

BELIZE

Belize's migration profile is as Caribbean as it is Central-American. With Caribbean countries, it largely shares a similar legal framework, a similar emigration profile (around 16% of its citizens live abroad),¹ a similar immigration profile, being an attractive destination for retirees, and it is also highly marked by brain-drain. With its neighbors Mexico and Guatemala, it shares the propensity to be a transit and/or immigration country for Central Americans fleeing violence and trying to migrate to the North.

In the last decades, tensions within Belize have arisen between the monolingual (Anglophone) population and the growing numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants.² These tensions extend to Belizeans abroad, who have framed their claims for external voting rights as a means to offset the growing influence of immigrants in their home country politics. Diaspora members resent not having electoral rights abroad while Belize remains relatively open to admit immigrants and offers them a path to full citizenship.³ The nationalistic overtones of this debate for external voting rights are linked to the long-standing territorial dispute between Belize and Guatemala, in which the diaspora has activated to lobby for the Belizean side.⁴

Economically, Belizeans are not sending remittances in the same rates as their Caribbean neighbors with similar emigrant populations, according to the IOM.⁵ This might be attributable to the lack of policies in place to attract remittances, but also to the emigrant profile of the Belizean diaspora. Remittances are by no means the only indicator of emigrants' interest in keeping bonds with their homelands, but there is little evidence of other initiatives to connect with the homeland, beyond the politicized publications in some social and online media.

From the other side of the relationship, however, the Belizean state is just beginning to take interest in its diaspora and to get an idea of who and where they are, as evidenced by the websites of some Belizean consulates featuring announcements of a campaign inviting Belizeans abroad to register in order to "determine the number of Belizeans living overseas and to foster a closer relationship with this overseas community..."⁶ The Belizean catalog of emigrant policies is rather thin at the moment.

1 OECD, *Connecting with Emigrants A Global Profile of Diasporas 2015*, 130.

2 The Economist, "A Spanish Accent."

3 Ramos, "Commentary: Belize Citizens Living Abroad Are Denied Their Voting Rights."

4 Jones, "Diaspora of Belize."

5 International Organization for Migration, "Migration Trends - IOM Belize - IOM RO San Jose."

6 Embassy of Belize in Washington D.C., "Registration of Belizean Overseas."

CITIZENSHIP/NATIONALITY

DUAL OR MULTIPLE NATIONALITY REGULATION

In Belize, there are no legal obstacles to double nationality/citizenship for Belizeans by birth or descent. This applies to the first and second generation.⁷ This is stated clearly in the law, while the tolerance or acceptance of dual nationality for the naturalized is not explicitly regulated, which could be interpreted as including a distinction.⁸ The existence of “economic citizenship” programs that give a second (Belizean) passport to “investors” signals that dual nationality for naturalized Belizeans is tolerated because there is no requisite of renunciation of previous nationality. The prevalence of distinctions “by origin” serves to regulate the revocation of citizenship from naturalized Belizeans who spend more than 5 years abroad. If individuals have dual or multiple nationalities, they may not exercise certain public offices: they are disqualified for membership in the House of Representatives or the Senate. It is explicitly stated that Belizeans by origin may take up another nationality. What applies to investor citizenship refers to preserving their nationality of origin when taking up the Belizean, but not to Belizeans by naturalization wanting to take up an additional nationality.

Naturalization (adoption of nationality by option) is only prohibited in Belize if the applicant has the nationality by origin of a country that has not recognized the independence of Belize (i.e. Guatemala).⁹ However, many Guatemalans have naturalized.

LOSS OF CITIZENSHIP/NATIONALITY

Belize makes no distinction between citizenship and nationality. Nationality can only be lost by naturalized citizens if they reside abroad for at least 5 consecutive years, except if they are government employees abroad, students, or spouses of Belizeans by descent. This does not apply to “economic citizens,” a category of naturalization that is discretionary and can be given to a person that “has made a substantial contribution to the economy and/or well-being of Belize, or has rendered distinguished services to the country.”¹⁰

In general, if sentenced in any court to imprisonment for a year or more, only citizens by registration and only by declaration by a Minister may lose their nationality. However, this is different if that person has “since the date of his becoming a citizen of Belize by registration, been for a period of not

