personalities.

### **The Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT)**

The present *murshid* or advisor of the GIT is Mr Wazir Baksh who is from Port Mourant, Guyana. Wazir Baksh attended Corentyne High School, the New Amsterdam Technical Institute, Guysuco Training School, and the University of Guyana where he majored in history. He is interested in social change and is very busy preparing field workers "to help people to help themselves and community development."<sup>61</sup> Unlike the CIOG, where the rank and file is from the elite society of Demerara, the GIT has attracted the ordinary Muslims from the countryside. These Muslims, like Wazir Baksh, have broken the glass ceiling and are in decision making positions. Since his coming to office, the organization has toned down its criticism of traditionalist practices, as mentioned before. This may be attributed to the traditionalists' discourse that is very vibrant today among the Muslims. Murshid Baksh seems to be a pragmatic leader with a focus on *dawah*, education, community building, relief, welfare, and youth development. The former *murshid* was Haseeb Yusuf.

Murshid Baksh came from a very humble background, yet he rose to become the CEO of the GIT. Strangely, all of the major Islamic organizations in Guyana are based in Georgetown, the capital. Leadership and ranks in these organizations have traditionally been held by the elites of Demerara, their friends and families. Hardly have Berbicans or Essequibians led these organizations. This is where the GIT is very successful, in that it is a grassroots organization among the poor that is doing *dawah* work, distributing *zakaat*, giving education and undertaking other community programs throughout the country. The GIT has created smaller administrative units or District Councils across seven out of ten regions of Guyana to achieve its ideals. Muslims speak fondly about the GIT and many of its supporters wear a beard or a *topi* (skull cap), and its female members are in *hijab*. Since its founding the GIT has been changing the face of Islam in Guyana. Many informants hold this belief.

Today the GIT claims that they have put aside petty issues. Its leader says, "There are a number of issues that we have to address, both from the GIT point of view and the broader Muslim community." They are also facing issues relating to *fiqh* in order to gain political mileage. Murshid Baksh revealed that the Muslims have felt a sense of marginalization and they are venting their pain, and he also confessed that there exist divisions among the Muslims in Guyana. Indeed, he says, there is "too much of hate and animosity among Muslims here, and national leaders are guilty of perpetuating this for their own narrow gains. For me, the challenges facing the Muslim community here, from within and without, are tremendous." Baksh confessed that the challenges are

multifarious and they must prioritize the most urgent needs of the Muslims. *Dawah* and community building and education are some of their priorities. Their *dawah* program has targeted indigenous Amerindians, Hindus, and Christians. They claim that in the year 2004, "200 or more reverted to Islam." They have also established a number of Islamic centers in Guyana's hinterland.<sup>62</sup>

The GIT's objective is to disseminate the message of Islam to the people of Guyana and to revive the practices of the Qur'an and *sunmah* in the lives of the Muslims, and to provide for those who respond to the call of Islam. It hopes to provide sound intellectual, spiritual, moral, and cultural training to those who want to cooperate and to individuals and groups locally and abroad. The GIT hopes to work towards promoting the "good and forbidding of evil in accordance with Quran and Sunnah."<sup>63</sup> This organization is committed to supporting the needy or deserving students, scholars, or those whose services are considered conducive to the attainment of the objectives of the GIT. The face of Islam is changing rapidly in Guyana and much of this must be attributed to the GIT's role in transferring Islam from "an Indian thing" to a universal religion. It is important to note that the Tablighi Jama'at and the Dar-ul-loom, its arm in Guyana, have also been instrumental in this revolution. Islam is not only a cultural expression of Indians as they have been preaching it for decades. And they have spent much of their work in mostly the Amerindian and African communities in Guyana.

#### *Ahmad Ehwaas, the Libyan*

Prior to the arrival of Ahmad Ehwaas in Guyana in 1977, and the birth of the GIT in October of 1978, it is crucial to briefly reflect on the life of Ahmad Ehwaas and the state of affairs of Muslims in Guyana because it was this background that motivated the Libyan to make a concerted effort to change the face of Islam in Guyana. Ahmad Ehwaas came to Guyana from a very religious family when he was in his 30s. He was a revolutionary and was part of the coup that seized power from the monarchy of King Idris in 1969. Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi later became afraid of Ehwaas and removed him from Libya by sending him to East Germany and then to Guyana as a Libyan diplomat. Ehwaas worked fervently with Muslims wherever he went, practicing the universal message of Islam and he did not see himself as an Arab or a Libyan but as a Muslim with a vision of Pan-Islamism. He was part of the nationalist and revolutionary fervor of the era; a product of his environment and a pan-Islamist.

From around the 1950s to the 1980s, Islam and the welfare of the Muslims had been abandoned in Guyana. This could be attributed to a few factors. The majority of Muslims came from India as contract workers beginning in 1838 and their lives were spent on the plantations at least 12 hours a day. Families were neglected; especially children were left unattended when parents left to toil on the plantations. The Colonial Government did not take responsibility for the education of the children of indentured laborers; rather they left it to the proprietors of the plantations who then turned it over to European evangelists. Moreover, during the early period of indentureship the *maktab* system was not yet established, and social welfare institutions were not in place. Muslim women had to abandon the *hijab* to perform harsh labor. It was not practical to be in *hijab* and work in the scorching heat of the tropics. Also, the dominant Christian Creole culture was very influential in the lives of Muslims because Muslim and Hindu religious holidays and marriages were not recognized by the British Government, unlike in Suriname where the Dutch abandoned Europeanization and passed the Asian Marriage Decree. The Dutch in Suriname were keen to ensure that the children of

immigrants did not lose their native language and religion and funded Muslim and Hindu schools, but the British wanted to “civilize” the “docile coolies” by bringing Christianity to them.<sup>64</sup> Islam, despite the conversion of a few, humiliation and subjugation, survived in Guyana, and it is an ongoing struggle.

