



Freedom in the World - Guyana (2011)

Capital:
Georgetown

Population:
773,000

Political Rights Score: 2 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Free

Overview

In 2010, preparations for the 2011 presidential elections began, though uncertainty remained over who would be nominated by the country's two main political parties. President Bharrat Jagdeo of the People's Progressive Party retained a strong base of support amidst speculation that he might amend the constitution to run for a third term. Midyear, the government started to slowly implement a security forces reform plan announced at the beginning of 2010.

Guyana gained independence from Britain in 1966 and was ruled by the autocratic, predominantly Afro-Guyanese People's National Congress party (PNC) for the next 26 years. In 1992, Cheddi Jagan of the largely Indo-Guyanese People's Progressive Party (PPP) won the presidency in Guyana's first free and fair elections. He died in 1997, and the office passed to his wife, Janet, who resigned in 1999 for health reasons. She was succeeded by Finance Minister Bharrat Jagdeo of the PPP-C, an alliance of the PPP and the Civic Party. President Jagdeo was elected in his own right in 2001.

Guyanese politics are dominated by a tense split between descendants of indentured workers from India, known as Indo-Guyanese, who make up about half of the population and generally back the PPP-C, and Afro-Guyanese, who compose 36 percent of the population and largely support the PNC-Reform (PNC-R) party. In 2004, the political climate showed brief signs of improving when the PPP-C and PNC-R announced that they had reached agreement on a wide variety of issues. However, the emerging harmony was disrupted when a police informant revealed the existence of death squads that enjoyed official sanction and had killed some 64 people. An investigation exposed apparent links to the home affairs minister, Ronald Gajraj, but he was largely exonerated by an official inquiry in 2005.

Violence escalated in 2006 ahead of that year's elections. In the spring, Agriculture Minister Satyadeo Sawh was brutally slain by masked gunmen, and four newspaper employees were shot dead on the outskirts of the capital in early August. The National Assembly was dissolved amid acrimony and mudslinging, and the elections were delayed by several weeks as deep conflicts within the seven-member Guyana Elections Commission undermined the credibility of the process. Despite those concerns, the elections unfolded without incident in August, due in part to the heavy presence of international observers.

President Jagdeo handily won another five-year term as his PPP-C captured 36 seats in the National Assembly. The PNC-R took 21 seats; a new party, the Alliance for Change (AFC), won 6 seats; and two minor parties, the United Force and the Justice for All Party, each captured 1 seat. The emergence of the multiracial AFC suggested that the fierce racial divide of Guyanese politics was on the wane, though relations between the government and opposition remained tense.

In 2009, President Jagdeo's strong support fueled speculation that he may seek to amend the constitution and run for a third term in the December 2011 presidential elections. While he denied such claims, the PPP-C had not chosen a successor by year's end, and no clear frontrunner existed. Meanwhile, opposition leader Robert Corbin of the PNC-R—who publicly charged that the Jagdeo government had links to convicted drug trafficker Robert Khan—repeatedly stated he would not seek the presidential nomination for the PNC-R. The possibility of a united coalition under the PNC-R seemed unlikely after the AFC chose to align with smaller parties and civil society groups rather than the PNC-R.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Guyanais an electoral democracy. The 1980 constitution provides for a strong president and a 65-seat National Assembly, elected every five years. Two additional, nonvoting members are appointed by the president. The leader of the party with a plurality of parliamentary seats becomes president for a five-year term and appoints the prime minister and cabinet.

The 2006 elections strengthened the hand of the ruling PPP-C, but also demonstrated that some Guyanese are beginning to vote across racial lines, as symbolized by the establishment of the multiracial AFC. The main opposition party remains the PNC-R. Other significant political parties or groupings include the Alliance for Guyana, the Guyana Labor Party, the United Force, the Justice for All Party, the Working People's Alliance, and the Guyana Action Party, which enjoys strong support from indigenous communities in the south.

