

Jamaica

Ethnicity in Jamaica

Group selection

In 1958 Jamaica joined the Federation of the West Indies and gained full independence in 1962. 91.2% of the Jamaican population is of West African origin, 6.2% are mixed. Rastafari make up a distinct religious and cultural minority within Jamaican society, which has begun to attract more people since the 1960s and is viewed as a political pressure group (²²⁸⁵). Jamaican society is divided along class and race lines, with notable overrepresentation of lighter-skinned people in leadership positions (²²⁸⁶: 1, 27). Yet, we do not code ethnicity as politically relevant in Jamaica for several reasons. In several recent reports race is not even addressed as an issue in Jamaica (see ²²⁸⁷; ²²⁸⁸).

²²⁸⁵ [CIA, 2014]

²²⁸⁶ [BTI, 2016]

²²⁸⁷ [UNHRC, 2016]

²²⁸⁸ [USDS, 2017]

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 (²²⁸⁹, 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 (²²⁹⁰) 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 (²²⁹¹) 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 (²²⁹²) implies the PNP was greatly influenced by the Black Power Movement. But his own list of more

²²⁸⁹ [West, 2005]

²²⁹⁰ [Brown, 1979]

²²⁹¹ [Showers Johnson, 2005]

²²⁹² [Thomas, 1992]

than 10 of the party's programmatic goals lacks an ethnic tinge (see pp.406-407).

Jamaica essentially has a two-party political system. The parties 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 (²²⁹³). 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 (²²⁹⁴). 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 (²²⁹⁵, 44). Overall, the racial division in society is not politically salient and the major parties - if tackling the racial question at all - even tended to further decrease tension on the matter in recent years (²²⁹⁶: 34, ²²⁹⁷: 2).

²²⁹³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008]

²²⁹⁴ [Moncrieffe, 2004]

²²⁹⁵ [Brown-Glaude, 2006]

²²⁹⁶ [BTI, 2016]

²²⁹⁷ [?]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Jamaica

From 1962 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Jamaicans	1.0	IRRELEVANT

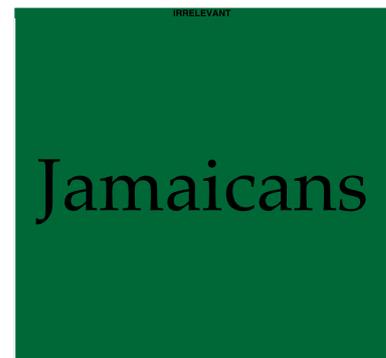


Figure 463: Political status of ethnic groups in Jamaica during 1962-2017.