Panama

Ethnicity in Panama

Group selection

In Panama, we code the following politically relevant ethnic groups: **Afro-Panamanians, Choco (Embera-Wounan), Ngobe-Bugle and Whites/mestizos**.

The largest ethnic minority in Panama are the **Afro-Panamanians**. Mainly the descendants from immigrants from the West Indian islands (like the black community in Costa Rica), they constitute about 14% of the total population ([4196], 285). Their situation within Panamanian society was historically. Viewed as anti-nationalist and pro-USA, as a threat to the mestizo nation, and as taking away the jobs rightfully belonging to Panamanians, they were politically and socially excluded ([4197], 50-1). At the same time, this discrimination led to the formation of a common identity as "Antillanos", later also "Afro-Panamanians" or "Panamanians of West Indian descent" ([4198], 51).

[4196] [Foster, 2000]

[4197] [Priestley, 2004]

[4198] [Priestley, 2004]

Panama's largest indigenous community is the **Ngobe-Bugle** group. It makes up about two-thirds of the whole indigenous population ([4199], 1), which is estimated to be about 6% of the total country population, so that the Ngobe-Bugle constitute 4% of the total population of Panama ([4200], 285). Note that the Ngobe and the Bugle are actually two different groups which are, however, culturally related ([4201], 1). The **Kuna** constitute one-fourth of the total indigenous population ([4202], 1) The third politically relevant indigenous group in Panama is the **Choco** group (also called **Embera-Wounan**). Regarding their political leverage, they can be placed in between the Kuna and the Ngobe-Bugle.

[4199] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

[4200] [Foster, 2000]

[4201] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

[4202] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

It is also important to mention the significant growth of the Chinese community which has now become the largest one in the region in the recent years. This community has experienced a long history of racism that has persisted to this day ([4203]). The first documentation of Chinese in Panama appeared in the mid-19th century, when the first group of male workers was brought into the country to build the trans-isthmian railroad ([4204]). Today, there are at least six generations of diaspora Chinese in Panama, also often referred as "Chinese Panamamians". This should not be confused with the most recent immigration during Manuel Noriega's military regime in the 1980's, which are referred to as "recent immigrants"([4205],182). However, this group is not politically mobilized and thus, no significant

[4203] [Minority Rights Group International, 2020a]

[4204] [Siu, 2002]

[4205] [Siu, 2002]

actor in the national political arena.

Power relations

1946-1959

Panama is one of the most extraordinary cases of indigenous political mobilization in Latin America, as demonstrated by the political history of the Kuna, which already possessed *regional autonomy status* during this early period.

In 1925, the small Kuna group, living mainly on the San Blas archipelago, rebelled against state presence in what they considered their own traditional territory. Backed by the United States, they entered into peace talks with the Panamanian government and achieved partial autonomy in 1930. In 1938, the "comarca" (autonomous zone) Kuna Yala in San Blas was officially established, constituting the first successful autonomy claim of indigenous people in whole Latin America, an unparalleled achievement for any ethnic community in the region in that time ([4206], 1, 4-6, 15; [4207], 31, 35-6; [4208], 47-8). Although always threatened by the Panamanian state's interest for their resources, the Kuna have managed to maintain control over Kuna Yala and protect their lands from extensive foreign exploitation ([4209], 48, 52, 54, 62; [4210]). The "comarca" is governed by a well-specified set of political institutions that are recognized in the Panamanian constitution ([4211]; [4212], 2; [4213]; [4214], 52).

[4206] [Jordan, 2004]
[4207] [Van Cott, 2001]
[4208] [Wickstrom, 2003]
[4209] [Wickstrom, 2003]
[4210] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005a]
[4211] [Jordan, 2004]
[4212] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]
[4213] [Van Cott, 2001]
[4214] [Wickstrom, 2003]

Jordan ([4215], 18) makes explicit comparisons between the Kuna in Panama and the Atlantic coast minorities in Nicaragua regarding the degree of autonomy actually exercised by the groups. According to his judgment, Kuna autonomy is "radically" more effective. Their example would later serve as a model for the autonomy processes of other indigenous groups in the country ([4216], 1). Therefore, the Kuna are coded with "regional autonomy" during the whole time period of the dataset. (It must be mentioned that not all Kuna live on the San Blas archipelago. Nevertheless, the San Blas portion forms the majority of the Kuna ([4217], 1), though over the years other Kuna communities have been granted their own "comarcas" as well.) During all periods, the Kuna are coded as possessing "regional autonomy" and powerless.

