

**ETHNORACIAL RELATIONS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO:  
ANALYZING HOW RACIAL DIVISIONS AMONG POLITICAL PARTIES BLOCK  
PROGRESSIVE REALIZATION**

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## Abstract

The country of Trinidad and Tobago has held longstanding tensions between its two dominant ethnoracial groups: Afro-Trinidadians (Black) and Indo-Trinidadians (East Indian), despite ratifying the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973 with zero reservations.<sup>1</sup> The present ethnoracial tensions, despite not being outright violent, have greatly influenced the culture of the islands both socially and systemically. Race is frequently discussed and weaponized in politics to the point where the competing political parties are divided by ethnicity and is used as a focal point in their campaigns to draw in voters of the matching demographic. The existing prejudices that fuel the current political system are a violation of ICERD Article 4. This Article contends State Parties should be condemning propaganda based on theories or ideas of racial or ethnic superiority over other groups rather than promoting or justifying them.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, there have been no interventions from the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination or other human rights committees based on racial discrimination. As a result: racial discrimination coupled with other human rights violations continue to persist within the country. Such examples include the disadvantaged standings of social, cultural, and economic rights that the Black and Indian populations face as well as the climate of crime through gang activity. This paper, therefore, argues that the racialization occurring within Trinidadian politics is negatively affecting the State and diverting it from fulfilling its obligations. I seek to explore Trinidad and Tobago's political system through a racial lens and highlight the consequences of the population prioritizing voting based on their ethnoracial identity rather than the society's collective need for improvement.

Keywords: Trinidad and Tobago, Ethnoracial, Politics, Race, Racialization, Ethnicity, Indo-Trinidadian, Afro-Trinidadian, Human Rights, Rights, Progressive Realization, People's National Movement (PNM), United National Congress (UNC), Crime, Racism, Socioeconomics, Critical Race Theory (CRT)

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. 2025. *United Nations Treaty Collection*. Accessed February 25, 2025. <https://treaties.un.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 2106. 1965. *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. (ICERD) December 21. Accessed September 9, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>. Article 4

## Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago is a multi-ethnic twin island that has two dominant ethnoracial groups: Afro-Trinidadians, who are of Black/African descent, and Indo-Trinidadians, who are of East Indian descent. It differs from other islands in the Anglophone Caribbean as the only island that does not have an Afro-Caribbean majority; containing the most ethnically diverse population in the Anglophone Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> While this diversity enhances the rich culture of the island, it also comes with certain tensions. The Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian populations remain strained in relations, and their disdain for each other has caused them to divide themselves. This division extends not just to everyday living (i.e. social interactions and living arrangements being largely divided by ethnoracial community) but also goes as far as politics: where the parties are separated by ethnicity. Trinidad and Tobago is a two-state party in a constant battle for dominance: The People's National Movement (PNM) (the Afro-Trinidadian party) and The United National Congress (UNC) (the Indo-Trinidadian party). Although there are very few instances of violent non-political acts perpetuated from one group onto the other based on their ethnic makeup after the country gained its independence, there still exists blatant favoritism taking place within the political sphere.<sup>4</sup> Each party markets itself toward the ethnic demographic that their party is comprised of. This greatly influences how the country is run, and the varied human rights issues concerning racial discrimination, socioeconomic inequality, and crime; all of which affect the State's overall advancement to progressive realization. Progressive realization covers a government's responsibility to move forward with human rights development and security, outlining that they must ensure rights are obtained throughout State development.<sup>5</sup> By this standard, racial discourse is inhibiting this progress.

The ethnic split between the parties promotes a continued division amongst the population, as ethnicity takes precedence over policy for the voters; Afro-Trinidadians will vote for the PNM because it is Black-led, and Indo-Trinidadians will vote for the UNC because it is East Indian-led. This mirrors the political dynamics of Guyana, where politicians have been

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly, M. D. A. 2023. The changing terrain of racial inequality in Trinidad and Tobago. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 86, 100826-. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2023.100826>, 1

