

Recovering historical inflation data from postal stamps prices

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Abstract

For many developing countries, historical inflation figures are rarely available. We propose a simple method, which aims to recover such figures thereby using prices of postal stamps, issued in earlier years. We illustrate our method for Suriname where annual inflation rates are available for 1961 until 2015, and where fluctuations in inflation rates are prominent. We estimate the inflation rates for the sample 1873 to 1960. Our main finding is that high inflation periods usually last no longer than 2 or 3 years.

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1. Introduction and motivation

The World Bank collects annual inflation rates for all countries in the world. For developed countries, such data can be available for a long span of time, also because statistical bureaus for the countries exist for a long time¹. For many developing countries, matters can be different. For example, Benin's first available inflation figure concerns 1993, whereas Ethiopia's first quote concerns 1966. There may be various causes for this lack of data, which can relate to a lack of institutions, and effects of decolonization.

For various reasons one may want to have some impression of historical figures. One would perhaps want to know if a current high inflation period has occurred before and which measures were taken to reduce inflation. Alternatively, one may want to compare inflation patterns across countries to discern similarities or specific differences. And, one may want to compute historical data on real GDP, real wages and purchasing power parity, which all involve price levels. Preferably, one would also want to have annual data without missing data in between.

Recovering historical price levels can be difficult because of lack of information on the prices of many goods and because good and services may have changed substantially over the years. Various recent studies present discussion of methods to recover historical data and the reliability of those historical statistics, see Allen et al. (2011), Bolt and van Zanden (2014), Cendejas Bueno and Font de Villanueva (2015), Deaton and Heston (2010), Frankema and Waijenburg (2012) and Jerven (2009).

In the present paper, we present a new method, which aims to reconstruct historical inflation rates. We seek to alleviate the issue of changing products over time by considering a product that has not often changed over time and for which prices are immediately available. This product concerns postal stamps. First, postal stamps have been issued in many countries for a long time. Next, the type of product and its use did not change much over the years. In addition, evidently, the price of the stamp is printed on the stamp, see for example Figure 1 where we present a few stamps for Suriname.

In the present paper, and for illustrative purposes, we consider the historical prices of this South American country, which border the Guyana's and Brazil. The World Bank can provide us with annual inflation rates starting in 1961. The first stamps in Suriname were issued

¹ See Franses and Legerstee (2014) for a table with dates for 106 countries when statistical bureaus were founded.

in 1873, and hence we aim to retrieve annual inflation rates since that particular year. We chose for Suriname as the estimation sample is reasonably large, ranging from, 1961 to and including 2015, as there were many stamps issued per year, and also as there is substantial variation in the inflation figures over time. It also so happens that, at the time of writing this paper in 2016, inflation is again very high, and people may wonder what the typical number of years is that high inflation periods last.

The outline of our paper is as follows. Section 2 deals with the inflation rates data and with the stamps data, and provides some characteristics. Section 3 deals with two types of models to see if (changes in) postal stamps prices have explanatory value for inflation. One model is a simple regression model, while the other is a so-called MIDAS regression, which fits annual inflation rates to quarterly stamps prices². Both models suggest strong predictive power of the stamps prices. Section 4 deals with the backward extrapolation and identifies a few historical periods with excessive inflation rates, and their potential causes. Section 5 concludes.

2. The data

The annual inflation rates for 1961 to 2015 for Suriname are retrieved from the World Bank. Table 1 presents the data, and Figure 1 visualizes the data. Clearly, the data show periods with high inflation, and especially 1994 stands out with an inflation rate of 368.5 per cent. This number associates with approximately 1.6 per cent per day. Periods with high inflation are 1993 to 1995 and 1999 to 2001, while also 1987 was an exceptional year. The International Monetary Fund provides a review of the potential causes for the high inflation rates in the nineties³.

Table 2 presents the data on the postal stamps, also for the period 1961 to 2015. We consulted two catalogues, and retrieved the median prices of all the stamps in each year. The first catalogue runs until November 12 1975, a few weeks before Suriname became an independent country on November 25 1975. Before independence, Suriname was a colony of the Netherlands ever since the 17th century. The first postal stamp in Suriname was issued in 1873.

² Important references to MIDAS regression are Andreou et al. (2010), Clements and Galvao (2008), Ghysels et al. (2004), and Ghysels et al. (2007).

