

THE WORLD

## Long Memories May Ensnare a Dictator



Tomas Munita for The New York Times

**REMEMBRANCE** Sunil Oemrawsingh's uncle was killed in 1982. Relics keep his memory alive.

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**PARAMARIBO, [Suriname](#)** — Running into Desi Bouterse is not easy to do. He does not frequent this capital's outdoor cafes. He keeps to his riverfront villa. He grants few interviews.

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Still, he is one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in this tiny former Dutch colony on South America's northeast shoulder, and in his story is a lesson — perhaps — for the rest of the continent in the virtues, and downsides, of patience.

Suriname's 470,000 people know Mr. Bouterse well. At 62, he is a former military dictator, a fugitive from Interpol, convicted in absentia in the [Netherlands](#) in 1999 on cocaine-trafficking charges. With immunity from extradition, he is also a member of Suriname's Parliament and a leader of Suriname's largest political party.

But these days, Suriname's courts are finally staring hard at the bloody start of his political career. He is in the opening phases of a trial in the killings of 15 opponents of his regime on Dec. 8, 1982.

Fifteen dead may seem a small total when compared to the deaths and disappearances of thousands who opposed far more powerful dictatorships and far more destructive revolutionaries elsewhere in South America in those years.

But 15 executions was a searing experience for a tiny new nation perched between jungle and sea, its population the size of Omaha's. Its multiethnic citizenry was already trying hard to reconcile the bitter legacy of Dutch colonial rule with a faith in Dutch democratic ideals.

What makes Suriname stand apart is the stolid patience with which it and its legal system have, ever so slowly, been catching up with Mr. Bouterse.

Larger neighbors seemed more wary of letting the law take its course; they trembled at the passions that might erupt if they put past tyrants in the dock. Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#) of Chile, for example, never faced trial. A Spanish judge had the British detain him, but when he was sent home, his lawyers staved off criminal complaints until he died. In the 1980s, the prospect of military rebellion led Argentina to shift from an early effort to prosecute crimes committed under military rule; instead, it granted an amnesty to lesser officers. And Peru watched former President [Alberto Fujimori](#) go into exile in Japan; he was brought home for trial only after he moved next door, to Chile, aiming to restart his political career in Peru.

Here, the pattern has been different, and the one colonial legacy that seems to account for it is Surinamese faith in a concept the Dutch call "rechtsstaat" — a state ruled by law.

The “December Murders,” as they are called here, gave the notion a profound test: in one swoop, they wiped out the top leaders in the resistance to Mr. Bouterse, a former Army sergeant who had taken power in a 1980 coup. Among the victims were lawyers, radio broadcasters, a union leader — the cream of a ministate’s intelligentsia.

For many years, Mr. Bouterse held power or great influence, even after elections resumed in 1987 and full civilian rule returned in 1991. But the “rechtsstaat” concept endured, too, offering resilience for Suriname and its whipsawed institutions to wait for another day, when the truths of Mr. Bouterse’s rule might be plumbed.

After the killings, despair was Suriname’s first reaction. The Netherlands cut off aid. Mr. Bouterse created a bizarre police state and preached resentment of the Dutch. He labeled himself an anti-imperialist revolutionary, taking inspiration from Cuba and Grenada, and aid from Libya.

“People were just in awe of Bouterse, this commanding figure who is humorous, cynical, defiant,” said Edward Dew, an American political scientist who has written widely on Suriname. “But they were also stunned by what had happened and at how long he remained in power.”

Mr. Bouterse got rich through timber and gold dealings and left the army in the early 1990s, but remained in politics, taunting Suriname’s new leaders. He has since reinvented himself as a populist supporter of Venezuela’s president, [Hugo Chávez](#). But the Dutch, whom he still denounces, have resumed their aid and attached to it a watchful concern for human rights.

So the ghosts of the Bouterse era, like Mr. Bouterse himself, remained in circulation as Suriname evolved. And the Surinamese found an odd equanimity.

These days, alongside Mr. Bouterse in Parliament is Ronnie Brunswijk, a guerrilla leader who fought him in the 1980s. Veterans of both armies bump into each other, and into relatives of their victims, in cafes along the Suriname River.

Human rights groups scoff at Mr. Bouterse’s ideological poses. “There were never any leftists in Suriname in Bouterse’s time and there aren’t any now,” said Betty Goede, a human rights activist. “What we do have in abundance are thugs, and the ideology of easy money.”

For a time, she joined the Surinamese diaspora in the Netherlands. She returned bearing mixed lessons from a society where the tools of democracy still worked, but where the native Dutch were often less than warm to her and her fellow exiles.

Eddy Wijngaarde, 65, a filmmaker whose journalist brother was among those killed in 1982, also has returned. Now, he says of the trial, "Nobody knows what the outcome will be, but as a test for our society, it is extremely important."

By that, he means it was the passage of time, rather than any forgetfulness, that almost foiled hope of trying Mr. Bouterse. By 2000, the statute of limitations on many crimes attributed to the regime had run out, and the one on murder was about to. But relatives of the dead filed a complaint just in time. The trial itself began only last November, and the process grinds on.

The judge has been hearing objections from lawyers for Mr. Bouterse and other defendants. Court meets just once a month, but the room bulges with relatives, defendants and ordinary citizens. Mr. Bouterse has yet to appear.

Sunil Oemrawsingh, a jeweler whose uncle was one of those killed in 1982, said in an interview that the last time he saw Mr. Bouterse was when he lived across the street. "It has taken a very long time, but our fear has finally disappeared," he said.

"All I want to do is look into the eyes of this man," Mr. Oemrawsingh said. "I wonder if he will return my gaze."