<sup>4</sup> Kelly. 2023. *Supra*, 2

<sup>5</sup> General Comment No. 3, The Nature of States Parties' Obligations, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN Doc. E/1991/23, 14 December 1990. Para 9

criticized by the Human Rights Committee for inciting racial hostility.<sup>6</sup> The promotion of racial tensions is in direct contradiction to both parties' constitutions, where they claim one of their many objectives is to eliminate all forms of discrimination within the State.<sup>7</sup> How the government conducts itself has led to varied violations of the contents of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). This treaty outlines the definition of racial discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”<sup>8</sup> In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, the parties play into these ethnic tensions to fuel their campaigns, creating environments that justify the hatred of another group based on ethnoracial identity. They use targeted, racialized ads to degrade the other party, and partner with gang leaders to prompt their support during elections. This violates ICERD Article 4, which states

States Parties condemn all propaganda and all organizations which are based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin, or which attempt to justify or promote racial hatred and discrimination in any form, and undertake to adopt immediate and positive measures designed to eradicate all incitement to, or acts of, such discrimination and, to this end, with due regard to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the rights expressly set forth in article 5 of this Convention...<sup>9</sup>

Both parties actively use race as a focal point in their campaigns to contribute to the racial divide between the two groups on a social level, which is fostering an environment welcoming of racial discrimination. Section 3, Article 31 of the Vienna Convention reviews the general rule of

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2024. *Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Guyana*. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Geneva: United Nations. General Comment [GC] 14

<sup>7</sup> Pandey, Basdeo. 2013. "UNC Constitution." *Untcc.org*. Accessed January 10, 2025. [https://unctt.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/UNC\\_Constitution.pdf](https://unctt.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/UNC_Constitution.pdf). Article 2 (ii)-(iii); The People's National Movement. 2023. *PNM Constitution*. May. Accessed January 4, 2025. <https://s3-sa-east-1.amazonaws.com/pnm-website/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/20094908/PNM-Constitution-May-23-version-final.pdf>. Articles 2.10 & 2.12

<sup>8</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 1.1

<sup>9</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 4

interpretation for treaty bodies. In looking specifically at the contents of Article 31.1 which asserts that “A treaty shall be interpreted in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the treaty in their context and in the light of its object and purpose.”<sup>10</sup> This is further supported by Article 31.4, which covers a term being given special meaning if it is established that the parties wish this to be the case.<sup>11</sup> In this given context, the “organizations”, referenced in ICERD Article 4 can extend to that of political parties, as the original text neither specifies nor excludes it in the passage, and political organizations serve as conduits for dictating major changes and relations within the State. Article 31 also covers implementing “any relevant rules of international law applicable in the relations between the parties.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, this would have to include political parties acknowledging that they are engaging in behaviour that violates ICERD Article 4 and interventions from the Committee on Eliminating Racial Discrimination (CERD), which is noticeably absent amongst periodic reviews of human rights committees on an international scale. The absence of international intervention concerning ICERD harms how the State upholds its contents, as there is no one there to ensure they are respecting, protecting, and fulfilling their treaty obligations.

The crux of this paper can be broken down into three distinct parts. The first is the exploration of Trinidad and Tobago’s ethnoracial demographics, their histories concerning colonialism, and how those histories impact the socialized relationships amongst the dominant political parties and their voters. The second part looks at the effects of these race relations. These mainly have to do with factors concerning socioeconomic status and social standing with the contextual understanding of race as an underlying factor. It will also look at the ongoing relationship between politics and crime. I will be focusing on the influence that gangs and gang culture have on the State. The presence of gangs enhances certain negative racial stereotypes about Afro-Trinidadians as a collective. This not only contributes to their negative treatment from the opposing racial group, but the interconnectedness gangs share with politicians has corrupted the integrity of their political system. The final part focuses on potential solutions to obtaining racial harmony within the political atmosphere. These solutions will mainly address de-segregating the parties so both groups are equally represented. This is looking at practices of

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations. 1969. *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*. United Nations Treaty Series, Vienna: United Nations. Article 31.1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

decolonization as a means of directing the State toward a more unified political atmosphere. Understanding the racialization of each group and how the people (politicians and voters alike) in the modern day continue to uphold colonial sentiments towards each other is how these racial barriers will be broken. There must be an effort made to get away from colonialism by understanding how it is still being upheld despite the country being made up of an overwhelming majority of people of colour to reach progressive realization.