³ <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/1999/PN9980.HTM>

The data in Table 2 show that, like inflation, the percentage changes in postal stamp prices can be substantial. The observation in 1994 stands out with a value of 4220.99 per cent. In various years, we also see that price changes were equal to 0.

Figures 3 and 4 provide scatters of inflation versus the percentage changes in stamps prices. The first scatter covers all data, whereas Figure 4 concerns the data except 1994. A first impression is that there may exist a positive relationship between the two series.

3. Two econometric models

In this section we consider two econometric models to link inflation with changes in stamps prices. We denote annual inflation as Y_T and the annual changes in stamps prices as X_T . For inflation, we have only annual data, but for the stamps prices we can also construct quarterly data. Each year a range of stamps was issued, and this allows us to construct quarterly percentage changes, as the catalogues give the exact dates (day, month, year) of issue. There are now two ways to compute these changes in postal stamps prices. The first refer a current quarter with the previous quarter, that is, the first-order differences. We denote these as $X_{q,T}^1$, where T again corresponds with years and q with the quarters 1, 2, 3 and 4. The data appear in Figure 5. The second type of percentage changes concern the differences between a current quarter and the same quarter the year before. We denote these as $X_{q,T}^4$, as these concern fourth-order differences. The data are depicted in Figure 6.

At first, we allow for potential differences across models for the periods before and after the date of independence, and we thus start with the following regression model for the data from 1975 onwards, that is

$$Y_T = \mu + \alpha_0 X_T + \alpha_1 X_{T-1} + \rho Y_{T-1} + \varepsilon_T$$

The estimation results for the sample 1975 to 2015 appear in the first panel of Table 3. The parameters are estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). The tests for normality and first-order residual autocorrelation indicate that the model can be improved. A closer look at the residuals reveals that there are (at least) two very large residuals, concerning 1993 and 1999. The second panel of Table 3 displays the estimation results for the case where lagged inflation is deleted (as it was not significant) and where the observations in 1993 and 1999 are not included. The test results now suggest that the model is appropriately specified. The last panel

of Table 3 presents the results for the same model, but now for the sample starting in 1961. Even though the tests do diagnose some problems with the errors (which are due to some modest outliers), the parameter estimates for current and lagged changes in stamps prices are remarkably constant across models and samples.

To see if data that are more detailed can lead to better models, we consider two MIDAS models. The first model is

$$Y_T = \mu + \rho Y_{T-1} + \beta_0 X_{4,T}^1 + \beta_1 X_{3,T}^1 + \beta_2 X_{2,T}^1 + \beta_3 X_{1,T}^1 + \beta_4 X_{4,T-1}^1 + \beta_5 X_{3,T-1}^1 + \varepsilon_T$$

The OLS estimation results for this model are given in the left-hand side panel of Table 4. The diagnostic tests for normality and first-order residual autocorrelation suggest that this model is adequately specified.

The second MIDAS model is

$$Y_T = \mu + \rho Y_{T-1} + \beta_0 X_{4,T}^4 + \beta_1 X_{3,T}^4 + \beta_2 X_{2,T}^4 + \beta_3 X_{1,T}^4 + \beta_4 X_{4,T-1}^4 + \beta_5 X_{3,T-1}^4 + \beta_6 X_{2,T-1}^4 + \varepsilon_T$$

The OLS estimation results are in the second panel of Table 4. This MIDAS model also seems to fit the data well. When we compare the in-sample prediction errors, we see that the difference in accuracy is small. Given that the diagnostic tests indicate appropriate models, we learn that adding higher frequency terms to the regression models leads to more accuracy.

Overall, the estimation results in this section show that inflation and changes in stamps prices are strongly connected, at least here for the case of Suriname. Because the frequency of publication of the postal stamps before 1975 is lower, the MIDAS models however are not useful for the purpose we have in mind, namely recovering historical inflation rates, despite the increased accuracy they offered.

4. Recovery of historical inflation rates

Given that a suitable model for annual inflation rates appears to be

$$Y_T = \mu + \alpha_0 X_T + \alpha_1 X_{T-1} + \varepsilon_T$$

we will use the parameter estimates in the final panel of Table 3 to make backward predictions for inflation. That is, for the sample 1873 to 1960, we compute

$$\hat{Y}_T = 9.288 + 0.085X_T + 0.044X_{T-1}$$

Figure 7 displays the observations on the changes in the postal stamps prices for these years, which were collected from the first mentioned catalogue in Table 2. And, Figure 8 displays the estimated historical inflation observations.

