



**ETHNICITY AND ELECTIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN:  
A RADICAL REALIGNMENT OF POWER IN TRINIDAD  
AND THE THREAT OF COMMUNAL STRIFE**

**Ralph R. Premdas**

**Working Paper #224 - April 1996**

**Ralph R. Premdas**, a Visiting Scholar at the Kellogg Institute (spring 1996), teaches regularly at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, in the Caribbean. Over the past two decades Professor Premdas has conducted extensive field work in Guyana and Fiji. Among his published works are *Guyana: Ethnic Conflict and Development* and *Fiji: Ethnicity and Development*, both published by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and by the University of Warwick's Research Series on Ethnic Relations. Other recent works by the author include *Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective* (Pinter, 1991), *The Enigma of Ethnicity: Ethnic and Racial Relations in the Caribbean and the World* (University of the West Indies, 1992), and *Ethnic Identity in the Caribbean: Decentering a Myth* (University of Toronto, 1995).

The author is grateful to all the friends and colleagues who generously contributed their assistance in putting this paper together, and he would like, in particular, to thank Mr. Henry Ramjass for his help.

## **ABSTRACT**

The 1995 elections in the multiethnic Caribbean state, Trinidad and Tobago, were not an ordinary affair. They not only saw a change of regime but with it a change in the ethnic identity of the new political rulers. Control of the government by one ethnic party or the other poses a threat to the welfare of excluded and defeated parties. For many years one ethnic community controlled the government and entrenched its supporters at all levels of government as well as allocating most resources for the benefit of its own community. With the arrival of a new communally based party to power following the 1995 elections, vital interests are at stake. This paper examines how the change of government occurred through the electoral process.

## **RESUMEN**

Las elecciones de 1995 en el multi-étnico estado caribeño de Trinidad y Tobago no fueron asunto corriente. Ellas significaron no sólo un cambio de régimen, sino, con él, un cambio en la identidad étnica de los nuevos gobernantes. El control del gobierno por uno u otro grupo étnico presenta una amenaza al bienestar de las partes vencidas y excluidas. Durante muchos años sólo una comunidad étnica controló el gobierno y estableciendo a sus seguidores en todos los niveles de gobierno al tiempo que distribuyendo la mayoría de los recursos para beneficio propio. Con la llegada al poder de un nuevo partido comunalmente basado luego de las elecciones de 1995, intereses vitales están en juego. Este artículo examina cómo ocurrió el cambio de gobierno a través del proceso electoral.

Following the general elections of 1995 in the twin island Caribbean state, Trinidad and Tobago, the society stands nervously on the brink of an outbreak of ethnic and communal strife. Should this occur, the events would add to the widespread incidence of ethnic conflict that currently engulfs the world, resulting in ghastly atrocities, human rights violations, and refugee flows.

After the end of the Cold War it was not anticipated that the 'peace dividend' would be quickly consumed by innumerable and sometimes genocidal ethnic and communal conflicts which have overwhelmed the world with unparalleled pain and suffering. Note the Rudolphs' comments on the resurgence of modern hate: "As political ideology recedes, the politics of identity and community, of religion, ethnicity, and gender have begun to occupy the space vacated by political ideology."<sup>1</sup> There are some 4,000 ethnocultural groups worldwide enclosed in 185 sovereign states. With few exceptions (Somalia, Japan, Korea, Swaziland), nearly all the states are polyethnic with about 40% constituted of five or more ethnic communities. Less than a third of the states contain ethnic majorities. From the fact of cultural pluralism has emerged a proliferation of internal strifes which have often spilled their borders and destabilized international peace and security. Never since WWII have there been so many conflicts, about a score classified as high intensity and a hundred as ongoing, with the deployment of over 70,000 UN peace keepers requiring more than \$4 billion annually to maintain. Refugee flows have reached about 15 million externally and about 25 million internally, most associated in one way or another with ethnonational conflicts. In a short time many persons uprooted voluntarily or involuntarily have experienced a radical shift of identity and citizenship in a world that seems at once to be contracting as a site of common global survival and expanding with a multiplicity of ethnocultural communities.

Ethnic conflicts emanate from many sources. In his report on ethnic conflicts around the world, published in the volume, *Minorities at Risk*, Ted Gurr put his finger unequivocally on one pattern that seemed to undergird these sectional strifes: *abrupt political transitions*.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic conflicts in this context of transition also tend to be very virulent and intense. To over half of the ethnopolitical conflicts, unanticipated political transitions were assigned as the 'immediate causes' by Gurr.<sup>3</sup> Most of these abrupt changes came from internal war attending ethnopolitical challenges to the state. However, whether it was a hot or cold conflict that attended or preceded the transition was not as significant as the abruptness of the change. Further, the

---

<sup>1</sup> S.H. Rudolph and L.I. Rudolph, "Modern Hate," *New Republic*, 22 March 1993, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> T.R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk* (Washington, DC: US Peace Institute, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> T.R. Gurr, "Peoples against States: Ethnopolitical Conflicts and the Changing World System," *International Studies Quarterly* 38, 1994, 361.

abruptness had to occur also in the societal context of an unintegrated multiethnic state. The mode of transition can be either be violent or peaceful, by coercion in warfare or consent in democratic elections. Once a transition threatens to radically reorder the distributive aspects of values, linked in turn to ascriptive ethnic criteria institutionalized in longstanding practices of domination and subordination, then abrupt, discontinuous political transitions have the potential to trigger intense, open, communal conflict. In effect, implicated in all of this abrupt transition of regimes are vexing issues related to status and recognition of substate ethnocultural communities, fears of reverse discrimination and domination, as well as new skewed state policies regarding resource allocation.

In this paper, I look at one case of the threat of ethnic and communal conflict in the Caribbean, the multiethnic state of Trinidad and Tobago, where democratic elections have witnessed an abrupt transition in power. The fact that the machinery of elections in a democratic setting rather than internal war has been the midwife in the transition has not shorn the transfer of power of sharp tensions that threaten to explode at the least provocation. In fact the electoral device itself is a source of controversy in deciding the right to rule. While most of the essay will be devoted to demonstrating how the transition of power took place in the elections, the problem thrown up by Trinidad's multiethnicity in part pertained to establishing legitimate rule in a form of government that did not pose a threat to the survival of another group and that ensured that the values of the state could be equally distributed. The governmental system bequeathed by Britain was anything but an arrangement that guaranteed the fulfillment of these political aims. Indeed the inherited British parliamentary system was erected on a zero-sum competitive party system that tended to inflame ethnic passions and apportion privileges very unevenly. This internal contradiction in Trinidad's polity stood as its most potent threat to stability of the society. Ethnic dominance in government soon became a way of life fraught with an immense undercurrent of sectional alienation. Each election that came tended to raise anew all the unresolved issues of ethnic equity. One ethnic group in an essentially ethnically bipolar state had captured power and, in the perception of the other major ethnic community, instituted an order that was ethnically repressive and discriminatory. An election campaign assumed the form of a collective communal struggle in which the claims of each community as a whole were ignited anew and expressed in uncompromising terms. Repeated victory by one sectional community over the other was soon silently accepted by the vanquished group which withdrew its moral support from the state.

Below the surface of Trinidad's political peace existed an antagonistic ethnic monster waiting its moment to explode.<sup>4</sup> Free and fair elections had taken place since 1946 when universal adult suffrage was first introduced in this former British colony in the Caribbean. After

---

<sup>4</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, "Political Succession in Trinidad and Tobago" in *The Modern Caribbean*, eds. P. Sutton and A. Payne (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992).

independence in 1962 successive elections occurred regularly, and—apart from one almost successful insurrection by the Black Power movement in 1970, accompanied by a virtual election boycott in 1971—political succession through the ballot became routine and has been taken for granted. Trinidad became a showcase of democratic practices to much of the outside world. Human rights appeared to be well safeguarded and institutionally entrenched. Accompanying this positive political outlook has been relative prosperity for the million or so citizens, who benefited from the island's endowment of petroleum resources. The high standard of living of the average Trinidadian was reflected in a per capita income of nearly (US) \$10,000 in 1980, an amount that placed the country among the most prosperous states in the Third World. Trinidadians indulged heavily in the ethos of a market consumerist society.

The image of a politically stable and economically prosperous state, however, concealed powerful internal contradictions in the society. Many critical tensions prowled through the body politic, threatening to throw the society into turmoil. Perhaps the most salient of these tensions derived from the country's multiethnic population. Among the one million, two hundred thousand citizens lived four distinct racial groups: Africans, Asian Indians, Europeans, and Chinese. For two centuries these racial groups coexisted in Trinidad but failed to evolve a consensus of shared values so as to engender a common sense of citizenship. Below the veneer of intercommunal camaraderie lurked a sense of deep ethnically rooted sectionalism which pervaded the society. After the colonial power departed in 1962, the new state found itself dominated by the rival political claims of the country's two largest ethnic sections, constituted of Indians and Africans, in antagonistic relationship to each other. This was the first significant contradiction in the state.

In Trinidad's multiethnic setting, then, the function of the election device had been thrown into question on several counts.<sup>5</sup> First, as a means of providing representation to citizens, elections seemed instead to have supplied a public will fractured along communal lines. While democracy is not about government by unanimity and is inherently partisan, for it to operate effectively it must be cast within the context of a larger commitment to the general values and beliefs of the system as a whole. Thus, elections are rarely about radical restructuring of the underlying consensus but tend to serve as rituals that affirm citizen commitment to the political system as well as supplying decisionmakers for the polity. The voting act then serves symbolically to link citizens to the system and to each other, regardless of the party that wins the elections. Issues are moderately debated and rarely so inflame passions that they threaten to rip the society

---

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the role of elections in a democratic polity and especially in the context of the multiethnic states of the Third World; see R.S. Milne, "Elections in Developing Countries," *Parliamentary Affairs* vol. xviii, no. 1, winter, 1964–65; T.E. Smith, *Elections in Developing Countries* (London: MacMillan, 1960); N. Palmer, *Elections and Political Development in Asia* (1975); W.J.M. MacKenzie, "The Export of Political Systems," *Political Studies* vol. v, no. 3, 1957; and Ralph R. Premdas, "Elections and Parties in an Ethnically Bifurcated State," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, August 1972.

apart. All of these latent functions that inhere in the institution of elections are enacted only when the larger context of shared trust binds the overwhelming majority of citizens and where representatives are responsive to public opinion and can be periodically changed.

The electoral device with these internal properties, however, was imported into Trinidad from Britain, an environment radically different in social structure from Trinidad. The adaptation of the electoral device to the multiethnic society in Trinidad has left important questions unresolved about the roles of representation, integration, citizen commitment, and government accountability assigned to the electoral system. In particular, representation tends to become communalized so that the party in power symbolizes not the public will but sectional solidarity and interests. Citizen commitment is passionately expressed but communally cleaved so that only one section at a time identifies with the governing regime. The out-section is alienated. Elections elicit fearsome primordial responses and are deeply divisive affairs. In a communally divided society lacking shared beliefs, all political structures, however neutrally designed, tend to be tainted and imbued with suspect ethnic motifs and interests. Consequently the electoral device, ordinarily in its appropriate social system, becomes larger than its original purpose which was designed for selecting decisionmakers. In Trinidad it was charged that elections became enmeshed in a system of ethnic domination. Observed one political analyst:

Citizens of African and mixed descent were made to feel that the continuation of this preferential access to resources, both material and symbolic, was dependent on the preservation of PNM rule. The Afro-Trinidadian was demonstrably unwilling to share public resources and symbolic space with other ethnic groups, not only because they regarded them as scarce but because they deemed them to be their legitimate and prescriptive right by reason of their historical presence in the territory and the greater proximity of their culture and patterns of behavior to the superordinate colonial culture by which public norms are referenced.<sup>6</sup>

This theme of ethnic dominance became entwined in the general elections of 1991 in Trinidad. In Trinidad it was charged that elections had become an arena of contesting identities enmeshed in a threat of ethnic domination.

