

## **BELIZE**

### **Maya**

Activity: 1995-2020

### **General notes**

NA

### **Movement start and end dates**

- The National Indigenous Council of Belize was founded in 1996, but there were protests already in 1995. Thus, we peg the start date to 1995. There are several organizations representing Mayan and indigenous interests other than the National Council, including the Maya Leaders Alliance and the Toledo Maya Cultural Council, but information about the organizations' histories is generally scarce. The Mayas asked for a declaration that the villages and its members hold collective and individual rights and title to the land and that government determine, demarcate, and provide official documentation of their titles. The issue seems to be largely about building and development on the land in question: The Supreme Court of Belize ruled in 2007 and again in 2010 that the Mayans who have ancestrally cared for these forests shall hold the legal titles to these lands. However, the Mayans are usually not consulted before the government gives green light for oil extraction. The movement is ongoing (Aslam 1997; BBC 2007; Indian Law Resource Center 2010; Julian Cho Society). [start date: 1995; end date: ongoing]

### **Dominant claim**

- The dominant claim among the Maya of Belize and the organizations representing their demands is cultural and political autonomy (Fox Tree 2010: 96). This coincides with the rise of the TMCC as the main group making these claims (Wainwright, 2021: 5). The claim for autonomy and especially land rights continued in recent years as demonstrated by various legal cases. (Wainwright, 2021; Cultural Survival, 2021). [1995-2020: autonomy claim]

### **Independence claims**

NA

### **Irredentist claims**

NA

### **Claimed territory**

- We were unable to find a precise definition of the territory to which the Maya's autonomy claims are tied, but they mostly concern Mayan settlement areas in the Toledo and Stann Creek districts (MRGI). We code this claim based on the Mayan settlements mapped by the GeoEPR dataset in these particular regions. However, it can not be ruled out that the Maya advocated also for land rights in their northern, more sparsely populated, settlement areas in Belize. We therefore flag this territorial claim as ambiguous.

## **Sovereignty declarations**

NA

## **Separatist armed conflict**

- No violence was found, hence a NVIOLSD coding. [NVIOLSD]

## **Historical context**

- The Maya are descendants of the Mayan Empire that stretched across Central America, including the Yucatan Peninsula and what is now Belize (Minahan 2002: 1214). The earliest evidence of the Maya in Belize dates to around 2500BC (Belize Adventure, ND), but the Empire is considered to have peaked between 600-900AD. The civilization began a long decline due to social and environmental factors, until the Spanish Conquests from 1531 destroyed the Maya's last city in 1546. The last Mayan nation fell in 1697, and Mayan culture was systematically destroyed to the point when in 1700 only 250,000 Maya remained (Minahan, 2002: 214-216). The Maya were largely subjugated, with the Caste Wars from 1847-1901 being historically salient for Mayan uprisings against Spanish domination and the establishment of Mayan polities, the last of which was destroyed in the 1930's (Danver 2015: 140).
- Belize was frequently occupied by British loggers and pirates from the 1600's despite Spanish attempts to evict them (Hewitt and Cheetham, 2000: 42-3). British Honduras became a British Colony in 1862, with conflicts against the Maya in 1867 and 1872 (Belize Adventure, ND), becoming a crown colony in 1884. It became a self governing colony in 1964, changed its name to Belize in 1973, and gained independence on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1981 with the first PM being George Price. Belize remains a member of the Commonwealth (Vogt et al, 2015; Cederman et al, 2010).
- Region wide insurgencies by Maya groups created a stronger imagined community for Maya in Central America. Rising resource and tourism wealth renewed interest in cultural heritage and demands for greater rights for the largely repressed group. (Minahan, 2002: 1217; Minahan, 2016: 263). In British Honduras, the main Mayan groups (Yucatec, Mopan, Ketchi) all struggled with logging and petrol industries taking their land, particularly in the south of the country. The Mopan and Ketchi, largely located in the south, organized for cultural and land rights in the 1970's but due to non recognition of indigenous status concessions were only made legally on a case by case basis. Overall, even with self governance in British Honduras under the Peoples United Party (PUP), there was no pretence of Mayan participation and only modest reforms (Vogt et al, 2015; Cederman et al, 2010).
- No concessions or restrictions were found in the ten years before the start date.

