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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

St. Vincent and Grenadines

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OVERVIEW:

In April 2011, torrential rain led to flash flooding and landslides that destroyed banana cultivation and severely impacted the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' economy; the country had already been reeling from the impact of Hurricane Tomas in October 2010. The government spent the year focused mainly on economic development and the country's recovery from the two disasters.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines achieved independence from Britain in 1979, with jurisdiction over the northern Grenadine islands of Bequia, Canouan, Mayreau, Mustique, Prune Island, Petit Saint Vincent, and Union Island.

In the 2001 elections, the social-democratic Unity Labour Party (ULP) captured 12 of the 15 contested legislative seats, and Ralph Gonsalves became prime minister. The incumbent, conservative New Democratic Party (NDP) was reduced to three seats. In the 2005 polls, Gonsalves led the ULP to reelection, again taking 12 seats, while the NDP took the remaining 3 seats.

In 2009, the country was polarized over a November national referendum to replace its 1979 constitution with one produced by a government-appointed Constitution Review Commission. Among other changes, the proposed constitution would make the country a republic, open national elections to members of the clergy and dual citizens, and permit marriage only between a biological man and a biological woman. The opposition strongly opposed the new constitution for falling short of fully reforming the government. Needing two-thirds majority, the measure failed to pass, receiving support from only 43 percent of voters.

In the December 2010 general elections, the ULP, still reeling from the defeat of the proposed constitutional reform referendum, won a slim majority of 8 seats, and Gonsalves retained the post of prime minister. Meanwhile, the NDP more than doubled its representation, taking 7 seats. Despite threats of legal challenges from NDP leaders, the elections were deemed free and fair by observers from the Caribbean Community, the Organization of American States, and the National Monitoring and Consultative Mechanism.

The focus of the Gonsalves administration during 2011 was on economic development and the recovery from natural disasters. Torrential rains in April 2011 led to flash flooding and landslides that wiped out the country's banana industry—which accounts for a third of Saint Vincent's exports—and resulted in approximately \$100 million in damage. The rains compounded the destruction caused in 2010 by Hurricane Tomas, which displaced some 1,200 people and resulted in approximately \$25 million in damages to the agriculture sector. Part of Gonsalves' economic plan is to bolster the tourism industry by constructing a modern international airport that would create easier access to Saint Vincent. Construction of the airport began in late 2011 after years of delays.

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Free

FREEDOM RATING

1.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

1

POLITICAL RIGHTS

1

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is an electoral democracy. The constitution provides for the election of 15 representatives to the unicameral House of Assembly. Six senators are also appointed to the chamber, four chosen by the government and two by the opposition; all serve five-year terms. The prime minister is the leader of the majority party. A governor-general represents the British monarch as head of state.

In recent years, there have been allegations of money laundering through Saint Vincent banks and drug-related corruption within the government and the police force. Saint Vincent was ranked 36 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The press is independent. There are two privately owned, independent weeklies and several smaller, partisan papers. The only television station is privately owned and free from government interference. Satellite dishes and cable television are available. The main news radio station is government owned, and call-in programs are prohibited. Equal access to radio is mandated during electoral campaigns, but there have been allegations that the ruling party has taken advantage of state control over programming. Some journalists also allege that government advertising is used as a political tool. Internet access is not restricted, and new network capabilities introduced in 2010 brought the promise of increased access.

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and respected in practice, and academic freedom is generally honored. Access to higher education is limited but improving as the University of the West Indies initiates degree programs with community colleges in Saint Vincent and throughout the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutional protected, and nongovernmental organizations are free from government interference. Labor unions are active and permitted to strike.

The government generally respects judicial independence, though the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Human Rights Association (SVGHRA) has charged that the executive branch at times exerts inordinate influence over the courts. The highest court is the Saint Lucia-based Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, which includes a court of appeals and a high court. Under certain circumstances, litigants have a right of ultimate appeal to the Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice. The SVGHRA has criticized long judicial delays and a large backlog of cases caused by personnel shortages in the local judiciary. At the end of 2011, there were 39 males awaiting trial for murder. Prison conditions remain poor. In October 2009, Saint Vincent opened the Belle Isle Correctional Facility to alleviate pressure on long-overcrowded correctional facilities. Murder convictions carry a mandatory death sentence, though executions have not taken place in over 15 years.

Women hold approximately 18 percent of seats in the elected House of Assembly and the appointed Senate. Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is a major problem. The Domestic Violence Summary Proceedings Act, which provides for protective orders, offers some tools that benefit victims. Homosexuality remains a criminal offense, and Saint Vincent rejected a 2011 call by the UN Human Rights Council to repeal laws criminalizing same-sex relations.

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