

# **SOLOMON ISLANDS 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Solomon Islands is a constitutional multiparty parliamentary democracy. Observers considered the April 2019 parliamentary election generally free and fair, although there were incidents of vote buying. Parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare prime minister after the election, and he formed a coalition government.

The Royal Solomon Islands Police is responsible for internal and external security and reports to the Ministry of Police, National Security, and Correctional Services; Australia and New Zealand support the police. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. Members of the security forces were not known to have committed abuses.

Significant human rights issues included: serious acts of corruption; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, although the law was not enforced; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor, including the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The government had mechanisms in place to identify and punish officials who may commit human rights abuses.

## **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**

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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 that government officials employed them. Impunity was not a significant problem in the security forces.

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

There were no significant reports regarding prison or detention center conditions that raised human rights concerns.

**Physical Conditions:** There were no major concerns in prisons and detention centers regarding physical conditions or inmate abuse.

**Administration:** Authorities permitted prisoners and detainees to submit complaints and request investigations of credible allegations of inhuman conditions. The respective prison commanders screened complaints and requests made to the Professional Standards Unit of the Correctional Service, which investigates credible allegations of problematic conditions and documents the results in a publicly accessible manner. The Office of the Ombudsman and the Public Solicitor investigate credible allegations of misconduct made against Correctional Services officers.

**Independent Monitoring:** The government permitted monitoring by independent human rights observers; but there were no reports of such visits during the year.

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

The constitution 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, and the government generally respected these prohibitions.

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

Only a magistrate or judge may issue warrants, although police have power to arrest without a warrant if they have reasonable belief a person committed a crime. The law requires detainees be brought promptly before a judge, and authorities respected this right. Delays sometimes arose after the preliminary hearing, but authorities brought detainees to court as soon as possible following arrest, especially if they were held without bail.

Police generally informed detainees promptly of the charges against them. The Public Solicitor's Office provided legal assistance to indigent defendants, and detainees had prompt access to family members and counsel. There was a functioning system of bail for less serious cases, and police and courts frequently granted bail.

**Pretrial Detention:** Delays in adjudication of the large number of cases before the courts resulted in lengthy pretrial detention for some detainees. Pretrial detainees comprised 50 percent of the prisoner population. The average length of time held in pretrial detention was approximately two years.

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

The constitution 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. Prisoners were not afforded timely trials due to a judicial backlog that resulted in long delays in bringing cases to trial.

Trial procedures normally operated in accordance with British common law, with a presumption of innocence and the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges. Detainees had access to attorneys of their choice and to free assistance of an interpreter, and the rights to be present at their own trial, to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense, to confront witnesses, to present witnesses and evidence, to refrain from self-incrimination, and to appeal

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convictions. The law extends these rights to both citizens and noncitizens. Judges conduct trials and render verdicts. The courts provided an attorney at public expense for indigent defendants facing serious criminal charges as necessary from the moment charged through all appeals.

### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

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

The constitution provides that any person whose human rights or freedoms were contravened may apply directly to the High Court for redress.

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

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

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

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

The constitution 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.

### **Internet Freedom**

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports 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.

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

The constitution provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights. Demonstrators must obtain permits, which the government generally granted.

### **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 constitution provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

### **e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Not applicable.

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

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons and other persons of concern.

**Access to Asylum:** The law does not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government did not grant refugee status or asylum during the year, and there were no known refugees in the country.

### **g. Stateless Persons**

Not applicable.

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

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

### **Elections and Political Participation**

**Recent Elections:** Observers regarded the April 2019 national parliamentary election as generally free and fair, although there was evidence of vote buying. The elections were the first since the full withdrawal of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands peacekeeping contingent. The Commonwealth Observer Group reported that members of parliament used rural constituency development funds to buy political support.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** Political parties operated without restriction but were institutionally weak, with frequent shifts in political coalitions and unstable parliamentary majorities. Electoral law requires all candidates to present party certificates.

**Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups:** No law limits participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate; however, traditional male dominance limited the role of women in government. There were two women in the 50-member parliament and four female permanent secretaries in the 25 government ministries. There was one female judge on the High Court. Civil society groups such as the Young Women's Parliamentary Group continued to advocate for more leadership positions for women.

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

While the law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the government implemented the law inconsistently, and officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were reports of government corruption during the year.

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Although a 2018 law established an Independent Commission against Corruption tasked with preventing official corruption and provided it with investigative and prosecutorial powers, as of September it was still not operational. The Office of the Ombudsman is responsible for investigating public complaints of government maladministration.

Taskforce Janus, operated by the police and Ministry of Finance and Treasury, works to identify corruption in the civil service.

The Public Accounts Committee is a permanent parliamentary committee established in the constitution with a mandate to examine public accounts and report to parliament.