Later, Muslims were occupied with politics and divided in their support for the PPP and PNC. Mosques were abandoned and Muslims did not pray five times a day, instead Islam was reduced to symbols. Muslims still bore Islamic names and Islam was reduced to the observance of *ta'zeem*, *melad*, recitation of *qaseeda*, and attending the *eid namaz* (Eid prayer). Another detriment to the Muslims was the loss of their mother language, Urdu. No longer could they read or write in Urdu, and most were illiterate in English because they kept their children out of Evangelists controlled schools to save their faith. And with the loss of their language began the loss of Urdu/Arabic names, because people were not aware of the meaning of these names. The mosques were empty and there were hardly more than a dozen people in the country who were versed in the Quran and the *hadith*. Women did not observe *purdah* (segregation) and when they did attend the mosques, they did not wear the *shalwar kameez*, the traditional dress of their ancestors, and they were not modest in their dress. The Islamic organizations that existed during this period were more like social clubs for the elite from the capital, Demerara.

When Guyana gained independence in 1966, many Islamic countries such as Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Pakistan, and Malaysia opened embassies and consulates in Georgetown. The presence of these missions in Guyana made Guyana unique among its Caribbean counterparts. In 1977, Libyan *Charge de affaire* Mr Ahmad Ibrahim Ehwaas arrived in Guyana, and in 1978 was responsible for the formation of the Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT). Mr Ehwaas was a practicing Muslim and he was disappointed with the conditions of the Muslims in Guyana, thus he introduced many activities to benefit the Muslim community, especially the youth. He started to work among the youth by educating them about the fundamentals of Islam and organized activities for them to work with their fellow youths. He did not neglect the elders of the community either. He worked with leaders of various organizations to have a cohesive approach to the development of the Muslim community and Islam in Guyana. However, his work was not only confined to men; he also organized the female community. Soon various kinds of activities were offered for the youth, as well as for men and women across Guyana. Mr Ehwaas was assisted by Daud Abdul Haqq of Barbados, Nizam Ahmad Raouf Zaman of Guyana, and Yasin Khan of Trinidad. Zaman is a graduate of the Aleemiyah Institute of Islamic Studies (Karachi, 1975) and a graduate of the Faculty of Usuluddin, Al-Azhar (Cairo, 1978).

#### *The State of Muslims before the GIT*

The GIT began as a youth organization in order to reform the Muslims in Guyana morally and socially through education, information and *dawah*. Many of the youths were disappointed by the elders and attributed the sad state of Islam to many factors, including Hindu culture and practices.<sup>65</sup> This and subsequent information has been pulled off the GIT's official web page ever since the new *murshid*, Wazir Baksh, took the helm of the organization. According to the GIT, the Indian Muslims, while having good intentions, expressed their adherence to the Hanafi *madhab*, but their practices reflected several innovations along with traces of *shia* and even Hindu influences. This was due to the close geographical proximity of Hindus and Muslims on the plantations of Guyana.<sup>66</sup> “The *masjid* was very insular—there was a closer relationship among

Muslims and Hindus on the same plantation than among Muslims from one plantation to the Muslims on the neighboring plantation.”<sup>67</sup>

From the period of 1940–1980, about half a century, the Islamic community of Guyana began crumbling spiritually and morally. The GIT is correct in its assertion that due to the collapse of the *madrasah* system, society became corrupted, especially the youths who were alienated from Islam; and those who had any social consciousness were involved in the communist movement. Years of neglect and disorganized work were a result of the lack of leadership and role models. The Muslim society was falling apart. Wearing the *hijab* became something of the past. No one knew the recitation of the Quran according to the rules of *tajweed*. Most *imams* were not performing *namaz* five times a day, much less the other Muslims. The cinema had become the main source of cultural transmission and the liberalism that came with it exerted a damaging influence on young people. In this regard, the traditional Hindu and Western films, which were later joined by Chinese films, only served to reinforce each other, and, with the Hindu and Western films progressively increasing in themes of violence and sex, a corrupt and promiscuous society came into being. Some old stalwarts of the GIT held the belief that Islam in Guyana was polluted with *bidah* or innovations that the ancestors of the Indian Muslims brought to Guyana from the Indo-Pakistani region. Information from the old GIT website alleged that Islam was polluted with reminences of Hinduism which the former Mughal ruler of Muslim India, Akbar, allowed to penetrate into the religion. The following information was also removed from the website: “because of the fraternisation of the Hindus and Muslims, and the numerical superiority of the Hindus, some practices of the Muslims reflected an accommodation of certain culture forms.”<sup>68</sup>

