

A first for Suriname

Nation gets a woman president

■ PARAMARIBO

Jennifer Geerlings-Simons yesterday became the first woman to be elected president of Suriname.

Lawmakers supported the doctor and former parliamentary speaker more than a month after voters in this Dutch-speaking Caribbean Community (Caricom) country went to the polls to elect a new government on May 25.

'I come into this office to serve, and I will use all my knowledge, strength and insight to make our wealth available to all of our people,' said the 71-year-old President-elect, who will be sworn into office on July 16.

'I am very aware of the responsibility now placed on our shoulders, a responsibility compounded for me by the fact that I am the first woman to hold this office. I do not need many words. My thanks and we will get to work,' she said in a brief speech after legislators had approved her appointment.

Her path to the presidency was effectively cleared when the Progressive Reform Party (VHP) of outgoing President Chandrikapersad Santokhi announced it would not nominate candidates for either the presidency or the vice-presidency.

Simons, representing the National Democratic Party (NDP), and Gregory Rusland of the National Party of Suriname (NPS) as her running mate for vice president, have secured the backing of 34 members of the National Assembly, exactly the number required for election in the first round.

The General Liberation and Development Party (ABOP), headed by outgoing vice president Ronnie Brunswijk, publicly supported the NDP-NPS ticket.

Suriname is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary of political independence and for the first time in the history of the republic, a woman has been elected president. There has also been no female vice-president to date, although two women-Indra Djwalapersad and Jennifer Simons herself -have previously been elected as speakers of the National Assembly.

In an emotional speech to the National assembly, outgoing President Santoki said 'power is temporary. Glamour is fleeting. But service to the people is eternal'.

He congratulated Geerlings-Simons and vice president Rusland, and also wished the incoming cabinet strength and wisdom.

'The path ahead of them is not easy, but it is a path that we must all walk together,' he said as he looked back on a tumultuous term of office, marked by economic crises, the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and political tensions.

'Decisions were made that could have been made differently. But leadership is not just claiming successes, it is also acknowledging shortcomings,' he told legislators, adding that he considered the economic recovery path and the introduction of the 'Royalty's for Everyone' programme, for which more than 60,000 citizens have now registered, to be among the highlights of his tenure in office.

He said the restoration of Suriname's credibility on the world stage was another important milestone in his speech in which a recurring theme was one of solidarity and dialogue, across political and cultural boundaries.

'Suriname can only move forward if we do not let go of each other,' he said, and called for building bridges instead of walls.

He expressed his gratitude to Parliament, the civil service, the security services and all citizens 'who often keep this country running in silence 'I will be saying goodbye to the highest office

in a few days with humility. But my love for Suriname knows no term of office,' he said, adding 'the future of Suriname is not in the hands of one man or woman, but in the hands of all of us.

'May Suriname be the country where our children can grow up safely. Where differences are not a threat, but a source of wealth. Where leaders serve and the people rule. *Sranan, mi lobi yu*,' Santokhi added.

-CMC