[4215] [Jordan, 2004]
[4216] [Jordan, 2004]
[4217] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

Afro-Panamanians are also considered "powerless" for this period and all subsequent ones. Nationalist leaders called for their repatriation and deportation, and in 1941 a new constitution was drafted excluding Antilleans from Panamanian citizenship. After a military coup in the same year, a Constituent Assembly (for which one Afro-Panamanian was nominated) drafted yet another new constitution in 1945/6. At this juncture, George Washington Westerman, a well-known Afro-Panamanian leader and owner of the "Panama Tribune", founded the National Civic League, which began to lobby for Afro-Panamanian citizenship rights. Also due to this lobbying, the new constitution restored (conditional) citizenship for Afro-Panamanians ([4218], 52; [4219], 230-1). This led to a significantly greater inclusion

[4218] [Priestley, 2004]
[4219] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]

of Afro-Panamanians into the clientelistic political system, "opening the door for Antillean-Panamanian political participation" and "leaving behind the period of political exclusion" ([4220], 52). Already in 1952, Afro-Panamanians became members of the Panama City Council or were elected to the national legislature. George Westerman became member of Panama's governments from 1952 to 1960 ([4221], 52, 54, 61), and in 1956 Panama's first anti-discrimination statute was passed ([4222], 231).

[4220] [Priestley, 2004]

[4221] [Priestley, 2004]

[4222] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]

1960-1983

A new period is introduced due to the political mobilization of hitherto inactive ethnic groups. The Ngobe-Bugle's political mobilization can be traced back to the early 1960s and the "Mama Chi" revitalization movement, a cultural movement addressing the Ngobe's relation to and status within the "outside" society. It served to construct a common identity and as a catalyzer of the group's politicization ([4223], 55-6). Overall, Ngobe political mobilization has also mainly focused on claims for access to and protection of their traditional settlement territories ([4224]). Over the years, the Ngobe became more included in national politics. However, as a result of their traditional lifestyle, they had the least political leverage of all Panamanian indigenous groups, despite their larger size ([4225], 50, 56).

[4223] [Wickstrom, 2003]

[4224] [Wickstrom, 2003]

[4225] [Wickstrom, 2003]

The political mobilization of the Choco also started in the 1960s, when they began making claims for the recognition of their land rights ([4226], 2).

[4226] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

During the 1960s, ethnic mobilization decreased, but by the mid-1970s, during the populist regime of General Omar Torrijos, several Afro-Panamanian political organizations emerged, such as the "Accion Reinvindicadora del Negro Panameno" (ARENEP), the "Asociación de Profesionales, Obreros y Dirigentes de Ascendencia Negra" (APODAN), and the "Congreso del Negro Panameno" that led an explicitly race-centered discourse. They were at the same time nationalists and "ethnic lobbyists", envisaging a more inclusive Panamanian nation-state that would include Blacks and indigenous peoples equally ([4227], 53-4, 61; [4228], 231). After initial hostilities, these organizations were tolerated (and even encouraged) by the military regime, not least to utilize their connections to Afro-Panamanians living in the U.S. during the re-negotiations of the Panama Canal Treaty ([4229], 55-6; [4230], 231-2).

[4227] [Priestley, 2004]

[4228] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]

[4229] [Priestley, 2004]

[4230] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]

Afro-Panamanian political mobilization continued in the 1980s, with many Afro-Panamanian individuals at the head of labor movements, human rights and minority rights groups ([4231]). They are coded as "powerless" throughout all periods.

[4231] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005c]

1984-1997

The government granted the Afropaniamians the "comarca" Embera-Drua in 1983 ([4232], 2), so that a new period is introduced.