In the past, the GIT brotherhood reviled the “un-Islamic” practice of not wearing a beard, using Urdu instead of Arabic, making *duas*, and the practices of *ta’zeem* and celebrating *melad-un-nabi* and reciting *qaseeda*. They see no reason why there should be any effort to resurrect a language now dead in Guyana, Urdu. They assert that it will only alienate the non-Indian Muslims. This has placed the GIT in confrontation with other Islamic organizations and some have accused the GIT of exerting a “heavy *wahabism*” influence; but where is the *wahabi* influence that GIT has emphasized?<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that many Islamic groups in Guyana loosely use the term Wahabism to demonize their opponents. The GIT emphasize that they belong to no single *madhab* and most of the Islamic materials they use in their schools are *Sunni* Hanafi. These allegations have been refuted by Baksh who says that they are not opposed to *duas* and they do not support extremism; they just want to bring the Muslims towards living their lives in accordance with the Quran and the *sunnah*. The GIT is ambitious to bring all the Muslims under its control in order to teach them the *sunnah* and the Quran without innovations. It is their belief that they are leading the Muslims on the straight path but that the CIOG, Hifaz, and the GUSIA have overlooked innovations that have penetrated Islam in Guyana. Those who observe and make *duas* and follow the path of the *sufis* are “destined to hell,” because it is against the *sunnah* and the Quran, claims the GIT.<sup>70</sup> This information, however, is also no longer available on their website. Recently the GIT has toned down its rhetoric about *bidah* for the benefit of unity, and it asserts that it is tolerant of other Muslims who might not share its religious ideology. Baksh admits that “changes cause a lot of friction with the old order,” and blames some of these frictions on the “youthful enthusiasm and immaturity and the fervor of the youths.” Eventually these youths were counseled by visiting scholars on how to approach their work, and by the 1980s they approached their work “in a more pragmatic way.”<sup>71</sup> While the GIT may still have reservations about these practices, it will not condemn others who practice

them as non-Muslims because Muslim unity is paramount. He expressed these sentiments: "The GIT look at Muslim unity very seriously, and it is prepared to tolerate certain practices that it might not agree with in order for cohesiveness of the community."<sup>72</sup>

### *Islamic Education*

In 1978, Mr Ehwaas was invited to speak at a Muslim youth forum at the Indian Islamic Trust College, Georgetown, and, when he took the podium, he more or less told the youth that the community depends on them for a bright future. Soon thereafter, he began teaching the students *salat*, *adaab* (manners), and other fundamentals of Islam. This teaching began expanding throughout the outlying areas of Guyana. This youth group began establishing a network of other youth groups in East Bank Demerara, Camp Kakuka, Berbice, and Essequibo. They began inviting their friends and relatives to day and weekend camps where they learned the fundamentals of Islam, and by August of 1979 two groups were established in Leonora and Anna Regina. By 1979 they were a national brotherhood and they had no sophisticated system nor office hierarchy in command. They appointed an *emir* (leader) based on the criteria of Islamic norms. Ehwaas met Daud Haqq of Barbados and invited him to Guyana. The collaboration of a black nationalist turned Muslim, Daud Haqq, and the revolutionary Islamist from Libya, Ehwass, would change the course of Islam in Guyana. Ehwass even convinced Zaman, a Guyanese who had just returned from Egypt, to remain in Guyana to work with the youth. After the 1978 basic course, Berbicans also developed a group and two other groups were established in East Demerara and Essequibo. Word spread quickly as the network developed and overzealous young men began showing off what they had learned. They motivated each other and by 1979 they were yearning for more advanced Islamic lessons. During Ramadan of 1979, which was during the summer, the young people were out of school and they had sufficient time for the three weeks' orientation class, where they learned the Quran and *hadith*. By this time they were performing 20 *rakats* *hifz* before *fajr* and were showcasing their talents.<sup>73</sup>

Knowing that women are the foundation of society, and that Muslim men will need wives to mother the future generations of Muslims in Guyana, they turned their attention to the females of the community and, in 1981, held a course for women at the MYO office. The wives of Daud Haqq and Ahmad Ihwaas were instrumental in the development of programs for these women. They taught female classes and nurtured the female community. All these women wore the *hijab* and suddenly the trend picked up pace across the country, wherever the brotherhood went. By the 1980s the Muslim community was transformed. The *hijab* became a norm and women were back at the mosques.<sup>74</sup>

The GIT was keen to develop leaders in the community and saw it fit to organize leadership courses in order for these prospective leaders to lead the Muslims in accordance with the *Ahle Sunna*. From 1980 to 1982 two special Islamic courses were offered (SIC). Students came from other parts of the Caribbean to attend these classes, whose objective was to develop a core group to help give the work of the GIT an impetus of rapid growth, and thus lead to the social transformation of the Muslim community of Guyana. These classes attracted students from the University of Guyana and the University of the West Indies and an Islamic group was established at the University of Guyana during this period. Muslim activists were now visible at the universities. Raouf Zaman and Daud Haqq were blazing across Guyana educating and training Muslims to be leaders in the

community. The network of fraternity was developing momentum throughout Guyana and more advanced Islamic courses were taught by these three activists. Weekend camps were held at Berbice and other parts of Guyana to introduce a 24 hour Islamic environment to the youth.<sup>75</sup>

By 1980 many people fled the hard economic life and dictatorship of Guyana, and many of the learned Muslims were part of this exodus. Ahmad Ehwaas left Guyana in 1981 for Libya, Yasin Khan left in early 1982, and Duad Abdul Haqq left in late 1982. The graduates of these one and two year courses became guides, thinkers and leaders of the GIT. Some young leaders at the time, such as Fazeel Ferouz, Moeen ul-Hack, and Imam Ahmad Hamid, were influenced by the GIT; Fazeel is today the CEO of the CIOG, and some others such as Imam Ahmad Hamid left Guyana. The migration outflow of the 1980s created a void in the country. This exodus of learned Muslims has affected all the major Islamic groups addressed in this paper. However, the *Tablighi Jama'at* and the *salafi* groups were busy in the trenches working with the most vulnerable in the society.