7 Elizabeth II, *Belize Act 1981*, Art. 3.

8 National Assembly of Belize, *Constitution of Belize*, Art. 27

9 Law Revision Commissioner, *Belizean Nationality Act Chapter 161*.

10 *Ibid.* Art. 20.

less than two years ordinarily resident in a foreign country of which he was a national or citizen at any time prior to that date, and has not maintained a substantial connection with Belize; or has taken an oath or affirmation of, or made a declaration of, allegiance to a foreign country.”¹¹

DIFFERENT RIGHTS FOR EXTERNAL CITIZENS

No difference in rights between resident and external citizens has been found other than their lack of electoral rights, which is described below.

SUFFRAGE

Belizeans abroad have no electoral rights: passive or active.

REGISTRATION FOR FRANCHISE

For resident citizens, registration in the electoral roll is active the first time, then lasts for 10 years. Since July 1st, 1997, the law states that there shall be a complete re-registration of electors every ten years.¹² However, the Representation of the People Act states that “For the purposes of paragraph (c) of subsection (1) above, a citizen of Belize who is a bona fide student studying abroad, or who is on official government duty outside Belize, shall be deemed to continue to reside in the electoral division in which his family home is situate and shall be eligible for registration notwithstanding that he may be physically outside Belize, provided that all other conditions for such registration are satisfied [and art. 5 subsection 1c specifies they must be residents two months before in the electoral division where they seek registration].” This is the case since 1997, which means that in effect a residence of two months previous to the election suffices for some categories of non-resident citizens to regain their electoral rights in Belize and allow them to register in the electoral roll. Still, this is qualitatively very different from granting them external voting rights. The electoral authority (The Elections and Boundaries Department) does consider proxy voting for the latter category (citizens on official government duty), but does not specify how this works and says nothing about students.¹³

11 Ibid. Art. 21 (1).

12 Law Revision Commissioner, *Representation of the People Act Chapter 9*, Art. 9.

13 Elections and Boundaries Department, “Municipal Elections Training Manual.” 22.

REGULATION OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

There is no regulation of Belizean political parties regarding their activities toward the diaspora, but according to experts from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, this applies to all areas of party activities: “While political parties in Belize are internally well organized, there are no external or legal regulations. Political parties in Belize are not legally required to be registered entities or to adhere to any regulations. The area of campaign financing is seriously underdeveloped. Campaign financing legislation simply does not exist, even though partisan politics and political campaigns are becoming increasingly expensive. [...] No aspect of political financing is regulated in Belize. There is growing recognition among the public and civil society that there is a dire need for campaign financing legislation.”¹⁴

MEMBERSHIP

Membership to parties is not regulated in any way by the state, but by the parties themselves. The Peoples United Party (PUP), which has been in power for most of Belize’s independent history, states that: “All Belizeans, eighteen years and over, including those residing abroad, and persons who have resided in Belize for at least three years, are eligible for adult membership to the PUP if they accept and abide by the creed, aims [...] and are not members of any other party...”¹⁵ The other major party, United Democratic Party (UDP) has no online constitution; only a manifesto with no information on membership requirements.¹⁶

INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION

CONSULTATIVE BODIES AT NATIONAL LEVEL

There is no consultative body of emigrant representation acting at the national level.

14 Griner and Zovatto, Daniel, *From Grassroots to the Airmaves. Paying for Political Parties and Campaigns in The Caribbean*. 2, 8, and 13.

15 People’s United Party, *The Constitution of the People’s United Party*, Art. 9.

16 United Democratic Party, “UDP Manifesto - 3rd Term Agenda 2015-2020.”

ADMINISTRATION

CONSULATES

Belize has thirteen embassies, with respective consular sections around the world, a High Commission in London, and 39 honorary consulates as of 2015.¹⁷ This means they have 14 consulates in 14 countries; as the remaining honorary ones only deal with limited services to Belizeans abroad, even if there is indication that some honorary consulates (see North Carolina) do issue documents to Belizeans abroad and perform traditional consular services.¹⁸ These consular offices offer no financial, legal or psychological consultancy services, assistance with healthcare providers, or any supplementary educational service. Also, they have no extended services on Saturdays, no online consulates, and no mobile consulates.