### **The Abrupt Transition in the Ethnocultural Configuration of Power**

On 6 November 1995 in the twin-island multiethnic Caribbean state of Trinidad and Tobago, when voters went to the polls for the seventh time since independence in 1961, most observers predicted a normal event in a victory for the predominantly African-based ruling People's National Movement (PNM). In what turned out to be a watershed election, the ruling PNM was dramatically ousted from power and replaced by the predominantly Indian-based United

---

<sup>6</sup> S. Ryan, *The Disillusioned Electorate* (Trinidad: Imprint Publishers, 1988), 2.

National Congress (UNC) in coalition with a smaller party, the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), making it the first time that an Indian acceded to the Prime Ministership. For some, especially the African-descended Creole population constituting about 38.9% of the population, the change of regime was greeted with grave apprehension since the Indian section, constituting about 39.6% of the population and already in control of much of the economy, was now poised to assert political preeminence also. In an essentially ethnically bifurcated polity, political power was wielded in the past (uninterruptedly from 1956 to 1986) by the Black Creole African section of the population. Even in the period 1986 to 1991 when the NAR, then a party composed of Indian and African supporters, won power, the Prime Minister was an African, thereby reasserting Creole continuity in the leadership of the country.

**Table 1**

**Population and Ethnic Groups in Trinidad and Tobago**

African	444,804	—	38.9%
Indian	452,709	—	39.6%
Chinese	4,322	—	.4%
Syrian/Lebanese	936	—	.1%
White	7,302	—	.6%
Mixed	207,280	—	18.1%
Others	25,773	—	2.3%
Total	1,143,126	—	100.0%

1990 Census: Trinidad and Tobago Statistical Office

In a society where interethnic suspicion is widespread and communal identity and power are symbolically interwoven and institutionalized in organized party politics, control of the government has always been seen as vital to the survival and well-being of each community. Hence, the ascension to power by an Indian for the first time potentially carries with it significant symbolic and substantive implications. Since independence, political stability in Trinidad and Tobago was maintained by a system of 'balance' whereby African Creoles controlled the polity and Indians and others, including the descendants of whites, dominated agriculture, commerce, and business. Indian ascendance to power, then, seemed to constitute not just a change of government decisionmakers following yet another election but a fundamental shift in the distribution of spheres of control, infringing upon this 'balance' and threatening the fragile stability of the multiethnic order. It is this aspect of the Trinidad elections that evokes comparisons with such societies as Fiji and Malaysia which are similarly ethnically bifurcated. To be sure, in Fiji and

Malaysia the dominance of the indigenous section has been established and inscribed in their constitutions, albeit by force in the former and threat in the latter. In Trinidad, however, no consensus for the sharing of spheres of sectoral economic and political control existed; rather, the political system built on the competitive parliamentary system was an open arena for the contestation of power. Dominance of the polity by the Creole African section and the economy by the Indian-European community eventuated from historical circumstances. All the same, in a society where interethnic distrust, especially between Africans and Indians, runs deep and in which intercommunal rivalry between the two main ethnic communities is played out every day in discourse over public policy, a radical shift in power as represented by the 1995 elections is the source of immense practical and academic interest. More particularly, it raises the problem of ethnic conflict regulation in relation to the problem of resource allocation and power sharing. In this paper these issues will be looked at generally; the focus, however, is on describing and analyzing the 1995 elections in some detail, showing how the shift in the system of virtual ethnic rule eventuated.

We shall continue by giving a broad overview of Trinidad's economy and polity followed by a recapitulation of the political system under which the elections of 1995 occurred. The body of the paper deals with elections—the parties, the electoral system, the issues, the campaign, the analysis of the results, etc.

### **Trinidad and Tobago: An Introductory Portrait to the Elections**

The twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago (Trinidad hereafter), independent since 1962, was first claimed by the Spaniards on 31 July 1498 and colonized by them until it fell under British control in 1797, where it stayed until the mid-twentieth century. For about four hundred and fifty years Trinidad evolved mainly as a territorial appendage of and a dependent supplier of raw materials to its European metropolises. Coffee, cocoa, cotton, and sugar were produced under a mode of plantation production that led to the implanting of an immigrant multiethnic population. The indigenous Amerindian population was recruited and eventually enslaved to meet the labor needs of the colonizers. In the long trek of Spanish colonial control the Arawaks and Caribs, unable to adapt to the work regimentation of the plantations, would be practically wiped out. The primary product grown was sugar; other exportable plantation crops also included coffee, cotton, and tobacco. The labor came from forced African servitude through the iniquitous slave trade.

When slavery was abolished in 1833 the colonists were forced to find a new source of labor. The fact that both Trinidad and India were colonies of Britain facilitated the recruitment of Indian indentured laborers from India. Asian Indians (Indians hereafter) came in shiploads for several decades. By 1917, when the Indian indenture scheme was terminated, some 144,000

Indians had been imported into Trinidad. Most were Hindus from north India but about 15% were Muslims. Indians emerged as the backbone of the plantations. While some opted to return to India at the end of their indenture, most chose to remain as permanent residents of the colony. By 1875 about 87% of the sugar plantation laborers were Indians. Autonomous Indian villages arose around the plantations and Indians became essentially rural dwellers. The emancipated Africans developed a contempt for the Indians who had willingly submitted themselves to the degrading regimen of the plantation. Indians in turn regarded the Africans as 'outcasts' who had readily accepted and acculturated to the ways of the oppressor. Herein, then, would the first seeds of Indian-African antipathy be born. Most Africans migrated to the urban areas where they evolved as a skilled and semiskilled proletariat and adapted to English ways.

Thus, with the arrival of Europeans, Africans, Indians, and Chinese and the addition of a significant group of 'mixed races,' would a plural multiethnic society be forged in Trinidad. African slavery and Indian indenture served as the twin bases on which the successful colonization of the tropical terrain occurred. A workforce of culturally different immigrants from the Old World was recruited to labor on plantations which provided the nucleus for a new society. Partly because of the superior economic and military power of the Europeans, a color-class stratification system evolved whereby things English and white were prized and became the measure of social value.

The pluralized ethnic structure that came into being in Trinidad was reinforced by multiple coinciding cleavages expressed in patterns of occupation, residence, and cultural orientation among each of the segments in the immigrant population. By the turn of the nineteenth century a communally oriented multiethnic society was fashioned; with some modifications, most of its essential features have persisted into the present. While European influence has remained preeminent (Europeans are collectively called French Creoles today and they are nearly all locally born and bred), intercommunal rivalry between Africans (locally called 'Creoles') and Asian Indians (called Indians) would emerge as the dominant feature in interethnic relations in the state. In addition a complex of almost exclusive ethnically bound cultural and social voluntary associations have emerged to consolidate the split personality of the new order. Negative stereotypes held of each group by others constitute the main medium of interethnic perceptions which in turn provide a vocabulary of racial slurs that reinforce ethnic exclusivity.

While sugar production is relatively old, petroleum was discovered at the turn of the twentieth century and slowly emerged as the dominant primary producing export product eclipsing sugar, coffee, and cocoa. Over centuries of evolution as a producer of primary products for an export market, the economy of contemporary Trinidad reflects this historical imprint by its heavy reliance on oil petroleum and sugar for its survival. In a peculiar twist of events that can only happen in a plural society, ethnic identity and the economy became enmeshed: sugar production came to be associated with the Indians, oil with Creoles, and big multinational business

corporations with French Creoles. In the twentieth century the Trinidad economy attained new levels of complexity registered especially in the development of a large public sector employing about 60,000 public servants, about 70% of whom were Creoles and mixed races. Indians did not remain exclusively with sugar even though most sugar workers and planters are still Indians. Many Indians have gravitated into small businesses, trades, teaching, and the professions.

Politics in Trinidad, like the economy, developed in terms of the underlying ethnic delineations in the state. When democratic politics brought mass representation and a party system after centuries of colonial rule, the fragmented social structure shaped political orientation and partisan preference. Ethnically based parties emerged and exacerbated communal tensions. Interethnic distrust would render nation-building and economic development problematic. In the 1950s two major parties, the People's National Movement (PNM) and the Democratic Labor Party (which would later become the United Labor Front and in the contemporary political scene became the United National Congress), were organized mainly around the Creole and Indian communities respectively. The Creole-based PNM party headed by Dr. Eric Williams led the colony to independence in 1962 and governed the state through several elections until December 1986. During the long period of PNM rule, the Indian community complained bitterly about ethnic discrimination, as attested to by the exclusion of Hindus from cabinet appointments and the overwhelming stacking of the civil service by Creoles.

When oil prices were high in the 1970s Trinidad enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and the PNM became entrenched. In the 1980s, however, with the plummeting of oil prices, a steep recession led to the eviction of the PNM from power in the 1986 general elections. The victorious party was called the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR). It was constituted by an unprecedented alignment of disgruntled Indians and Creoles. It represented that elusive multiethnic formation that had so far failed to appear in Trinidad's modern mass politics. The NAR called itself a 'rainbow party' bound by 'One Love.' Its ethnic unity was short-lived, however. About one year later the NAR was fatally split between an Indian group led by Basdeo Panday and the Creole group led by Prime Minister Robinson.

In the December 1991 elections, the NAR was comprehensively defeated as the African-based PNM regained power and the Indian-based UNC returned to its familiar role as opposition party. After about four years in power the PNM returned to the polls again for a renewed mandate.

## **The Structure of the 1995 Elections: The Main Parties and the Electoral System**

In the 1995 elections the main actors competing for office consisted of three parties: the People's National Movement (PNM), the United National Congress (UNC), and the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), along with four other parties without any significant following. Two main parties, the UNC and PNM, erected around a core of Indian and African constituents respectively, had dominated Trinidad's politics since 1961 and would do so again in 1995. The NAR was reduced to its Tobago rump with small margins of support in Trinidad.

The PNM was launched in 1956 as an anticolonial mass movement by academic historian Dr Eric Williams. The party's charter proclaimed a commitment to promote equity in a multiracial society: "We are rather a rally, a convention of all and for all, a mobilization of all the forces in the community, cutting across race and religion, class and color, with emphasis on united action by all the peoples in the common cause." The promise of a crosscultural and interethnic society under the PNM for seven successive terms of office covering thirty years of uninterrupted rule was, however, belied by the fact that the party became preponderantly uniethnic in composition and support.

From a small nucleus in 1956 the PNM would become bigger, beginning with its victory in the 1956 general elections in which it won 13 of 24 seats. The PNM went on to lead the colony to independence in 1962 and for six consecutive parliamentary terms served as the governing party until 1986. To the African communal core, the PNM while in power would add the Mixed Races, Europeans (French Creoles), Chinese, and a significant slice of the Indian middle class. Wielding undisputed paramountcy over the polity and society in its control over jobs, contracts, and other values, the PNM at once became a tower of strength and place of reverence in periods of plenty and a source of all sin in times of adversity. An immense target, it was easily bludgeoned into humiliating submission in 1986 when it was only able to obtain only 3 out of 36 seats in Parliament. In the wake of steep economic decline, the PNM was weakened and widely perceived as corrupt and incompetent. Dr. Williams had died in 1981 and the loss of his charismatic presence coincided with the degeneration of economic well-being in the society. Indians as a whole saw the PNM as an instrument of ethnic repression, and in 1986 they would join forces with other dissident groupings in dislodging the PNM from power. In the 1991 elections, however, after the Indian-African unity in the NAR fell apart and ethnic voting returned in its traditional form, the PNM romped home to victory with 21 out of 36 seats.

The NAR, the ruling party from 1986 to 1991 led by A.N.R. Robinson, was formed in 1986 from three opposition fragments pitted against the PNM. The three elements were: the United Labor Front (UFL), which was the Indian-based mass party led by Basdeo Panday; the

Organization for National Reconstruction (ONR), which was a multiethnic middle-class party led by former PNM stalwart Hudson Phillips; and the Democratic Action Congress (DAC) led by another ex-PNM cabinet member, A.N.R. Robinson. Although according to its constitution the NAR was a unitary party in which constituent components had submerged their respective identities, in practice it was a loose confederal combination of unintegrated parts. The PNM was their common enemy and *raison d'être*.

