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**Democracy and freedom of the media under the ULP  
(Reprinted from May 2017)**

**Introduction**

The 2017 Freedom House report is out and can be viewed at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org). Freedom House is an independent watchdog organization which examines democracy, political freedom and human rights in the world. Freedom House has said that media freedom is at its lowest level in the last thirteen years. In fact Freedom House says that only thirteen percent of international countries can be termed as being free, with forty percent being described as partly free, and the remaining 45 percent as being not free.

This is an interesting development from this reputable global organization which conducts research and advocacy. Freedom House ranks St. Vincent and the Grenadines among the thirteen percent of countries which are free. Of course there will be people in the opposition New Democratic Party who will say otherwise. They will claim that media freedom in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is under attack by the ULP administration, that people are afraid to speak out for fear of being victimized, and that the ULP influences the Court. All these are unfounded charges and are complete false.

**The St. Vincent and the Grenadines scores**

Freedom House gives the country an aggregate score of 91 out of one hundred. On a scale of one to seven, with one being the highest and seven the lowest, the country scored a one out of seven for civil liberties, one out of seven for political rights and one out of seven for press freedom. Countries and territories with a rating of 1 enjoy a wide range of political rights, including free and fair elections. Candidates who are elected actually rule, political parties are competitive, the opposition plays an important role and enjoys real power, and the interests of minority groups are well represented in politics and government.

From the scores, only three countries, Barbados with 97, Dominica with 95 and St. Lucia with 92 are ahead of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In fact SVG is ahead of countries like Trinidad and Tobago, Italy, Japan and France. All this information is available from the Freedom House website, and can be accessed by all and sundry.

And so the question which must be asked is, do these scores mirror what is happening on the ground in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The answer to this

question is undoubtedly yes. Civil rights and civil liberties are guaranteed by the constitution, and the ULP administration has been, and is committed to ensuring the highest quality of justice, maintaining and promoting law and order, and bolstering to the fullest, the safety and security of our citizens.

Indeed there are certain watchdog institutions in the country which operate to ensure that the rights of citizens are maintained. These include the trade union movement, and the Human Rights Association. The latter organization, when functional, operates as a quasi-opposition entity, without any interference from the government.

General elections in St.Vincent and the Grenadines are free and fair, as certified by international observer groups, including the Commonwealth and the Organisation of American States, the OAS. Naturally, having lost four in a row, the opposition NDP will find all kinds of things to say about the conduct of the polls, including the ridiculous statement that the ULP stole the elections in 2010 and 2015. As is their right, they have gone to the courts with their petition, to seek a determination in relation to the 2015 election, and so we await the decision of the courts.

### **The local media**

The three newspapers, lone television station and the eight radio stations with active talk show programmes in the morning, all operate without any influence or interference from the ULP administration. There is one radio station which has dedicated its programming to removing the ULP administration from office. That station has been sued several times for allowing its operators to make defamatory statements about Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, and the Court has adjudicated over these matters.

Vincentians have been able to voice their critical comments about the government, subject to issues related to slander. Prime Minister Gonsalves has routinely called radio stations to converse about issues related to national development. The government will be robust in defense of its programmes and policies, especially in the face of critical comments which are false and untrue, but there is no victimization.

Recently a radio station broadcast a comment in relation to the security operations at the Argyle International Airport, claiming that the airport had failed certain security tests conducted by the US based Transportation and Safety Administration, the TSA. This was a total lie and a fabrication of the worse kind. The ULP administration was robust in its response, to set the matter straight and to correct the false information. That radio station has since made a public apology.

### **Conclusion**

Outside of Freedom House, other international organizations have rated St.Vincent and the Grenadines highly, in this or that field, for the excellent work being done by the ULP administration. For example, the organization, Transparency International which is based in Germany, has given the country high marks in its 2016 report, in relation to corruption, and the ease with which business can be conducted here.

Vincentians should be proud of the fact that the ULP administration is performing so admirably in government, that among other positive things, it has been able to attract very favourable ratings from international organizations. The ULP administration is indeed the party of choice for all Vincentians, having been tried and tested in some of the most challenging circumstances, and its leadership has made an immense difference for the better.