**Corruption:** Corruption was a pervasive problem in the government, especially in the forestry and fishing sectors. In September a senior public officer was convicted of bribing a principal internal auditor in the Ministry of Finance and Treasury to stop the audit of an oil palm project in West Are'are, Malaita Province.

**Financial Disclosure:** Public officials were subject to financial disclosure laws under the leadership code of conduct. The Office of the Leadership Code Commission investigates misconduct involving members of parliament or senior civil servants. If the commission finds conclusive evidence of misconduct, it sends the matter to the Office of Public Prosecution, which may proceed with legal charges. The commission chairperson and two part-time commissioners constitute a tribunal with power to screen certain cases of misconduct and apply fines for members of parliament or senior civil servants.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

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**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The constitution provides for an Office of the Ombudsman with power to subpoena and investigate complaints of official abuse, mistreatment, or unfair treatment. Although independent, a lack of resources limited its effectiveness.

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

#### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law criminalizes rape of women, including spousal rape, with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Domestic violence is a crime with a maximum penalty of three years in prison and a substantial fine. Violence against women and girls, including rape and domestic abuse, remained a serious problem but was underreported. Among the reasons cited for failure to report abuse were pressure from male relatives, fear of reprisals, feelings of shame, and cultural taboos on discussing such matters.

Police often charged persons suspected of domestic violence and assault against women. As part of the police curriculum, officers receive specialized training on how to work with rape victims. Police have a sexual assault unit, staffed mostly by female officers, to provide support to victims and investigate charges. In reported cases of domestic abuse, victims often dropped charges before a court appearance, or settled cases out of court. In cases in which charges were filed, the time between the charging of an individual and the subsequent court hearing could be as long as two years. The magistrates' courts dealt with physical abuse of women as with any other assault, but prosecutions were rare due to low judicial and police capacity and cultural bias against women.

For victims of domestic violence, the law provides for access to counseling and medical services, legal support, and a safe place within the community if they cannot return home. The government has a referral system in place to coordinate these services, but referral agencies often lacked funding, especially in rural areas. The Family Support Center and a church-run facility for abused women provided counseling and other support services for women.



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**Other Harmful Traditional Practices:** Customary bride-price payments remained common and contributed to the perception of male ownership of women.

**Sexual Harassment:** Sexual harassment was not illegal and was a widespread problem.

**Reproductive Rights:** Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children; to manage their reproductive health; and to have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. The government's National Family Planning Program provides all women and men with information on contraception and access to contraceptives. Skilled health-care providers assisted 86 percent of deliveries.

A reported 64 percent of reproductive-age women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lives. Although the National Population Policy 2017-2026 includes a goal to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services for sexual violence survivors, this goal appeared to be aspirational only.

According to the World Bank, the maternal mortality ratio was 104 per 100,000 live births in 2017 due to factors including a high adolescent birth rate (79 per 1,000 ages 15-19 years), minimal access to antenatal care, and a high rate of unmet need for contraception. Although a reported 94 percent of women and 98 percent of men were aware of at least one contraceptive method, only 29 percent of married women used contraception.

**Coercion in Population Control:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

**Discrimination:** While the law accords women equal legal rights, including the right to own property, most women were limited to customary family roles that prevented them from taking more active roles in economic and political life. No laws mandate equal pay for work of equal value (see section 7.d.). The government did not enforce equal rights laws effectively.

## Children

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**Birth Registration:** Children acquire citizenship through their parents. The law does not allow dual citizenship for adults, and persons who acquire dual citizenship at birth must decide by age 18 which citizenship to retain. Registration delays did not result in the denial of public services to children.

**Education:** Education was neither free nor compulsory. Government policy was to cover operational costs for children age six to 15 years to attend school, but it rarely covered all costs and allowed schools to request additional contributions from families in the form of cash or labor. These additional costs prevented some children from attending school.

**Child Abuse:** Child sexual and physical abuse remained significant problems. On September 21, police arrested a 19-year-old man on allegations that he raped a 14-year-old girl multiple times in August. On September 24, a 60-year-old man was arrested for raping an eight-year-old girl and a 10-year-old girl on multiple occasions throughout 2018 and 2019. The law grants children the same general rights and protections as adults, with some exceptions. The law mandates the Social Welfare Division of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to coordinate child protection services and authorizes the courts to issue protection orders in cases of serious child abuse or neglect. Laws do not specifically prohibit the use of children in illicit activities such as drug trafficking.