The argument to be made here is that race intersects with politics in a way that violates the contents of ICERD. As a result, this inhibits the State's overall progressive realization. Many of these blockages to progressive realization can be traced to the lack of incorporation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) within the State. The CRT movement focuses on studying and transforming the relations between race, racism, and power.<sup>13</sup> CRT covers how racism is repackaged with a "colourblind" approach to adapt to the modern world and maintain a sense of divisiveness that remains unaddressed, also known as the ordinariness of racism.<sup>14</sup> This paper, therefore, argues that the racialization occurring within Trinidadian politics is negatively affecting the State and diverting it from fulfilling its obligations. I seek to explore Trinidad and Tobago's political system through a racial lens and highlight the consequences of the population prioritizing voting based on their ethnoracial identity rather than the society's collective need for improvement.

### **Trinidad and Tobago – An Island Overview**

Trinidad and Tobago is home to approximately 1.4 million people.<sup>15</sup> These people come from varying ethnic/racial backgrounds (Figure 1). The country's current state concerning ethnic makeup is attributed to its violent colonial beginnings. Slavery and indentured servitude were used as conduits for building the infrastructure and economy of the country.

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<sup>13</sup> Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and ANGELA HARRIS. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition*. NYU Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg9h2>. 3

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 8

<sup>15</sup> Pawelz, Janina. "In bed with criminals: Gangs and politics in Trinidad and Tobago." *Urban Crime. An international Journal* 1, no. 2 (2020): 54-75. 60



This is in direct opposition to the treatment freed slaves received. Unlike East Indians, they were not granted land to generate wealth. As Kelly reports “Emancipated Africans who had left plantations for peasant farming and worked in non-rural areas were offered nothing. In fact, most had to resort to squatting if they could not afford the exorbitant price for modest plots of land on the outskirts of estates.”<sup>17</sup> This shows that the Indian population was given an advantage in establishing themselves independently, which helped to elevate their socioeconomic status over that of the African population post-emancipation.

The differences in treatment both ethnic groups received largely shaped their socioeconomic status. It also shaped the colonial hierarchy, which the population had been socialized to accept as their truth. Racism and classism intersect in many of the beliefs regarding prevailing racial stereotypes against both groups. Rhoda Reddock breaks down these prejudices where she illustrates the talking points of Afro-Trinidadian radio hosts, Black nationalist, and Afrocentric leaders, who reinforce racial stereotypes about Afro-Trinidadians being an economically undeveloped ethnic group; they are lazy and uneducated because unlike Indians: they did not receive any additional privileges.<sup>18</sup> These viewpoints Afro-Trinidadians parrot, are taken from Indo-Trinidadian populations who share the same sentiment. The inferiority that Afro-Trinidadians are dealt with relates to the viewing of slavery versus indentured servitude. Since the Indian population were never slaves, they were above Afro-Trinidadians according to the established colonial socioeconomic hierarchy. Because of the perceived advancement Indo-Trinidadians were given: Afro-Trinidadians follow this same rhetoric and blame them for their social and economic inferiority.

In analyzing the ethnic dynamics between these two groups, their respective treatments have helped cement the ordinariness of racism CRT addresses. There are social hierarchies in which race and class intersect in ways that determine one’s worth, which were initially created by settler colonialism. The ordinariness of racism continues to thrive in a multitude of social and

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Reddock, Rhoda. 2020. *Understanding ourselves: confronting shame, blame and internalised racism: Reimagining the Future*. September 9. Accessed January 11, 2025.  
[https://trinidadexpress.com/features/local/understanding-ourselves-confronting-shame-blame-and-internalised-racism/article\\_fb7d9eea-f232-11ea-a857-0b0d3970ce17.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/features/local/understanding-ourselves-confronting-shame-blame-and-internalised-racism/article_fb7d9eea-f232-11ea-a857-0b0d3970ce17.html). Sec 8-10

political structures because it has failed to be properly addressed.<sup>19</sup> It has only been addressed in the context of white people versus people of colour. On a larger scale, however, there is a lack in understanding of how people of colour can maintain structures of racialization and discrimination.

### **Trinidad and Tobago's Political System**

Trinidad and Tobago is currently a two-party system with rivalries between The People's National Movement (PNM) and the United National Congress (UNC). The PNM is the Afro-Trinidadian-led and oldest political party in the country. Founded and led in 1955 by Eric Williams, its establishment led to the nation's independence in 1962 and dominant African representation in government. The PNM's rival party until 1971 was the Democratic Labour Party (DLP). The DLP consisted of three multi-ethnic backgrounds: Indian, Portuguese, and Afro-Grenadian. During this time, the DLP was most popular amongst middle-class Indian voters, as the party was Indo-Trinidadian-led.<sup>20</sup> Basdeo Pandey created the UNC in 1988, becoming the first Prime Minister of Indian descent in 1995.<sup>21</sup> This party replaced the DLP and became a source of Indian representation within the State. The history of these parties demonstrates the role race plays in the political structure. The DLP's popularity with middle-class Indians stemmed from representation that the PNM lacked. The creation of the UNC established the need for Indo-Trinidadian representation in Parliament after the DLP. The PNM was a push for Afro-Trinidadian representation in government that previous parties did not have.