In the historic December 1986 elections, the NAR served itself up as the 'rainbow party' committed to 'One Love' in the promise to replace the African-based PNM with a merging of identities in an authentic multiethnic party. In Robinson an African leader was found; in Panday an Indian leader was recruited; and in the ranks of the ONR leadership the Mixed Races and French Creoles had representation. In bringing the final party into existence no formula was agreed upon to share the spoils of power should it win. In fact, not even NAR members themselves expected it to win. The NAR did win, by a margin of 33 seats to 3. But for a variety of personality, ethnic, and ideological reasons, the ULF segment led by Panday was expelled from the NAR just one year later, throwing not only the ruling party in crisis but also the nation, which had been euphoric about giving the NAR a decisive victory. In the 1991 elections an ethnically riven NAR was comprehensively defeated, gaining only two seats, both in Tobago.

The United National Congress, led by Panday, was a direct descendant from the NAR but in fact had a longer pedigree, going back to the mid-1950s. In this continuity the UNC owed its lineage to Indians who constitute one of the two largest ethnic communities in Trinidad and who were organized from the very inception of mass politics in anticipation of self-government in the 1950s.

The UNC's votes were concentrated in the central sugar-growing plains where Indian parties since 1961 have been able to obtain about a third of the parliamentary seats. In 1991 the UNC obtained 14 seats out of 36; in a 1994 by-election it won more at the expense of the PNM.

In 1995 the essentially two-way contest was a mixture of old and new motifs in Trinidad's politics. The PNM and UNC represented the old ethnic politics; these parties could count on a solid core of ethnic constituents to vote for them. The NAR represented, at least in its initial formation in 1986 to 1988 prior to the expulsion of Panday, a genuine multiethnic grouping which had significantly disengaged many voters from their traditional cultural partisan moorings. The original NAR phenomenon with its multiethnic following had caused a new model of party representation to be founded in Trinidad. While the old parties had nominally claimed multiethnic constituents, the fact remained that Africans and Indians under the old order remained loyal to their respective parties. By the victory of the original NAR in December 1986, a new example of cross-communal partisan coalition had emerged as a strategy for electoral victory. In 1991 the

NAR was reduced to a shadow of itself as most of its 1986 Indian and African supporters returned to their ethnic camps in the PNM and UNC.

In 1995, in an electorate of 837,453 eligible voters, seven parties mounted 114 candidates (with no independent candidate since 1956) for the 36 seats in the National Assembly. Of the 36 candidates whom the PNM put up, 15 were Indians, 1 white, and the others Africans and Mixed Races. Only one of the PNM's Indian candidates in the Arouca South constituency could be regarded as a sure win, while three in St. Joseph, San Juan-Barataria, and San Fernando West were given a fair chance of winning. Of the 34 candidates that the UNC put up, 18 were Indians, 1 white, and the others Africans and Mixed Races. None of the African and Mixed Race UNC candidates was placed in a safe UNC stronghold. The electoral system is based on a parliamentary single seat simple plurality procedure under which the candidate with the largest number of votes wins. The electoral system is administered by a neutral and independent Elections and Boundaries Commission, and the elections are free and fair.

### **Issues**

In early October 1995 when Prime Minister Patrick Manning called for general elections about a year before it was necessary, he took practically everyone by surprise including his own party. It seemed to be excellent timing since Manning was emerging triumphant from his role in hosting Carifesta and the newly launched Caribbean Association of States. However, only a few months prior to these events, his image had suffered badly from the negative impact of a series of events that included the resignation of the former Foreign Minister from the cabinet. This protracted messy affair awkwardly culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency whose sole purpose was to evict the PNM's own appointed Speaker of the House of Representatives from office. There was a residual fear that the countersuit by the evicted Speaker of the House could have succeeded in the courts, and her restoration to her former position would have severely embarrassed the government. This and a few other reasons, including pending local council elections and a by-election for the House of Representatives, both of which the ruling party was uncertain of winning, influenced the early calling of the elections. However, the Prime Minister chose to give another reason for calling the elections. Said Manning: "...the current configuration of Parliament [with the PNM holding 19 seats and the opposition parties holding 17] reduces the government's flexibility in conducting the nation's business to unacceptable levels."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Maharaj, "Panday, ANR in Crisis Talks Today," *Express*, 7 November 1995, p. 1.

The surprise date of the elections, which in part was intended to catch the opposition parties unprepared, paradoxically would provide the occasion for a fateful informal collaboration between the UNC and NAR, eventually leading to the toppling of the PNM from power. While it was true that Basdeo Panday, the Leader of the opposition UNC, claimed that he had all along anticipated the early calling of the elections, the fact remained that his party as well as the NAR were caught with limited time to complete the nomination of their candidates for the polls and scrambled hectically to improvise. In fact, the NAR, which had held power from 1986 to 1991, was caught without a leader and in desperation turned to ex-Prime Minister A.N.R. Robinson again to lead them. It was desperation that made strange bedfellows in Robinson and Panday, erstwhile bitter political enemies, coming together in an ad hoc strategy to combine their efforts against the PNM. The UNC did not post any candidates in the two Tobago constituencies and the NAR did not place candidates in a number of constituencies in Trinidad, underscoring the emergence of cooperation between the NAR and UNC. This arrangement in effect allowed the UNC and NAR to combine their forces in a number of critical constituencies instead of competing against each other, which would spell defeat for the PNM. Just as importantly, the exigency of the early election date fostered important consultative and cooperative attitudes between the opposition parties which would spill over into the making of a victorious coalition government. The date of the election emerged as an unexpected issue with far-ranging consequences. The initial glee of the PNM came back to haunt them when the combined artillery of the UNC and NAR tore into the proud armor of the ruling party, seized the campaign momentum, and carried it to the very end of the electoral struggle.

The sudden calling of the elections was, however, quite rational and strategically calculated. The PNM had hoped to highlight the accomplishments of its government, especially in the economy. In the December 1991 elections which brought back the PNM to power, a young and relatively inexperienced team calling itself the 'new PNM,' headed by Patrick Manning, had to demonstrate to the country that it could govern, especially in the management of the economy which was still under siege, facing formidable external debt payments and internal debt obligations to civil servants. The defeated NAR had predicted an apocalypse within six months to a year given the legendary profligacy of the old PNM in government expenditures. To govern effectively in this age of IMF-dispensed structural adjustment medicine would require immense discipline, involving the denial of the patronage of office to partisan supporters and even the retrenchment of loyal government workers. The PNM had promised 'a caring government' to replace the NAR regime, which had followed the austere IMF prescriptions to its own political grave in the 1991 elections. Almost four years later in 1995 the PNM attempted to show, as it launched the election campaign to regain office, that it not only governed well in managing the external debt but also prospered. Rather as the NAR had futilely deluged the electorate with

positive statistical economic data in its bid to recapture power in the 1991 campaign, the PNM in 1995 unfolded an impressive array of economic figures in an attempt to further its success.

To bring all the economic statistics into a coherent social and political whole for popular consumption in the elections, the ruling party projected what it referred to as “a PNM vision ‘to create’ a world-class society.” It claimed to have achieved 4.6% growth in 1994; reduced unemployment from 20% to 16.5%; increased foreign reserves from practically zero in 1991 to US \$700 million in 1994; decreased government subsidies by reducing the number of government corporations from 87 in 1992 to 49 in 1995; liberalized the economy and external trade while controlling inflation and stabilizing prices; and successfully floated the Trinidad currency. In addition it advanced evidence to show that it had significantly improved and expanded the infrastructure of roads, educational facilities, and power and water supply. It was a staggering catalogue of claims which warranted the PNM invitation to the population to seek ‘world-class’ status in striving for “a level of excellence that allows us as a nation to compete with the best in the world.” The PNM vision aimed at making Trinidad “an outward-oriented, multilingual, knowledge-driven, harmonious society over the next 10 to 15 years.” To court the business community in this election-inspired vision, the PNM announced that it would bring down the corporate income taxes.<sup>8</sup> The economic strategy was aimed at fostering private investment in a highly competitive world; the PNM claimed to have established an attractive investment environment. This was a critical indirect attack on the opposition leader who was a trade union activist with unabashed claims to being a socialist. The PNM vision of the future required not only the right economic strategy but also a national consensus which, the argument ran, could not be achieved in a coalition government but only within the PNM.

The list of accomplishments claimed by the PNM was impressive. It had hoped to make them the showcase occupying the center of the discourse and discussion in the election campaign. The PNM’s claims were presented at the party’s annual convention, serving as the opening volley in the electoral fray commenced on October 8. The scope and preparedness of the attack seemed to have flattened the opposition which was taken by surprise. However, Trinidad is not a sleepy place where issues arise and die just before and after elections. Rather, its small closely knit community is in constant agitation, peppered by political debate and disputation. It did not require, therefore, an extraordinary awakening of the opposition and the population to rise to the challenge. About a week after the PNM’s call for elections, the opposition UNC party was up and running, posting to the public its own countervision of the state of the economy and society. It not only contradicted the vaunted economic claims of the PNM but refused to accept them as the agenda for popular debate. This it had to do within a mere 24 days before polling.

---

<sup>8</sup> S. Chouti, “Taxes to Come Down,” *Sunday Express*, 22 October 1995, p. 3.

Against the unemployment figure of 16.4% were portrayed vivid life scenes of suffering among those who did not have jobs, suggesting that the figures were incorrect and concealed the real widespread hardship among a significant segment of the population. Rather than a cost-saving achievement in government expenditures, the reduction in the number of state-owned corporations in the government's policy of privatization and divestment was portrayed by the opposition as insensitive to the interests of workers and adding to poverty and unemployment in the country. The PNM's so-called successes were projected by the opposition as actions taken in service to what opposition leader, Panday, called "the capitalist parasitic oligarchy" at the expense of the common people. All the shiny and meticulous economic statistics on economic growth were challenged and recast so as to paint the PNM as an uncaring party in government, serving the interests of a small elite.

While the guns of the combined opposition parties were initially aimed at discrediting the economic achievements of the PNM, the centerpiece of the UNC counterattack was to be the issue of crime. To penetrate the economic armor of the PNM boasts, the UNC effectively utilized repeated salvos of its own statistics accompanied by numerous 'real-life' stories of crime gone rampant and uncontrolled in the country. Panday employed an unconventional and dramatic method to put the spotlight on crime when at the beginning of the campaign he called a televised news conference in front of a store where the sole breadwinner of a family had been brutally gunned down. Said Panday: "It was more than a year ago when one Michael Agard was murdered in front of this store when he was going to visit some friends. What we are saying is that Michael was neither a drug dealer nor was he a bandit. He was simply an honest man trying to make a better living for himself and his mother and father who lived with him. What we are saying is that [there were] 111 murders in 1993, 126 in 1994, and not a single person has been punished."<sup>9</sup>

Panday was enacting the modus operandi that the opposition resorted to in the use of dramatic human case histories often familiar to citizens on this small island to answer the assault of the statistical evidence that the government mobilized in its own cause. Crisis in the areas of crime and the judiciary were close to the daily experiences of most Trinidadians, who felt that it was these items that were of foremost importance to most citizens. On 3 October 1995, just a few weeks before the elections, Chief Justice Michael de la Baptiste reviewing the performance of the judicial system drew a dramatic picture of despair: "The court system continues to prove inadequate to the demands being made on it, with the result that the backlog of cases has grown to monumental proportions and the delays in determination of cases both civil and criminal have been almost grotesque."<sup>10</sup> Underscoring the urgency of the situation, the Chief Justice noted that "as of 31st June, 1995, the prison population included 516 persons awaiting trial at the

---

<sup>9</sup> "Panday Holds Unusual Press Conference," *Toronto Express*, 31 October 1995, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> "Court System Still Inadequate, CJ," *Guardian*, 11 October 1995, p. 10.

