

Suriname

Country:

Suriname

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

2

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

77

Freedom Rating:

2.5

Overview:

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), led by President Desi Bouterse, won a simple majority in May 2015 parliamentary elections. The new National Assembly then reelected Bouterse in July.

As a consequence of the election result, Bouterse was less likely to face criminal charges for his actions as leader of the country's military regime in the 1980s. A law that had granted him amnesty in 2012 was supposed to be reviewed by a Constitutional Court, but the NDP-controlled legislature has declined to establish the court. Although a November 2015 ruling by another court instructed prosecutors to proceed with Bouterse's trial, it remained unclear at year's end whether they would do so.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 34 / 40 (+1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The 1987 constitution provides for a unicameral, 51-seat National Assembly. Representatives are elected for five-year terms via proportional representation. The president is elected by a two-thirds majority of the assembly, also for five-year terms. If no such majority can be reached, a United People's Assembly—consisting of lawmakers from the national, regional, and local levels—convenes to choose the president by a simple majority. The electoral laws meet international standards of fairness.

Suriname held legislative elections in May 2015. The NDP became the first single party in the country's history to win a simple majority, taking 26 of the 51 seats. An opposition coalition, Victory

7, won 18 seats. The A-Combination coalition claimed 5 seats, while the Party for Democracy and Development through Unity (DOE) and the Progressive Workers' and Farmers' Union (PALU) won 1 seat each. In July, the National Assembly reelected President Bouterse, who was unopposed. International election observers considered the voting to be transparent, free, and fair.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16 (+1)

Suriname's many political parties operate freely. They often reflect the country's ethnic cleavages. Most parties form coalitions to contest elections; while Bouterse's NDP ran alone in 2015, it had formed an electoral bloc for the previous elections in 2010. The opposition coalition Victory 7, which placed second in 2015, campaigned on promises to fight corruption, strengthen democracy, and repeal the 2012 law that granted Bouterse and 24 other defendants amnesty for their role in extrajudicial killings in 1982.

Despite Bouterse's military background, the civilian authorities maintain control over the military. Citizens did not face intimidation in casting their votes during 2015.

Ethnic minorities have political opportunities and are protected against exclusion, though the representation of some groups remains low, and the political system has failed to address the interests of indigenous and Maroon communities regarding issues such as land rights.

C. Functioning of Government: 8 / 12

Freely elected officials determine the country's laws and government policies, but the government does not effectively enforce anticorruption laws. Widespread official corruption has been linked to trafficking of drugs and other contraband. President Bouterse and lawmaker Ronnie Brunswijk of the A-Combination bloc both face 1999 convictions in absentia for drug trafficking in the Netherlands. In March 2015, Bouterse's son, Dino Bouterse, was sentenced to more than 16 years in prison in the United States after pleading guilty in 2014 to drug trafficking and other charges; in a sting by U.S. authorities, he had agreed to various transactions with agents posing as members of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

A September 2014 report on Suriname's implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption noted a lack of transparency and accountability in the High Court of Justice, the Public Prosecutions Department, the Ministry of Justice and Police, and the Central Government Auditing Bureau. Government officials are not legally required to disclose information on their finances. Suriname does not have laws to facilitate access to information, which is limited in practice.

Civil Liberties: 43 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

The constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The media sector is fairly diverse, and internet access is not restricted, though some journalists and outlets reportedly engage in self-censorship in response to government pressure. Defamation and libel remain criminal offenses. Contempt toward or hatred of the government is punishable with up to seven years in prison. Insulting the head of state is an offense punishable with five years in prison and the loss of some civil rights, including the right to vote.

Article 18 of the constitution protects freedom of religion. The constitution also bans discrimination on the grounds of religious origin. The authorities typically respect these guarantees and do not infringe on academic freedom. Private discussion is also generally open and free.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

The constitution protects the right to freedom of peaceful association and assembly, as well as the right to demonstrate. The government respects these rights in practice. While workers are free to join independent trade unions, civil servants lack the legal right to strike. Collective bargaining is a legal and common practice. Trade unions are actively involved in politics.

F. Rule of Law: 8 / 16 (-1)

The country's legal system is based on the Dutch civil system. Defendants' right to a fair and public trial, with the presumption of innocence, is generally enforced. Constitutional guarantees notwithstanding, judicial independence is a matter of considerable concern.

President Bouterse, who led the country's military regime from 1980 to 1987, was involved in the abduction and extrajudicial killing of 15 political opponents in 1982. Although he has accepted "political responsibility" for the murders, he has not faced legal consequences for his actions. The parliament pardoned Bouterse and 24 fellow suspects in an amnesty law in 2012. The law's constitutionality was challenged, but it could not be reviewed until the establishment of a Constitutional Court, as called for in the constitution. The legislature has yet to establish such a court, effectively blocking a trial. In November 2015, Suriname's top appellate court, the Court of Justice, instructed the attorney general to proceed with the case against Bouterse and the other defendants, but it remained unclear at year's end whether he would comply. The attorney general is appointed by the president, and the prosecution and court system remains dependent on the Ministry of Justice and Police for funding.

While prison conditions are generally adequate, temporary detention facilities suffer from hygienic deficiencies and overcrowding. In March 2015, the National Assembly abolished the death penalty, which had not been carried out since 1927. However, the new legislation also increased the maximum prison sentence from 20 to 50 years and tightened parole provisions for serious crimes.

Suriname remains an important transit site for the trafficking of drugs. Violent crimes such as burglary and armed robbery are increasingly common, and police resources are insufficient to address the problem. There are many cases of police abuse. In one prominent incident in 2015, police reportedly assaulted Guyana's ambassador to Suriname.

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Nevertheless, the Maroons, descendants of slaves who make up roughly 21 percent of the population, face inequality in areas such as education and employment. Indigenous groups do not enjoy any group rights or special protections. Under Article 41 of the constitution, all natural resources are national property, meaning minority groups can be dispossessed of their lands. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has found this situation to be in violation of international law, and a draft law that would acknowledge the collective ownership rights of indigenous communities has yet to be adopted.

Same-sex sexual relations are legal, though the age of consent differs from that for heterosexual couples. The penal code changes adopted in March 2015 added protections against discrimination and hate speech for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. However, in practice

members of the LGBT community continued to face societal discrimination, harassment and abuse by police, and open hostility from some politicians and public figures.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 10 / 16

The government generally upholds constitutional freedoms of internal movement and residence, though the lack of protections for indigenous and Maroon lands leave those communities vulnerable to displacement by unregulated logging and mining operations. Property rights and private business activity are impeded in part by corruption, which is evident in land policy, government contracts, and the issuing of licenses.

The constitution bars gender discrimination, but many women face de facto inequality on issues related to marriage, inheritance, and property due to discriminatory local customs. Legal protections notwithstanding, women also experience disadvantages in access to employment and education, and domestic violence remains a serious problem. Women hold about a quarter of the seats in the National Assembly.

Women and migrant workers are especially at risk of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labor in various industries, including illegal mining operations. Corruption among officials has facilitated the criminal activities of traffickers.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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