

Belize | Freedom House

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 the 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 credible and well administered. Dean Barrow, the prime minister since 2008, returned for another term following the victory of his United Democratic Party (UDP) in the 2015 elections.

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 for five-year terms. The Senate has 12 seats. The ruling party, the 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 in government. The opposition People's United Party (PUP) took the remaining 12 seats. Observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) 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. 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 their 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 have entrenched the two largest parties. While a number of smaller parties have competed, only the PUP and UDP have won seats in the parliament.

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

The political system allows for opposition parties to increase their support or gain power through elections. Since 1984 there have been fairly regular transfers of power between the two main 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 of undue interference from entities outside the democratic political sphere. However, the OAS has raised concerns about the potential impact of unregulated campaign financing on the transparency of the political 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 two seats in the current House of Representatives and three seats in the Senate. There were 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 people, particularly those of Mayan descent, are not well represented in politics. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community faces discrimination, and this affects the ability of LGBT people to engage fully in political and electoral processes. A collection of religious denominations nominate one member of the Senate, but non-Christian groups are not included in the process.

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 freely 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 problem. 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. Among other scandals in recent years, the Lands and Surveys Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources has been accused of illegally distributing land to UDP supporters.

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

The government 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 until members were finally appointed by the ruling party and the opposition in 2017. There is little opportunity for the public to challenge the disclosures. Members of the country's business community allege that favoritism influences the government's awarding of licenses and public contracts.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 50 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16

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

The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, though it includes exceptions for interests such as national security, public order, and morality. While reporting generally covers a wide range of viewpoints in practice, journalists sometimes face threats, physical harassment, or assault in the course of their work. In May 2018, a state-owned telecommunications firm reportedly stopped advertising with a media group that had links to the opposition PUP.

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 largely respected in practice. Religious groups must register with the authorities, and foreign missionaries are required to obtain a visa and permit, but the procedures are not onerous.

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

There are no significant constraints on individual expression regarding politics or other such matters, whether in private discussion or on social media.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 10 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally protected, and the government generally respects this right. Protests occasionally lead to clashes with police, though no major incidents were reported during 2018.

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

Unions are free to form and operate, and employers have been penalized for violating union rights under the labor code. However, while labor unions are active and politically influential, their ability to protect workers' rights is limited in practice. There are some restrictions on the right to strike, including an official definition of "essential" workers that is broader than the International Labour Organization's standard.

F. RULE OF LAW: 12 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

The judiciary, though lacking in resources, is generally independent. There have been attempts by political and business interests to interfere with the composition of the judiciary. In a long-running dispute, a group of companies controlled by businessman Michael Ashcroft has attempted to have Samuel Awich removed as a judge on the Court of Appeal, Belize's highest judicial body. In July 2018, the Caribbean Court of Justice ordered Belize's Judicial and Legal Services Commission to review Ashcroft's complaint, reversing an earlier decision by the Court of Appeal.

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 suspects 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 the length of trials and other procedures, with many defendants spending years in pretrial detention.

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

Belize is free from major threats to physical security, such as war and insurgencies. The homicide rate remains high, with 143 murders recorded in 2018, for a rate of about 36 murders per 100,000 people. The problem stems from gang violence focused largely on the south side of Belize City, though some violent crime has spread to other parts of the country. In September 2018, the government declared a 30-day state of emergency in two areas of Belize City's south side in response to an uptick in gang violence, granting police enhanced powers to arrest and detain suspects.

Cases of police brutality continue to be reported. The Police Amendment Act, promulgated in April 2018, was designed to improve disciplinary procedures and increase penalties for police misconduct.

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

The constitution and laws protect against many forms of discrimination, but there are no specific provisions addressing sexual orientation or gender identity.

Discrimination against LGBT people persists. In 2016 the country's Supreme Court struck down a portion of the criminal code that outlawed same-sex sexual activity. The government accepted the decriminalization, but in September 2017 it appealed a portion of the judgement finding that unconstitutional discrimination based on sex includes sexual orientation. Although the Roman Catholic Church appealed the entire ruling, it withdrew from the case in March 2018. The Court of Appeal had yet to rule on the government's petition at the end of 2018.

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.

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. Leaders of the indigenous Maya community have alleged that their ancestral land rights are not protected, particularly with regard to oil exploration and logging activities.

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

Personal social freedoms are generally respected, though domestic violence remains a serious problem despite government measures to combat it. Rape, including spousal rape under some circumstances, is illegal, but reporting and conviction rates are low, and sentences are sometimes light.

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

Some legal protections against exploitative working conditions are respected and

enforced. However, Belizean and foreign women and girls are vulnerable to sex trafficking, and migrant workers are sometimes subjected to forced labor in agriculture, fisheries, and retail businesses. In 2018, the US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* continued to rank Belize in its lowest tier. The report noted that the government identified some possible victims and investigated cases, but it was critical of the fact that no traffickers were prosecuted or convicted during the coverage period. The government did not target public officials involved in trafficking "despite allegations of a significant level of official complicity," the report said.