Assizes, some of them for as long as 10 years; 465 persons with appeals pending against conviction, more than one-third of whom were convicted before 1993.”<sup>11</sup> Delays were staggering: “...it is not unusual for committal proceedings to take as long as 4 years to be completed and wait for a further 8 years between committal and trial... [T]he total number of criminal cases in Trinidad in which persons committed for trial between 1986 and 1994 [both years included] and have not been yet tried is 23,187.”<sup>12</sup> This was the stuff with which the opposition parties had a heyday, holding the ruling regime responsible even though much of this quagmire was inherited from previous governments. One large UNC advertisement in the main newspapers resonated rhetorically: “ARE YOU SAFER NOW THAN 4 YEARS AGO?”<sup>13</sup> The UNC had clearly discovered the Achilles heel of the PNM regime in the most sensitive security issue of most citizens. Cried out one UNC platform line, which satisfied the citizen’s thirst for retribution: “You do the crime, you do the time.” The UNC accompanied its critique of the crime situation in Trinidad by promising 24-hour community police patrols and more cars and equipment for the police force. The PNM’s record here was not objectively its weakest link, and Manning futilely insisted that his government had done reasonably well in an international context where crime was in the ascendancy and out of control. The PNM even demonstrated that it had increased police transportation between 1991 and 1995 by 205 motor cycles, 205 cars, and 242 other vehicles and constructed new police stations, introduced an innovative and relatively effective night court, and did deploy community patrols.<sup>14</sup> While overall the PNM had increased expenditures on the security forces and supplied statistics to validate its claims, this was not perceived as adequate in stemming the wave of crime that had left much of the population living in a state of daily terror.

Even with its back against the wall and losing the initiative to the opposition, the PNM was not to be entirely outdone. It sought to pin the crime epidemic on the person of the most famed criminal lawyer in the land, Lawrence Maharaj, who was a UNC candidate and a close confidante of Panday and was believed by many observers as the probable successor to the ailing UNC leader. In fact, at mid-campaign the PNM subordinated its stress on its record of economic performance and decided to focus its artillery on Maharaj as the central issue. This became known as the ‘Maharaj factor.’ The PNM leader went on record as saying “nothing sends a chill down my spine more than the thought of Maharaj becoming this country’s Attorney General or Minister of National Security.”<sup>15</sup> To impale the UNC on the issue of crime in its counteroffensive, the PNM went further in seeking to link the UNC to the drug trade, which was rampant in the country and had

---

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 *Guardian*, 29 October 1995, p. 13.

14 Kathy A. Waterman, “UNC, PNM: We’re Tough on Crime,” *Sunday Express*, 22 October 1995, p. 4.

15 Chouthi, op. cit. (note 8).

made Trinidad a major drug transshipment point in the Caribbean. Insinuated Manning: "They have advertisements on the radio, on television, and in the newspapers about crime, but not about drugs."<sup>16</sup> The public was reminded that Lawrence Maharaj's name was raised in the well-known official Scott Report on drugs, although there was no proof of any wrongdoing.

An aspect of crime that silently and by insinuation was inserted into the campaign was the pending case of sexual harassment brought by the police against the leader of the opposition. About a year prior to the elections three former employees of the UNC charged that Panday had made unwelcome sexual overtures towards them. The police filed criminal charges against the UNC leader, who was scheduled to face trial before a magistrate. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the charge was that one of the aggrieved women turned out to be the political coordinator of an organization established by Hulsie Bhaggan, a former UNC parliamentarian who was expelled from the UNC in a head-on conflict with Panday. The charge against the opposition leader was belatedly made and first raised in public in a speech from a campaign political platform. Without investigating the allegations, the police quickly and eagerly filed charges against an embarrassed Panday. This act cast a dark suggestive shadow of ulterior political design aimed at crippling the UNC in forthcoming elections. The UNC leader's lawyer, Lawrence Maharaj, argued as much in suing the plaintiffs for defamation, saying that "the prosecution was used as a sword against Panday as political leader of the UNC" in "a clear conspiracy between government officials and other persons" using "a weapon of harassment against the Opposition."<sup>17</sup> Hence, during the campaign, Panday was submitted to much innuendo aimed at undermining his integrity and suitability for the office of Prime Minister. As fate would have it, the day following the appointment of Panday as Prime Minister after the elections, the case was thrown out by the magistrate, who in an elaborate description showed how there was little or no evidence to institute charges and called the prosecution case a clear instance of abusing the judicial process.

Another issue relating to crime that emerged on the campaign trail referred back to the 27 July 1990 attempt by the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen, a small militant Muslim sect, to overthrow the Robinson-led NAR government. The aborted coup had severely traumatized the population, who witnessed the violent seizure of the Parliament with the Prime Minister and his cabinet taken captive and endured several days of murder, kidnapping, looting, and general mayhem, which left over twenty persons dead and millions of dollars damage from fires that gutted the business district of the capital city, Port of Spain. Imam Abu Bakr, the leader of the Muslimeen, and his insurrectionary band of some 100 armed persons were put down by the armed forces and surrendered but not before they had extracted a written general amnesty. At the time of the Muslimeen assault on the Parliament, the then opposition leader, Patrick Manning, who was

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> C. Maharaj, "DPP May Still Play a Hand," *Sunday Express*, 19 November 1995, p. 25.

present for the entire day's sitting had suddenly and at that critical juncture left the premises of the Red House (the local name for the Parliamentary building). After the insurrection was quelled, questions were raised about the coincidental departure of Manning from the Parliament at just that time. The matter, however, was left uninvestigated and laid to rest until in the 1995 election campaign when it was resurrected. It was Abu Bakr, released from custody on the basis of the amnesty, who openly alleged that Manning had had foreknowledge of the Muslimeen intent to overthrow the government and might even have abetted it. At a public meeting at Woodford Square, Abu Bakr swore: "I call the curse on me and my family that Patrick 'Judas Barabas' Manning is the culprit who left the Red House and came and made two calls to us."<sup>18</sup> Bakr had become very frustrated with the Manning government which had refused to pay the Muslimeen about \$10 million in claims for properties including a mosque and schools that were damaged by the armed forces as they searched and dismantled the headquarters of the insurrectionary movement. Upon Bakr making his charge against Manning, Robinson, the NAR leader who was Prime Minister when the Muslimeen carried out their attack, publicly argued that Manning had foreknowledge of it.<sup>19</sup> The immediate response of Manning was to sue both Bakr and Robinson and the news agency that reported these stories with the aim of putting a cap on this potentially embarrassing issue to the PNM campaign. This tactic did not quite succeed, and at one point just a few days before polling Manning himself even alleged that the Muslimeen was acting in concert with the opposition in campaigning against the PNM and insinuated that there was a link between the Muslimeen and the UNC in the insurrection.<sup>20</sup> The courts had set the Muslimeen insurrectionists free but Bakr had threatened ever since that he would repeat his treasonous act if provoked. The Muslimeen continued to command considerable fear among the population as attested in a postelection survey that revealed that 90% of the population expressed a desire to see the Muslimeen punished for their role in 1990.<sup>21</sup>

While the economy, poverty, unemployment, and crime occupied center stage in the ongoing exchange of election offensive and counteroffensive, the UNC harped upon another issue as its most positive offer to the population should it win. This was the proposal for a government of national unity (GNU) which became a source of campaign debate. In the PNM manifesto the idea of a GNU or a coalition was dismissed without discussion since the party felt that it could achieve a national consensus under its own victorious wing. In the election campaign itself it was clear that each of the two major parties adopted the strategy of first consolidating its own ethnic base and then seeking to add converts to that secure position. This strategy was

---

<sup>18</sup> "Manning Knew of Coup," *Share* (Toronto), 26 October 1995, p. 13; see also R. Pantin, "A Very True Story," *Sunday Express*, 22 October 1995, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> "ANR Agrees Manning Knew," *Share*, 26 October 1995, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> J.T. Lee, "Tell about Jamaat Links," *Sunday Express*, 6 November 1995, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> "No Forgiveness for the Muslimeen," *Guardian*, 19 November 1995, p. 1.

implemented at the grassroots and simultaneously enacted in the broad open appeal for support from all sources so as to create a multiethnic government. Despite this contradiction if not outright hypocrisy, the GNU idea contained a sort of salve that softened the crude edges of communal appeals for support and conferred on its advocates an aura of enlightened legitimacy in the quest for power. In this regard, the PNM lost much ground by dismissing the GNU idea, while the main opposition parties never lost sight of it in advocating a reconciliation among the races and ethnic communities in Trinidad. The PNM leader openly denounced the GNU idea, calling it illegal at one point and declaring that it was "a recipe for chaos." The UNC and NAR, on the other hand, were engaged in an open courtship and appealed to the population to join in this act of 'One Love.' Behind the rhetoric of love and harmony the UNC knew that it could not win the elections alone and that it would need the NAR, and the NAR similarly knew that it was going to be consigned to a Tobago rump without some sort of arrangement with a larger party. The UNC and NAR had been engaged in a joint relationship that brought them to power in 1986 but they remembered that things did not work out then and the arrangement had miscarried with Panday expelled and left in the cold. On this occasion, however, while the UNC leader declared that "it was time to love again," this time around it would be "in a UNC bed under the rising sun" (which was the symbol of the UNC).

Finally, an important issue that underlay much of the campaign debate focused on the relative merits of the two main leaders, Manning and Panday. The PNM leader was often accused of being incompetent and arrogant. Early in the life of the new PNM government, Manning had sought to establish undisputed authority in the PNM. This was not easy for he was relatively junior and inexperienced in the hierarchy when he assumed the leadership. In rebuilding the PNM from its comprehensive defeat in 1986, Manning had decided to jettison most of the old PNM leadership which was associated in the public mind with corruption and incompetence. While he did succeed in clearing the PNM of its old leadership, this had inevitably incurred their wrath and they had deeply resented being ignored and neglected once the PNM regained power. The old PNM guard was in the sidelines, awaiting an opportunity to capitalize on the failures and mistakes of the youthful and inexperienced Manning. It was in this quest to overcome his insecurities as well as to establish uncontested control that he would step on the toes of many potential challengers. For example, in the early years of his rule he had to sideline a potential rival in the prominent lawyer Desmond Allum, who was the likely candidate for the position of Attorney General. Similarly, he had to take action to expel the independent-minded Secretary-General Nello Mitchell, who had close links with the old leadership of the PNM. These events created enemies for Manning within the PNM. With a difficult economic situation facing him, it was inevitable that he would make mistakes. Unfortunately for Manning some of his more high-

handed actions drew crosspartisan derision and suggestions that he was losing his balance in a display of arrogance and delusions of grandeur.

### **Analysis of the Election Results**

The most significant datum in the 1995 elections is the tie in the seats obtained by the two major parties, 17 for the PNM and 17 for the UNC, in a 36-member House of Assembly. The NAR captured the remaining 2 seats and therefore held the balance of power. In the past, from 1961 to 1986 and from 1991 to 1995, the PNM won with convincing majorities; in 1986 when the NAR won it obtained 33 out of the 36 seats. A tie was unprecedented and ushered in for the first time the politics of postelection coalition formation. The popular votes received by the main parties showed that no one received a majority of the votes cast. The tiny parties that contested the elections all did so badly that they lost their deposits. Voter turnout was 63.17%; in 1991 it was 63.39%. Of the voters who cast their ballots, the PNM received 48.35%, an increase of 3.04% from 1991; the UNC got 45.31%, an increase of 16.01% from 1991; and the NAR 4.71%, a decrease of 19.72% from 1991. While these results underscored the polarized ethnic partisan preferences of the population, just as significantly it undeniably demonstrated that the losses of the NAR party were overwhelmingly gained by the UNC. This was reflected in the increase of the UNC parliamentary seats from 14 to 17. The gains by the UNC were most profound in a handful of critical constituencies where Indian/African ratios were close.