We see that high inflation periods each time last for usually 1 or 2 years and at most 4 years, consider Figure 9. Specifically, if we define a high inflation period as a period with inflation higher than 10 per cent, the average length of such a period is 1.45 using the fitted sample from 1873-2015.

Figure 10 displays the actual data from 1961 onwards and the estimated data back to 1873 in one single graph. Clearly, the data in the nineties are exceptional. Postal stamps experienced enormous price changes during the 1990s. This period exactly coincides with the hyperinflation that Suriname experienced during that time.

However, various other periods in our forecasting sample are characterized by high inflation rates. Consider for example the 1900s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (specifically 1957). In Table 5, more details on these periods are discussed. The high inflation rates around 1900 coincides with the gold rush at the same time at the Lawa River in Suriname, which amounted to higher tariffs for transportation, see van Velzen and van Velzen (2013). The higher inflation rates in the 1930s can be related to a period of economic decline and austerity measures, causing social upheaval (Hoefte, 2013). The developments in 1940s can be most likely attributed to the consequences of the Second World War. The very high inflation rates as indicated by the peak at 1957 occur in the same year as the establishment of the central bank of Suriname,⁴ but certainly coincides with the so-called Eisenhower recession.

5. Conclusion

We proposed a simple method to estimate annual historical data on inflation using changes in postal stamps prices. The method seems to work, at least for Suriname. A next step would be

⁴ <https://www.cbvs.sr/about-cbvs/history>

to reconstruct historical figures for other countries. If possible, we would want to match our estimates with actually observed inflation rates, should those data be available.

SURINAME

9.10.1996



Figure 1: A few stamps issued in 1996 in Suriname, (with exceptionally high prices).