[4232] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]

1998-2021

It was not until 1997 that the Ngobe-Bugle were granted their "comarca" with regional autonomy ([4233], 1; [4234], 58). Therefore, the Ngobe-Bugle are coded as "irrelevant" until 1959, as "powerless" from 1960 (about the time when they started to mobilize collectively) to 1997, and as enjoying regional autonomy from 1998 on. All other designations for indigenous peoples stay the same during this period both in terms of political inclusion and regional autonomy ([4235]; [4236], 4; [4237], 20). Although some indigenous leaders have achieved political posts at the national level, and a few seats are reserved for them in the National Assembly ([4238]), indigenous groups remain mostly powerless at the national level ([4239]: 20).

[4233] [Vakis & Lindert, 2000]
[4234] [Wickstrom, 2003]
[4235] [Freedom House, 2016]
[4236] [UNHRC, 2014]
[4237] [USDS, 2016]
[4238] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005b]
[4239] [USDS, 2016]

There have been some challenges to the regional autonomy status of indigenous peoples, though not enough to change the designated coding. During this period, there were several disputes between indigenous peoples and the national government, mostly in the context of land rights in resource-rich regions where large-scale investment projects are planned or executed ([4240]; [4241]: 19; [4242]: 21). Furthermore, in April 2016, the Kuna congress decided to break relations with central government because of an alleged lack of respect for their autonomy ([4243]: 20). Indigenous peoples still face disproportional poverty and structural discrimination in Panama ([4244]: 3).

[4240] [Freedom House, 2017]
[4241] [UNHRC, 2014]
[4242] [USDS, 2016]
[4243] [USDS, 2016]
[4244] [BTI, 2016]

Nevertheless, according to Van Cott ([4245], 33), Panama (along with Colombia) has granted the greatest degree of political autonomy to indigenous peoples in Latin America regarding the geographic extension of autonomy, its institutionalization, and access to state resources. Consequently, she places Panama in the category of Latin America's "strongly multicultural" countries ([4246], 132).

[4245] [Van Cott, 2001]
[4246] [Van Cott, 2007]

Since 1999, the "black movement" has grown more united. Afro-Panamanian organizations have come together in an overarching, rather heterogeneous national institution called "Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Negras Panamenas". Furthermore, institutions like the "Comito Panameno Contra el Racismo" and the "Afro-Panamanian Forum" were founded ([4247], 227-8, 242). Yet, social and economic discrimination continues ([4248]). In 2004, one Afro-Panamanian formed part of Panama's government ([4249]). But still today, Afro-Panamanians are clearly disadvantaged in the political sphere ([4250], 64). Moreover, unlike Panama's indigenous peoples, Afro-Panamanians do not enjoy any collective rights (such as regional autonomy) as a group ([4251], 298). Nevertheless, as outlined above, since the 1946 constitution, there has always been political participation by and a certain political inclusion of Afro-Panamanians. Therefore, the Afro-Panamanians were coded as politically relevant (according to the EPR definition) and "powerless" throughout the entire time period of the dataset, as they still lack significant influence on decision-making either at the national or regional level ([4252]: 19-20; [4253]: 11).

[4247] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]
[4248] [Priestley & Barrow, 2008]
[4249] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005b]
[4250] [Priestley, 2004]
[4251] [Hooker, 2005]
[4252] [USDS, 2016]
[4253] [BTI, 2016]

According to the most recent BTI report ([4254],7), in recent years,

[4254] [BTI, 2020]

indigenous and environmental movements have become more visible in the political arena, owing to significant mobilizations. These groups have opposed mining and hydroelectric dams projects, but also have protested against the government over land title disputes (in particular the Emebera and Wounaan communities).

The last elections took place in May 2019, where the centre-left (Democratic Revolutionary Party) candidate Laurentino Cortizo was declared winner of Panama's presidential election ([4255]). While indigenous participation was solely trough the political parties, they hoped that the elected president will appoint indigenous professionals to some of the Ministries. To this end, the president appointed Ausencio Palacio from the Ngäbe community as Vice-Minister of Indigenous Affairs, he also appointed Alexis Oriel Alvarado from the Gunadale people to run the National Department for Indigenous Lands and Municipal Assets ([4256]: 159). At last, during the same year the Panamanian government created 13 comarca-level departments and recognised the existence of 25 indigenous territories for titling ([4257]).

