

Belize: How an European still can be the head of State.

It is 2022. After more than 70 years on the British throne, Queen Elizabeth II passes away. She is succeeded by her son, Charles III, who becomes the new king of the United Kingdom.

In addition to being King of the United Kingdom, Charles III is also the symbolic head of the Commonwealth of Nations, an organization consisting of 56 independent countries, many of which share a historical connection with the former British Empire.

Within this Commonwealth, there are still several countries where the British monarch remains the official head of state. One of these countries is located in Central America: Belize. This country is unique because it is the only mainland Central American nation where English is the official language and where Charles III still serves as head of state.

But how did the British arrive in this region? Why has Belize, unlike many other former colonies, continued to recognize the British monarch as its head of state? And how much power does King Charles III actually have there today?

These are the questions we will explore in this article.



Flag Belize. Source:

[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Belize)

History Belize



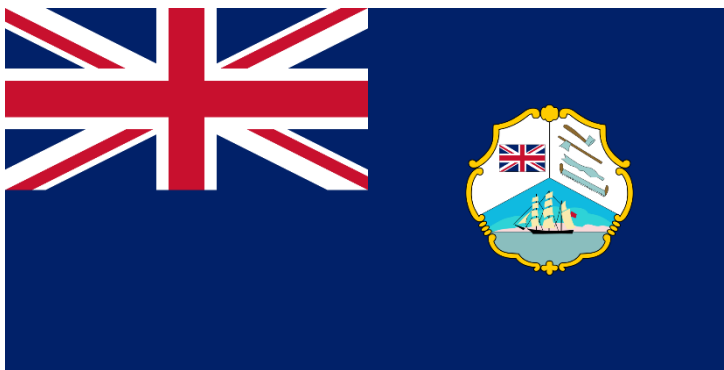
To properly answer these questions, we first need to go back to the beginning of Belize's history.

Before the discovery of America in 1492 — at least from a European perspective — the American continent was already home to great civilizations such as the Inca, Aztec, and Maya civilizations.

The Maya, in particular, lived for centuries in the region that is now Belize. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how long they had been present there, it is known that their civilization flourished in this area for many centuries. After the arrival of European colonists, including the British, many Maya people were displaced, killed, or forced into labor.

During the 19th century, the region received an official colonial status. In the 1840s, it became known as British Honduras (despite the fact that modern-day Honduras was never part of this territory).

In 1862, British Honduras officially became a Crown Colony of the United Kingdom, meaning it came formally under British administration.



Flag British-Honduras. Source: wikipedia.org

This situation remained largely unchanged until after the Second World War. Between 1958 and 1962, British Honduras was part of the West Indies Federation, a political union of several Caribbean territories, including Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. However, this federation quickly collapsed.

In 1964, British Honduras gained self-government, marking an important step toward full independence. In 1973, the territory officially changed its name to Belize, although the country did not become fully independent until September 21, 1981.



The name “Belize” is likely derived from the Maya word *belix*, meaning “muddy water” — a reference to the rivers and waterways of the region and the original Maya inhabitants who lived there.

Despite gaining self-government, the British governor continued to hold significant influence for many years. The independence movement gained momentum under the leadership of George Cadle Price and his party, the People’s United Party (PUP). Price became premier in 1964 and played a crucial role in the negotiations that eventually led to independence. When Belize became independent in 1981, he became the country’s first prime minister.

After independence, British troops remained stationed in Belize until 1991, partly due to tensions with neighboring Guatemala. Guatemala had long maintained territorial claims over Belize and initially refused to recognize both the country and its predecessor, British Honduras.

Because of unresolved border disputes, tensions remained high — and to some extent, the effects of this dispute can still be felt today.



George Cadle Price. Source: wikipedia.org

English influence

Like almost every country in Central and South America, Belize’s main language is a result of colonization. While Spanish became the dominant language in most countries in the region, there are a few exceptions:



Brazil (Portuguese), Suriname (Dutch), Guyana (English), and Belize itself (English).

What makes Belize unique, however, is that it is one of the few countries in the region where Charles III is still recognized as the official head of state. This makes Belize part of the Commonwealth of Nations and, more specifically, a so-called “Commonwealth realm.”

The role of Charles III in Belize is largely symbolic. In practice, he is represented by the governor-general, currently Froyla Tzalam, who carries out the duties of the head of state within the country.

However, this system has increasingly become a subject of debate. Due to Belize’s colonial past — particularly its history of slavery — there is growing support within the country for becoming a republic and permanently ending the connection with the British monarchy.

Because Belize is officially a constitutional monarchy, such a change would require a constitutional amendment, making it a complex and lengthy process. Although discussions about becoming a republic have existed since independence in 1981, the debate gained significant momentum after 2022. Since then, more serious steps toward a possible republic have been considered.



Froyla Tzalam, the current governor-general of Belize. Source: satiim.org

Political system

But what is the actual role of Charles III in modern-day Belize? Below is a short and clear summary of the country’s political system.



Belize is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. This means that the country has a king as its head of state, but that political power mainly lies with a democratically elected parliament and government.

Within Belize's political system, two positions are especially important: the governor-general and the prime minister. The current governor-general is Froyla Tzalam, while the prime minister is Johnny Briceño.

The prime minister is elected through national elections and is the actual head of government. The prime minister then advises the king on who should become governor-general. Formally, the governor-general is appointed by Charles III, but in practice the king always follows the advice of the Belizean prime minister.

The governor-general represents the king in Belize and carries out the duties of the head of state within the country. These duties include, among others:

- signing laws
- appointing and dismissing ministers
- opening parliament

Although these responsibilities may appear to give the governor-general significant power, they are almost always carried out based on the advice of the government. The role is therefore largely ceremonial.

This highlights an important difference from what many people assume: the governor-general does not independently exercise political power but acts almost entirely according to the decisions of the democratically elected government.

The situation is somewhat comparable to King Willem-Alexander in the Netherlands, although the governor-general technically has slightly more formal powers. In practice, however, the difference is limited.

As for the role of Charles III himself, his direct influence over Belize is extremely limited. His main formal responsibility is appointing the governor-general, but even this decision is made based on the advice of the Belizean government.

Conclusion



It is remarkable that Charles III still plays a (symbolic) role as the head of state of Belize today. Although his power is extremely limited in practice, it remains unusual that a European monarch is formally involved in the governance of a country in Central America.

Over the past decades, many former colonies have fully distanced themselves from their colonial past. However, Belize remains one of the countries where this historical connection is still visible within its political system.

The question is therefore how long this situation will continue. Calls for Belize to become a republic are growing, with supporters arguing that the country should have its own head of state and permanently end its connection with the British monarchy. At the same time, such a transition would be complex: changing the constitution is a significant process that requires broad political and public support.

From its colonial history to independence in 1981, and from English as its official language to its connection with the Commonwealth of Nations, Belize holds a unique position within Central America.

It remains a fascinating example of how history continues to shape the present: an independent country in the Americas that still has a European king as its head of state.

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