To an overwhelming degree, ethnic identity determined voter choice in 1995, unlike the 1991 elections when about 15 to 20% of the population evinced ambivalence as reflected in the NAR vote (24.43%) which, apart from Tobago, was of multiethnic derivation. For nearly all the constituencies except 10, the presence of overwhelming concentrations of either Indians or Africans preordained the outcome. Tables 2 and 3 show how the PNM and UNC performed in these electorates in the 1991 and 1995 elections. In 1991 both the UNC and PNM lost votes to the NAR which attracted about 20% of the votes in most constituencies. In 1995 the NAR was reduced to less than 5% of the votes except in the two Tobago seats.

Tables 2 and 3 show that 15 seats were strongly PNM and 9 UNC with clear ethnic majorities. Together these account for 24 seats and given that the two Tobago seats are personalistically controlled by the NAR leader, Robinson, this leaves 10 seats up for grabs. It would be these 10 constituencies that would decide whether the UNC or PNM won an election. In turn, in these 10 seats, in the 1995 elections, it was the structure of the split of the NAR vote to the UNC and PNM that would substantially determine how these seats went. Table 4 portrays how the votes were decided in 1991 in these 10 constituencies.

---

**Table 2**

---

**Preponderantly African Constituencies: PNM Votes**

---

	<b>Name</b>	<b>% of Votes in 1995</b>	<b>% of Votes in 1991</b>
1.	Diego Martin East	70.34	55.27
2.	Diego Martin West	74.88	60.99
3.	Diego Martin Central	76.56	57.81
4.	POS-N-St. Ann's W.	77.83	63.04
5.	Laventille E./Morvant	80.32	73.05
6.	St. Anne's East	72.62	74.90
7.	Arouca North	65.63	61.06
8.	Arouca South	71.87	68.99
9.	Arima	61.08	60.39
10.	Toco/Manzanella	57.35	52.00
11.	San Fernando East	65.35	67.59
12.	Point Fortin	62.20	56.94
13.	La Brea	60.77	59.66
14.	POS South	69.78	73.44
15.	Laventille W.	84.87	81.35

---

---

**Table 3**

---

**Preponderantly Indian Constituencies: UNC Votes**

---

	<b>Name</b>	<b>% of Votes in 1995</b>	<b>% of Votes in 1991</b>
1.	Oropouche	81.23	59.26
2.	Naparima	77.43	56.81
3.	Caroni East	68.37	57.93
4.	Caroni Central	65.57	51.84
5.	Siparia	79.61	65.92
6.	Tabaquite	72.22	41.40
7.	Couva North	75.90	72.90
8.	Couva South	66.51	55.31
9.	Chauguanas	71.81	46.20

---

---

**Table 4**

---

**Voting in the Marginal Seats in 1991**

---

	<b>Seat</b>	<b>PNM</b>	<b>UNC</b>	<b>NAR</b>
1.	St. Joseph	41.67	34.55	24.58
2.	Tunapuna	47.17	28.64	22.42
3.	Barataria	44.65	34.59	19.37
4.	Fyzabad	36.79	37.09	16.03
5.	Ortoire-Mayaro	46.91	37.22	15.87
6.	San Fernando W.	48.89	14.62	35.87
7.	Nariva	36.49	46.21	15.66
8.	Princes Town	37.75	47.07	15.15
9.	St. Augustine	29.48	46.14	22.92
10.a.	Pointe-a-Pierre (1991)	36.37	35.11	26.92
b.	Pointe-a-Pierre (1994)	33.07	57.57	06.82

---

Given that the NAR had been rendered virtually impotent in 1995 in the Trinidad constituencies, resulting in a two-way race between the UNC and the PNM, how the 1991 NAR support was split between these two parties was absolutely crucial to the outcome of the elections. Some indication of this was already signaled in the 1994 by-election for the Pointe-a-Pierre constituency which had become vacant after the sitting PNM Member of Parliament died. The Pointe-a-Pierre seat has historically been a marginal seat with the PNM winning it 4 out of 9 times since 1956, and changes in voter sentiment have often served as a bellwether showing the way the general elections would go. Certainly, this would be the case of the 1994 by-election results in relation to what was likely to transpire in 1995. By 1994 NAR, having been devastated in the 1991 general elections, was reduced to a mere shadow of its 1986 self. In gaining victory in the by-election, the UNC picked up about 70% of the NAR support, suggesting that it could replicate the act in constituencies like Pointe-a-Pierre, St. Joseph, Tunapuna, San Juan Barataria, Ortoire-Mayaro, San Fernando West, Fyzabad, St. Augustine, and Princes Town—all places with large Indian concentrations approaching 50%. A large part of the 1991 NAR vote in these seats was drawn from the middle-class Indian community. The results in 1991 and 1994 are displayed in Table 5.

**Table 5**

**Pointe-a-Pierre Results in 1991 and 1994**

<b>Party</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1994</b>
PNM	36.37%	33.07%
UNC	35.11%	57.55%
NAR	26.92%	6.82%

Because of the large Indian presence in 4 of the 10 marginal constituencies, Pointe-a-Pierre, Nariva, St. Augustine, and Princes Town, and given an emasculated NAR in 1995, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the UNC would take these seats with only a small fraction of the 1991 NAR support. Hence, to the 9 safe UNC seats must be added the additional 4 for a total of 13 seats, meaning that going into the 1995 elections the PNM had 14 sure seats, the UNC 13, and the NAR 2. That left 6 seats in the role of arbiter of the final outcome, namely, Tunapuna, St. Joseph, Fyzabad, San Juan Barataria, Ortoire-Mayaro, and San Fernando West. In the end the PNM would take 2 of these, Tunapuna by a margin of 244 votes and San Fernando West by 1288 votes. The UNC would take the remaining 4, two by small margins, St. Joseph by 614 votes and Ortoire-Mayaro by 900, and two by more substantial leads, Fyzabad by 2,197 and San Juan Barataria by 1,183.

## ***Explaining the Results***

Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain the astounding results of the 1995 elections, including the persistence of ethnic voting patterns, personality and leadership factors, campaign strategy, grassroots mobilization capabilities, the impact of structural adjustment policies, and UNC-NAR collaboration. In a sense all these factors were at play with different saliences individually and in combination to spell disaster and defeat for the PNM. A few of these factors in particular could be credited for the shift in favor of the UNC of which the differential voter mobilization capabilities of the parties in the context of persisting ethnic preference was probably most significant. The mobilization explanation is therefore about a party being able in the first place to get out its communal supporters and then to persuade undecideds and others to vote for it. There has been some suggestion that differential party mobilization by itself needs to be understood in the context of demographic changes in favor of the Indian population. However, as yet there is no evidence available to validate this view even though it is known from the last census that the Indian population has overtaken the African overall in the country. The mobilization factor also includes the assumption that many erstwhile PNM supporters, either disenchanted with the PNM record of achievement or complacent about a foregone PNM victory, decided to stay home. Contained in the mobilization hypothesis, then, is a complex subset of associated assumptions. A brief examination of the marginal seats where the UNC triumphed over the PNM would serve to illustrate the interplay of these factors.

In the St. Joseph constituency the UNC scored 7,564 votes to the PNM 6,960, giving a slender victory margin of 604 votes out of 15,518 votes cast. The NAR, seemingly by prior arrangement with the UNC, did not place a candidate to compete here; in the 1991 elections it had taken 24.58% of the votes cast. During the night of ballot counting in 1995, the lead switched back and forth with both the PNM and UNC candidates at one point conceding defeat. The PNM candidate, Gus Ramrekersingh, accounted for his loss saying "...the UNC was better able to get their voters to turn out."<sup>22</sup> The St. Joseph seat was in terms of Indian-African ratio an almost evenly ethnically mixed area with the results in 1991 showing the PNM with 41.67% of the votes, the UNC with 34.55%, and NAR with 24.58%. Clearly, in the 1995 elections, it was the peculiar split of the votes that the NAR received in 1991 in favor of the UNC that contributed to the UNC victory more than any other factor. In fact, the UNC candidate Mervyn Assam was a high-ranking NAR member until the announcement of the election. In what seemed like a preelection UNC-NAR deal Assam collected both the traditional UNC and the preponderance of the NAR

---

<sup>22</sup> U. Cambridge, "Ramrekersingh Concedes Government," *Express*, 7 November 1995, p. 3.

votes. Status and leadership factors were also at play in this contest. Assam, a prominent political personality who was ambassador to Great Britain under the NAR administration, was up against an equally prominent PNM candidate in Ramrekeringh, who was a deputy leader of the PNM and the Minister of Education. Patronage played a role too. The PNM candidate had the benefit of having several short-term job creation projects deployed in the St. Joseph constituency to assist in the election effort. Assam had none but promised many should he win. Finally, Ramrekeringh was an Indian so he was in a position to receive not only the traditional Creole PNM vote but also some Indian support. The PNM grassroots apparatus was well organized and feverishly at work on behalf of its candidate, but in anticipation of probable victory the UNC apparatus was at least equally motivated and likely more mobilized. But taken together, patronage, leadership position, ethnic identity, and good mobilization capability from the PNM apparatus were not adequate to overcome the combined UNC and NAR support which towards the end of the campaign had seized the propaganda momentum countrywide. Hence, it could be reasonably inferred that the UNC victory in the marginal St. Joseph seat emerged from a combination of factors that included ethnicity, candidate prominence, party mobilization, and above all the structure of the split of the 1991 NAR vote preponderantly in favor of the UNC. The results in 1995 showed that the UNC increased its take of the votes by about 14% from 34.55% in 1991 to 48.74% while the PNM increased its showing by about 3% from 41.67% in 1991 to 44.85%, with each party taking a part of the 24.58% of the 1991 NAR vote.

The San Juan-Barataria constituency is also illustrative of the complex of factors that entered in the making of the UNC performance. Like the St. Joseph seat, which is situated in the East-West corridor (the traditional bastion that has reliably generated PNM victories since 1961), the San Juan-Barataria seat was split as follows in 1991: PNM 44.65%, UNC 37.09%, and NAR 16.03%. In 1995 the NAR did not compete here and its votes were distributed even more decisively than in St. Joseph in favor of the UNC candidate, who gained 7,818 votes to the PNM's 6,685 for a victory margin of 1,233 votes out of 14,471 votes cast. Again, almost uncannily, all the factors that featured in the St. Joseph seat appeared to be present in approximately the same proportions in San Juan-Barataria. The victorious UNC candidate, Dr. Fuad Khan, attributed his triumph from inroads that were made among the nontraditional UNC supporters, especially youths.<sup>23</sup> Khan did not think that his mobilization capability was superior to the PNM's: "If our machinery worked as well as the PNM's in that area, the margin of defeat would have been greater."<sup>24</sup> This point is significant because it underscores the argument made here that the UNC mobilization capabilities, bolstered by the animus of probable victory for the first time, improved in the 1995 elections, but this did not mean that the PNM's mobilization was necessarily

---

<sup>23</sup> "Fuad Khan: We Broke the Barriers," *Guardian*, 5 November 1995, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

inferior or surpassed. Above all it seemed that it was the nature of the split in the NAR vote overwhelmingly in favor of the UNC that spelled defeat for the PNM candidate, Linda Baboolal. Baboolal, an Indian and a medical doctor like her rival Khan, was additionally a PNM cabinet minister who, despite generating some patronage jobs for her supporters through short-term projects, confessed that she was unable to satisfy the heavy unemployment demands in the depressed San Juan-Barataria area. Said Baboolal: "We had the URP [the Unemployment Relief Program] and we did a lot of training with young people through YTEPP [Youth Training and Employment Partnership Program] and other things. I hired a manager in the constituency office five days a week who was responsible for meeting people and dealing with their problems. Then on Thursday evenings after cabinet meetings, I would generally go to the office. I visited the area often and went on locations where there were problems. I did not go and knock on people's doors to announce that I was there, but the point is that I kept in touch. This year alone I had 17 cottage meetings. The major problem was that 50% of the people who came to see me wanted jobs. I had to tell them that I didn't have a job that I can give."<sup>25</sup> The constituency is notable for its very high unemployment, especially among youths to whom the Khan campaign had made a special pitch. Remarked Fuad Khan, a popular medical doctor in his community: "I have seen a lot of starvation over the last three weeks of the campaign that I was not aware of before."<sup>26</sup> It is not clear how many of the poor who were traditionally ethnic PNM identifiers decided to bolt the PNM camp, simply stayed home on election day, or converted to the UNC cause. It is notable, however, in this regard that the UNC campaign among others things constantly harped on the plight of the poor and unemployed, who were allegedly neglected by the PNM government.

