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Country:

St. Vincent and Grenadines

Year:

2015

FIW Status:

F

PR Rating:

1

CL Rating:

1

Aggregate Score:

90

Combined Freedom Score:

1.0

Overview:

In January 2014, a lower court in Biabou dismissed opposition senator Vynette Frederick's application for the dismissal of false declaration charges against her, clearing the way for the senator to stand trial. The government had filed the charges against Frederick in relation to a complaint she lodged against Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves after the 2010 elections. While no libel lawsuits were filed in 2014, government officials issued inflammatory statements about each other and the media throughout the year.

The economy continued to show signs of slow recovery after in the wake of heavy rainfall that devastated the country's banana industry in 2011, destruction caused by Hurricane Tomas in 2010, and the global financial crisis. However, public debt remained above 70 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), with close to one-third of all revenue servicing the debt.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 36 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 11 / 12

A governor general represents the British monarch as head of state. The constitution provides

for the election of 15 representatives to the unicameral House of Assembly. In addition, the governor general appoints six senators to the chamber: four selected on the advice of the prime minister and two on the advice of the opposition leader. All serve five-year terms. The prime minister is the leader of the majority party.

Legislative elections were most recently held in 2010. The incumbent social-democratic Unity Labour Party (ULP) won eight seats, and Gonsalves retained his post as prime minister for a third term. The conservative New Democratic Party (NDP) more than doubled its representation, taking seven seats. Despite threats of legal challenges from NDP leaders, observers from the Caribbean Community, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the National Monitoring and Consultative Mechanism deemed the elections free and fair.

Prime Minister Gonsalves appointed three new senators to the cabinet in 2013, including his son as minister of foreign affairs, foreign trade, and consumer affairs. Gonsalves's cousin is also a minister. In September 2014, Gonsalves placed the ministry of works under the purview of the prime minister's office.

Efforts to clean up the voter list, initiated by the supervisor of elections in early 2013, continued in 2014. A significant portion of the population has migrated elsewhere but maintained registration. An individual must have lived abroad for five years before they can be removed from the voter list, although details of residency are often hard to verify.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16

The political landscape is dominated by the NDP and the ULP, although the Green Party also contested the 2010 elections. The Democratic Republican Party, led by a former NDP senator, was formed in 2012. In 2014, the NDP announced that it was suspending all cooperation with the Gonsalves government until the next general elections.

Opposition senator Vynnette Frederick faces a criminal case based on charges of swearing falsely and lying under oath in relation to a private criminal complaint she filed against the prime minister following the 2010 elections. Frederick has continued to hold office despite the pending case against her. A magistrate court denied Frederick's challenge to the charges in January 2014, and her trial remained pending at year's end.

C. Functioning of Government: 9 / 12

In recent years, there have been allegations of transnational money laundering through local banks and drug-related corruption within the government and the police force. The government has taken some steps to prevent and prosecute such crimes, including by enacting the Amendment to the Proceeds of Crime and Money Laundering (Prevention) Act 2012. No independent body investigates government corruption, and there is no active legislation requiring government officials to disclose assets, incomes, or gifts.

In October 2014, the former registrar of Saint Vincent's High Court, Vanessa Gibson-Marks, pled guilty to stealing court funds and abusing her authority while in office. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was ranked 29 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. The OAS issued a report in September

2014 detailing the country's adherence to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption; many of the OAS's initial implementation recommendations remain pending.

Civil Liberties: 54 / 60 (+1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

The press is independent, and the constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and the press. While freedom of information legislation was passed in 2003, it has yet to be fully implemented. There are several privately owned independent weeklies and one daily newspaper. The national newspapers freely publish opinions critical of the government. The Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Broadcasting Corporation operates one television station, and satellite dishes and cable television are available. The main news radio station is partly owned by the state. Internet access is not restricted.

While libel lawsuits are common in the country (Prime Minister Gonsalves has filed five since taking office), none were initiated in 2014. Nice Radio—considered to be aligned with the opposition—has faced numerous lawsuits in the past. In 2013, the station was ordered to pay the prime minister EC\$206,000 (US\$76,000) in damages for defamation. Also in 2013, the newspapers *Vincentian* and *News* issued apologies in response to separate threats of lawsuits by Gonsalves. A newspaper considered to be aligned with the ULP had printed the same article as the *News* but was not asked to apologize.

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and respected in practice, and academic freedom is generally honored.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally protected, and nongovernmental organizations are free from government interference. Labor unions are active and permitted to strike and engage in collective bargaining.

F. Rule of Law: 13 / 16 (+1)

The government generally respects judicial independence. The highest court is the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, which includes a court of appeals and a high court. The country recognizes the original jurisdiction of the Caribbean Court of Justice, but the Privy Council in London remains the final court of appeal. There are often long judicial delays and a large backlog of cases caused by personnel shortages in local courts. In 2013, parliament passed important witness protection legislation. Police occasionally use excessive force in arrest proceedings and in custody. In May 2013, four civilians were shot by police in a period of ten days, including a man in police custody who died. However, no such incidents were reported in 2014.

Crowded prison conditions have improved after the long-awaited transfer of prisoners to a

new correctional facility in 2012.

Same-sex sexual activity remains a criminal offense, carrying a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 14 / 16

Women are underrepresented in political decision-making positions, and hold only 4 of the 23 seats in parliament. Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, remains a problem. The Domestic Violence Summary Proceedings Act, which provides for protective orders, offers some tools and resources to victims.

The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act of 2011 criminalizes forced labor and prostitution. In 2013, the government appointed a 12-member Reparations Committee to investigate the killings and forced deportations of the indigenous Garifuna and Kalinago groups, as well as land appropriation and the enslavement of African people in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Also in 2013, Prime Minister Gonsalves announced a Caribbean Community joint legal action against the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands for the legacy of the slave trade. In March 2014, the joint committee adopted a plan to seek reparations from these nations, including formal apologies and debt cancellation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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