



Freedom in the World - ↓ Guyana (2010)

Capital:
Georgetown

Population:
773,000

Political Rights Score: 2 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Free

Trend Arrow

Guyana received a downward trend arrow due to the violation of detainees' rights by law enforcement officials.

Overview

In 2009, President Bharrat Jagdeo retained a strong base of support despite a series of government scandals relating to sex, drugs, and credible allegations that police officers had tortured criminal suspects. Charges of corruption and police brutality spiked in 2009, with formal complaints increasing by 11 percent.

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-R.

In 2004, the political climate showed brief signs of improving when the two main parties, 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 received 54 percent of the vote and 36 seats in the 65-member National Assembly. The main opposition PNC-Reform party (PNC-R) won 34 percent of the vote and 21 seats. A new party, the Alliance for Change (AFC), won 5 seats, and two minor parties, the United Force and the Justice for All Party, each won a single seat. The emergence of the multiracial AFC suggested that the fierce racial divide of Guyanese politics was on the wane. Nevertheless, 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 seek a third term. While denying such claims, it remained unclear who his party would choose as a successor. Meanwhile, opposition leader Robert Corbin of the PNC-R led demonstrations and publicly charged that the Jagdeo government had links to convicted drug trafficker Robert Khan. The government also faced an array of lesser scandals. A former army chief forged paperwork in relation to an adoption application, and the U.S. visa of the president's press secretary was revoked for soliciting sex with a teenager. Additionally, Guyanese policemen were accused of torturing three suspects held in connection with a murder investigation, including a fifteen year old boy whose genitals were doused with flammable liquid and set ablaze by local authorities.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Guyana is an electoral democracy. The 1980 constitution provides for a strong president and a 65-seat National Assembly, elected every five years. An Assembly Speaker is also elected, and 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.

Guyana was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index, the worst ranking in the

English-speaking Caribbean. 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.

Several independent newspapers operate freely, including the daily *Stabroek News* and *Kaieteur News*. 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 introduce new broadcast legislation to rectify it. In October 2009, police arrested opposition activist Mark Benschop during a search of his home, citing illegal radio transmission, but Benschop was exonerated of terrorism charges and released in November. Seventeen privately owned television stations freely criticize the government, although in March 2009, the government urged CNS TV not to air the opposition party program "AFC on the Move," and the program was subsequently dropped. In 2009, the Guyana Press Association denounced a government initiative to license media professionals as an attempt to impose control over the profession. Opposition party leaders complain that they lack access to the state media. 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 in practice. 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 that have been sold off by the government.

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. A series of violent crimes in 2008 left over 30 dead, raising public concerns about government ineffectiveness. Security forces responded

forcefully to a July 2009 arson attack on the Ministry of Health, and an increase in reported police brutality followed. Formal complaints against corruption and police brutality increased by 11 percent in 2009, representing one complaint every two days. There were 78 unique allegations of unlawful arrest and 46 complaints of excessive use of police force throughout the year. In October, two police officers were charged following evidence that they had tortured three murder suspects, including lighting a teenager's genitals on fire. The officers were granted bail and the case remained unresolved at year's end.

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. Guyana appointed its first female and first indigenous foreign minister in April 2008.

Domestic violence and violence against women in general are widespread. Rape, is illegal, but often goes unreported and is infrequently prosecuted. Furthermore, spousal rape is considered a lesser offense. In 2009, 60 persons were charged with rape and a quarter were found guilty. Over 250 persons were charged with statutory rape, resulting in only 22 convictions. There is no pre-determined sentence for a rape conviction, and the average prison time ranges from 5 to 10 years in the event of a guilty verdict. The Guyana Human Rights Association has charged that the legal system's treatment of victims of sexual violence is intentionally humiliating. Sodomy is punishable with a maximum sentence of life in prison. Guyana has the second-highest HIV prevalence rate in Latin America and the Caribbean.

** 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.*