

Trinidad and Tobago

Country:Trinidad and Tobago**Year:**

2016

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

2

Civil Liberties:

2

Aggregate Score:

81

Freedom Rating:

2.0

Overview:

General elections held in September 2015 led to the defeat of Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's People's Partnership (PP) coalition government by the People's National Movement (PNM), led by Keith Rowley. In the lead-up to the vote, several incidents shook the political landscape. In May, a parliamentary majority suspended Rowley from the legislature due to his role in the so-called "emailgate" scandal, in which alleged government emails shared by Rowley connected several officials to abuse of office and other crimes. Also in May, police arrested Jack Warner, Independent Liberal Party leader and former vice president of FIFA, the global soccer governing body. The arrest followed a request by U.S. authorities, who filed charges against Warner and several others for fraud and related malfeasance in FIFA operations. Separately, several cabinet ministers and other high-ranking officials faced administrative penalties during the year—including dismissal from the PP government—for suspected malfeasance.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**Political Rights: 33 / 40 [Key]****A. Electoral Process: 11 / 12**

The president is elected to a five-year term by a majority of the combined houses of Parliament, though executive authority rests with the prime minister. Parliament consists of the 41-member House of Representatives and the 31-member Senate; members of both houses are elected to five-year terms. The president appoints 16 senators on the advice of the prime minister, 6 on the advice of the opposition, and 9 at his or her own discretion.

Anthony Carmona has held the presidential seat since 2013. The most recent general elections were held in September 2015 and led to a change of government. The PNM, which had been in opposition since 2010, won 23 seats, while the ruling PP took 18. PNM leader Rowley took office as prime minister.

The Elections and Boundaries Commission, which oversees the conduct of elections, extended voting by one hour due to heavy rain on the island of Trinidad. Persad-Bissessar's United National Congress (UNC), the majority PP member, challenged the decision in court, arguing that the extension was unconstitutional. Trinidad and Tobago's appeal court voted in favor of the UNC in November, allowing the party to officially contest results in six constituencies. Subsequent proceedings were ongoing at year's end.

A controversial 2014 constitutional reform bill stalled in 2015, and neither government expressed intentions to pursue it further. Among other things, the bill sought to limit the time a prime minister could stay in office, to allow for the recall of members of the House of Representatives, and to require that electoral candidates win a majority—rather than a plurality—of votes in single-member districts to gain seats.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 13 / 16

A wide range of political parties operate in Trinidad and Tobago. After the country gained independence in 1962, the PNM dominated the political landscape for several decades. However, increasingly diverse political groupings have been able to compete for power in recent years, and the political arena is now largely divided between the PNM and the PP, which consists of the UNC, the Congress of the People, the Tobago Organization of the People, and the National Joint Action Committee.

Political parties are technically multiethnic, though the PNM is favored by Afro-Trinidadians, while the UNC is affiliated with Indo-Trinidadians; the PP coalition overall represents multiethnic interests.

C. Functioning of Government: 9 / 12

Corruption remains a pervasive problem in Trinidad and Tobago, which was ranked 72 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. A number of legislators and other high-ranking officials were either forced to resign, suspended from their duties, or dismissed in 2015 for suspected abuse of office and other misdeeds. In February, Persad-Bissessar requested the resignation of Anand Ramlogan and Gary Griffith from the posts of attorney general and minister of national security, respectively; the two faced accusations of tampering with witnesses in a defamation lawsuit filed against Rowley. Separately, in May, the U.S. Department of Justice filed charges against Warner for racketeering, fraud, money laundering, and bribery in connection to his role as FIFA vice president. Trinidadian police arrested Warner, and U.S. officials sought his extradition to face charges. He launched a challenge against the extradition request, and the case was ongoing at year's end.

Trinidad's Integrity Commission, established in 2000, has the power to investigate public officials' financial and ethical performance. In May 2015, the body concluded its inquiry into "emailgate," a scandal that emerged in 2013 when Rowley shared emails seemingly implicating Persad-Bissessar, Ramlogan, and other senior figures in serious crimes, including conspiracy to harm a journalist, illegal surveillance, and obstruction of justice. The accused officials as well as several independent entities contested the authenticity of the emails, and the Integrity Commission concluded that there was insufficient evidence of any serious wrongdoing. The commission's conclusions were not

without controversy; the deputy chairman of the body resigned due to disagreement with the termination of the investigation.

Drug-related corruption extends to the business community, and a significant amount of money is believed to be laundered through front companies. The 2000 Proceeds of Crime Act imposes severe penalties for money laundering and requires that major financial transactions be strictly monitored. Legislators approved a new law in January 2015 that will create a special office to oversee and regulate matters related to public procurement.

Civil Liberties: 48 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

Freedom of speech is constitutionally guaranteed. Press outlets are privately owned and vigorously pluralistic. There are three daily newspapers and several weeklies, as well as private and public broadcast media outlets. Internet access is unrestricted. Media advocates have expressed concerns that the Defamation and Libel Act of 2013 has the potential to limit press freedom. In June 2015, the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago voiced alarm at threats and harassment against journalists, asking law enforcement agencies to step up protection efforts.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government honors this provision in practice. Academic freedom is generally observed, and private conversations are not surveilled or sanctioned by the state.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

Freedoms of association and assembly are respected. Civil society is relatively robust, with a range of interest groups engaged in the political process. Labor unions are well-organized and politically active, though union membership has declined in recent years. Strikes are legal and occur frequently.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16

The judicial branch is independent, though subject to some political pressure and corruption. Rising crime rates have produced a severe backlog in the court system. Corruption in the police force, often drug-related, is endemic, and misconduct by officers sometimes leads to the dismissal of criminal cases. Most abuses by the authorities go unpunished. Trinidad and Tobago has a mandatory death sentence for murder on the books, but no one has been executed since 1999. The death penalty was a major topic of debate in 2015, with Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi—who replaced Ramlogan—voicing support for reviving its application. Most prisons are severely overcrowded.

The government has struggled in recent years to address violent crime. Many Trinidadians of East Indian descent, who are disproportionately targeted for abduction, blame the increase in violence and kidnapping on government and police corruption.

Racial disparities persist, with Indo-Trinidadians comprising a disproportionate percentage of the country's upper class. Same-sex sexual relations are illegal, though the law is not generally enforced. Human rights groups have criticized the government's unwillingness to address

discrimination and violence against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people in Trinidad and Tobago.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16

There are no undue restrictions on freedom of movement and the right to choose one's residence. Citizens are free to seek admission to local educational institutions and engage in commercial activity, though corruption in the business sector impedes equality of opportunity.

Domestic violence as well as violence based on gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation remain significant concerns. A draft policy on gender and development was introduced for legislative discussion in 2009 and submitted to the cabinet in 2012, but has since stalled. In the September 2015 vote, 13 women won seats in the House of Representatives, one of whom became speaker; nine women also gained ministerial positions in the 24-member cabinet.

The U.S. State Department's 2016 *Trafficking in Persons* report placed Trinidad and Tobago on its Tier 2 Watch List, but noted that the government elected in September 2015 boosted antitrafficking efforts, including by increasing funding, trainings for police, and educational campaigns.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

Source URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/trinidad-and-tobago>