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Belize

Country:

Belize

Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

1

Civil Liberties:

2

Aggregate Score:

86

Freedom Rating:

1.5

Overview:

Belize is a democracy that has experienced regular rotations of power through competitive elections. However, government corruption is a problem. Authorities have also been reluctant to address persistent problems with police brutality, and human trafficking within the country's borders.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 36 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The prime minister, usually the leader of the largest party in parliament, is head of government. Formally, the prime minister is appointed by the governor general, who represents the British monarch as head of state. The legitimacy of the prime minister is largely dependent on the conduct of legislative elections, which are typically professionally run and credible.

Dean Barrow returned as prime minister following the victory of the United Democratic Party (UDP) victory in 2015 elections, which the Organization of American States (OAS) said were conducted in a fair and professional manner.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The 31 members of the House of Representatives are directly elected to five-year terms. The Senate has 12 seats; the ruling party, opposition, and several civil associations select the senators, who are then appointed by the governor general.

In the 2015 legislative polls, the incumbent UDP increased its representation to 19 seats in the House of Representatives, and entered an unprecedented third consecutive term. The opposition People's United Party (PUP) took the remaining 12 seats. OAS observers said the polls were conducted in a fair and professional manner.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

Electoral laws are generally fair, although ahead of the 2015 polls it was reported that the Chief Elections Officer and her family were threatened by masked men ahead of election day. In response, police provided added security at her home. Separately, the OAS has suggested that the role of the Elections and Boundaries Commission and the Elections and Boundaries Department be strengthened, and that authorities work to reduce partisanship associated with the confirmation of appointees. It further noted that voter lists should be reviewed.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 14 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Political parties can organize freely. The effects of the country's "first-past-the-post" electoral system has entrenched two-party politics; while a number of small political parties have competed, only the PUP and UDP have won seats in parliament.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

There are realistic opportunities for opposition parties to increase their support or gain power through elections. Since 1984 there has been a fairly regular transfer of power between the two parties.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

Recent elections, including those in 2015, have been viewed as generally free and fair. However, the OAS has raised concerns about the potential impact of unregulated campaign financing on the transparency of the electoral process.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Women hold only 2 seats in the current National Assembly, and 3 seats in the Senate. There were only 11 women candidates out of a total of 88 in the 2015 elections. However, women play a significant role in the political system more generally.

Indigenous groups, particularly of Mayan descent, are not well represented in politics. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is marginalized, and this impacts the ability of LGBT people to engage fully in political and electoral processes.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 10 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

The elected prime minister, cabinet, and national legislative representatives are duly seated following elections and are able to determine the policies of the government.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

Belize continues to struggle with corruption, and there is little political will to address the issue. Anticorruption laws are poorly enforced; for example, no one has ever been prosecuted under the Prevention of Corruption in Public Life Act, which has been on the books for over 20 years. Members of the country's business community allege that favoritism influences the government's awarding of licenses and public contracts. In 2016, the government faced accusations of corruption over the issuance of visas and passports; in August of that year, a special audit that confirmed the involvement of high-ranking officials became public.

Controversy and financial disputes continue in connection with the government's recent nationalization of the heavily indebted Belize Telemedia Limited.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 4 / 4

The government of Belize generally operates with openness and transparency. However, while the law requires public officials to submit annual financial disclosure statements for review by the Integrity Commission, the body had been defunct for years before members were finally appointed by the ruling party and opposition in early 2017. There is little opportunity for the public to challenge the disclosures.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 50 / 60 (-1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

The Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, and in general, reporting covers a wide range of opinions. However, authorities can restrict press freedom in the interests of national security, public order, or morality. Separately, in September 2017, media coverage of an anticorruption demonstration was reportedly disrupted when police deployed tear gas against protest participants.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and respected in practice. The various religious groups in the country are integrated and, despite some minor political disagreements, coexist peacefully.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

Individuals are free to express their views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 10 / 12 (-1)

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally protected, and the government generally respects these rights. However, protests occasionally become unruly. In September 2017, clashes between protesters and police took place after anticorruption demonstrators refused police orders to stop blocking roads. Officers reportedly deployed tear gas against the protesters.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights—and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations are generally free from government interference.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 3 / 4 (-1)

Unions are free to form and operate. Official boards of inquiry adjudicate labor disputes, and businesses have been penalized for labor-code violations. However, while labor

unions are active and are politically influential, their ability to protect workers' rights is limited in practice. In 2016, the Belize National Teacher's Union (BNTU) held several national strikes, prompting the government that fall to accept a number of workers' demands, including a 3 per cent salary adjustment. Nevertheless, reports of teachers not being paid continued in 2017. The country's definition of "essential" workers—whose ability to strike is limited—is broader than the International Labor Organization's definition.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because despite their robust activity, unions have struggled to secure protections for workers.

F. RULE OF LAW: 12 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

The judiciary is generally independent, if underresourced. However, there have been attempts by political and business interests to interfere with the composition of the judiciary. Litigants may appeal cases to the Caribbean Court of Justice, the country's highest appellate court.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

Detainees and defendants are guaranteed a range of legal rights, which are mostly respected in practice. However, police have reportedly detained suspect without charge for longer than is permitted by the law, and have used the threat of extended detention to intimidate suspects. Judicial delays and a large backlog of cases contribute to lengthy trial and other procedures.

In January 2017, a new attorney general, Michael Peyrefitte, was sworn in. He replaced Vanessa Retreage, who had resigned the previous month. Retreage and Prime Minister Dean Barrow denied rumors that she had been forced out for her work in reforming the Lands Department.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Belize is free from war and insurgencies, and ordinary citizens have little reason to fear for their general safety. However, cases of police brutality continue to emerge. In April 2017, a viral video depicted a woman being thrown to the ground and kicked by police officers during a confrontation between police and residents of San Pedro. While two officers were charged in connection with that incident, the government frequently ignores or dismisses reports of abuses by police, or transfers accused officers to other areas within their department.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Legal and societal discrimination against LGBT people persists. Although in August 2016 the country's Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a portion of the criminal code that outlawed same-sex sexual activity; the case is currently being appealed. Belize held its first Pride Week in August 2017.

Women face employment discrimination and are less likely than men to hold managerial positions. However, the government has actively pursued programs aimed at encouraging gender equality and protecting women's rights.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 13 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

The government generally respects freedom of internal movement and foreign travel. In April 2016, authorities temporarily prohibited citizens from accessing the Sarstoon River in response to a spike in tensions with Guatemala over its contested border. The decision was widely criticized, and was subsequently rescinded.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or non-state actors? 3 / 4

Individuals have the right to own property and establish private businesses. However, legal regulations are at times poorly enforced, and the indigenous Maya community say that their ancestral land rights are not protected.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, remains a serious problem. Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, but there are poor conviction rates and when there are convictions, sentences are sometimes light.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Belize is a source, transit, and destination country for women, men, and children trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor. In 2017, the US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* continued to rank Belize in the lowest tier. The report cited widespread sex and labor trafficking, and a lack of government efforts to address the problem.

Economic inequality is significant, and unemployment remains a problem.

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