

Jamaica

Ethnicity in Jamaica

Group selection

91.2% of the population is of West African origin, 6.2% are mixed. Rastafari make up a distinct religious and cultural minority within Jamaican society, which begins to attract more people since the 1960s and is viewed as a political pressure group (¹⁶⁶³).

¹⁶⁶³ [CIA, 2014]

Power relations

In 1958 Jamaica joined the Federation of the West Indies and gained full independence in 1962.

There was a 'Black Power' movement in the 1960s and 1970s, but a number of reasons recommend against characterizing this period as driven by ethnic politics. On the one hand, the movement was not a coherent one but split up in different small groups lacking any form of coordination or synchronization on the national level. One reason for this uncoordinated co-existence of several black movement groups may be the fact that those groups came from very different backgrounds thereby representing very different sectors of society such as Rastafarians, radical intellectuals, urban youths, religious rebels and university students (¹⁶⁶⁴, 20). On the other hand, if there had been a general understanding of politics to be about ethnicity, then the Black Power Movement should have been able to form a political party and dominate control of the state: For 'blacks' or 'non-whites' (the latter being the real meaning of 'black' for the Black Power Movement) were and are the vast majority of the population (In this regard, both Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago might be useful contrasts, where voting has indeed been an ethnic census). However, as Brown (¹⁶⁶⁵) notes, "the ideology of the Black Power movement runs counter to the government's multiracial ideology which is shared by the majority of the Jamaican people" (p.157). Showers Johnson (¹⁶⁶⁶) notes that this majority view is supported by the composition and policies of the major parties: "The dominant parties, the People's National Party and the Jamaican Labor Party, essentially transcend race, color, and class in their membership, leadership, and agenda" (p.160). Thomas (¹⁶⁶⁷) implies the PNP was greatly influenced by the Black Power Movement. But his own list of more than 10 of the party's programmatic goals lacks an ethnic tinge (see pp.406-407).

¹⁶⁶⁴ [West, 2005]

¹⁶⁶⁵ [Brown, 1979]

¹⁶⁶⁶ [Showers Johnson, 2005]

¹⁶⁶⁷ [Thomas, 1992]

Jamaica essentially has a two-party political system. The par-

ties are multi-class alliances, which, while not functioning precisely along ethnic lines, reflect the nature of a society stratified along race, class and gender lines. Conspicuously few members of the mainly black working class are among the top leadership positions. These are dominated by light-skinned persons (¹⁶⁶⁸). The first black Prime Minister was Percival Patterson who assumed office in 1992, amid widespread glee that it is black man's time now, but still racial animosities persist (¹⁶⁶⁹). Until then, race was considered a non-issue in Jamaican politics, where the image of a multiracial/nonracial society was supported. The Patterson government broke with this tradition by undertaking several cultural and political efforts to "blacken" Jamaican national identity. Those efforts consisted in the re-introduction of the "Emancipation Day" (after becoming independent, the "Emancipation Day" was the Jamaican national holiday; it was renamed as "Independence Day" shortly after, to affirm the governing elite's concept of a multiracial society), a change in interpretation patterns of the national flag (shifting away from an interpretation that associated the color black with hardship and moving to a meaning of strength and creativity) and in the abolition of the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen of England (¹⁶⁷⁰, 44). Still, politics were never driven by mere ethnic topics. This is why ethnicity is coded as irrelevant since 1946.

¹⁶⁶⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008]

¹⁶⁶⁹ [Moncrieffe, 2004]

¹⁶⁷⁰ [Brown-Glaude, 2006]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Jamaica

From 1962 until 2013

| Group name | Proportional size | Political status |
|------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Jamaicans | 1.0 | IRRELEVANT |

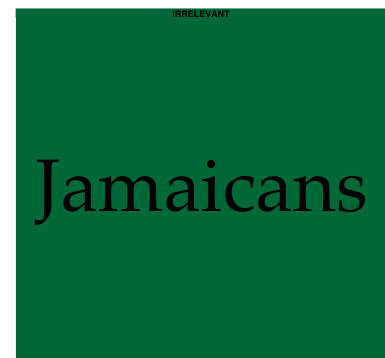


Figure 396: Political status of ethnic groups in Jamaica during 1962-2013.