



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Belize

86

FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	35/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	51/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

86 /100 **Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

Belize is a democracy that has experienced regular rotations of power through competitive elections. Civil liberties are mostly respected. Government corruption is a concern, as is the high rate of violent crime. Authorities have been slow to address persistent problems of police brutality and human trafficking within the country's borders.

Key Developments in 2019

- In March, the opposition People's United Party (PUP) filed a Supreme Court claim against Prime Minister and Finance Minister Dean Barrow and an aide, for allegedly spending \$645 million from Petrocaribe without parliamentary authorization. The court heard the case in November, with a ruling due in January 2020.
- The US State Department's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* noted two new human trafficking prosecutions, the first in four years.
- A long-running border dispute with Guatemala remains unresolved. In March, three Guatemalan gun boats blocked a Belize Coast Guard patrol from accessing the Sarstoon River, which is part of Belizean territory.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

<p>Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?</p>	<p>4/4</p>
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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 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	4/4
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The 31 members of the House of Representatives are directly elected to 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 0-4 pts

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

B1 0-4 pts

<p>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?</p>	<p>4/4</p>
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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 0-4 pts

<p>Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?</p>	<p>4/4</p>
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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 forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 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 0-4 pts

<p>Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender,</p>	
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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. In municipal elections held in March 2018, women won 18 of the 67 seats. No woman was elected as a mayor. 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. LGBT+ people face discrimination, and this affects their ability 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

C1 0-4 pts

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 0-4 pts

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.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	3/4
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The government generally engages in policymaking with openness and transparency, though there are persistent problems with officials' financial disclosure statements, and procurement processes. 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 Belize's business community allege that favoritism influences the government's awarding of licenses and public contracts. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its October 2019 mission report recommended that authorities implement and enforce asset declaration rules and strengthen the rules on conflicts of interest.

Recent corruption scandals have involved allegations that the Ministry of Natural Resources illegally distributed land to UDP supporters, as well as a separate controversy regarding the alleged unlawful sale of passports by the Immigration and Nationality Department. In March 2019, the opposition PUP filed a Supreme Court claim against Prime Minister Dean Barrow (who is also the finance minister) and Financial Secretary Joseph Waight for spending \$645 million of Petrocaribe funds without parliamentary authorization. The opposition said it was in violation of the Finance and Audit Reform Act and the Constitution of Belize; the government claimed the spending was due to urgent and unforeseen circumstances. The Supreme Court heard the case in November, with a ruling due in January 2020.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because rules aimed at ensuring government transparency are weak and inconsistently enforced.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	3/4
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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.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	4/4
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Religious freedom 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 0-4 pts

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

D4 0-4 pts

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

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	4/4
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Freedom of assembly is constitutionally protected, and the government generally respects this right. Protests occasionally lead to clashes with police, though no major incidents have been reported in recent years.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because demonstrations are unrestricted, and recent protests have not been marred by violence.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?	4/4
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Nongovernmental organizations are generally free from government interference.

E3 0-4 pts

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

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	3/4
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The judiciary is generally independent, despite lacking resources and periodic attempts by political and business interests to interfere with its composition. In a long-running dispute, a group of companies controlled by businessman Michael Ashcroft have attempted to have Samuel Awich removed as a judge on the Court of Appeal, Belize’s highest judicial body.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	3/4
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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 lengthy trials and other procedures, with many defendants spending years in pretrial detention.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	3/4
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Belize is free from major threats to physical security, such as war and insurgencies, but the long-running border dispute with Guatemala remains unresolved. Tensions have lessened in recent years, but there are occasional incidents. In March 2019, three Guatemalan gun boats blocked a Belize Coast Guard patrol from accessing the Sarstoon River, which is part of Belizean territory.

The homicide rate remains high, with 143 murders recorded in 2018; in the first 11 months of 2019, there were 120 murders. That figure amounts to 36 murders per 100,000 people, which placed Belize among countries with the highest murder rates in the world. The violence is localized around the south side of Belize City, though some violent crime has spread to other parts of the country.

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 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	3/4
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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 the portion of the judgement finding that unconstitutional discrimination based on sex includes sexual orientation. The Court of Appeal had yet to rule on the government's petition at the end of 2019.

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

G1 0-4 pts

<p>Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?</p>	<p>4/4</p>
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The government generally respects freedom of internal movement and foreign travel.

G2 0-4 pts

<p>Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?</p>	<p>3/4</p>
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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 say their ancestral land rights are not protected, particularly with regard to oil exploration and logging activities.

G3 0-4 pts

<p>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?</p>	<p>3/4</p>
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Personal social freedoms are generally respected, though domestic violence remains a serious problem despite government measures to combat it. Rape is illegal, but reporting and conviction rates are low, and sentences are sometimes light.

G4 0-4 pts

<p>Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic</p>	
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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. The US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* for 2019 noted two new trafficking prosecutions, the first in four years, and increased resources for the antitrafficking police unit. However, the report also noted that "the government did not investigate or prosecute any public officials for complicity in trafficking-related offenses, despite allegations of official complicity."



On Belize

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

86/100 Free

Other Years

2019

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