

8. SOVEREIGNTY:

Why is Belize an independent nation state?

8.1 Concepts of State and Nation

What makes an area a state, country, nation or region? What makes a territory independent? What makes a state sovereign? What role do borders, population; territory government and shared identity play in defining these concepts? What is self-determination? Do sovereignty and independence mean the same thing?

1. What is a state?

In modern times, the **state** is the predominant form of politically organizing human societies. We often use the term 'state' interchangeably with the terms *country*¹, *government* and *nation*, although we will see that a 'nation' is often understood to be different from a state. The characteristics we use to define what a **sovereign** state means for us can be broken down into the following main ideas:

1. A state has a **permanent population**.
2. A state has a **defined territory**.
3. A state has the **capacity to enter into relations with other states** whether it be their immediate neighbour or others across the globe.
4. A state has a **government**.

A **government** could then be understood as a collection of persons who occupy political office and **exercise state power**.

Sociologist Max Weber also described the state as having a **monopoly on the legitimate use of force** (that is limited to its defined territory) and a **bureaucracy** for the purpose of establishing order and security.

The "legitimate use of force" means that the state is the only one that can provide **order and security** in human societies through using force. States provide order through **institutions** like the **police** and **military forces**. Despite this, the state is often not the only one that uses force in

¹ A country does not have to be a sovereign state, but a non-sovereign or formerly sovereign political division or a geographic region associated with a set of previously independent or differently associated people with distinct political characteristics. For example, Scotland is understood to be country within the sovereign state of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

societies; criminal and terrorist organizations use force illegitimately as they undermine order in societies.

A bureaucracy provides the **administration** of a state, and divides tasks and functions among public servants according to rules, regulations, and hierarchy.

While it is now the predominant form of politically organizing human societies, it is important to recognize that there has not always been an international system of states.

In conclusion, a state is a legitimate **political power** over a defined geographic territory with a permanent population through a set of public institutions.

- **Sovereignty, Authority, and Power**

Sovereignty is the full exercise of **power** by a state over itself *without the interference of other states or other entities*. The United Nations (UN) and international law say that all sovereign states must never intervene in the internal or external affairs of a state unless that state requests assistance from other states.

Across the world, **the sources of authority and power** for each state vary, and these different sources have an effect on the construction of the rules of politics in each state. These rules generally take the form of **constitutions**. Constitutions define the role of a government and the limits and obligations of government with respect to the rights of a state's citizens.

In modern times, there are various challenges to the sovereignty of states. We mentioned already that the illegitimate use of force by criminal and terrorist organizations often undermine the ability of a state to provide order in its society - challenging a state's sovereignty. But states often voluntarily join **regional organisations** for the purposes of deepening trade, political relations and **integration** and this involves states cooperating to establish unifying political, economic and trade policies. Belize, for example, is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and this has involved Belize adapting trade and economic policies that were established by and apply to all the member-states of CARICOM. The processes of **globalization** may bring more challenges to the sovereign state as states become more inter-dependent and inter-connected and as global issues like climate change require deeper collaboration and unifying policies.

- **Sovereignty and Independence**

The exercise of sovereignty is intricately related to **independence**. Independence describes the attainment, by the people of a country, nation or territory, of the ability to exercise sovereignty and full **self-government** over their territory from another external polity or source of authority and power.

In other words, independence means becoming a sovereign state.

From the Second World War to the mid-1980s, numerous sovereign states emerged around the world from **the collapse of European colonial empires**. As you know, Belize emerged as a sovereign state on September 21st, 1981 when it gained independence from the United Kingdom.

2. What is a nation?

In contrast to the state, a **nation** is often understood to be a human community with a shared culture and history and a strong sense of unity and common consciousness.

Elements that could contribute to the **shared identity** of a nation include common territory, common history, common culture, common ethnicity, common religion, common language, common political aspirations and common interests, but none of these are essential to making a nation. It is critical to note that the elements which build a nation keep changing over time.

While they are treated as different, many states are rooted in national common national myths – what we call **nation-states**.

A major contributor to keeping **nation states** together and the formation of **nation states** is when people identify themselves as a community that share agreed upon identities. Flags are a very good example of a symbol people use to identify themselves as a **nation**.

What ideas of a 'nation' existed here before the arrival of Europeans to our shores is still being debated. Researchers are still trying to understand how civilizations like the Maya, Taino, Kalinago, Aztec, Incas, and Olmecs defined what a nation meant for them in ancient times. This is attributed not to our indigenous ancestors lacking a clear attachment to their kin groups, traditions, and territory, of identity of the state they were included in, but because much of our history was erased and altered by foreign European invaders starting in the 1500s that it is difficult to determine in some cases the details. We can conclude though that when we talk about these civilizations as homogenous [as one] by using a single term such as Maya, it is not referring to all of them considering themselves as one nation state. The Maya civilization over its thousands of years of history at different times was composed of various sovereign nation states, it is only the details to answer the question of how they went about defining what a sovereign nation meant for them that is still being investigated.

3. The right to self determination

Also, every group of people that meets the intent to express those characteristics mentioned have the right to **self determination** of doing so without outside forces telling them they don't have the freedom to identify as a **sovereign** state.

It is important to note that in today's world, some nations don't have states but are actively seeking to establish one (the Kurds for example). Some argue that the Palestinians do not have meet all the requirements outlined above, but their recognition by 138 members of the UN enables Palestine to enter into relations with other states, despite not having a government with full control over its full territory.

8.2 What makes Belize a Sovereign, Independent State?

How do concepts such as state, country, nation, independence, sovereignty and self determination apply in the specific case of Belize? How and why might this change?