

# Costa Rica

## *Ethnicity in Costa Rica*

### *Group selection*

Afro-Costa Ricans are the descendants of West Indian immigrants and are Costa Rica's largest ethnic minority, settled primarily on the Atlantic coast, in Limón province (<sup>805</sup>, 149). According to the 2000 Census, they constitute 1,9% of the country's total population (<sup>806</sup>, 2). There are other Afro-Hispanics, descendants of African slaves imported during the colonial period who intermixed with Europeans and indigenous people, but they do not constitute an identifiable ethnic group anymore (<sup>807</sup>, 150, 161 (fn. 11)). Whites/mestizos (here called "Costa Ricans") make up 93,7% of the population and include all population groups that do not belong to Afro-Costa Ricans, indigenous or Chinese groups (<sup>808</sup>, 2).

<sup>805</sup> [Bourgois, 1986]

<sup>806</sup> [Putnam, 2002]

<sup>807</sup> [Bourgois, 1986]

<sup>808</sup> [Putnam, 2002]

### *Power relations*

Although rising from poor, landless laborers to an economically well-off landowning class within their region, West Indians were long socially and politically discriminated in Costa Rica (<sup>809</sup>), considered "an unwelcome addition" to Costa Rica's "white" society (<sup>810</sup>, 104). Even their permitted working areas were legally restricted by a 1934 decree (<sup>811</sup>, 152; <sup>812</sup>, 107). To defend their rights and interests many West Indians became affiliated with the global "Universal Negro Improvement Association" (UNIA) whose local division in Limón has survived until today (<sup>813</sup>, 151-2; <sup>814</sup>, 115). Only after the short civil war in 1948, they became more involved in national politics, and "white" politicians – not least civil war "hero" and later president José Figueres – showed interest in including them into the political process. After a public pressure campaign by West Indian political leaders – most of all Alex Curling Delisser – the government partially abandoned the discriminatory law of 1934, by rescinding the provision for all those West Indians who could prove to be Costa Rican citizens (<sup>815</sup>, 175-7). (Originally, West Indians did not possess Costa Rican citizenship. By 1948 those who had become citizens were still a minority (<sup>816</sup>, 112).)

<sup>809</sup> [Bourgois, 1986]

<sup>810</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>811</sup> [Bourgois, 1986]

<sup>812</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>813</sup> [Bourgois, 1986]

At the same time, there was a shift in identity from West Indian to Afro-Costa Rican identity. This change was mirrored in the emergence of new ethnic advocacy groups such as the "National Association for the Advancement of Young Coloured People" (NAAYCP), the "Afro-Costarrican Youth Uplift Association", or the "National

Association for the Progress of Coloured Costa Ricans" (NAPCCR) who all bore this "black but Costa Rican" element in their names and who promoted the idea of naturalization. They understood Costa Rican citizenship to be West Indians' salvation because the government continued with its discriminatory policies against non-nationals (<sup>817</sup>, 116-7).

Real political integration occurred during the 1953 presidential campaign by Figueres who strategically included West Indians with Costa Rican citizenship into the electoral base of his PLN party, which accepted candidates from the Afro-Costa Rican community (<sup>818</sup>, 103, 118-20; <sup>819</sup>, 181). Figueres and his party won the 1953 elections, and Curling became the first Afro-Costa Rican to be elected to Congress (<sup>820</sup>, 119).

Figueres' political opening resulted in two crucial changes. West Indians effectively became "Afro-Costa Ricans" and, as a consequence, targeted political discrimination by the Costa Rican state ended. They came to be politically included and began to participate in Costa Rican politics (<sup>821</sup>, 119-20). However, despite the repeated election of Afro-Costa Ricans to Congress (especially since the 1990s), the recent nomination of an Afro-Costa Rican woman to the presidency by the second largest party, and her being a pre-candidate for the 2010 presidential elections, Afro-Costa Ricans are still politically disadvantaged today (<sup>822</sup>, 103; <sup>823</sup>). Moreover, according to Hooker (<sup>824</sup>, 298), they do not enjoy any collective rights (such as regional autonomy) as a group. Therefore, the Afro-Costa Ricans were coded as "discriminated" until 1952, and as "powerless" from 1953 until 2009.

Costa Rica's indigenous population represents 1,7% of the country's total population (<sup>825</sup>, 2). In the 1970s, the Costa Rican state set up a National Commission for Indigenous Affairs (CONAI) – in order to improve the socio-economic situation of indigenous people – and passed an Indigenous Law. A national indigenous movement emerged during the 1980s. In spite of everything, according to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (<sup>826</sup>), Costa Rica's indigenous population did not obtain the right to vote until 1991. Analyzing the current situation, Van Cott (<sup>827</sup>, 132) places Costa Rica (like, for instance, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) in the category of countries that provide "modest" recognition of indigenous rights. Thus, the indigenous peoples was coded as "discriminated" until 1991 and as "powerless" from 1992 on when they obtained the right to vote.

<sup>817</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>818</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>819</sup> [?]

<sup>820</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>821</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>822</sup> [Harpelle, 1993]

<sup>823</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005a]

<sup>824</sup> [Hooker, 2005]

<sup>825</sup> [Putnam, 2002]

<sup>826</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005b]

<sup>827</sup> [Van Cott, 2007]

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## Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica

*From 1946 until 1953*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.937	MONOPOLY
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.019	DISCRIMINATED
Indigenous peoples	0.017	DISCRIMINATED

*From 1954 until 1991*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.937	DOMINANT
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.019	POWERLESS
Indigenous peoples	0.017	DISCRIMINATED

*From 1992 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.937	DOMINANT
Afro-Costa Ricans	0.019	POWERLESS
Indigenous peoples	0.017	POWERLESS



Figure 197: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1946-1953.



Figure 198: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1954-1991.



Figure 199: Political status of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1992-2013.

## *Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Costa Rica*

*From 1946 until 2013*

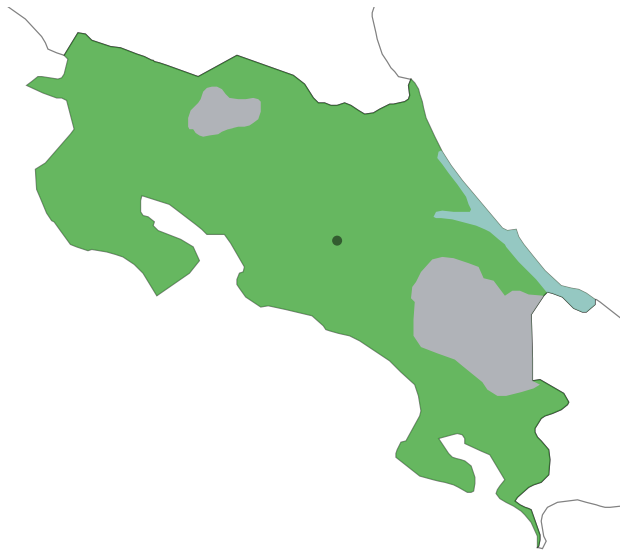


Figure 200: Map of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1992-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Whites/mestizos	51 287	Statewide
Indigenous peoples	6356	Regionally based
Afro-Costa Ricans	1375	Regional & urban

Table 59: List of ethnic groups in Costa Rica during 1946-2013.

## *Conflicts in Costa Rica*

*Starting on 1948-03-03*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Costa Rica	National Liberation Army	Whites/mestizos	1948-03-03	No	No	No