[4255] [BBC, 2019a]

[4256] [IWGIA, 2020]

[4257] [IWGIA, 2020]

The group size was updated in order to reflect the latest changes in the population. The most significant change concerns the Afro-Panamanians. In 2015 the Institution Nacional de Estadística y Censo (INEC) produced a new estimate of 14.9% for this group (compared to the 9.2% estimated in the 2010 Census). This in part due to "greater self-recognition by Afro-Panamanians, alongside more sophisticated measuring methods that allow for greater accuracy in reflecting Panama's population" ([4258]).

[4258] [Minority Rights Group International, 2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in P

From 1946 until 1959

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.837	MONOPOLY
Afropanamanians	0.146	POWERLESS
Kuna	0.015	POWERLESS

Figure 805: Political status of ethnic groups in Panama during 1946-1959.

From 1960 until 1983

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.8	MONOPOLY
Afropanamanians	0.14	POWERLESS
Ngäbe-Buglé	0.04	POWERLESS
Kuna	0.015	POWERLESS
Choco (Embera-Wounan)	0.003	POWERLESS

Figure 806: Political status of ethnic groups in Panama during 1960-1983.

From 1984 until 1997

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.8	MONOPOLY
Afropanamanians	0.14	POWERLESS
Ngäbe-Buglé	0.04	POWERLESS
Kuna	0.015	POWERLESS
Choco (Embera-Wounan)	0.003	POWERLESS

Figure 807: Political status of ethnic groups in Panama during 1984-1997.

From 1998 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.71	DOMINANT
Afropanamanians	0.16	POWERLESS
Ngäbe-Buglé	0.09	POWERLESS
Kuna	0.025	POWERLESS
Choco (Embera-Wounan)	0.01	POWERLESS

Figure 808: Political status of ethnic groups in Panama during 1998-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Panama

From 1946 until 1959

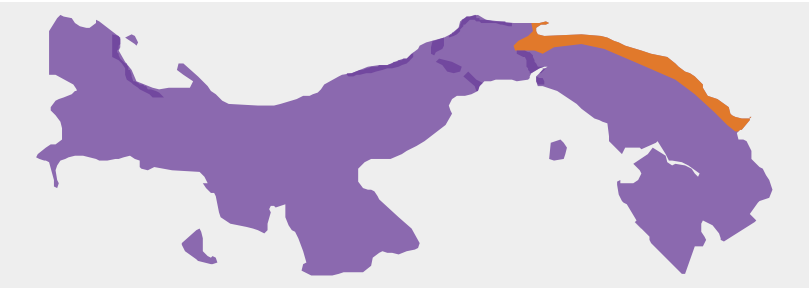

Figure 809: Map of ethnic groups in Panama during 1946-1959.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
	Whites/mestizos	74 095	Statewide
	Kuna	2906	Regionally based
	Afropanamanians	1517	Regional & urban

Table 299: List of ethnic groups in Panama during 1946-1959.

From 1960 until 2021

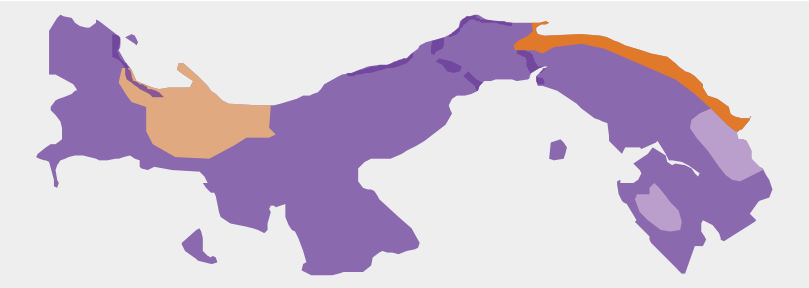

Figure 810: Map of ethnic groups in Panama during 1960-2021.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Whites/mestizos	74 095	Statewide
■	Ngäbe-Buglé	6826	Regionally based
■	Choco (Embera-Wounan)	3412	Regionally based
■	Kuna	2906	Regionally based
■	Afropanamanians	1517	Regional & urban

Table 300: List of ethnic groups in Panama during 1960-2021.

Conflicts in Panama

Starting on 1989-10-02

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Panama	Military faction (forces of Moisés Giroldi)	Whites/mestizos	1989-10-02	No	Yes, from EGIP	No

Starting on 1989-12-15

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Panama	Government of United States of America		1989-12-15			