

Jamaica

Response to Information Request Number:	JAM99001.ASM
Date:	22 September 1999
Subject:	Jamaican Posses
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Jamaica, Political activity, Political persecution, Political parties, Political violence, Drug trafficking

Query:

1. How did Jamaican posses originate and how were they linked to political parties?
2. What is their current sphere of influence and do they continue to function politically in areas where they operate? If so, in what ways?

Response:

1) The Jamaican posses began in the late 1960s and 1970s as urban gangs recruited and armed by politicians to: organize local constituencies, distribute political favors, enforce party loyalty and turn out votes. (Moser and Holland, 1997; World Bank, 1997) Such gangs were created by members of both the conservative Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the leftist People's National Party (PNP), Jamaica's principal political organizations. (Gunst, 1995; National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997) The use of armed gangs and the promotion of violence as strategic initiatives to secure or retain political power became known in Jamaica as "political tribalism." (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997) The gangs would eventually call themselves "posses," a result of the infatuation in urban ghetto areas at the time with the gunslinger ethos of American and spaghetti-western movies. (Gunst, 1995)

The posses, led by local "dons" in league with political party figures, established urban political strongholds known as "garrison" communities, veritable fortresses completely controlled by one political party or the other, "states within a state" in which those who sought to oppose the dominant party "would definitely be in danger of suffering serious damage to their possessions or person. (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997; Gunst, 1995) By the late 1970s, both PNP and JLP garrison communities had been established throughout the capital of Kingston; in the adjacent St. Andrew parish to the north; and in St. Catherine parish just to the west where the principal city is Spanish Town. (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997) During the run-up to the 1980 elections, running battles between PNP and JLP posses resulted in an estimated 800 political killings and nearly 20,000 people burned out of their homes. (World Bank, 1997)

2) In the early 1980s, many posses became involved in cocaine and marijuana smuggling as Jamaica developed into a transshipment point for drug trafficking to the United States. (Gunst, 1995; World Bank 1997) With this new source of income, posses and their dons could rely less on the patronage of politicians and began to operate more independently. Still, posses continued to play a political role through the 1980s and 1990s, and because of the overlap and, in some places, integration between political and drug-trafficking structures, the line between political and purely criminal violence became blurred. (Moser and Holland, 1997; Payne, 1998)

Though the level of specifically political violence has not returned to the heights of 1980s,

and political party leaders have tried to disassociate themselves from armed political enforcers, garrison control of communities through force and intimidation has actually expanded. (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997; Carter Center, 1998) In 1997, eight of Jamaica's 60 electoral constituencies—all in Kingston, St. Andrew and St. Catherine—were identified as "unambiguously garrisoned," an increase from just three in 1989, while there were four others where domination by one political party or the other was estimated at 50 percent or more. (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997) At the same time, purely political violence has become more of a "seasonal phenomenon," primarily affecting communities during electoral campaign and periods of national political tension. (Moser and Holland, 1997)

Over the course of the last two decades, the leadership and relative strength of posses have evolved, as new dons have emerged and some posses have split, reorganized or established bases of operations in the United States and Britain. (where they are known as "yardies") (Gunst, 1995; Vulliamy, 1999) In some communities, posses today are not only trafficking in drugs and guns, they have also begun funding and running their own social welfare schemes. (Vulliamy, 1999) What has not changed is the division of urban communities along traditional political lines and the cyclical feuding and retaliation posses over turf and limited public resources. (World Bank, 1997; Rosenberg, 1999) For example, the electoral constituency of Western Kingston remains a JLP stronghold, while much of St. Andrew as well as East Central St. Catherine remain PNP garrisons. (National Committee on Political Tribalism, 1997; Payne, 1998)

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