One of the GIT's goals, to empower the local Muslims and to seek political representation, is yet to materialize.<sup>76</sup> The GIT's effort to educate and train local Muslims to become *imams* by establishing educational institutions for adults and children has been successful. Generally speaking, the GIT hopes to educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam and to bring the message of Islam to non-Muslims. The GIT also undertake welfare relief and humanitarian work, and they have established Islamic schools throughout Guyana. It is their mission to educate the youth and younger children before they fall through the cracks of society. They have established a women's coalition in their organization as well, and are keen to promote women's development. They hope that all these activities will help to rebuild the Muslim community in Guyana.<sup>77</sup>

### *Islamic Schools Nationwide*

The increase in Islamic education and the proliferation of Islamic schools must be attributed to the GIT. Recently the GIT has focused its energy on the building of Islamic schools in Guyana. Its first school was built in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. The school is named after one of Islam's most influential eleventh century scholars, Ibn Sina. The Ibn Sina Academy is spearheaded by the Council for Islamic Academic Education, which is a subsidiary of the GIT. The building for the school cost 50 million dollars and is housing about 400 students. It provides education from kindergarten to the secondary levels in "an environment that resonates Islamic decorum and moral values."<sup>78</sup> The school follows the regular state mandated curriculum as established by the Guyana Ministry of Education; however, the Arabic language at the GCE/O levels and a certificate in Islamic studies is offered. This successful undertaking has led to the establishment of two other Islamic schools in Rosehall, and Skeldon, Berbice. These schools will serve kindergarten to secondary school students. The Muslims in this region are much excited about this development and are anxiously awaiting the opening of these schools. Today most Muslim families prefer to send their children to such schools since government run schools have failed to provide quality education.

Mr Haseeb Yusuf stressed that "we are not only giving knowledge or education but also making them . . . responsible members of society."<sup>79</sup> He explained that Islam does not differentiate between religious and secular education. "Islam has always had a history of seeking knowledge, be it chemistry, astronomy, biology or physics."<sup>80</sup> The Ibn Sina Academy in general will reflect an Islamic environment. The design of the building

incorporates elements of Islamic architecture, comprising of three stories including 16 classrooms, a gymnasium, an auditorium, and *namaaz* and *wuzu* (ablution) areas. The GIT now calls the school ISA Academy after learning that Ibn Sina was a famous Sufi. Some have privately questioned the GIT's "brand of Islam." "The GIT schools are teaching their children that Duas are wrong, and that the observation of the Prophet's birthday celebration is *haraam*."<sup>81</sup> This charge has been denied by the GIT, however these are the issues that continue to divide the Muslims in Guyana. Besides providing Quranic education and teaching *adaab*, the ISA Academy has been very successful in terms of academic performance. "The ISA Islamic School broke its own records, producing two of Guyana's best Common Entrance students and a pleasing 75–100% passes at the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) examinations."<sup>82</sup>

### **The Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG)**

On 1 July 1979, at the Bishops High School in Georgetown, Muslims from all parts of Guyana assembled, and elected the first executives of the CIOG. This marked the birth of the CIOG in the hope of reorganizing the local Muslim population. The CIOG's slogan was unity and mobilization. The organization wanted to depoliticize Islam and to regain the dignity of the local Muslim community after a decade of politicking. Its first director was Mr. Nasir and its current CEO is Al Haj Fazeel M. Ferouz. The CIOG, like the Anjuman, is mostly controlled by the Demerara elites, many of whom are related to each other.<sup>83</sup> Since its establishment in 1979, the CIOG has worked vigilantly on the domestic and international scenes for the welfare of local Muslims, non-Muslims, and the *ummah* at large. It has worked to strengthen Muslim education and social welfare through various programs while propagating Islam. One of its members' strengths has been their shrewd political acumen to relate themselves to the wider polity and to the society at large. They have long responded to the challenge by insisting that Muslims must seek a dialogue with people of other faiths and work along with them for common goals, such as democracy, secularism, social justice and inter-communal harmony. The CIOG members have also sat on the Election Reform Committee and the Sodomy Committee. The fact that the CEO of the CIOG was part of the PPP presidential visits to India and the Middle East in the last decade has aroused the envy of other Islamic organizations.

The CIOG came into being during the turbulent period of 1962–1978 when the Guyana United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman was marred with political problems. Later, internal division of the Sad'r Anjuman led to its division into two factions. According to the CIOG, this situation convinced a group of concerned Muslims to unite following their consultation with other existing organizations in the country.<sup>84</sup> A "concerned" group of Muslims, such as Mohammad Ayube McDoom, Mohammad Moen McDoom, Azam Ally, Sultan H. Rahaman, Mooner Ahmad Khan, Fazeel Ferouz, and Al-Hajj S. M. Shakoor, were joined by other active Muslims across Guyana in their efforts to solicit support to form a new organization. Mr S. H. Rahaman, who was part of that "concerned group," writes, "We met with 112 *jamaats* to discuss and deliberate, of which 86 gave their signed resolutions, and pledges. Twenty six withheld their signed resolutions; however most of the twenty six gave verbal support to the formation."<sup>85</sup> After a period of almost one year, from June 1978 to June 1979, consensus was reached to forge a new Islamic organization. The concerned group of Muslims had received the mandate of the people to establish a new organization to represent the Muslims of the country. The CIOG claims that there is no other Islamic organization in Guyana that can make this claim.

