



Freedom in the World - Jamaica (2011)

Capital: Kingston

Population:
2,702,000

Political Rights Score: 2 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Free

Overview

In May and June 2010, Jamaican security forces conducted a manhunt aimed at arresting alleged drug lord Christopher “Dudus” Coke and extraditing him to the United States. The operation included gun battles that resulted in over 70 civilian deaths. Reports that the government had initially used public funds in a bid to block the extradition request led to a public inquiry, highlighting continued links between politicians and organized crime.

Jamaica achieved independence from Britain in 1962. Since then, power has alternated between the social democratic People’s National Party (PNP) and the more conservative Jamaica Labour Party (JLP).

In the 2002 elections, Percival James Patterson of the PNP was elected to a third consecutive term as prime minister, as the PNP maintained control of Parliament. Following Patterson’s resignation in 2006, Minister for Local Government Portia Simpson-Miller won the right to serve out Patterson’s term for the ruling party. Poor economic growth and fallout from Hurricane Dean, which struck the country in August 2007, contributed to the PNP’s defeat in the September 2007 parliamentary elections. The JLP won 33 seats in the House of Representatives, ending 18 years in power for the PNP, which took 27 seats. Opposition leader Bruce Golding became the new prime minister.

Under Golding, Jamaica has struggled with high levels of crime, sluggish economic growth, and a public sector in need of major reform. In 2009, an all-time high of 1,682 homicides were reported. Over half of these were gang related, and only 21 percent were solved in court. The situation improved somewhat in 2010, with 1,428 murders reported during the year. However, according to human rights organizations, extrajudicial killings and other abuses by the security forces increased. More than 400 civilians were killed in security operations in 2010, compared with 253 in 2009.

Long-standing relationships between elected representatives and organized crime, in which criminal gangs guaranteed voter turnout in certain neighborhoods in exchange for political favors and protection, received special scrutiny in 2009 and 2010 as the U.S. government pressed for the extradition of alleged drug trafficker Christopher “Dudus” Coke. The gang Coke reputedly led, the Shower Posse, was based in Tivoli Gardens, an area of Kingston that Golding represented in Parliament. In April 2010, the *Washington Post* reported that a JLP government official had signed a \$400,000 contract with a U.S. lobbying firm to fight Coke’s extradition. The public outcry in the United States and Jamaica forced Golding in May to order Jamaican security forces into Tivoli Gardens to arrest Coke, leading to days of violence in which over 70 civilians and several police personnel were killed. Coke was finally apprehended in late June, reportedly on his way to surrender at the U.S. embassy. He agreed to extradition and was set to face trial in 2011. In Jamaica, a public investigation into the Coke affair was pending at year’s end.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Jamaica is an electoral democracy. The British monarch is represented as head of state by a governor general, who is nominated by the prime minister and approved by the monarch. Following legislative elections, the leader of the party or coalition holding a majority in the lower house is appointed as prime minister by the governor general. The bicameral Parliament consists of the 60-member House of Representatives, elected for five years, and the 21-member Senate, with 13 senators appointed on the advice of the prime minister and 8 on the advice of the opposition leader.

In recent years, the ideological gulf between the two main political parties—the center-left PNP and the more conservative JLP—has narrowed considerably due to the retirement of their respective

veteran leaders. Powerful criminal gangs in some urban neighborhoods maintain influence over voter turnout in return for political favors, which has called into question the legitimacy of election results in those areas.

Corruption remains a serious problem in Jamaica. Government whistleblowers who object to official acts of waste, fraud, or abuse of power are not well protected by Jamaican law, as is required under the Inter-American Convention against Corruption. The Corruption Prevention Act of 2002 requires that some government officials make their financial assets public, but implementation of this law has been problematic. Jamaica was ranked 87 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitutional right to free expression is generally respected. While newspapers are independent and free of government control, circulation is generally low. Broadcast media are largely state owned but are open to pluralistic points of view. Journalists occasionally face intimidation in the run-up to elections. The country enacted an access to information law in 2002.

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and generally respected in practice. While laws banning Obeah—an Afro-Caribbean shamanistic religion—remain on the books, they are not actively enforced. The government does not hinder academic freedom.

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. Jamaica has a small but robust civil society and active community groups. Approximately 20 percent of the workforce is unionized. Labor unions are politically influential and have the right to strike.

The judicial system is headed by the Supreme Court and includes a court of appeals and several magistrates' courts. The Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice became the highest appellate court for Jamaica in 2005. A growing backlog of cases and a shortage of court staff at all levels continue to undermine the justice system.

In 2010, Human Rights Watch reported that security forces had carried out extrajudicial killings during the search operation for alleged drug trafficker Christopher "Dudus" Coke in Tivoli Gardens, though such claims could not be substantiated. Unreliable witnesses, lack of evidence, and the chaotic nature of the circumstances prevented prosecutors from building a case, a common problem in the country. Separately, the public prosecutor in October declined to file charges against army and police officers recommended for trial in the killing of five men in a 2008 operation in Tivoli Gardens. The decision was widely criticized by Jamaican human rights groups. Despite frequent complaints involving the use of lethal force by police, legal proceedings in such cases are rare, raising serious questions about the ability and willingness of the authorities to investigate accusations of abuse. Ill-treatment by prison guards has also been reported, and conditions in detention centers and prisons are abysmal.

Kingston's insular "garrison" communities remain the epicenter of most violence and serve as safe havens for gangs. Jamaica is a transit point for cocaine shipped from Colombia to U.S. markets, and much of the island's violence is the result of warfare between drug gangs known as posses. Contributing factors include the deportation of Jamaican-born criminals from the United States and an illegal weapons trade.

Violence against gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals remains a major concern. Amnesty International has identified homosexuals in Jamaica as a marginalized group, openly targeted for extreme harassment and violence. Same-sex intercourse is punishable by 10 years in prison with hard labor. In recent years, Jamaicans have been granted asylum in Britain and Canada on the grounds that they were in danger because of their sexual orientation. Prime Minister Bruce Golding has confirmed the illegality of homosexual acts, vowing never to allow gays in his cabinet. The antigay lyrics of Jamaican entertainers, particularly dancehall singers, remain a source of contention.

Legal protections for women are poorly enforced, and violence and discrimination remain widespread. Women are underrepresented in government, holding just eight seats in the House of Representatives.

**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.*