In the Ortoire-Mayaro constituency, which has been traditionally won by the PNM, some of the same factors as in St. Joseph and San Juan-Barataria seats seemed to combine in the victory of the UNC candidate. In 1991 the votes were distributed as follows: PNM 46.91%, UNC 37.22%, and NAR 15.87%. In 1995 the UNC obtained 8,944 votes while the PNM garnered 8,201 votes, a difference of 743 votes. As in the rest of the country, ethnic voting patterns persisted here for the vast majority of voters. The NAR bloc of votes again was decisive in determining the final outcome. The NAR did not compete in this electorate by UNC-NAR prearrangement. The mobilization factor as well as the patronage variable seemed to play the familiar role that would become an established pattern in the marginal seats. Many PNM voters expressed alienation from their candidate, Keith Sobion who was the Attorney-General in the PNM government, for failure to bring enough projects to the constituency and for his irregular visits. Reported one newspaper: "Market vendors, store clerks, police officers, bank clerks all

---

<sup>25</sup> K. Rampersad, "Baboolal Not Giving Up," *Guardian*, 12 November 1995, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> "Fuad Khan..." op. cit.

described Sobion as an absentee representative—destined to pay the ultimate price.”<sup>27</sup> When a member of Parliament regularly attended to the demands of his/her constituents as Baboolal did, he/she discovered the frustrations of the electorate and the limited capacity of the patronage machine to provide jobs. The Ortoire-Mayaro seat is not only geographically the largest constituency in Trinidad, it is rural and suffers from multiple deficiencies in water supply and other services available to urban residents. Sobion not only had a very logistically demanding ministry to serve but found it necessary to live in town away from his supporters in order to carry out his cabinet responsibilities. This became costly at election time. A resident said: “Sobion may be the big Attorney-General and an attorney, but he lives quite in town and we hardly see him.”<sup>28</sup> The UNC candidate in contrast, a prominent local government councilor, was very busy organizing his supporters, claiming that “we have a campaign plan that involves working from the grassroots.”<sup>29</sup> This was also true of the PNM campaign organization which had the added advantage of several patronage projects in place. It seemed overall, therefore, that it was the favorable split of the NAR vote in the UNC-NAR collaborative effort that spelled doom for Sobion.

The San Juan-Barataria, St. Joseph, and Ortoire-Mayaro seats illustrate the interplay of ethnic identity, party mobilization capability, patronage, leadership status, and the UNC-NAR collaboration in deciding the outcome of these critical seats in favor of the UNC. Two seats that were similarly structured in that they contained about the same mix of Indians and Africans and in which the NAR vote in the 1991 elections in part facilitated the victory of the PNM were Tunapuna and San Fernando West. In 1995 these seats were won by the PNM by margins of the same slight magnitude as the UNC eked out in St. Joseph, San Juan-Barataria, and Ortoire-Mayaro. In the case of Tunapuna, the PNM received 7,467 votes to the UNC's 7,223, giving the PNM victory by 244 votes, the smallest margin of victory in any constituency in the elections. In this seat the UNC and NAR did not reach an agreement to cooperate and the NAR obtained 368 votes, enough to have given the UNC victory. In the San Fernando West seat where the NAR and UNC did not enter into a collaborative arrangement, the PNM got 7,748 votes, the UNC 6,460 votes, and the NAR 616 votes. The PNM's victory here was by 1,288 votes, more than enough to overwhelm the combined UNC and NAR votes. It is noteworthy that even where the NAR did not reach a deal with the UNC, most of the 1991 NAR votes went to the UNC anyway. In part the reason was that towards the closing stages of the campaign, a euphoria about a possible UNC upset that might result in a government of national unity with at least a NAR component was sweeping the country and probably spilled over in favor of the aggregate UNC vote. Besides, several NAR stars including Winston Dookeran and Clive Pantin had not only declared in favor of a UNC victory

---

<sup>27</sup> D. Brewster, “Absent Sobion Learns a Lesson,” *Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> K. Radhay, “Sobion in Grassroots Showdown,” *Mirror*, 20 October 1995, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

capped with a government of national unity but also campaigned towards this end, especially by launching the Committee of National Reconciliation. Throughout the country, regardless of whether the NAR and UNC had reached specific constituency collaborative arrangements or not, the 1991 NAR vote practically evaporated into preponderant UNC support at the polls. This was the case in the Tunapuna and San Fernando seats; it was not enough to translate into UNC victories but points in that direction if in future there is greater UNC-NAR collaboration. For instance, in the 1991 elections in the San Fernando West seat the PNM got 48.89% of the votes, the UNC 14.62%, and the NAR 35.87%, suggesting that a combined UNC-NAR effort could be successful. This is even more convincing in the Tunapuna constituency where in 1991 the PNM obtained 47.17% of the votes, the UNC 34.55%, and the NAR 24.58%.

Finally, in the rest of the marginal seats, it was felt in some quarters that those in Nariva, Fyzabad, Pointe-a-Pierre, St. Augustine, and Princes Town were up for grabs between the UNC and PNM, because in 1991 the UNC had won them with less than a majority of the votes cast. In 1995, given that these constituencies contained fairly decisive Indian majorities and that the existence of UNC-NAR interparty collaboration had significantly weakened the NAR support base, a UNC victory in these seats was more predictable. With most of the Trinidad-based NAR support in the critical marginal seats constituted of Indians (more than likely of middle income and higher educational attainment) and a rise of collective Indian solidarity in the face of the possibility of enthroning an Indian as Prime Minister, chances are that all of these ten marginal seats will in future go to the UNC.

What is clearly significant in all these marginal seats is that voter preference was driven by ethnic identity but in the case of the Indian section seeking victory this needed to be effectively mobilized. In the 1995 elections it is clear that the Indian bloc vote was more thoroughly mobilized than ever before, but it is not necessarily true that the PNM mobilization was less than that of the Indian community. Put differently, it is not clear from the evidence that the UNC apparatus outperformed the PNM's in the same way that it outperformed itself as compared with previous elections. What is clear is that the tilt in favor of the UNC, especially in the critical seats in St. Joseph, San Juan-Barataria, and Ortoire-Mayaro, was due to the absence of the NAR party and the cooperation of the NAR and the UNC. There were other general factors at play that seemed to have aided the UNC in gaining its 17 seats (which, it should be emphasized, did not constitute a majority of seats in the 36-member House of Assembly). Three of these factors warrant brief discussion.

First, at the macrolevel of the campaign, especially where the use of the mass media such as the newspapers and television was involved, the UNC seemed to have crafted an assault on the senses of the citizenry superior to the PNM's. To carry out this expensive project the UNC openly procured the financial backing of three multimillionaire businessmen, namely Brian Kuei

Tung, a former PNM cabinet member, Ishwar Galbaransingh, a wealthy hotelier, and Steve Ferguson, a construction tycoon, all of whom had recent frustrations with the PNM administration. They not only provided funds, which brought skilled professional services to the UNC media campaign, but successfully recruited other businessmen to their cause. This was an important part of the UNC strategy aimed at modifying the socialist and labor orientation of Panday and alleviating the fears of the business community. In this regard the UNC also procured the assistance of a former United States congressman, Merv Dymally, who offered guidance to the Panday camp in campaign techniques, image-making, and communication of the UNC message.

Second, the UNC's constant harping on the theme of a fashioning a government of national unity in a coalition regime successfully attracted to its fold a number of prominent persons, from the NAR camp in particular. While Panday was able to wrap himself in the garb of a healing statesman in advocating ethnic and class reconciliation, Manning rejected the very idea of a coalition as 'a recipe for chaos.' When the UNC unity proposal was successfully attracting more and more non-UNC support from a diverse group of prominent persons, the PNM chose to label these people disparagingly as 'grasshoppers' while one pollster sympathetic to the PNM lost his balance and dubbed it 'whoring.'<sup>30</sup> Among the persons from the NAR leadership who crossed over to the UNC cause in support of a national unity government were Winston Dookeran, Clive Pantin, George Laquis, Jennifer Johnson, Raul Rafael, Suruj Rambachan, Robert Sabga, Tim Gopeesingh, who banded together with others as "A Committee of National Reconciliation."<sup>31</sup> The group also included writers, cultural and spiritual groups such as the predominantly African group, the Spiritual Baptists (claiming to have over 120,000 members),<sup>32</sup> and the Orishas, as well as Errol Macleod, the President of NATUC, the apex organization of labor unions in Trinidad. The larger point is that over a period of about three weeks into the campaign, on almost a daily basis, one prominent person after another either joined or spoke up on behalf of the UNC position for a government of national unity to heal the fractured wounds of the multiethnic state. It all unleashed a moral momentum in favor of a UNC-led coalition government and correspondingly isolated the PNM as undeserving of a second term.

Finally, the PNM leader himself emerged as a negative issue and in the postelection this came to be discussed openly as 'the Manning Factor.'<sup>33</sup> As so often happens in defeat, a leader becomes the subject of scorching criticism and analysis. Much of this attitude, however, tended to be suppressed while the leader still wielded power. During the last year of his tenure in office

---

<sup>30</sup> "TT Poll Puts Ruling Party Ahead," *Toronto Express*, 3 October 1995, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> W. Gibbins, "The Dookeran Factor," *Sunday Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> S. Shepherd, "Senator Appeals for Baptist Unity," *Sunday Express*, 7 December 1995, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> "Manning Shot Himself in the Foot," *Guardian*, 12 November 1995, p. 18; see also C. Maharaj, "Blame It on the Manning Factor," *Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 5.

Manning became involved in a messy sequence of events that sullied his image as a competent leader of the government. This was referred to as the 'Knowlson Gift affair' which saw the dismissal of the Foreign Affairs Minister from his position and culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency to evict from office the sister of the dismissed minister who was the PNM appointed Speaker of the House of Assembly. To many, the protracted sequence of events that took center stage in the affairs of the country showed an arbitrary use of power, and when during the course of these events the Prime Minister referred to himself as "Father of the Nation," this underscored the emergence of his arrogance and pointed to the government losing its moderation and sense of balance. Manning would also face another sort of disturbance to his leadership, this one coming from within the membership of his party. A poll showed that the most popular person in the PNM was not Manning but Wendell Mottley, his Finance Minister, who subsequently was 'sidelined' which led to his decision not to run as a candidate for reelection. This incident happening just at the very beginning of the PNM campaign sent strong ripples of consternation not only among PNM members but throughout the business community, which had developed considerable confidence in the way the Finance Minister had conducted the financial affairs of the state and brought stability during turbulent times. In the election campaign the opposition parties capitalized on these events to make the additional charge that the PNM had lost its popular moorings and turned into an organization in the service of a cozy coterie of privileged persons. Panday, who in the field of candidates deployed in the 1995 campaign was "an orator without equal," unlike Manning who was not a particularly stimulating public speaker, exploited to the hilt these aspects of the PNM leadership. Hence, to the charge of arrogance of power was appended elitism, administrative incompetence, and a scent of irregularity, which were adeptly manipulated on the platform of the combined opposition parties to the detriment of the PNM.

Taken together, the superior and well-oiled UNC media and public relations campaign, the numerous conversions of prominent persons to the UNC cause, the government of national unity proposal, and 'the Manning Factor' seemed to have registered an intangible but very real psychological tilt in favor of the opposition parties, generating a momentum that placed the PNM on the defensive throughout the elections.