According to the CIOG, when it makes a statement it speaks for the Muslims of Guyana, and it claims that there are 134 mosques in Guyana and the *imam* and president of each mosque is a member of the General Council of the CIOG.<sup>86</sup>

In the area of education, the CIOG conducts training programs of various lengths of time for *imams*, Islamic teachers, women, and youths. Training courses for children, youths, and women are held in various parts of Guyana. A special committee called the National Committee of Sisters' Affairs (NACOSA) was founded in July of 1992 by 23 Muslim women who voluntarily engaged in the activities and projects undertaken, either directly or through the CIOG. Also the CIOG organizes activities to bring Muslims together. Such occasions have provided excellent opportunities for creating social awareness in the Islamic community. In addition to counseling classes for married people experiencing difficulties and parents/children encountering problems, the NACOSA also conducts literacy programs for women and children, which focus on educational and religious topics.<sup>87</sup>

Secular subjects such as leadership training, civil responsibility, computer training, vocational skills, English, math, and science are also covered in the CIOG's education plan. In the future, the CIOG envisages more computer schools and the establishing of four vocational schools. Three schools have been completed and are awaiting furniture. The executives of the CIOG are also exploring the possibility of distance education via the internet and computers, or by setting up a television station that will focus on education and community development. In 1997 the CIOG received a commitment from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in Jeddah to build four vocational schools.<sup>88</sup> The money from the IDB is given to the contractors as they complete phases of the project. Three buildings have been completed at a cost of 150,000 USD from the allocated funds. Additional costs for completing each building would be 75,000 USD including furniture. In 2005 the CIOG constructed a school in New Amsterdam, Berbice, and applied for more funds to furnish the existing schools. Representatives of the IDB were in Guyana in August of 2005 and they visited the project and met with President Jagdeo and members of the CIOG, however there seems to be some hiccups in further funding because the IDB is requiring "qualified" teachers to work in these schools and Guyana has a brain drain.

Since 1999, the CIOG, in collaboration with the IDB, has been providing interest-free loans for Muslim students pursuing studies at the University of Guyana. Over the years many students have benefited from this program at the university and some have graduated in civil engineering and computer science. Most recently, the CIOG and IDB have been in the process of establishing a trust fund to benefit other students from the repayment of funds by students who have already graduated. Besides secular subjects, scholarships are also given to young Muslims for Islamic studies at universities in Egypt, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Syria.

#### *Social Welfare Activities of the CIOG*

The CIOG administers an excellent social welfare program that ameliorates the economic burden that orphans, widows, abused women, runaways, prisoners and the elder face in this poor country. Its excellent *zakaat* programs are outstanding, to which even its critics would agree. Through some dynamic programs in conjunction with the business community, the legal and the medical Muslim community, the CIOG has been able to provide help to the most needy in society and to also safeguard those at risk. For example, in one year the CIOG collected 2.3 million Guyana dollars from

Muslims on a monthly basis and distributed it to approximately 937 poor Muslims in 100 mosques throughout Guyana. In one year when funds received amounted to about 32 million Guyana dollars, it disbursed 27 million Guyana dollars in *zakaat*.<sup>89</sup> The team arranging this comprised of the CIOG's executive and regional representatives who spearheaded the collection drive.

On a yearly basis, the CIOG, in collaboration with the Zakaat House of Kuwait and with other local Muslims, sponsors an event called Orphan Day. The goal of this event is to highlight the need for more protection of children. The president of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, frequently expresses his admiration for the commitment of Muslims to charitable work in communities across Guyana. While attending "Orphan Day," the president called for new laws backing protection of the child that can be passed in Guyana. There have been recent cases of child abuse, which have triggered concern in the society. The Zakaat House currently sponsors 890 orphans. Under the CIOG's Orphan and Destitute Program, it generously provides for some 360 orphans from Skeldon; West Berbice; East and West Coast Demerara; East and West Bank Demerara; Essequibo Coast and the islands of Georgetown and Bartica. All orphans receive assistance in the educational, social, medical and financial areas, the CIOG said. According to the CIOG, this program started seven years ago with 23 children and grew to 360 children. The CIOG spends more than G\$800,000 per month on this program. These Muslim orphans receive a total of G\$535,000 monthly.<sup>90</sup> They are also provided school uniforms, clothing, schoolbooks, shoes, and access to medical attention.

The CIOG has a medical committee that conducts an outreach program in the poor areas of the country. The medical committee also assists in helping people who have to go overseas for medical attention, regardless of race or religious background.<sup>91</sup> Many Muslim doctors in Guyana volunteer in this activity. The Medical Committee of the CIOG recently donated a Caesium unit and neurosurgery equipment to the Georgetown Public Hospital.<sup>92</sup> This donation was received through the CIOG's strong relationship with Muslim organizations in Kuwait. "It is unfortunate that the Ministry of Health has not been able to get this unit operational as yet because we were hoping to ask the same organization for a donation of a kidney dialysis machine."<sup>93</sup> Guyana does not have a dialysis machine for patients suffering from kidney problems. The CIOG will soon open a dialysis centre in Guyana and it will charge patients half the price of what private institutions charge.