The country is a transshipment point for South American cocaine destined for North America and Europe, and counternarcotics efforts are undermined by corruption that reaches to high levels of the government. The informal economy is driven primarily by drug proceeds and may be equal to between 40 and 60 percent of formal economic activity. Guyana was ranked 116 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, the worst in the English-speaking Caribbean.

Freedom of the press is generally respected. Several independent newspapers operate freely, including the daily *Stabroek News* and *Kaieteur News*. However, opposition party leaders complain that they lack access to state media. The state owns and operates the country's sole radio station, which broadcasts on three frequencies. However, Guyana's courts ruled in 2009 that this represented an unfair media monopoly, and the government pledged to adopt new broadcast legislation to rectify it, though no such legislation had been introduced by year's end. Seventeen privately owned television stations freely criticize the government. In 2009, the Guyana Press Association denounced a government initiative to license media professionals as an attempt to impose control over the profession. Government officials occasionally use libel lawsuits to suppress criticism. President Bharrat Jagdeo filed libel charges against *Kaieteur News* and journalist Freddie Kissoon in July 2010 in relation to an article that allegedly portrayed the president and his government as racist. Jagdeo demanded GUY \$10 million (US\$48,550) in damages, but the case was still pending at year's end. The government also closed an internationally-funded Media-Monitoring Unit, established in 2006 to monitor media ahead of national elections. There are no government restrictions on the internet.

Guyanese generally enjoy freedom of religion, and the government does not restrict academic freedom.

The government largely respects freedoms of assembly and association. The right to form labor unions is also generally upheld, and unions are well organized. However, employers are not required to recognize unions in former state enterprises.

The judicial system is independent, but due process is undermined by shortages of staff and funds. In 2005, Guyana cut all ties to the Privy Council in London, the court of last resort for other former British colonies in the region, and adopted the Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice as its highest appellate court. Prisons are overcrowded, and conditions are poor.

The Guyana Defence Force and the national Guyana Police Force are under civilian control. Racial polarization has seriously eroded law enforcement, with many Indo-Guyanese complaining that they are victimized by Afro-Guyanese criminals and ignored by the predominantly Afro-Guyanese police. Meanwhile, many Afro-Guyanese claim that the police are manipulated by the government for its own purposes. Official inquiries have repeatedly pointed to the need for improved investigative techniques, more funding, community-oriented policing, better disciplinary procedures, greater accountability, and a better ethnic balance in the police force, but the government has taken few concrete steps to implement the proposed reforms. The government announced a security sector reform plan in early 2010, after three years of consultations and important political maneuvering. The plan proposes a constitutional reform that would establish a standing parliamentary committee to oversee the security sector. Implementation, however, has proceeded slowly.

Guyana is home to nine indigenous groups with a total population of about 80,000. Human rights violations against them, particularly with respect to land and resource use, are widespread and

pervasive. Indigenous peoples' attempts to seek redress through the courts have been met with unwarranted delays by the judiciary. While racial clashes have diminished in the last decade, long-standing animosity between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese remains a serious concern. A Racial Hostility Bill passed in 2002 increased the penalties for race-based crimes.

Domestic abuse and violence against women in general are widespread. Rape is illegal but often goes unreported and is infrequently prosecuted. The Guyana Human Rights Association has charged that the legal system's treatment of victims of sexual violence is intentionally humiliating. In May 2010, the Sexual Offenses Act was signed into law, which makes rape gender-neutral and expands its definition to include spousal rape and coercion and child abuse; the new law also provides for offenses committed against the mentally disabled. Sodomy is punishable with a maximum sentence of life in prison, and cross-dressing is criminalized for both men and women. In 2009, seven men were convicted of cross-dressing and fined GUY \$7,500 (US\$36) each. In February 2010, the Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) filed a motion with the Supreme Court, challenging the constitutionality of the law banning cross-dressing; the case was still pending at year's end.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*