HOME COUNTRY ADMINISTRATION

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade created the Diaspora Focal Point and the Diaspora Advisory Council of Belize in 2009. However, there is no information about their composition.¹⁹ It is also not clear what the rank of the Diaspora Focal Point or the Diaspora Advisory Council would be, or if they would be integrated in public administration under a ministry. The closest one, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belize, is headed by a Chief Executive Officer and has four directorates, none of which deals with the diaspora or seems to incorporate a unit in charge of it.²⁰

ECONOMIC POLICIES

REMITTANCES

There are no programs to stimulate the sending of remittances or their channeling to other programs.

INVESTMENT

The Belizean government has created the Diaspora Returnee Incentive Program,²¹ which foresees providing incentives for investment in Belize, but so far there is no development of any particular program to this end.

17 EmbassyPages.com, "Belize - Embassies and Consulates."

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Honorary Consulates of Belize."

19 Diaspora of Belize, "Diaspora Programs | Diaspora of Belize."

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Organization."

21 Diaspora of Belize, "The DIASPORA Returnee Incentive Program | Diaspora of Belize."

BRAIN-CIRCULATION NETWORKS AND BRAIN-GAIN PROGRAMS

So far there are no brain-circulation or brain-gain programs developed by the Belizean government to bring back highly-skilled emigrants, even though, as of 2015, the rate of emigration of highly educated Belizeans is close to 35%.²²

RETURN POLICIES

As part of the Diaspora Returnee Incentive Program, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established programs to attract Belizeans who are considering return, especially those who have funds to invest in either housing or businesses in Belize. It also targets Belizeans who have a monthly pension or income from a guaranteed source, which they would be depositing and spending in the local economy. It also foresees economic and social benefits, but it is not clear in which form. So far, the program includes, but is not limited to, tax (import duties) exemptions upon return.²³

OBLIGATIONS

MILITARY SERVICE, SOCIAL SERVICE, TAXES

In Belize, men of 18 years of age are eligible for voluntary military service; laws allow for conscription only if volunteers are insufficient; but this has never been implemented. Being voluntary, emigrants are not obligated to serve.²⁴ There is no social service in Belize. The Belizean state taxes citizens upon a residential principle, and there are no special taxes for emigrants.²⁵

SOCIAL POLICIES

Maternity, invalidity and sickness payment are only paid to workers contributing to the welfare system through their employers in Belize, as residents. This system is, however, quite modest and recent, covering only a small part of the population. According to a report, "Legislation protecting the health of Belizean citizens, particularly in the workplace, was weak and poorly enforced. Belize did, however, have a social security system, designed with the help of the United Nations International Labour Organization. In addition to providing pensions for retired and injured workers, the system also provided short-term benefits for sickness and maternity leave."²⁶

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Belize."

25 Law Revision Commissioner, *Income and Business Tax Act*.

26 Merrill, "Health and Welfare."

Regarding healthcare, the situation is similar: there are no healthcare programs targeting the diaspora. Emigrants have access to Belizean healthcare schemes in the same conditions as resident citizens only if they remain enrolled in it. Theoretically, this would allow them to enjoy healthcare if they went back home, as the system is universal and based on citizenship and residence. However it is not clear if domicile suffices as a proof of residence. Emigrants are not required to pay for their family's enrollment to Belizean healthcare plans as they are enrolled anyway as Belizean residents. There is no program for the remote support for health insurance by third parties in Belize, as the system is based on residence and is universal.²⁷

Regarding education policies, there is no government program or policy directed to the Belizean diaspora.²⁸

SYMBOLIC POLICIES

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Belize's Independence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade launched "Homecoming 2011," included a program of historical and cultural heritage, development activities, site visits, tours and participation in an official September Celebration program. The program was promoted through traditional media as well as emails and social media.²⁹ However, this is neither a consistent of policy nor a regular event.³⁰

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27 Confirmed by the Head of Consular Services at the Belize's High Commission in London. Telephone interview, June 23, 2015.

28 Ibid.

29 7 News Belize, "BTB to Diaspora: 'Come Home!'"

30 Ramos, "Reconnecting 100,000 to 300,000 Belizeans Abroad to Their Homeland – the Diaspora Program."

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