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Suriname

Country:

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Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

2

Civil Liberties:

2

Aggregate Score:

78

Freedom Rating:

2.0

Overview:

Suriname is a constitutional democracy with a unicameral legislature. Corruption and nepotism are pervasive problems in government. Attacks on judicial independence, underscored by the president's interference in his own murder trial, remain a concern. However, the judiciary has resisted pressure from the executive.

Ratings Change:

Suriname's civil liberties rating improved from 3 to 2 due to increased judicial independence, notably reflected in the handling of a case in which the current president is accused of involvement in the 1982 mass murder of his political opponents.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 34 / 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 president is elected to five-year terms by a two-thirds majority of the 51-seat National Assembly. If no such majority can be reached, a United People's Assembly—consisting of lawmakers from the national, regional, and local levels—convenes to choose the president by a simple majority. In 2015, the National Assembly reelected President Dési Bouterse in accordance with international standards.

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

The 1987 constitution provides for a unicameral, 51-seat National Assembly. Representatives are elected for five-year terms via proportional representation. The last legislative elections in 2015 were considered credible by monitors.

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

Electoral laws meet international standards of fairness. Critics charge that the proportional representation system stimulates the formation of ethnic voting blocs. The president appoints the members of the election commission, the Independent Electoral Bureau, and has the power to fire them.

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

Suriname's many political parties, which often reflect the country's ethnic cleavages, operate freely.

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

Opposition parties can gain power through elections. Most parties form coalitions to contest elections. In the 2015 elections, the V7, an opposition coalition, won 18 of 51 seats in the National Assembly.

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? 3 / 4

There are no indications that people's political choices are subject to undue coercion. Opposition political parties have raised concerns about campaign financing, which is unregulated and lacks transparency, and the resulting influence that special interest groups can have on political parties.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Parties are often formed along ethnic lines, meaning most ethnic groups have political representation. However, the interests of indigenous communities are often overlooked. Women have historically played a limited role in politics, but have experienced gains in recent years—in 2015, 13 out of the 51 representatives elected to the National Assembly were women, compared to 6 women elected in 2010.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 8 / 12

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

Freely elected legislators work with the president to determine the laws and government policies.

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

Government corruption is pervasive, notably within the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Justice and Police, which in 2017 remained entangled in a scandal involving residence permits.

In August 2017, the National Assembly adopted a new anticorruption law. Under the law, a new corruption prevention commission oversees charges of corruption, and the identity of whistleblowers is protected. The law, however, does not have retroactive force.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

The government does not always operate with transparency. Officials are not legally required to disclose information about their finances. Suriname does not have laws to facilitate access to public information, and access is limited in practice.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 44 / 60 (+1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16

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

The constitution guarantees press freedom, and the media sector is fairly diverse. Although some journalists engage in self-censorship in response to government pressure and intimidation, the press frequently publishes stories critical of the government. Defamation and libel remain criminal offenses. In 2014, lawmaker Noreen Cheung threatened to sue the magazine *Parbode* for libel after it quoted her expressing doubt about controversial amnesty legislation from 2012 that would have protected President Bouterse from prosecution.

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

and private? 4 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, which is typically upheld in practice.

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

Freedom of expression is enshrined in the constitution, and private citizens are generally able to engage in discussions of a sensitive or political nature without fear of retribution or surveillance. In August 2017, the government proposed a bill to parliament that would make insulting the president on social media a criminal offense.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 11 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, which is generally respected in practice. However, members of the antigovernment protest movement We Zijn Moe-Dig (We Are Tired/Courageous) say President Bouterse has characterized them as traitors. The movement was founded in 2015, and grew in 2017 as Suriname struggled with sluggish economic growth and high inflation.

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

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) function freely in Suriname.

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

Workers are free to join independent trade unions, which are actively involved in politics. Civil servants lack the legal right to strike. There have been isolated reports of private-sector employers denying collective bargaining rights to unions.

F. RULE OF LAW: 8 / 16 (+1)

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 2 / 4 (+1)

Executive influence over the judiciary remains a matter of concern. While President Bouterse has accepted “political responsibility” for his involvement in the abduction and extrajudicial killing of 15 political opponents in 1982, he has yet to face legal consequences for his actions. After a military court declared an amnesty law unconstitutional in June 2016, Bouterse sought to prevent a trial from moving forward. When his efforts failed, Bouterse fired the Minister of Justice and in March 2017 replaced her with a close ally. In June, the public prosecutor demanded a 20-year prison sentence

against Bouterse. The government subsequently adopted a resolution warning the prosecutor to be “careful,” and asking him to voluntarily resign. Bouterse later withdrew this resolution in the face of public outrage, and the trial proceeded.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to signs of increased judicial independence, reflected in the handling of a case in which the current president is accused of involvement in the 1982 murder of his political opponents.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process is undermined by corruption, a shortage of judges, and a lack of resources and staff to support the judiciary. Payments are sometimes made to obtain favorable outcomes in criminal and civil proceedings. There is a backlog of cases involving non-Dutch speakers, as interpreters who have gone unpaid have refused to work additional cases.

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

The use of force by law enforcement officials is prohibited, but cases of police abuse have been reported. While prison conditions are generally adequate, temporary detention facilities are characterized by unhygienic conditions, understaffing, and overcrowding. Suriname lies on a major drug-trafficking route, giving way to some drug-trafficking-related violence. Violent crimes such as burglary and armed robbery are common, and police resources are insufficient to address the problem.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Nevertheless, the Maroons, descendants of slaves who comprise approximately 21 percent of the population, face inequality in areas such as education and employment. Indigenous groups do not enjoy any group rights or special protections. Despite rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, minority groups can legally be dispossessed of their lands.

Same-sex sexual relations are legal, though the age of consent differs from that of heterosexual couples.

The constitution bars gender discrimination, but in practice, women experience disadvantages in access to employment and education.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 10 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 4

The government generally upholds constitutional freedoms of internal movement and residence, though the lack of protections for indigenous and Maroon lands leave those communities vulnerable to displacement by unregulated logging and mining operations.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Although Suriname's constitution guarantees property rights, they are sometimes inadequately protected. Corruption can hinder private business activity, especially regarding land policy, government contracts, and licensing.

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

The constitution bars gender discrimination, but in practice women face inequality related to marriage, inheritance, and property due to discriminatory local customs. Domestic violence remains a serious problem, and laws criminalizing it are not well-enforced.

Despite legal protections adopted in 2015, members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face societal discrimination, harassment, and abuse by police. In February 2017, the civil registrar appealed a January court ruling that granted a transgender woman the right to have her official registration reflect her gender identity. The Minister of Justice criticized the appeal.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Human trafficking remained a problem in 2017. Women and migrant workers are especially at risk of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labor in various industries, including illegal mining operations. Corruption has facilitated the criminal activities of traffickers. The government has taken steps to address the issue, including the establishment of a shelter for victims, but arrests and prosecutions for trafficking dropped in 2017.

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