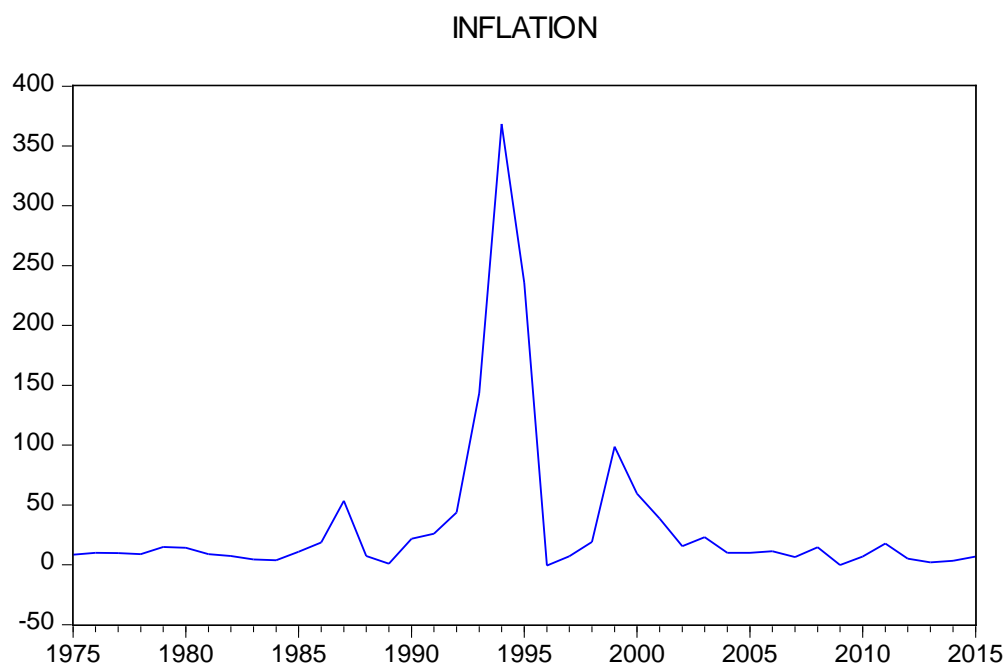


Figure 2: Inflation (in yearly percentages) in Suriname

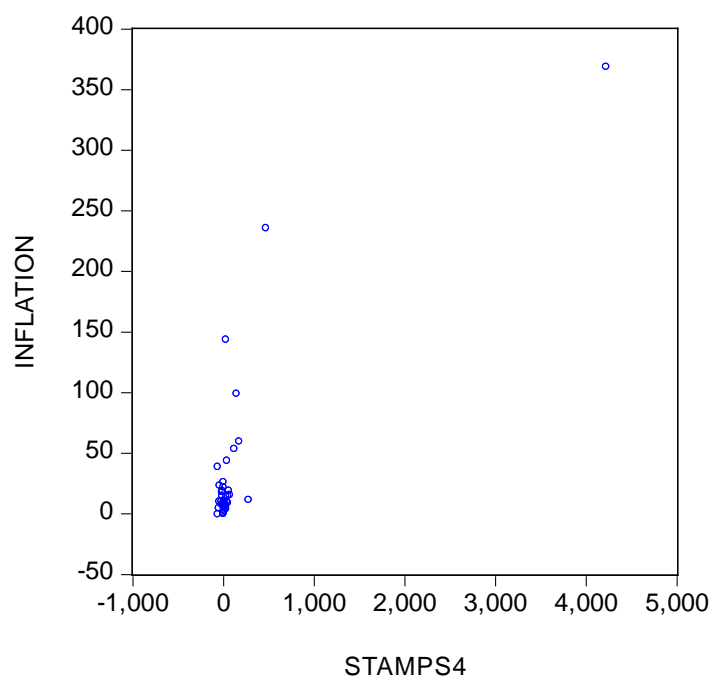


Figure 3: Scatter of inflation versus percentage changes in stamps prices (all observations)

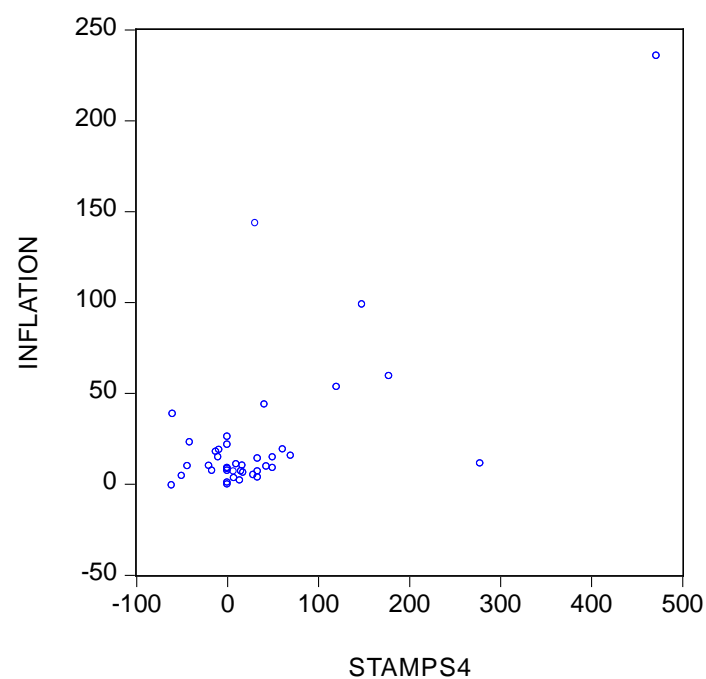


Figure 4: Scatter of inflation versus percentage changes in stamps prices (excluding 1994)

