

Political Reforms BELIZE
ELECTION DATE: CONTINUOUS VOTER REGISTRATION

Political reforms implemented by the Said Musa government in 1999 and 2000, included legal adjustments which allowed for the following:

- Direct voting for Mayors by electors
- Setting firm date for Municipal Elections as the first Wednesday of March every 3 years
- Direct voting for Chairpersons of Village Councils

The Municipal Council Acts, namely Town Councils Act Cap 67, Belmopan City Council Act Cap 86 and Belize City Council Act Cap 85, all utilize identical language in the abovementioned alterations. Evident in Part II Section 10 (1) and (2) are the direct election of the Mayor, and the method of electing the Deputy Mayor: *“the Mayor shall be directly elected by the electorate from among persons who offer themselves as candidates for Mayor in a general election held to elect a new Council. At the first meeting of the Council after every general election to constitute a new Council, the members of the Council shall elect a Deputy Mayor from among their number.”* Regarding a Council’s terms of office and the date of the Council’s general election, Part II Section 4 (1) expresses that, *“Every Council shall hold office until the last day of February next ensuing after the day on which the Council has been two years in office”*; and Section 5 states that *“An election of members of the Council shall be held on the first Wednesday next ensuing after the day on which the term of office of the Council expires”*.

Belize City voters were the first to vote for a Mayor in the 1999 Belize City Council election. All other municipalities, inclusive of the City of Belmopan, followed suit in 2000. It was the first election for the Belmopan City Council following the referendum of 1999. Also in 2001 electors voted for Chairpersons in the Village Council elections for the first time. Two new developments in our election history at 2003 are worthy of note: general elections for all municipalities occurred on the same date; the Parliamentary Election was also called on the same date as the Municipal Elections. Prior to this general election for Belize City Council was held on a separate date. Consequentially, voters of Belize participated in three elections in one day for the first time—Belize City and the City of Belmopan, all town councils, as well as Parliamentary Elections. Voter turnout for the parliamentary was 79.51% with the PUP garnering a super majority of 22 of 29 seats (75%). The PUP also won a majority of the Town Councils, and the two City Councils. While the Parliamentary Election was not quite a snap election, there was an element of surprise, in that the combination of council and parliamentary elections was a first.

- Continuous voter registration implemented in 1999

Daily registration of Voters was introduced, allowing ample time for voters to acquire the necessary source documents to get on the voters’ register in time for any or all elections. A monthly register of new entrants is advertised on a prescribed cut-off date by law. Amendments to this rule was exercised by the UDP government with SI #7 of 2012, signed January 7, 2012; just days before the final cut-off date for new entrants to make the Voters’ List for the 2012 Parliamentary Election. SI #7 allowed for voter registration to be extended to ten more days, and limited the time for processing of inquiry on new registrants by about 50%. Several newly sworn-in Belizeans benefitted from this change, as they were allowed to register as first time voters in time for the 2012 Parliamentary Election. The very short notice and the call of a snap

election may have benefited the party (UDP) in government. SI #7 was repealed after this one election in 2012. The UDP won the election, albeit narrowly by two seats or 60 votes.

All in all, the political reforms primarily created a system of voter registration that was more efficient and accessible to electors. The new amendments clearly empowered voters, broadened democracy, and enhanced governance in terms of consistency and transparency in local government. The downside in terms of fairness and transparency, or good governance principles is the ability of the party in government to make changes--that there is the ability to quietly change the rules can be an area of concern.

The actual date for parliamentary elections remains the Prime Minister's prerogative, as there is not a set date in law. The process and schedule to arrive at a specific date is determined by the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act (ROPA) Cap 9. General knowledge of these sections of the law can afford one a good guesstimate. According to the Constitution at section 85 (1) "*A general election of members of the House of Representatives shall be held at such time within three months after every dissolution of the National Assembly...*" Also section 84 (2) states "*...the National assembly...shall continue for five years from the date of the first sitting of the House of Representatives...*" So one can ascertain the maximum life of a Parliament to be five years from the first meeting of the new Parliament. Belizean voters however, have experienced early or snap elections—those called ahead of the five-year term limit. The first was in 1993 called by the PUP; and as aforementioned, while the 2003 was not quite a snap election, the surprise element was holding the election on the same day of a combined municipal election. Snap elections were called by the UDP in 2012 and 2015. In fact, Belizeans went to the polls three times in 2015—two bi-elections for Cayo North in January, and for Dangriga in July followed by a snap Parliamentary Election in November.

The ROPA in Part IV guides the processes and timeline to arrive at a more specific path to the actual election date for parliamentary elections. First a Writ has to be issued stating the day and place of nomination of candidates. Section 19 (1) states, "*For the purpose of every general election of members of the House of Representatives... the Governor-General shall issue writs of election under the Public Seal of Belize, addressed to the returning officers of the respective divisions for which members are to be returned...*" Section 19 (3) states, "*Each writ...shall specify the day and place of nomination of candidates, the days on which, if necessary, the poll shall be taken, the first of which being not less than fifteen days and not more than twenty-one days after the nomination day...*"

In outlining the specifics laid out by the ROPA, some timeline is evident as follows:

1. Election day is not less than 15 days and not more than 21 days after Nomination Day
2. Nomination Day is included in the Writ and is 10 clear days after notice of the Writ of Election

It demonstrates that 28 days are needed to complete the processes to election day itself. The knowledge of the law offers less guessing time for actual preparation by those in opposition. However, this does not provide equal opportunities to the opponents, nor does it present the level of openness as provided by the revision of the laws for Municipal Elections and called for by the principles of good governance and democracy.