Since the UNC's establishment, the UNC and the PNM have been the two dominant parties within the State. Each party has a constitution which outlines its aims and obligations. The PNM's obligations refer to developing education, raising economic development, achieving a higher standard of living, eliminating crime, and eliminating discrimination via cultural collaboration and integration.<sup>22</sup> The UNC's obligations outline similar goals. They center on abiding by and respecting ethnic and cultural diversity, eliminating discrimination based on racial and economic background, developing the social and economic state of Trinidad and

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<sup>19</sup> Delgado et al. 2012. *Supra*, 8

<sup>20</sup> Brown, Kahlia. "A Brief History of Race, Politics and Division in Trinidad and Guyana." *Caribbean Quilt* 5 (2020): 44–54. doi:10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v5i0.34377. 49

<sup>21</sup> Brown. 2020. *Supra*, 51

<sup>22</sup> The People's National Movement. 2023. *Supra*. Article 2

Tobago, obtaining a higher standard of living, and involving citizen contribution to the molding of the State.<sup>23</sup>

### **Campaigns – Weaponizing Race, Contributing to Division**

Trinidad and Tobago's political structures and their corresponding discourses mirror Guyana's. Like Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana is a predominantly Afro and Indo-Caribbean country with their political parties reflecting the same homogenous ethnic makeup for each corresponding demographic.<sup>24</sup> Guyana's Afro and Indo-Caribbean parties exhibit the same behaviour of politicians and parties engaging in promoting racial division which violates the contents of ICERD Article 4. Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago are both guilty of failing to respect, protect, and fulfill the contents of ICERD Article 4, yet only one State is being recognized for inciting racial hatred.

According to Yvonne Baboolal, elections and post-election life are difficult for Trinidadians.<sup>25</sup> She quotes political scientist Dr Bishun Ragoonath, who states "It has been suggested we do not have a racial problem in T&T but it is the politicians who exacerbate the tensions between the races, particularly when there are elections."<sup>26</sup> Politicians have a habit of using old racialized stereotypes of each group and deny doing so when there is a negative response to it. In the same breath, however, both parties have gone on record to say that they are aware that their votes lie with ethnic divisions,<sup>27</sup> so they use that to their advantage when campaigning. Campaigns conducted by both parties have had histories of centering race in their discussions.

In 2018, during a PNM event, a skit was performed by one of the party's members about a woman wearing a yellow sari (the colour representing the UNC). The skit showed the woman's sari being violently ripped off by men in gorilla suits, revealing a red sari underneath (the colour representing the PNM). The PNM claimed this was a light-hearted joke to try to appeal to Indo-Trinidadian voters. Still, they received backlash for making a mockery of cultural clothing as

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<sup>23</sup> Pandey. 2013. *Supra*, Article 2 (i)-(xii)

<sup>24</sup> Brown. 2020. *Supra* 48-49

<sup>25</sup> Baboolal, Yvonne. 2020. *Politicians Blamed for Racial Tensions*. August 31. Accessed January 22, 2025.

[https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/politicians-blamed-for-racial-tensions/article\\_0bd0fabcb21-11ea-99a7-7bd4ff2871b5.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/politicians-blamed-for-racial-tensions/article_0bd0fabcb21-11ea-99a7-7bd4ff2871b5.html). Sec. 8, 9 & 11