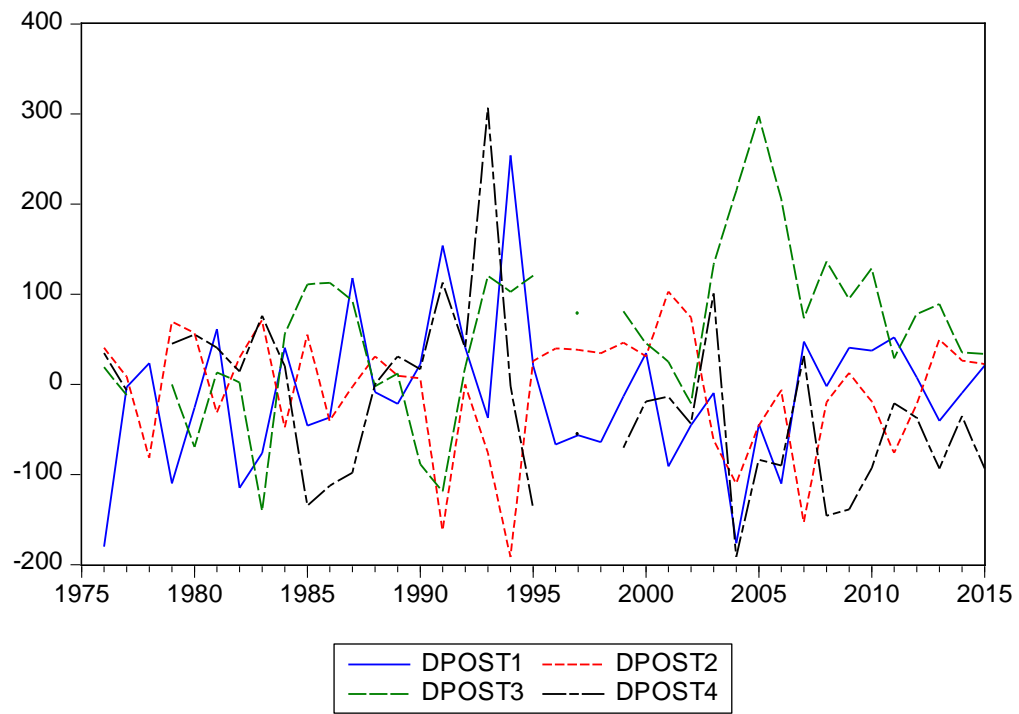


Figure 5: Quarter-to-quarter changes in stamps prices for MIDAS regression

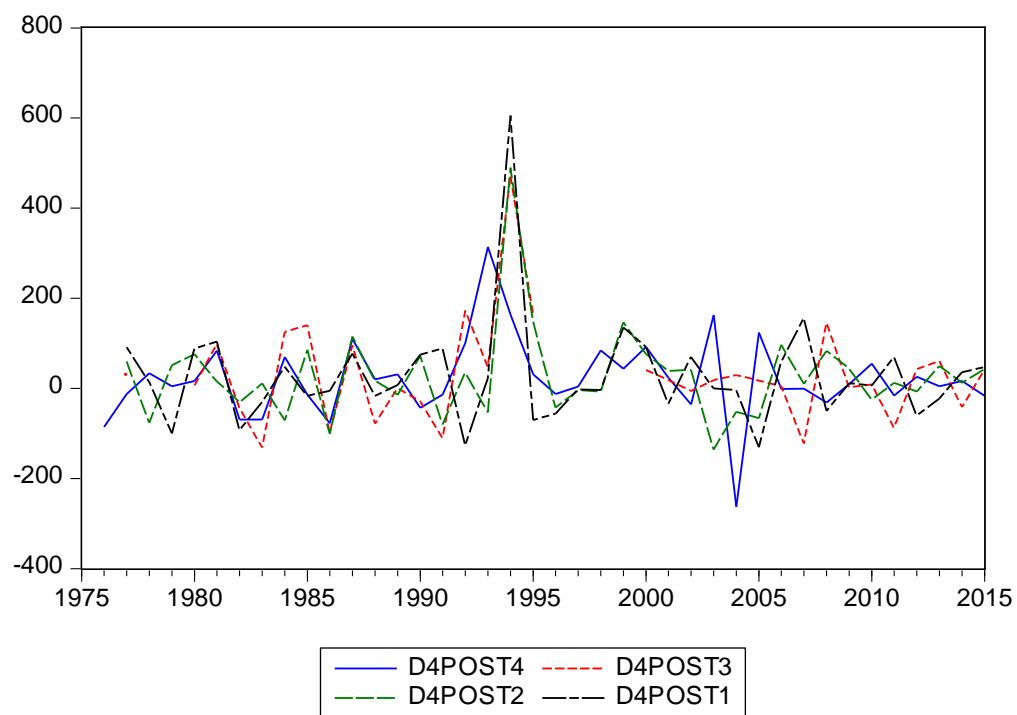


Figure 6: Annual changes in stamps prices, observed per quarter, for MIDAS regression