### **The Making of a New Government**

The 17-17-2 result ('a state of betweenness,' as it was referred to) imposed the demand for a coalition government, the first in Trinidad and Tobago's history. Robinson and the NAR, who were comprehensively defeated in 1991, held the balance with their two Tobago seats. While it was true that the UNC and NAR leaders met prior to the elections and agreed to cooperate in the defeat of the PNM, the arrangement was very informal and incomplete, in part because of the

improbability of vanquishing the formidable and well-financed PNM, even to the minimal extent of a draw between the main parties plus the two NAR seats. To be sure, Panday just about a week before the election polls had publicly predicted a 17–17–2 result, though all the public opinion projections declared the PNM a foregone winner. After the vote, Robinson now holding the balance in the face of no firm undertaking to join the UNC in forming the next government, the country was thrown into two days of speculation about the shape of the next government and whether the electorate had to return to the polls. Robinson and Manning were not on good personal terms and Robinson had made the remark during the campaign that “if he reached heaven and saw Manning there, he was turning back.”<sup>34</sup> But there were also objective grounds to assume that Robinson would choose to go with the UNC, even though he had scheduled meetings with both Manning and Panday thus adding to the suspense and uncertainty. During the elections Manning and the PNM had committed one major error that deeply offended Robinson in that they sought to undercut the NAR leader’s influence in Tobago by striking a secret devolution deal with the leaders of the Tobago House of Assembly without consulting Robinson and went one step further in mounting a vigorous campaign that accused Robinson of “using Tobago’s electorate as a bargaining chip for his own ambitions.”<sup>35</sup> Tobago was Robinson’s territory and the PNM had sought to undercut his influence and failed. Another incident during the first week of the election campaign would see Robinson and Manning at each other’s throats over the latter’s role in the Muslimeen uprising in 1990. During the insurrection the Parliament was forcibly occupied, the cabinet taken hostage, Robinson was shot in the knee and savagely brutalized.<sup>36</sup> As mentioned earlier, Manning was present in the Parliament until an hour or so before the assault took place. His fortuitous departure invited speculation whether he knew in advance of and actually abetted the insurrection. The matter was shelved until the election campaign in 1995 when both Robinson and Abu Bakr, the Muslimeen leader, publicly said that Manning knew of the impending assault.<sup>37</sup> Manning sued Bakr, Robinson, and the news organization that reported on the event for defamation but with the object of silencing discussion of the issue in the elections.<sup>38</sup> Hence, these two events as well as the meetings between Robinson and Panday over UNC-NAR collaboration in the campaign all suggested that Robinson

---

<sup>34</sup> Kathy A. Waterman, “The Making of a Government,” *Sunday Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> “PNM Tells Tobago We Are Sorry,” *Express*, October 20, 1995, p. 4; see also “It’s Licks on November 6, 1995,” *Sunday Express*, 5 November 1995, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas’s review of S. Ryan’s “The Muslimeen Grab for Power” in *The Caribbean Review of Books*, no. 2, 1991, 1; also, B. Ragoonauth, “The Muslimeen Attempt to Overthrow the Government of Trinidad and Tobago,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Studies*, July 1993.

<sup>37</sup> “Manning Knew...,” op. cit. (Note 18); also “ANR Agrees...,” op. cit. (note 19).

<sup>38</sup> F. Wilson, “Manning Sues Bakr,” *Sunday Express*, 20 October 1995, p. 1.

was most likely to join Panday in forming the next government. When eventually Robinson and Manning were scheduled to explore the possibility of a coalition, Robinson stood Manning up which suggested that some sort of old score was being settled.

The UNC-NAR coalition acceded to power on December 8 with Panday as Prime Minister and Robinson as “Minister Extraordinaire,” an ambiguous title. The coalition agreement which was made public proposed that the PNM secret arrangement with the Tobago House of Assembly on devolution be set aside and a new formula be enacted around the recommendations of House Paper No. 6 of 1978 under which Tobago would be accorded substantial self-government. In effect this would consolidate Robinson’s base in the greater autonomy of Tobago.<sup>39</sup> Calling itself a coalition ‘party of partners’ and not a fusion of parties, the agreement also contained provisions for resolving inter UNC-NAR conflicts and consolidating their cooperation.

The Panday-led coalition government, which brought for the first time an Indian and a trade unionist to power, potentially represented striking if not radical departures from the past. In particular, the ascension of an Indian to the Prime Ministership carried the greatest anxiety, especially for the African community long accustomed to the idea of a Creole chief executive as a sort of rightful inheritance. Above all, the future of the UNC-led coalition would be at the mercy of African-Indian relations. The fact of an Indian Prime Minister is fraught with symbolism of power and domination, an intangible factor of potentially explosive implications to the proportions of an all-out civil war. Much nervousness and malaise prevailed in Port of Spain and the PNM strongholds after the cliffhanger election results were announced in favor of the UNC. The very indecisiveness of the results generated instability. Commented one newspaper: “One false move, one inflammatory statement by any of you can reduce Trinidad and Tobago to chaos. The Africans in the east-west corridor are moving around in stunned silence, many disbelieving the results projected on TV.”<sup>40</sup> Indians were advised “not to rub salt in the wound. The friction from that attitude can generate flames which could create chaos on the corridor.”<sup>41</sup> Panday himself threatened to deal out harsh retribution to any UNC supporter who used ethnic slurs in their celebrations of victory. While Panday was announcing that “it was time to love again” as he embraced with Robinson reminiscent of the ‘One Love’ campaign that the two leaders had conducted in 1986 to bring the NAR to power, the situation was tense and unstable throughout the country in the wake of the election results. While the PNM leader had said on the day before the polls were open that “it was either the PNM or chaos,” a veiled threat about the consequences

---

<sup>39</sup> Ralph R. Premdas and H. Williams, “Self-Determination in the Caribbean: Tobago,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, fall 1990.

<sup>40</sup> “Fragile Peace in the Corridor,” *Bomb*, 10 November 1995, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

of a UNC victory,<sup>42</sup> the editorial in the most widely distributed newspapers in the country saw the results as a “challenge in our becoming a nation.”<sup>43</sup>

The eminent political commentator Lloyd Best put the matter of coping with the Indian-African malaise in telling metaphors while noting that Indians were descendants of indentured laborers who were isolated on the Caroni sugar plains of Trinidad: “Well, have we not made history? Perhaps the Caroni volcano did not quite erupt. It has shaken the premises of our government and politics to their foundations.”<sup>44</sup> Noting the historic rural-urban pattern of Indian-African settlement in Trinidad, Best described the UNC victory as “a plantation party disguising its entry into the city.”<sup>45</sup> The ascent of the UNC into the cockpit of power portended an upsetting of the traditional sectoral distribution of spheres of power with Indians in control of much of agriculture and small businesses in the economy and Africans in control of the government. Best admonished the UNC-led government for its own sake not to quickly upset the equation of power, especially in the public bureaucracy which has been politicized under past PNM governments and made into a preserve of the Creole section. Said Best: “The immediate task is public administration in the teaching, protective, and judicial services. In the absence of a properly equipped party, Williams (the founder of the PNM and first Prime Minister) necessarily politicized their functioning and recruited a cadre of his own. He never bothered either to make the change explicit or introduce the safeguards that it clearly demanded. Instead he muzzled dissent and ostracized opposition. Precisely because he, his sherpas and mandarins are in some ways alienated from the ethos and culture of Port of Spain, Panday may find this to be the most challenging of his problems. It is one that he will at his peril solve by inducting or promoting Indians to sensitive areas.”<sup>46</sup>

Public service, which is the vehicle through which the UNC-led government must execute its policies, is under the command of a set of Creole professionals at the most strategic senior levels of decision-making. To facilitate his rule, Panday has appointed Wade Mark, the Creole Chairman of the UNC as the Minister of the Public Service who must engineer the reforms in the administrative structures of the government, especially in the area of recruitment. The UNC had promised during the election campaign to pay the huge debt that the government owes to civil servants, \$2 billion (TT), and this could be one way for the new government to ingratiate itself with the public service. The ethnic problem of the public service in part is focused around the political leadership of the police and military services. Panday deftly resolved this issue in the

---

<sup>42</sup> *Sunday Express*, 7 November 1995, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> “Testing Time for T&T,” *Express*, 7 November 1995, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Lloyd Best, “Panday Playing for Time,” *Sunday Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Lloyd Best, “Cabinet Shows Shift in Center of Gravity,” *Sunday Express*, 19 November 1995, p. 1.

appointment of the former Creole commander of the armed forces, Joe Theodore, as Minister of National Security.

In assuming control of the government, the UNC is caught in the crossfire of both Indian and African demands, with one volley emanating from the African public service technocracy insisting that its traditional privileges and prerogatives be maintained and the other volley coming from Indians demanding equality and entry in not only the job-replete public service but also the distribution of projects and other benefits. How these two claims are reconciled in what is essentially a zero sum game in which one community can only benefit at the expense of the other will determine the stability of the Panday-led regime and its very hold on power. The Robinson factor cannot be offended, and should the PNM jettison Manning as leader this may easily pave the way for Robinson to bolt the coalition for a PNM-NAR government.

Even if the UNC can quell the immediate needs of the NAR and the public service, it will still need to deal with the storm of apprehensions of the big business community. As a trade union leader, Panday had referred to the big business sector, which is ethnically dominated by French Creoles and by multinational corporations, as “the parasitic oligarchy.” In an age of structural adjustment and falling trade barriers in a Trinidad economy built around capitalist enterprise and foreign investment, the UNC leader needed to placate the fears of the business community. The Chamber of Commerce was so apprehensive of Panday acceding to power in the 17–17–2 results that it became actively involved in lobbying for a PNM-NAR government.<sup>47</sup> This effort failed, but Panday on assuming power moved swiftly to assuage business fears and a run on the floating Trinidad currency by appointing Brian Kuei Tung, a Chinese businessman (and UNC financial backer) as Finance Minister, and Mervyn Assam, a businessman, as Minister of Trade and Industry. While all of this succeeded in temporarily maintaining calm on the business and financial front, the fact of Panday’s connections and obligations to the labor unions had to be reconciled to the equation. The NATUC leader, Errol Mcleod, had supported Panday in the elections, and the UNC had committed itself to alleviating poverty and unemployment in the country, all suggesting redistributive policies at the expense of business.

The campaign strategy and tactics designed by the parties were the means by which they sought to capture a majority of seats in Parliament and, hence, power. In assigning a variable role to campaign organization and technique, it is assumed that the voter’s preferences are not foreclosed by race or any similar firm factor. This is a critical idea in the study of elections in communal settings, since a closed system of voter choice marginalizes the independent role of such variables as issues and campaign strategy. In the Trinidad and Tobago context the campaign methodology followed a commonly shared set of modalities and procedures among the

---

<sup>47</sup> C. Maharaj, “Power Plays behind the Throne,” *Sunday Express*, 12 November 1995, p. 4.

competing parties. In part this was dictated by the constitutional format under which the electorate was divided into 36 constituencies, each to be won by a plurality of votes in a game of first-past-the post. Only adult citizens, males and females 18 years and above, were registered and were eligible to vote in their respective constituencies.

These structural electoral facts in part dictated that campaign techniques had to be focused around the individual idiosyncrasies of each constituency, specifically with regard to their ethnic, religious, and class compositions. A finely tuned strategy sought to combine the demographic and behavioral elements of each constituency in a coalition likely to confer victory. In practice, this entailed the use of a standard set of perfunctory campaign organizational techniques combined with unique insights and good fortune in the mobilization of votes for a victory formula.

The organizational format in campaigning for each party was similar in structure but different in delivery capability and traditional practices. The three major parties penetrated each constituency with their basic 'grassroots' party unit or group located around each polling division. Each constituency had a number of polling divisions and each put in place a constituency executive group which in turn was subdivided into polling division units equipped with their own staff canvassers. It was the task of each constituency party group to map comprehensively its polling divisions so that a portrait of the ethnic, economic, and religious characteristics of voters could be ascertained. These data serve as the raw materials for identifying three categories of voters:

1. 'core' or loyal supporters;
2. 'marginals' in need of conversion; and
3. 'die-hard' opposition party supporters.