The government did not effectively enforce laws designed to protect children from sexual abuse, child labor, and neglect (see section 7.c.). The law criminalizes domestic violence including violence against children, but there was poor public awareness, and the law was not well enforced; however, on August 24, a 44-year-old man was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison for raping his 12-year-old niece at knifepoint in 2018.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** Both boys and girls may legally marry at age 15, and the law permits marriage at age 14 with parental and village consent. Marriage at such young ages was not common.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The minimum age for consensual sex is 15 years. The maximum penalty for sexual relations with a girl younger than age 13 is life imprisonment, and for sexual relations with a girl age 13 to 15, the penalty is

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15 years' imprisonment. Consent is not a permissible defense under these provisions; however, in the latter case, reasonable belief the victim was age 16 or older is a permissible defense. Selling or hiring minors younger than 18 for prostitution is punishable as a criminal offense. There were reports of workers in logging camps sexually exploiting girls as young as age 12, but in most cases official charges were not filed.

Child pornography is illegal and carries a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment. The law criminalizes the commercial sexual exploitation of children and participation in or use, distribution, or storing of sexually exploitative materials involving children. Girls and boys were exploited in prostitution and sexual servitude. Commercial sexual exploitation of children carries a maximum sentence of 20 years' imprisonment.

**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

The Jewish community was very small, 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

No law or national policy prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities, and no legislation mandates access to buildings, information, or communications for such individuals. Very few buildings were accessible to persons with disabilities. The law requires electoral officials to provide special accommodation for voters with disabilities.

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The country had one separate educational facility, supported almost entirely by the International Committee of the Red Cross, for children with disabilities. Children with physical disabilities could attend mainstream schools, but inaccessible facilities and a lack of resources often made it difficult for them to do so. No law requires reasonable accommodations in the workplace, and high unemployment nationwide made it difficult for persons with disabilities to find work, particularly in rural areas.

There were very limited government facilities or services for persons with mental disabilities.

### **Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups**

The country has more than 27 major islands with approximately 70 language groups. Many islanders saw themselves first as members of a clan, next as inhabitants of their natal island, and only third as citizens of the nation. Tensions and resentment between the Guadalcanalese and the Malaitans on Guadalcanal culminated in violence lasting from 1998 to 2003. Underlying problems between the two groups remained, including issues related to jobs and land rights.

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

“Sodomy” is illegal, as are “indecent practices between persons of the same sex.” The maximum penalty for the former is 14 years’ imprisonment and for the latter five years. There were no reports of arrests or prosecutions directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex persons under these provisions during the year, and authorities generally did not enforce these laws.

There are no specific antidiscrimination laws based on sexual orientation and gender identity. There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons based on sexual orientation or gender identity, although stigma may hinder some from reporting.

### **Other Societal Violence or Discrimination**

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Sorcery-related violence was reported. Such violence typically targeted the most vulnerable persons: young women, widows without male sons, and the elderly. In March authorities charged 12 men with beating a man to death after they accused him of using sorcery to kill a fellow villager. The court case continued. In April police arrested 10 boys for burning down the house of someone they believed had used sorcery. Police continue to investigate the arson.

Nongovernmental organizations operate 11 safe houses throughout the country. The safe houses receive funding from church groups and international donors, but do not receive government funding or support. One safe house in Honiara provides professional training and workshops and also paralegal counseling for victims of gender-based violence.

### **Section 7. Worker Rights**

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

The law provides for the right of workers in the formal sector to form and join unions, conduct legal strikes, and bargain collectively. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination but does not specifically provide for reinstatement of workers fired for trade union activity. The law permits strikes in both the public and private sectors. A notice to the government 28 days prior to a strike is required for strikes to be legal. The government has discretionary power in relation to cancellation and suspension of registration of unions, a power which can take effect even in the case of judicial review.

The government prohibits strikes by civil servants in essential services, but there are procedures in place to provide these workers due process and protect their rights. The government defines essential services as including, but not limited to, the health, public security, aviation, marine, immigration, and disaster-relief sectors. The law does not provide for the rights of workers in the informal sector to organize or to collective bargaining. In addition the law places limits on the rights of workers to act as union representatives based on age, literacy, criminal record, and membership in more than one union.

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Government enforcement of the law was inconsistent; the small penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights. The penalty for antiunion discrimination was not effective, for example, because employers could afford to pay the fine and easily replace workers. Penalties for illegal strikes, on the other hand, served as a deterrent for employees to strike.

Collective bargaining agreements determined wages and conditions of employment in the formal economy. Disputes between labor and management not settled between the two sides were referred to the Trade Disputes Panel for arbitration, either before or during a strike. While the panel deliberates, employees have protection from arbitrary dismissal or lockout. The three-member panel, composed of a chairperson appointed by the judiciary, a labor representative, and a business representative, is independent and neutral. The panel's decisions are binding on the parties. Administrative and judicial procedures were not subject to lengthy delays or appeals.