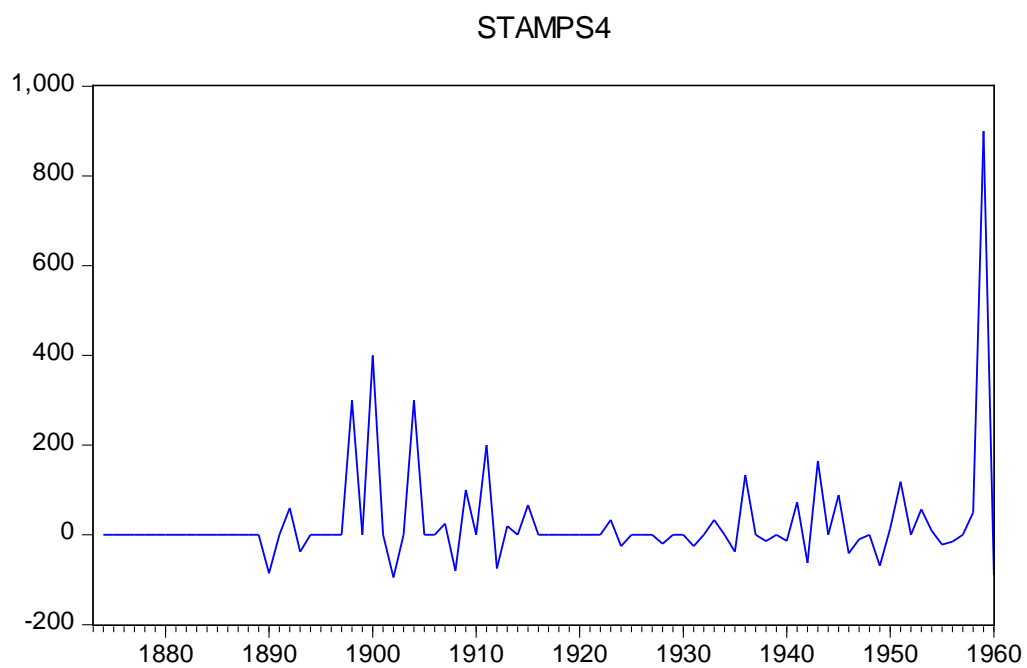


Figure 7: Percentage changes in postal stamps prices, 1873-1960

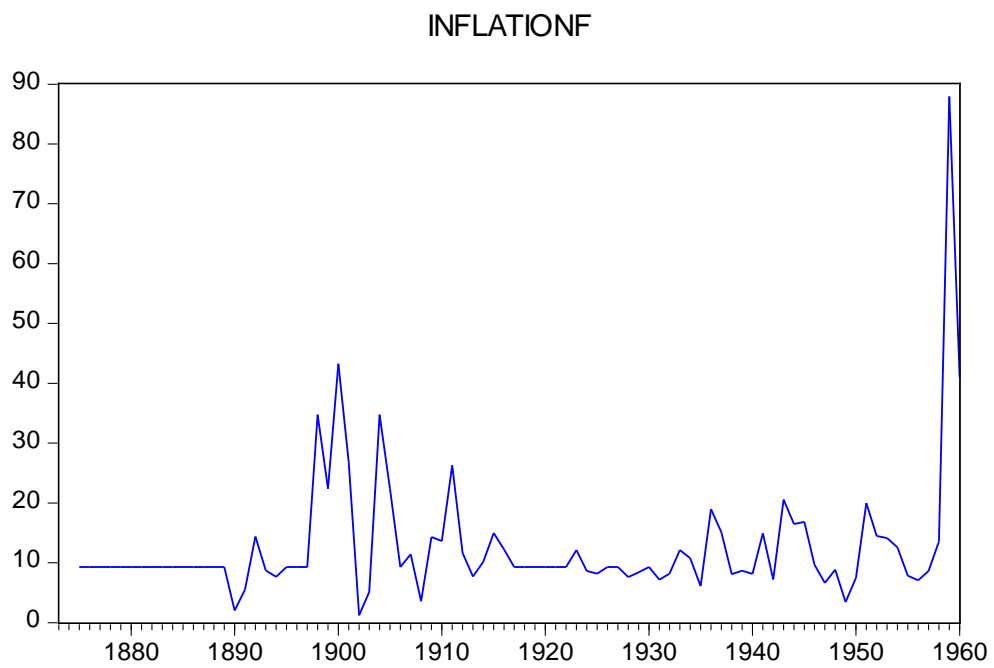


Figure 8: Predictions of inflation rates for 1873 to 1960

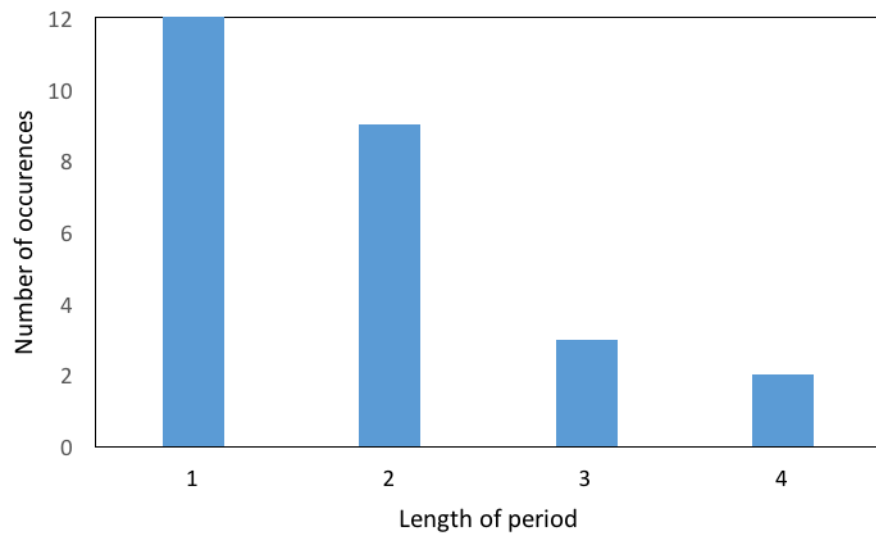


