

# SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is a multiparty, parliamentary democracy. The prime minister is the head of the government. The United Kingdom's Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state, represented by a governor general. In 2015 Ralph Gonsalves was elected by his party to a fourth consecutive term as prime minister. International observers assessed the election as generally free and fair.

The Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police are the only security force in the country and are responsible for maintaining national security. Its forces include the Coast Guard, Special Services Unit, Rapid Response Unit, Drug Squad, and Antitrafficking Unit. The police force reports to the minister of national security, a portfolio held by the prime minister. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

Significant human rights issues included the criminalization of libel and the criminalization of consensual same-sex activity between men, which was not enforced during the year.

The government took steps to investigate and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, and there was not a widespread perception of impunity for security force members.

### **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:**

#### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

#### **b. Disappearance**

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

The law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports the government employed them systematically.

#### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions were less than adequate, although they varied depending on the facility. Key problems with prison facilities included understaffing, overcrowding, the inability to control contraband, and limited space to segregate noncompliant and juvenile prisoners.

Physical Conditions: Limited prison capacity prevented authorities from segregating juvenile offenders, with 32 offenders between the ages of 16 and 21 housed with adult prisoners. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that juvenile offenders were not housed in the juvenile center. Female prisoners were housed in a makeshift facility while construction of a women's prison was underway. The two facilities for male prisoners were near capacity throughout the year.

Administration: There were no reports of mistreatment, but the authorities worked with an NGO to investigate credible allegations of mistreatment. There was inadequate prison security staffing. There was a report of a prisoner held on murder charges who walked out of prison and called his lawyer to pick him up before officials became aware of the escape.

Independent Monitoring: An NGO monitors the prison and conducts twice-yearly inspections.

### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

#### **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The law requires a judicial authority to issue arrest warrants. The bail system was generally effective. Authorities generally gave detainees prompt access to a

lawyer. For indigent detainees accused of a capital offense, the state provides a lawyer. For other crimes the state does not provide a lawyer, and defendants without the financial means to hire a lawyer must represent themselves.

Although lengthy delays prior to preliminary inquiries were reported, government authorities and civil society reported compliance with Court of Appeal guidelines, which require a preliminary hearing to be held within nine months of detention.

The government operated a juvenile justice reform program to reduce recidivism.

#### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

#### **Trial Procedures**

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty and were informed promptly and in detail of the charges. Defendants have the right to a fair, timely, and public trial and to be present at the trial. Defendants are able to select an attorney of their choice. The court appoints attorneys only for indigent defendants charged with a capital offense. Defendants had adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. Defendants had access to free assistance of an interpreter as necessary. Defendants could confront and question witnesses and present their own witnesses and evidence. Defendants cannot be compelled to testify or confess guilt. Witnesses and victims sometimes refused to testify because they feared retaliation. Defendants may appeal verdicts and penalties.

#### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

#### **Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies**

There is an independent, impartial judiciary in civil matters, where one may bring lawsuits seeking damages for human rights violations. Individuals may appeal

domestic courts' decisions to the Eastern Caribbean Court of Appeals or the United Kingdom's Privy Council.

#### **f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The law prohibits such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

### **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:**

#### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press**

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, and the government generally respected this right. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for the press.

Libel/Slander Laws: Civil society observers reported concerns about criticizing the government, primarily due to fear of facing libel charges, including under the 2016 Cybercrime Act. Civil society representatives indicated these fears resulted in media outlets practicing self-censorship. The act establishes criminal penalties, including imprisonment, for offenses including libel by electronic communication, cyberbullying, and illegal acquisition of data. The government did not charge anyone with libel or defamation during the year.

#### **Internet Freedom**

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

#### **Academic Freedom and Cultural Events**

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

#### **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The law provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights. Civil society, however, reported

citizens were hesitant to participate in antigovernment protests due to fear of retaliation.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at [www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/](http://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/).

### **d. Freedom of Movement**

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

### **e. Internally Displaced Persons**

Not applicable.