The CIOG operates a transportation service for the burial of Muslims and expects to expand this service to a fully operational funeral home that will cater for both Muslims and Non-Muslims. It has been working aggressively to ensure that poor Muslims who die at the Palms or at Georgetown Hospital are buried for free. The burial and hearse committee continues to take care of many Muslims, and provides an excellent service that is more economical than all the existing funeral homes. The CIOG provides the transportation, the burial cloth, the coffins, and performs the *ghusl* (washing the body) for the poor. It is free for the poor, and for those who can afford to pay, it is half the price that they would pay at the funeral homes in Guyana. The CIOG also works with the most at risk in the community. It conducts two programs per week in the prison. One is the *jumma* (Friday) prayer program and the other is a program to assist prisoners to help improve their secular education. The CIOG also has a prison committee petition for the parole of prisoners, and aims to provide skills and training opportunities for those who are in prison. This will make it easier for many of these persons to find employment when they are released from prison. The CIOG has also helped prisoners to pay the fees

to enable them to take their Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) exams and complete their secondary education.<sup>94</sup>

During the month of Ramadhan, the CIOG features articles and news relating to this time in *Al Bayan*, its official publication, and in daily newspapers. Like other Islamic organizations in Guyana, it also sponsors radio and television programs during this important month of the Islamic calendar. Funds are collected from Guyanese Muslims in Canada and the US, and then *zakaat* and *sadqatul fitr* are distributed to about 74 mosques and Muslim prisoners during the month of Ramadhan. In one year, for example, the CIOG claims that a total of 3,770 persons benefited, 37 of whom were orphans, and approximately 52 mosques were visited.<sup>95</sup> In addition, for *eid-ul-adha*, the CIOG has special TV and radio programs and sponsors ads in newspapers, and *qurbani* (sacrificial) meat is distributed throughout the country. Every Muslim household, rich or poor, receives *qurbani* meat; however many mosques are independent of the CIOG and they make their own arrangements to distribute *qurbani* meat.

The CIOG has numerous programs to help Muslims and non-Muslims. Their feeding program is held at the Bourda Market daily. Their medical program, headed by Dr Bacchus, provides medical aid to poor Muslims who can't afford the fees of private doctors. In one year (1998), 700 patients were provided with free medication, consultation and treated for many different problems. The Medical Committee handled 26 circumcisions for poor Muslims. The legal committee of the CIOG provides legal assistance to Muslims. Ombudsman S. Y Mohammed heads it. Muslims are provided with free legal advice and given assistance in the preparation of legal documents. The CIOG also runs a cemetery operation, which is geared towards the cleaning up of the Muslim section of the Le-Repentir Cemetery in the capital Georgetown. This venture included the cleaning of drains, weeding of grass, cleaning of bushes, and the construction of three bridges. According to the CIOG, the project is the beginning of a series of works to beautify the surroundings and simultaneously fulfill the Muslims' "moral duties towards our deceased relatives."<sup>96</sup> More recently, since 2006, the CIOG has been sponsoring young people to have heart surgery abroad, regardless of religious affiliation. The CIOG is seen as Guyana's most respected and dynamic NGO by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

#### *Relationship with the Islamic World and Pan-Islamism*

Since independence in 1966, the local Muslims have been exposed to the wider *ummah*. The influence of the Middle East on the local Muslim population has been an interesting phenomenon. Local Muslims identify with the *ummah* more than before and increased contacts with the Muslim world have led to a sense of Pan-Islamism which is far more important today than at any time in the past. The Muslim organizations of Guyana have maintained these strong links and access to the print and electronic media is also attributed to this phenomenon. Strengthening this relationship are the frequent visits of Muslims from the Islamic World. Guyana is no longer at the Islamic periphery. Sympathy for Islamic causes and for the state of Muslims globally has become evident. All major Islamic organizations in Guyana have been at the forefront, condemning atrocities taking place against Muslims in places from Bosnia to Kosova, from Chechnya to Kashmir and from Palestine to the Philippines. They have brought many Islamic scholars from across the world to Guyana, and they have also raised issues relating to Muslims at home and abroad. This has enabled local Muslims to identify with the global *ummah*. As well, the Muslims have influenced local politics. The government of Guyana issued

statements on hot issues such as Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Kosova, and Bosnia.

The publications of these Muslim groups have constantly strived to educate the locals about the *ummah* across the world. Consistently, pages in their publications have dealt with the history and current news of Muslims in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Since 1936, the Sad'r Anjuman has used the pages of its journal, *Voice of Islam*, to educate the locals about the *ummah*, and after World War II, when the struggle for freedom engulfed the Muslim World, the pages of the *Voice of Islam* were proliferated with news from Algeria, Palestine, Indonesia, Egypt, Transjordan, and Pakistan. The Anjuman also sought scholarships for local Muslims to study abroad. Pakistan was one of the first Muslim countries to offer aid to Guyanese Muslims since its creation in 1947. Local Muslims, under the Sad'r Anjuman, raised funds for Muslim causes as early as in 1947 (when Pakistan was created), and more recently they brought scholars to enlighten the local Muslims about the plight of the Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosova, Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir, and Chechnya. They have sent charitable donations to Muslims in Kosova and Bosnia, and to non Muslims in places such as Grenada which was affected by a hurricane.