Figure 9: Length of periods with high inflation rates (inflation above 10 per cent) and their frequency of occurrence, based on fitted sample of 1873-2015

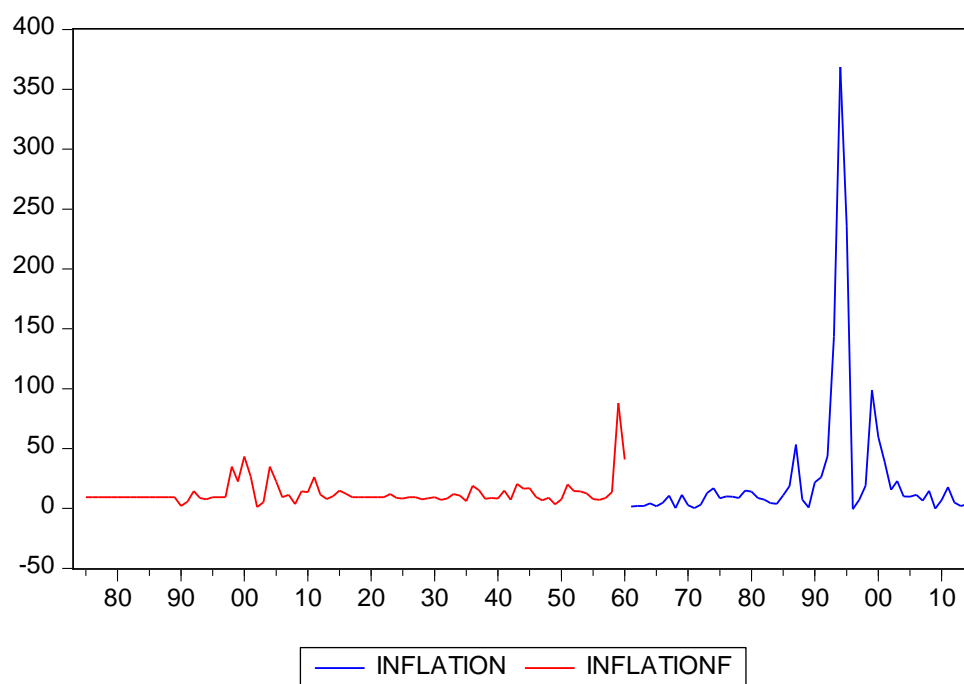


Figure 10: True and estimated inflation rates

Table 1: Inflation data: All items index annual average (source: World Bank)

