



## Freedom in the World - Jamaica (2010)

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Capital:  
Kingston

Population:  
2,702,000

Political Rights Score: 2 \*

Civil Liberties Score: 3 \*

Status: Free

[Overview](#)

**In 2009, Jamaica experienced an increase in crime, with homicides reaching an all-time high of 1,680, surpassing the previous record from 2005. Gang violence persisted, especially in urban areas.**

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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 2002, Percival James Patterson of the PNP became the only prime minister in Jamaican history to be elected to three consecutive terms. His party won 34 of 60 seats in the House of Representatives, giving the PNP continued control of Parliament. The JLP remained in opposition with 26 seats.

In March 2006, Patterson announced that he would step down after 14 years in power, setting off a hard-fought PNP leadership battle between Minister for Local Government Portia Simpson Miller, National Security Minister Peter Phillips, and Finance Minister Omar Davies. Simpson Miller fended off her competition by securing 46 percent of the vote among 3,800 party delegates. Her victory was heralded as a major advance for the role of women in Jamaican politics, but her government foundered due to poor economic growth and the fallout from Hurricane Dean, which struck the island in August.

In parliamentary elections held in September 2007, the JLP won 33 seats in the House of Representatives, ending the 18-year rule of the PNP, which took 27 seats. Opposition leader Bruce Golding became the new prime minister, but Simpson Miller survived her party's defeat, easily winning reelection to her parliamentary seat. The popularity of the ruling JLP lagged behind that of the PNP in 2008, due to a sluggish economy and the new government's inability to stem the rising crime rate.

Under Golding's rule, Jamaica has continued to struggle with high levels of crime. In the first six months of 2009, 4,778 major crimes were reported, representing a 19 percent increase over the same period the previous year. The 1,680 homicides reported in 2009 represented an all-time high, marking a four percent increase

over 2008 numbers. Over half of these murders were gang-related and only 21 percent were solved in court.

In April 2009, Jamaica witnessed its first major airplane hijacking in years when a gunman took six crew members hostage on a CanJet flight; however, the perpetrator was captured after an eight hour standoff, and no injuries were reported.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Jamaica is an electoral democracy. Violence has often accompanied elections, but in the 2007 vote there were only two shootings. The British monarch is represented as head of state by a governor-general, who is appointed by the monarch on the recommendation of the Jamaican prime minister. Following legislative elections, the governor-general appoints the leader of the majority party or coalition in the lower house, the House of Representatives, to be the prime minister. 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.

Corruption remains a considerable problem. 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. In 2009, an overhaul of the customs service resulted in the firing of several employees allegedly linked to corruption, and customs revenue subsequently increased by 25 percent. The Corruption Prevention Act of 2002 requires that some government officials make their financial assets public, but implementation of this rule has been problematic; over 5,000 government employees have reportedly filed late or not at all. Jamaica was ranked 99 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 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. In 2008, one local television station began broadcasting the news in Jamaican Patois, breaking with the long-standing practice of using the dialect only in informal settings. Journalists occasionally face intimidation in the run-up to elections. The government does not restrict access to the internet; about 50 percent of Jamaicans have access, more than double the regional average of the Caribbean.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally

respects this right in practice. The government does not hinder academic freedom.

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. Jamaica has a robust civil society, though the most influential nongovernmental actors tend to emanate from business interests. 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 several magistrates' courts and a court of appeals. The Privy Council in London was formerly the highest appellate court for Jamaica, but it was replaced with the Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice, inaugurated in 2005. Privy Council rulings against the death penalty had angered many in Jamaica, and in 2009, the defendants in two separate murder cases were sentenced to death by hanging.

Despite government efforts to improve penal conditions, a mounting backlog of cases and a shortage of court staff at all levels continue to undermine the judicial system, which is slow and inefficient, particularly in addressing police abuses and violence in prisons. In July 2009, Amnesty International reported that 224 civilians had been killed by the police during the preceding year and criticized the lack of punishment for negligent officers. Police are officially allowed to use lethal force if an officer's life is threatened or a dangerous felon is escaping, but its use is widespread in practice. The system for investigating police abuse lacks personnel to pursue cases, protect crime-scene evidence, take statements from officers in a timely manner, and conduct adequate autopsies of victims. Ill-treatment by police and prison guards has been reported, and conditions in detention centers and prisons are abysmal.

In 2009, violent crime continued to depress tourism and investment. High-crime areas often overlap with tourist destinations like Montego Bay, but Kingston's garrison communities were the epicenter of most violence in 2009. 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.

Amnesty International has identified homosexuals as a marginalized group that is targeted for extreme harassment and violence. Same-sex intercourse is punishable by 10 years' imprisonment at hard labor. In recent years, several Jamaicans have been granted asylum in Britain on the grounds that they were in danger because of their homosexuality. Activists for gay and lesbian rights remain targets of violence. Gareth Henry, a prominent member of the advocacy group Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays (J-FLAG), fled to Canada in 2008 and filed for refugee status following an escalating series of threats against his life. In 2009, Prime Minister Bruce Golding endorsed keeping homosexuality illegal and vowed never to allow gays in his cabinet. The antigay lyrics of Jamaican entertainers, particularly reggae singers, remain a source of contention.

Despite legal protections for women suffering from violence and discrimination, enforcement remains lacking, and violence against women continues to be widespread. In an April 2009 survey conducted by International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, nearly 49 percent of female respondents between the ages of 15 and 17 had experienced sexual violence or coercion.

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*\* 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.*