Workers exercised their rights to associate and bargain collectively, although employers did not always respect these rights. Since only a small percentage of the workforce was in formal-sector employment, employers could easily replace workers if disputes were not resolved quickly.

The Workers Union of Solomon Islands actively negotiated with private employers during the year.

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

The constitution prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, except as part of a court sentence or order, such as community service in lieu of a fine or jail term. The immigration act prohibits transnational forced labor, and the penalties are commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. Penalties for forced labor that is not transnational are commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. The government typically relied on labor inspectors to report on any instances of forced or compulsory labor during regularly scheduled routine inspections; however, there were not enough inspectors or resources to enforce the laws effectively. Unlike in prior years, the

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Labor Division did not report conducting any monitoring and inspection activities at logging operations or in the fishing or mining sectors.

There were reports of children and adults forced to work in logging camps, on plantations, and of children in domestic servitude or service industries. Local and foreign fishermen reported situations indicative of labor trafficking, including nonpayment of wages, severe living conditions, violence, and limited food supply on Taiwan-flagged fishing vessels in the country's territorial waters and ports.

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 prohibits labor by children younger than age 12, except light agricultural or domestic work performed in the company of parents, or other labor approved by the commissioner of labor. Children younger than age 18 may not work at night in any industry without specific written permission from the labor commissioner.

Girls younger than age 18 may not work on a ship or underground in mines; boys may work on a ship or underground in a mine if they are at least 16 years old, provided they have a medical certificate attesting they are fit for such work. The law bars children younger than age 15 from work in industry or on ships, except aboard training ships for educational purposes. The law does not limit the number of hours a child can work, nor does it clearly set forth a minimum age for hazardous work or delineate the type of work considered hazardous for all children. The law prohibits child sexual exploitation and penalizes anyone who causes, facilitates, or procures a child for sexual purposes. Not all of the worst forms of child labor are prohibited. The law does not specifically outlaw the use, procuring, or offering of a child younger than age 18 for the production and trafficking of drugs.

The commissioner of labor is responsible for enforcing child labor laws, but the resources devoted to investigating child labor cases were inadequate to investigate or deter violations. The law provides for penalties that were not commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes.

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Children worked in agriculture, fishing, alluvial mining, as domestic servants, cooks, and in logging camps where conditions often were poor. For example, young girls worked long hours and in isolation as domestic workers in mining camps. In some cases these conditions could amount to forced labor (see section 7.b.). There were reports of commercial sexual exploitation of children (see section 6, Children). Children also assisted in cultivating, distributing, and selling local drugs such as betel nut or marijuana. They were at risk of physical abuse, mental illness, addiction, sexual abuse, and robbery.

According to the *Solomon Islands Demographic and Health Survey*, 2 percent of children age five to 11 years and 12 percent of children age 12 to 14 were engaged in paid labor. Paid child labor was more common among female children in urban areas and all children living in rural areas.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

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

No laws prohibit discrimination in employment and occupation. By regulation public-service officers should ensure their workplace is “free from harassment, including sexual harassment.” Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred on grounds of gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and gender identity, and HIV-positive status.

Women experienced discrimination especially in the attainment of managerial positions. Employed women were predominantly engaged in low-paying and low-skilled jobs. A significant gender gap exists in senior positions. For example, women dominated the lower administrative level of the public-service workforce, but very few women held senior management positions. A shortage of jobs compounded the limited entry and advancement opportunities for women in the workforce. A program, “Waka Mere” (She Works), funded and implemented by the International Finance Corporation, Australia, and New Zealand, worked with businesses to promote gender equality in the private sector.

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



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In August 2019 the minimum wage was increased and is above the poverty level. The standard workweek is 45 hours and is limited to six days per week.

Occupational safety and health laws require employers to provide a safe working environment and forbid retribution against any employee who seeks protection under labor regulations. These laws are current and appropriate for main industries. Laws on working conditions and safety standards apply equally to foreign workers and citizens. Some workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety, particularly in the fishing and logging industries, without jeopardy to their employment.

The commissioner of labor in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Labor and Immigration, the public prosecutor, and police are responsible for enforcing labor laws and usually reacted to complaints. The government, however, did not effectively enforce labor laws. The government's minimal human and financial resources limited its ability to enforce the law in smaller establishments, the informal economy, and the subsistence sector. While inspectors have the authority to conduct unannounced inspections, the number of labor inspectors was insufficient to monitor labor practices routinely, particularly in extractive sectors outside of the capital. An active labor movement and an independent judiciary, however, helped provide effective oversight of labor law enforcement in major state and private enterprises. The law does not specify penalties for violations, significantly weakening effective enforcement.

Workers in the logging, construction, and manufacturing industries were subject to hazardous and exploitative work.