In the past decade, the Anjuman, MYL, and CIOG have broadened their friendship with neighboring countries such as Suriname, Trinidad, and French Guiana. There was always a vibrant relationship with Pakistan and India, and in the past two decades these Muslim bodies of Guyana have been very active in forging strong ties with the Guyanese Muslims in England, the Netherlands, the US and Canada, because they contribute generously to the social-welfare of their local brethren. The CIOG, MYL, and GIT all maintain friendly ties with the embassies of the US, Great Britain, Canada, Pakistan and India, the representatives of which are always invited to various Islamic functions held by these religious bodies. There have been many exchange visits between Guyana and Suriname. This growing link has been encouraged by Fazeel Ferouz (President of the CIOG), the MYL, Hifaz, and the Sad'r Anjuman. People to people relationships are forging together ties between the two Muslim communities. The Guyanese organizations have hosted the visits of Khilafat Anjuman and Hidayatul Islam, two Islamic organization of Suriname, and in the past five years they have been holding *qaseeda* competitions in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad.

Suriname and Guyana have much in common because the majority of Muslims in these two countries are South Asians. They are also from the *sunni hanafi madhab*, and sometime in the past, shared the Urdu language. Urdu is the language of the Surinamese Hindustani Muslims who have resisted Arabic, while in Guyana Urdu is hardly used. Strong ties with Suriname will be beneficial to Guyanese Muslims since most Guyanese youths who travel to Arabia, Pakistan, or Egypt for Islamic education never return to Guyana to serve the community. Now there is an effort to train married and older Guyanese Muslims in Suriname or places such as Syria and Egypt. Suriname is capable of training *imams* and providing Islamic teachers to Guyana, and Hifaz and the MYL want to exploit this good will. They see no reason why the youths should be sent to Arabic speaking countries for training, from where they do not return to Guyana. Instead, these new *alims*, who are funded by local Islamic organizations or by Muslim nations, end up in the US, Canada, and other parts of the Caribbean. According to Hifaz/MYL and the SADR, their efforts to promote "orthodox Islam" will greatly be boosted when a promise made by the Khilafat Anjuman of Suriname to provide a *maulana* who would live in Guyana is realized.<sup>97</sup>

*The Role of the CIOG*

The CIOG currently is the most active and dynamic Islamic organization in Guyana; and it is capable of being such because it has the capital, and has the recognition from the government as the so-called representative of the Muslims of Guyana. The president of the CIOG often travels to the Islamic World and visiting Muslim dignitaries frequent the CIOG's secretariat. The CIOG hopes to use its contacts in Islamic countries in the Middle East, Far East and Africa to promote trade and investment opportunities and to get markets for Guyanese products in these countries. The CIOG is to carry out many projects in Guyana on behalf of the International Islamic Charitable Organization (IICO), Kuwait; Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Saudi Arabia; World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Saudi Arabia; Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia; Saudi Embassy, Washington, DC; and Al-Azhar University, Egypt. Discussions were also held with Waleed Ad-Dyel, a member of the Chamber of Commerce of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, to bring a team of Saudi Arabian businessmen to Guyana.<sup>98</sup>

The CIOG has maintained an active role in the politics at home and abroad. It has been a champion of Islamic causes throughout the world. It has brought to the attention of many the plight of Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, Kosova, Bosnia, and Kashmir. On many occasions the Organization has called for Guyana to sever ties with Israel because of its occupation of Arab lands and gross human rights violations against Palestinians.<sup>99</sup> The CIOG, following the advice of Dr Ali Kettani, a specialist in Muslim minority affairs, lobbied the government of former President Hoyte of Guyana to join the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). President Hoyte was committed to joining the OIC in 1992 but in that year he was defeated at the polls by the PPP. However, this was not a setback because the CIOG pushed the idea to the new Prime Minister of Guyana, Mr Sam Hinds, who had reservations about joining the OIC. He felt that it would have offset the balance of Guyana's close ties with India. But after learning about the nature of the OIC and India's own quest to join that body, the Prime Minister took the idea to President Cheddi Jagan. Under the former President of Guyana, Dr Cheddi Jagan, Guyana became a permanent observer of the OIC in 1996 and in 1998 became the 56th member of the OIC.

The CIOG vehemently denies that it has been pocketed by the ruling government. According to its CEO, Al Haji Fazeel Ferouz, its relationship with the government is based on mutual respect. "We have meetings with the President and many Ministers to discuss different problems that come up from time to time and need to be addressed."<sup>100</sup> Ferouz says that his organization lobbies for the Muslim community, and the government of Guyana has reacted favorably. He highlighted some of these achievements: "land for masjids, land for the poor, money to assist people to go abroad, duty free for items for mosques, we look into claims of wrongful dismissals, or a Muslim being discriminated against."<sup>101</sup> When asked about future plans of the CIOG, Ferouz revealed that it is actively looking to open a library at its new secretariat, a bookstore in each county of Guyana, a TV and radio recording studio and eventually a TV and radio station, an Islamic university that will cover both secular and Islamic subjects, a Muslim Credit Union—which will be the forerunner to the IDB—and to organise some economic projects to assist in the funding of its activities.