### **f. Protection of Refugees**

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status; the government addresses each case individually. The government has not established a system for protecting refugees.

### **g. Stateless Persons**

Not applicable.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

### **Elections and Political Participation**

Recent Elections: In 2015 the United Labour Party won eight of the 15 elected seats in the unicameral House of Assembly, which also includes six appointed senators. The New Democratic Party won seven seats. International observers from the Caribbean Community and the Organization of American States declared the elections generally free and fair.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process. Women reportedly were reluctant to campaign for office, with only three women in the 21-seat legislature; all were appointed senators.

#### **Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government**

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. Officials at times engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. NGOs and the opposition party reported instances of government corruption during the year, including allegations of misappropriation of money allocated for aid and development programs.

Corruption: Allegations of political handouts and other forms of low-level corruption persisted.

Financial Disclosure: There are no financial disclosure laws for public officials.

#### **Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

The Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Human Rights Association (SVGHRA), a domestic human rights group, generally operated without government restriction, and investigated and published its findings on human rights cases. The government held various meetings with civil society that included the SVGHRA. Civil society reported that even where government officials shared the SVGHRA's concerns, government officials were intimidated by senior officials from investigating allegations of human rights abuses.

#### **Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons**

##### **Women**

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, and the government generally enforced the law. Sentences for rape begin at 10 years' imprisonment. Authorities referred allegations of rape or physical or sexual abuse of women to the police, and police were generally responsive to these complaints. The government operated sexual abuse awareness training, but civil society cited the lack of public education efforts in perpetuating an environment of insensitivity to sexual abuse victims. Police and human rights groups reported that perpetrators

commonly made payoffs to victims of rape or sexual assault in exchange for victims not pressing charges.

Civil society groups reported domestic violence against women remained a serious and pervasive problem. The Division of Gender Affairs in the Ministry of National Mobilization offered programs to assist women and children. The ministry maintained a crisis center for survivors of domestic violence.

Sexual Harassment: The law does not specifically prohibit sexual harassment, although authorities could prosecute such behavior under other laws. Local human rights groups and women's organizations considered enforcement in the workplace ineffective.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: Women enjoy the same legal rights to family, nationality, and inheritance as men. Women receive an equitable share of property following separation or divorce. The law requires equal pay for equal work, and authorities generally enforced it.

## **Children**

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived by birth within the country's territory or from either parent. Birth registration usually occurred within a few days of a child's birth.

Child Abuse: The law provides a legal framework for the protection of children, including within domestic violence laws. The Family Services Division of the Ministry of Social Development monitored and protected the welfare of children. The division referred all reports of child abuse to the police for action and provided assistance in cases where children applied for protection orders with the family court. Unlawful sexual intercourse with children younger than age 15 remained a problem, and it was in some cases linked to transactional sex with minors. Government and NGO interlocutors indicated that child abuse remained a significant problem.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18. Parental consent is required for underage marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law does not prohibit the use of children for prostitution, pornography, or pornographic performances. The law prohibits girls younger than age 15 and boys younger than age 16 from engaging in consensual sexual relations, and the government enforced the law. The law prohibits statutory rape, with special provisions for those younger than age 13. Observers noted that male and female teenagers engaged in prostitution and transactional sex. NGO and government representatives reported some mothers pressured their daughters to have sexual relations with older men as a way to generate family income. Government officials conducted sensitization workshops in the community and schools to address the problem.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

### **Anti-Semitism**

There was no organized Jewish community, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

### **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **Persons with Disabilities**

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, mental, and intellectual disabilities, and the government generally enforced these prohibitions. The law does not mandate access to buildings for persons with disabilities, and access for such persons generally was difficult. NGOs reported government funding for organizations supporting persons with disabilities was insufficient to meet the need. NGOs reported subtle discrimination in hiring practices throughout the economy but noted the government's strong attempt to recruit and hire persons with disabilities through programs such as the Youth Employment Scheme and the Secondary Education Training Program.