1961	1.7	1971	0.2	1981	8.8
1962	2.1	1972	3.2	1982	7.3
1963	2.1	1973	12.9	1983	4.4
1964	4.2	1974	16.9	1984	3.7
1965	1.9	1975	8.4	1985	10.9
1966	4.7	1976	10.1	1986	18.7
1967	10.7	1977	9.7	1987	53.4
1968	0.2	1978	8.8	1988	7.3
1969	11.3	1979	14.8	1989	0.8
1970	2.6	1980	14.1	1990	21.7
1991	26.0	2001	38.6	2011	17.7
1992	43.7	2002	15.5	2012	5.0
1993	143.5	2003	23.0	2013	2.0
1994	368.5	2004	10.0	2014	3.3
1995	235.6	2005	9.9	2015	6.9
1996	-0.7	2006	11.3		
1997	7.1	2007	6.4		
1998	19.0	2008	14.7		
1999	98.8	2009	-0.2		
2000	59.4	2010	6.9		

Table 2: Percentage changes in the median stamp price per year (sources: for the data until and including November 12, 1975, “Speciale catalogus 2002, Postzegels van Nederland en overzeese tijksdelen” NVPH, Amsterdam, Joh Enschede, and for the data since November 25 1975, “Officiële postzegelscatalogus, Suriname, 31ste Editie 2016, Guernsey, Uitgeverij Zonnebloem)

1961	33.33	1971	8.70	1981	50
1962	-30.0	1972	20	1982	-16.67
1963	0	1973	0	1983	-50
1964	3.57	1974	0	1984	33.33
1965	3.45	1975	0	1985	10
1966	33.33	1976	16.67	1986	-9.09
1967	25	1977	42.86	1987	120
1968	0	1978	0	1988	0
1969	0	1979	-10	1989	0
1970	-8	1980	33.33	1990	0
1991	0	2001	-60	2011	-12.5
1992	40.91	2002	70	2012	28.57
1993	30.65	2003	-41.18	2013	13.89
1994	4220.99	2004	-20	2014	7.32
1995	471.43	2005	-43.75	2015	6.82
1996	-61	2006	277.78		
1997	15.38	2007	17.65		
1998	61.11	2008	50		
1999	148.28	2009	0		
2000	177.78	2010	33.33		

Table 3: Estimation results for various regression models relating inflation with lagged inflation and current and lagged percentage changes in stamps prices. Estimated standard errors are in parentheses.

Variable	Sample 1975-2015	Sample 1975-2015 Without 1993, 1999	Sample 1961-2015 Without 1993, 1999
Intercept	15.683 (4.977)	11.032 (2.214)	9.288 (1.686)
Y_{T-1}	0.026 (0.129)		
X_T	0.083 (0.007)	0.085 (0.003)	0.085 (0.003)
X_{T-1}	0.040 (0.013)	0.043 (0.003)	0.044 (0.003)
R^2	0.858	0.963	0.960
P value tests			
Normality	0.000	0.131	0.000
Autocorrelation	0.010	0.037	0.008

Table 4. Estimation results for the MIDAS regression models, sample runs from 1975 to and including 2015

Version 1		Version 2	
Variable		Variable	
Intercept	1.828 (5.048)	Intercept	0.315 (4.629)
Y_{T-1}	0.554 (0.067)	Y_{T-1}	0.893 (0.154)
$X_{4,T}^1$	0.240 (0.053)	$X_{4,T}^4$	0.190 (0.052)
$X_{3,T}^1$	0.209 (0.063)	$X_{3,T}^4$	0.051 (0.066)
$X_{2,T}^1$	0.190 (0.089)	$X_{2,T}^4$	-0.023 (0.077)
$X_{1,T}^1$	0.402 (0.068)	$X_{1,T}^4$	0.232 (0.052)
$X_{4,T-1}^1$	0.430 (0.054)	$X_{4,T-1}^4$	0.049 (0.064)
$X_{3,T-1}^1$	0.319 (0.065)	$X_{3,T-1}^4$	0.084 (0.061)
		$X_{2,T-1}^4$	-0.264 (0.080)
R^2	0.932		0.944
P value tests			
Normality	0.184		0.645
Autocorrelation	0.149		0.740
RMSPE, in sample	19.305		18.363

Table 5: Estimated historical episodes with high inflation

Years	Potential causes
1900s	Gold rush (Lawa railway construction)
1930s	Economic decline, social upheaval in the form of riots
1940s	WW II
1957	Establishment of the Central Bank of Suriname, Brokopondo-agreement with Alcoa and Eisenhower Recession

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