The CIOG's Haji Ferouz was part of the late President Dr Cheddi Jagan's delegation during his 1996 tour of the Middle East. In fact, he worked behind the scenes to execute this tour successfully. Haji Ferouz and Dr Jagan had a meeting with an official of the IDB of Saudi Arabia. This meeting took place in Bahrain.<sup>102</sup> As part of the presidential

delegation, Ferouz visited Bahrain, Syria, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These countries agreed to send trade and investment missions to Guyana. In Kuwait, the Guyanese leader held talks with the Kuwaiti leader, Sheikh Al-Ahwad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Kuwait has lived up to its promise. In 2004 the CIOG facilitated a meeting between President Bharrat Jagdeo and the Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Kuwait, Bader-Al Mutairi. The two discussed key areas of cooperation in which their respective governments can be engaged and discussed the fostering of amicable relations between the two countries. Fazeel Ferouz and the CEO of the CIOG, Moen ul-Hack, accompanied Al Mutairi to meet President Jagdeo. Ferouz stated that the Under-Secretary's visit was made in return for the many visits he has made to that country.<sup>103</sup>

The CIOG is affiliated with the IDB. Now that Guyana is a member of the OIC, full membership of the IDB is possible at the national level, which will benefit the entire nation. The CIOG has been in the forefront in this endeavor to forge strong ties with the IDB. It is its opinion that Guyana and its people will benefit if Islamic banks and Islamic insurance companies invest in Guyana. The CIOG has already drawn funds from the IDB for projects in Guyana. The late President of Guyana, Dr Cheddi Jagan, had asked the CIOG to request the IDB to send a team to Guyana to have discussions with the government and the private sector on Islamic banking and insurance. However, the death of Dr Jagan and the unstable political situation in Guyana since 1997 delayed these negotiations. The CIOG later held discussions with former American-Jewish born Guyanese President, Mrs Janet Jagan, to follow up these discussions with the IDB and to arrange for officials to come visit Guyana. The CIOG has been in communication with the IDB in Jeddah and a team from the CIOG and the private sector commission was planning to visit Jeddah to hold discussions with the IDB.<sup>104</sup> However, to date, the Muslims have been paid lip service by the government of President Bharrat Jagdeo who steered his government away from the OIC by not attending several key OIC summits and meetings in the past five years. More recently, the Muslims were again promised that Guyana would appoint an ambassador to the OIC and join the IDB after the general elections of 2006. More recently, President Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana promised to make a state visit to the Middle East. Since becoming the president in 1999, he has visited India three times. The Muslims have been urging him to tour the Middle East.

The CIOG is very keen to have Guyana join the IDB. The CIOG views contact with the IDB as very crucial as it will enable it to get the necessary expertise to venture into many areas using the systems of financing that are permitted under Islamic law.<sup>105</sup> Muslim organizations cannot participate in programs that charge interest, for it is forbidden in Islam. "We are also of the opinion that the interest rate[s] being charged by most of the financial institutions to small business and in the micro-credit programs are far too excessive."<sup>106</sup> In the interest of the nation the CIOG says, "These rates range from 20% to 40%. We call on the government to intervene and reduce this high rate of interest if we are to stimulate the economy of our country. These high interest rates are stifling the poor, especially women's group, the youth and the unemployed."<sup>107</sup> The CIOG has been urging organizations such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to make available loans to Muslims using the systems permitted by Islamic law. "These development organizations can get knowledge of these systems through their international networks, very easily from the Muslim countries in Africa, Middle East or the Far East."<sup>108</sup> The CIOG plans to hold discussions with the CIDA and UNDP on these issues; the outcome of such

initiations is yet to be determined. Due to the fact that micro-credit has a component of interest, the CIOG has been forced to curtail its activities in the areas of micro-credit and extending loans to poor Muslims to build their homes.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

There is a lack of cooperation among Islamic organizations in Guyana because they tend to compete instead of complementing each other; however each organization has served a specific purpose. Hifaz, the MYL, the GIT, and the GUSIA have engaged their opponents in a scholarly discourse and the conflicts over traditional practices have subsided. They have also led the way in forging ties with the Islamic communities of Suriname, the Netherlands, Pakistan, and Trinidad and Tobago. The GIT has been aggressive in its *dawah* and education drive and has opened many institutions to teach Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many of its schools offer Islamic and secular education to Muslim students and today, in Guyana, Muslim parents have the option of sending their children to Islamic schools. As well, the GIT has opened the frontier of Guyana to Islam by extending its *dawah* drive to indigenous communities. The CIOG, on the other hand, through its dynamic *zakaat* program, has supported the orphans, widows, and elders of society who are most at risk, and at the same time it has lobbied the government for providing social and economic benefits to local Muslims. It is recognized unofficially as the voice of the Muslims in Guyana and has negotiated internationally on behalf of the local Muslims. The CIOG's commitment to charitable work in communities across Guyana has earned it great admiration.

However, rivalry among the CIOG, GIT, Hifaz, and GUSIA, the leading organizations; theological differences in *fiqh*; the exodus of learned Muslims; lack of human resources; economic hardship and the dictatorship from 1966 to 1992 are some of the many factors that have stymied the full development of this community socially, economically, and politically. These organizations seem preoccupied with competing and condemning each other, and at the center of the debate are questions surrounding practices such as *ta'zeem*, *melad*, recitation of *qaseeda*, the use of the Urdu language and traditions which came from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent with the early Muslims in the period from 1838 to 1916 and are now branded as *bidahs*. The CIOG's president, Fazeel Ferouz, warns that "there is division and disorder that affects the public image of Muslims and Islam in Guyana and also the correctness and validity of worship and cohesion based on time-honoured devotional practices."<sup>110</sup> These divisions have had a lasting effect on Guyana's two main ethnically-based political parties, the PPP and the PNC, and they have exposed the weaknesses of the Muslim community in Guyana.

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