## **Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

Consensual same-sex conduct between adults is illegal under indecency statutes, and some sexual activity between adult men is illegal under anal intercourse laws. Indecency statutes carry a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment, and anal intercourse carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison, although these laws were rarely enforced. No laws prohibit discrimination against a person based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

Anecdotal evidence suggested there was some societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, especially in employment. The government provided food packages to some persons with HIV/AIDS, but civil society reported that eligible participants had to preregister at health centers, which some individuals were reluctant to do out of fear of public identification and discrimination. NGOs operated a network to assist persons with HIV/AIDS with medical services and psychosocial support.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The government recognizes the right to freedom of association, with restrictions. The International Labor Organization (ILO) noted with concern the discretionary authority of the government over trade union registration, and the government's unfettered authority to investigate the financial accounts of trade unions. The government generally respected the right to collective bargaining in the private sector. The law provides for the right of workers to form and join unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law does not require employers to recognize a particular union as an exclusive bargaining agent. Authorities formed arbitration panels, which included tripartite representation from government, businesses, and unions, on an ad hoc basis when labor disputes occurred.

The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and dismissal for engaging in union activities. Although the law does not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity, a court may order reinstatement.

Workers providing essential services--defined as the provision of electricity, water, hospital, and police services--are prohibited from striking unless they provide at least 14 days' notice to the authorities. Some of these sectors were not covered under the ILO's description of essential services.

The government generally enforced labor laws effectively. Government penalties were sufficient to deter violations.

### **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Penalties against forced labor carry punishments commensurate with serious crimes and were sufficient to deter violations. The ILO expressed concern that membership in an illegal organization could result in prison labor, in contravention of Convention 105, Abolition of Forced Labor.

While there were no forced labor investigations during the year, civil society reported that during the tourist season a small number of persons--including minors--were vulnerable to forced labor in underground economic activities in the drug trade and prostitution.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law bars the worst forms of child labor and sets the minimum working age at 14. Compulsory education ends at age 16. The law prohibits children and youth from working between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. Children younger than age 18 may not work for more than 12 hours a day. Types of hazardous work prohibited to children are not specified by law or regulation.

The government did not effectively enforce child labor laws. The Department of Labour did not conduct any inspections specifically related to child labor. Instead, the government relied on general labor inspections to identify any child labor violations, but these inspectors had no specialized training on identifying child labor. There were no reported complaints related to child labor. Covered under its trafficking in persons legislation, penalties for child labor could result in 20 years' imprisonment and were sufficient to deter violations.

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at [www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings](http://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings).

#### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

Laws and regulations related to employment and occupation prohibit discrimination based on sex or disability, but no laws prohibit discrimination against a person based on race, religion, political opinion, national origin, social origin, age, or language. Whether the law covers sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV-positive status is untested in court. The government did not effectively enforce laws prohibiting employment discrimination. It was unclear whether penalties were sufficient to deter violations.

#### **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

Minimum wages, updated in 2017, varied by sector and type of work and were below the poverty line. The law prescribes hours of work according to category, such as industrial employees (40 hours per week), professionals (44 hours per week), and agricultural workers (30 to 40 hours per week). The law provides that workers receive time-and-a-half for hours worked above the standard workweek. There was a prohibition against excessive or compulsory overtime, which authorities did not enforce effectively.

The law concerning occupational safety and health is outdated. Workers have the right to remove themselves from unsafe work environments without jeopardizing their employment, but authorities did not effectively enforce this right.

The government did not employ enough inspectors to enforce the law effectively. The Ministry of Agriculture conducted inspections and worksite visits in the agricultural sector related to occupational safety and health. The Department of Labour stated it did not have the legal authority to impose fines for violations, but it conducted follow-up inspections to assess if the shortfalls had been addressed. The Department of Labour and judicial officials have the authority to prosecute violations of workplace law and impose fines. Workers who receive less than the minimum wage may file a claim with labor inspectors, who investigate and, if warranted, refer the matter to arbitration. The department received very few complaints concerning minimum wage violations but received more complaints regarding wrongful dismissal.