## **Concessions and restrictions**

- In the 1998 general election, the PUP platformed on entering meaningful negotiations with indigenous communities to concerning land and cultural rights, with the PUP winning (Wainwright, 2021).
- As part of the PUP election platform, in 1998 a Review Committee for Forest Licenses was established to protect Maya land from exploitation without Mayan representation. The eight person body included the leader of the Toledo Maya Cultural Council (TMCC) and two other Maya leaders (Wainwright, 2021: 10). This is a minor concession but a salient one due to the damage done by logging to Mayan communities. It ultimately introduced a new level of control of the Maya people over their land even if it falls short of full governance of said land. It is therefore coded as an autonomy concession. [1998: autonomy concession]
- Following the 1998 election, the PUP PM Said Musa and TMCC leader Julian Cho met to discuss a settlement to land issues. On the back of these meetings (after Cho died in December 1998) the

Ten Points Agreement was introduced in 2000. This was a decision of the Supreme Court to recognize Maya land rights (Vogt et al, 2015; Cederman et al, 2010). The agreement fell short of providing full legal protection for land rights protection, but did provide a level of land rights protection not seen previously by becoming a political framework for State-Maya relations (Wainwright, 2021: 16). [2000: autonomy concession]

- Ongoing land rights issues led to the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) intervening on the side of the Mayan people in 2015. Although the CCJ cannot force change in favour of Maya communities (Wainwright, 2021), the decision declared multiple ongoing land rights cases in Belize National Courts should result in favour of Maya, particularly the 38 Mopan and Ketchi communities of southern Belize. It declared Mayan land rights were equivalent to any other form of property in Belizean law (Cultural Survival, 2015) This is not coded as it is an external decision, but it provides context for further concessions.
- As part of the implementation of the CCJ 2015 ruling, the Belizean government and Maya people entered into a December 2018 Agreement for the Free, Prior and Informed Consent Protocol on land use in Maya areas. This facilitated the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2021 Supreme Court ruling in favour of Maya land rights in Jalacte Village vs Attorney General. This ruled that the Belizean government breached the constitutional rights of the Maya as propertied people, forcing the return of land taken without permission of Maya communities and ordering compensation (Cultural Survival, 2021). This is an autonomy concession as Mayan property rights were finally recognized by the state, and acted upon in the courts. The 2015 CCJ ruling is too early as it had no formal impact of Belizean processes. However, the 2018 agreement laid legal foundations for the individual case in 2021. Therefore, this event is coded as an autonomy concession, surrounding communal land ownership rights, in 2018. [2018: autonomy concession]

### Regional autonomy

- The Mayan communities in Belize are not coded to have any meaningful autonomy. The concession made have primarily concerned community land rights and economic development. Although Mayan participation has been apparent, these moves fall short of any sort of recognized self governance. [1995-2020: no regional autonomy]

### De facto independence

NA

### Major territorial changes

NA

### EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Maya
<i>Scenario</i>	1:1
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	Maya
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	8003000

### Power access

- We draw data on the Maya's representation in the central government from EPR.

- The first PM, George Price, was a descendent of both Maya and Creole peoples. However, political tradition in Belize downplays group labelling of politicians (Vogt et al, 2015; Cederman et al, 2010). Only one Maya person from the southern Maya region has held a cabinet level position (Wainwright, 2021: 5). This reaffirms the EPR coding of Powerless. [1995-2020: powerless]

### Group size

- We draw data on the Maya's relative group size from EPR. [1995-1999: 0.1105; 2000-2009: 0.1056; 2010-2020: 0.113]

### Regional concentration

- The Mayas are coded as regionally concentrated in EPR, but EPR applies a lower bar and according to additional evidence we found, the Mayas do not have a single spatially contiguous settlement area but live in different areas in Corozal, Orange Walk, Cayo, and Toledo districts (e.g., Belize Adventure; also see GeoEPR polygon). [not concentrated]

### Kin

- According to Minahan (2002: 1213), there are millions of Mayas in both Mexico and northern Guatemala, as well as smaller communities in Honduras and El Salvador. This information matches with EPR. [kin in adjoining country]

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