As a matter of first priority, each party had attended to its core supporters and thereafter focused its efforts on the 'marginals' or floating voters. Voters and constituency areas that are perceived as constituting opposition 'faithfuls' and strongholds tended to be neglected in practice. As a result of this tactic of selective canvassing, plus the fact that in a number of cases party canvassers are openly afraid to enter an area perceived as belonging to the domain of an opponent, most constituencies throughout the country had not been crisscrossed comprehensively by all the parties. In an election where ethnic preference became salient the consequence of this practice was the reinforcement of old voting patterns. In the 1991 elections, the presence of the NAR as a multiethnic party without a 'natural' traditional ethnic constituency such as was associated with the PNM and UNC meant that the old selective practices of ethnically directed campaign behavior were partially breached but not so much by the PNM or UNC as by the NAR in desperate quest for

votes wherever they could be found. The PNM and UNC had to protect their old ramparts from NAR raids.

The method of access to each voter and household was through individual house-to-house canvassing and small group, household, and neighborhood gatherings called 'cottage' meetings. Parties such as the PNM had fashioned the 'cottage' meeting into an effective tradition with a semipermanent cadre of grassroots party activists and homes always available for activation and mobilization, especially in loyal core areas. It is at this level of intimate interpersonal communication that each party had hoped to consolidate its support. When it seemed that the NAR as the ruling party with its access to a huge reservoir of resources was about to outspend other parties at the level of the mass media campaign, the PNM reacted by saying that it was going to deploy 50 grassroots canvassers for every 50 dollars that the NAR spent on advertisements. The PNM bragged that it could mobilize as many as 100,000 canvassers and was aiming at getting their campaigners into 75% of households. Lacking funds, the UNC similarly converted this deficiency into a virtue, promising to minimize buying mass media 'propaganda' and rely more on the 'personal touch.' In every case, however, the parties realized that the campaign canvasser was to be located at the very front line of their efforts. Often canvassers came in 'blitzes,' moving as waves of small groups sometimes in the company of the candidates calling on the homes of voters for quick visits. Most often these were periodic superficial affairs which were intended to convey the impression of a popular party presence.

The mass of canvassers who made 'sweeps' through a polling division was often supplemented at a more intense level by solicitations by community leaders. This technique was particularly intended for the conversion of 'marginals' and 'floaters.' In every constituency a roster was maintained of community leaders such as schoolteachers, preachers, businessmen, sports leaders, senior civil servants, and social workers, many of these persons serving as officials in local clubs and sociocultural voluntary organizations. These were the party's influentials from whom the party's polling and constituency committees were composed and oftentimes the source from which candidates were selected. Usually a party's candidate for a constituency was someone with a long list of service in community organizations. Even where a candidate lacked these credentials, he or she was still sold to the constituency in this wrapping of community service. Community leaders, constituting a critical tier of citizenry, operated in a network exerting continuing influence on behalf of the party at the grassroots. When a party sought to penetrate another's stronghold of support, often this was done at the level of community leaders. During the 1991 elections several of these persons long associated with one or the other party, when converted, were paraded on party platforms as proof of extensive party support.

The canvassers and community leaders were usually the carriers of the party's paraphernalia of buttons, T-shirts, posters, and messages. They made the party literally visible in

the constituency by constantly parading and placing on display all the physical symbols of the party's campaign presence. The collection of party activists, party paraphernalia, music, cottage meetings, and visible up-and-down movements, especially within areas that were already captured as well as small townships, markets, and shopping malls, all added up to a formidable phalanx and in some constituencies they engaged in fierce competition for party allegiances on the microlevel of the campaign. The PNM, out of power, was able to devote full time to grassroots campaigning and sustained this exercise of ongoing party activism in its basic form for almost a year prior to the elections. The UNC was not able to do this overtly or as comprehensively as the PNM, mainly because it was embroiled in its own party in-fighting. But the UNC had its network of canvassers and community leaders lying dormant for activation as the election date came closer. The NAR was able to recruit a number of converts at the grassroots level from both the PNM and UNC. Through a variety of programs sponsored by the government such as National Service, Y.E.S.S., E.C.H.O., and cooperatives, the NAR has weaned away a number of PNM and UNC supporters. It seemed to many observers that the NAR had succeeded in a large number of areas in displacing old voter loyalties through its assiduous activities among community leaders at the grassroots. It was, however, not clear how many of these persons were real converts to the NAR and how many enlisted for jobs and patronage.

At a macrolevel in support of the grassroots political organizations were party advertisements and events which served to link all the constituency and subconstituency groups into an integrated dynamic national unit. Among the activities of the macroparty campaign were mass meetings which were often attended by party activists from other constituencies and on whose platforms speakers and candidates from other constituencies appeared. The mass meetings tended to occur at various levels ranging from individual constituency meetings to regional and national gatherings. These mass gatherings were all characterized by a level of theater that maximized the party's image as a popular, multiethnic, vibrant and optimistic organization. The staging was marked by party music arranged for the occasion; the speakers were well orchestrated so as to include local leaders and national figures, small parochial issues and national debates; and in all cases a major effort was made to have a flamboyant display of party flags, buttons, and placards in concentrated mass formation. The design of this show was often a work of art; high tech entertainment intended to lure everyone to come for a social as well as a political treat. The idea was in part an image of party popularity and strength.

## Conclusion: Towards a Resolution

In the 1995 elections wider issues with immense theoretical significance had been embedded. Was race and ethnicity becoming erased by rational issue-oriented politics? Will Trinidad point the way to other Third World countries in overcoming the claims of communalism? Most Third World countries have suffered from the ravages of internal ethnic conflict. Development has been derailed by uncompromising ethnic rivalry. Elections have tended to be bound by competitive communal parties and sectionally divided electorates. The upshot has been political instability and the fall of the democratic process itself. Military coups and one-party systems in the Third World became the norm. Trinidad's postindependence politics, erected on its ethnically plural society, had fallen partly into the Third World pattern of divisive communal politics.<sup>48</sup>

On a larger canvas, a more basic set of issues was engaged by the general elections in Trinidad. Specifically, stemming from the potential of ethnic conflict to frustrate efforts at development, should openly competitive elections to secure a legitimate government be retained? Elections in the plural societies of the Third World tend to involve destructive collective communal struggles among sectionally based parties. Sir Arthur Lewis, the Caribbean Nobel Laureate, identified communal conflict as the single most significant factor that inhibits Third World development. Said Lewis: "... each country contains several tribes, living at different economic levels. Tribal consciousness and economic differences combine to produce mutual antagonisms which menace the unity of the state. The fundamental problem is neither economic nor foreign policy, but the creation of nations out of heterogeneous peoples."<sup>49</sup>

Communal conflict tends to be built on several coinciding cleavages such as culture, language, religion, race, etc.<sup>50</sup> In Trinidad the ethnic matrices were erected around race, religion, and culture. These discrete features provided the boundaries of identity construction, creating communal compartments which are exploited during elections for office. Democratic elections in an open system of discourses invite appeals for votes based on ethnic identity. In the give and take of the electoral campaign, negative ethnic stereotypes are often invoked and manipulated for

---

<sup>48</sup> See D. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Ralph R. Premdas, *Ethnicity and Development* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1991); C. Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976); and R.S. Milne, *Politics in Ethnically Bipolar States* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982).

<sup>49</sup> W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), 49.

<sup>50</sup> See L. Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); Ralph R. Premdas, *Ethnicity and Development: The Case of Fiji* (London: Avebury Press, 1995); and D. Horowitz, *op. cit.*

votes. Consequently, intersectional animosity and distrust rise to new levels at elections time.<sup>51</sup> After the elections are over, the ethnic distrust that was cultivated does not disappear but is retained as a residue on which new fears are built. Hence, over several competitive open elections, the level of ethnic fear grows in a game over which the spoils of victory assume greater importance. In the zero-sum contest for votes, more than just office and jobs are at stake, even as important as these are. The arousal of interethnic fears over several successive elections tends to destroy the basis of trust in a government captured by one or the other ethnic group. Together then, the zero-sum structure of the electoral contest as well as the increasing momentum of interethnic fears over several elections create the incendiary basis for an ethnic conflagration.

Elections serve, therefore, as a critical variable in unleashing ethnic tensions and turmoil. In part the problem clearly also revolves around the zero-sum exclusionary contest in elections which tends to empower a part of the society while alienating others. For Sir Arthur Lewis this was not a necessary outcome. He advocated a system of consociational sharing: "It is necessary to get right away from the idea that somebody is to prevail over somebody else, from politics as a zero-sum game. Words like 'winning' and 'losing' have to be banished from the political vocabulary of a plural society."<sup>52</sup> He argued that "some kind of coalition is indicated because no numerous and politically conscious group is willing to be ruled by others."<sup>53</sup> Lewis inveighed against politics based on ethnic dominance: "...this view of politics is not just irrelevant; it is totally immoral, inconsistent with the primary meaning of democracy and destructive of any prospect of building a nation in which different peoples might live together in harmony."<sup>54</sup> He took umbrage at the excesses of majoritarian democracy in these polyethnic states: "...the parties have been reared on the erroneous definition of democracy, by which it means that the majority is entitled to rule over the minority. The divine right of the majority rule has played such an important role in the struggle for independence that many people have come to believe in it."<sup>55</sup>

Trinidad's political system has lent itself to such a practice of ethnic repression.<sup>56</sup> Elections have served not as a mechanism to weld a diverse people together but to signal a struggle for ethnic assertion and superiority. In part, this evolved not so much out of a conspiracy by ethnic chauvinists but from the fact of interethnic fear of domination by another communal section. It was in a quest for self-protection that ethnic assertion was first born and then

---

51 Premdas, *Ethnicity and Development*, op. cit. (note 48).

52 Lewis, op. cit., 67; see also Ralph R. Premdas, "The Politics of Inter-Ethnic Accommodation: The Lewis Model" in *Sir Arthur Lewis: An Economic and Political Portrait* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1991), 71–92.

53 Lewis, op. cit.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 76.

56 See Ralph R. Premdas, "Ethnic Conflict Regulation in Trinidad and Tobago" in *Trinidad Ethnicity*, ed. K. Yelvington (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993).

deteriorated in turn into a form of domination after victory was won at elections, especially when supporters demanded patronage and refused to share spoils with their ethnic adversaries. Lewis proposed a solution to this dilemma by advocating a system of proportional sharing in government: "...instead of the President sending for the leaders of the largest party to form a cabinet, the rule may well tell him to send for the leaders of every party which has received more than 20% of the votes and divide the cabinet seats between them."<sup>57</sup>

In the system of sharing inheres the larger issue of legitimacy of government. Legitimacy is especially problematic in multiethnic states. Recognition of a government's right to rule is in part imparted by a sense of sharing in the fruits of governing. In the relatively impoverished societies of the Third World the act of sharing very limited resources with ethnic adversaries is especially difficult. The western tradition of patronage assumes a different form in the unintegrated societies of the Third World. Because parties tend to be erected around ethnic population clusters, patronage assumes an aura of rewarding an ethnic family member and excluding an ethnic enemy. The symbolism that inheres in patronage drives the communities further apart and generates a new round of ethnic assertions and militancy. The unity of the state is further impaired and cross-ethnic legitimacy is lost. Thereafter, like a house of falling dominoes, one thing leads inevitably and uncontrollably to another, culminating in the construction of ethnically repressive regimes with the excluded groups seeking ways and means to sabotage the state peacefully or by insurrectionary acts.<sup>58</sup>

In the longer perspective, Sir Arthur Lewis's proposals were intended to address the problem of democracy and development in the Third World. He said democracy inheres not only in the practice of compromise in the accommodation of diverse interests but, most significantly, in the creation of a healthful environment for development. For Lewis the dynamic of development is fully unleashed only when a society is free, open, and accommodative of all interests. Elections that systematically constrict the representation of interests of large sections of the population tend to be counterproductive in stimulating development. The excluded sections are apt to withdraw their support, often engage in acts of noncooperation, sabotage, and migration and, in the end, enfeeble the entire effort aimed at social and economic transformation. Elections in Third World countries in particular have implicit development features built into them, therefore.

---

<sup>57</sup> Lewis, op. cit., 83.

<sup>58</sup> Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*, op. cit. (note 2); also Ralph R. Premdas, et al. (eds.), *Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).