<sup>26</sup> Baboolal. 2020. *Supra*, sec 16

<sup>27</sup> Brown. 2020. *Supra*, 51

well as promoting sexual assault against Indian women.<sup>28</sup> During the 2020 election, the PNM secured 22 seats in the House of Representatives over the UNC's 19.<sup>29</sup> Both campaigns were heavily run based on race, referencing it in ads and campaign speeches<sup>30</sup>, further promoting that the population's interests must align primarily on ethnicity and policy second. The UNC put out a campaign ad depicting Afro-Trinidadians as economically disadvantaged and surviving on handouts, stating that they would fix these issues of Black impoverishment and help Afro-Trinidadians in their campaign.<sup>31</sup> This narrative was based on racist, stereotypical notions surrounding Afro-Trinidadians that portrayed them as the ethnic group with the lowest economic standing within the country. Upon the UNC's loss in the election, many of their voters took to social media to engage in spreading racist hatred towards the opposing party as well as the Black population. One comment called them "Cockroaches [that] keep populating."<sup>32</sup> This racist rhetoric was ignored by the UNC, only receiving backlash from the Afro-Trinidadian community and party. Failing to denounce these ideologies is an example of the State failing to fulfill its positive obligations in ensuring the protection of these groups against racialization. Both examples illustrate how Articles 4 and 1 of ICERD work in tandem to foster an environment of racial hatred and discrimination. Politicians perpetuating racial rhetoric in campaigns trickle down to the voters' attitudes, thereby influencing how they regard and treat each other.

Other instances promoting racial hatred include the PNM Government Minister made about comparing the UNC constituents to being alligators in the same murky lagoon (implying that the party is corrupt, a racial stereotype typically associated with the Indian population).<sup>33</sup> Prime Minister Keith Rowley commented the day after the 2020 general election that the vote recounts the UNC requested has an "ethnic flavour" to it. He asserted that the UNC was insinuating to the public that the PNM must have cheated due to a small victory margin and that

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<sup>28</sup> Mendes-Franco, J. 2019. Trinidad & Tobago promotes equality, but politicians often can't resist talking about race. GlobalVoices. [Trinidad & Tobago promotes equality, but politicians often can't resist talking race · Global Voices](#), sec 4

<sup>29</sup> Mendes-Franco, J. 2020. After its general election, Trinidad and Tobago's racist underbelly is showing. GlobalVoices. <https://globalvoices.org/2020/08/14/after-its-general-election-trinidad-tobagos-racist-underbelly-is-showing/>, sec 1

<sup>30</sup> Khadan, Jeetendra, Inder Ruprah, and Luisa Godinez-Puig. 2022. "Ethnic Cleavages and Vote Choice in Trinidad and Tobago." *Ethnopolitics* 22 (2): 222–52. doi:10.1080/17449057.2021.2023275. 222

<sup>31</sup> Mendes-Franco. 2020. *Supra*, sec 1

<sup>32</sup> Mendes-Franco. 2020. *Supra*, sec 3

<sup>33</sup> Baboolal 2020, *supra* Sec 25; Kernahan, Paolo. 2020. *Into the Heart of Darkness*. August 17. Accessed February 2, 2025. <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/08/17/into-the-heart-of-darkness/>. Sec 9

this move was a way for the UNC to discredit government legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> Recounts, however, are part of the democratic process and the PNM has also requested them.<sup>35</sup> So, the claim Rowley made seemed to be intended to promote racial discourse, implying that an Indian-led party could not accept a graceful loss against their Black opposition.

These are just a few of many examples wherein race is weaponized to serve as an advantage for competing political parties, thus violating the contents of ICERD Article 4. Political leaders are using propaganda-like language of racial identity to promote that one group is less trustworthy than the other, and therefore, the inferior choice for political power. Their voters harbour these racialized perceptions of the opposing group as a result. As leaders of the country, they set the standard for overall attitudes perpetuated throughout the islands. The general population witnessing their government incite racial division conveys the idea that racism is acceptable. In turn, they also engage in these divisive practices, inciting hateful and racist rhetoric to further enforce that racial division is the best way for politicians to appeal to their voting demographics. This further demonstrates the presence of the ordinariness of racism within the State's political structures. Racism is normalized in campaigning, yet both parties fail to correct their racist behavior and that of their voters.

These attitudes are identical to those of Guyana's political system. Where they deviate from Trinidad, however, is in the recognition of International Human Rights Law being broken. The Human Rights Committee and The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues have made note of Guyanese politicians stoking racial tensions and creating an environment for racial discrimination and hatred to thrive. The Human Rights Committee, for example, states in general comments 14 (a) and (b), "...The Committee is concerned about reports of: (a) the continued ethnic divide and tensions in the State party; (b) hate speech and incitement to racial hostility by politicians and public officials..."<sup>36</sup> The core issue The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues encountered were as follows

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<sup>34</sup> Kernahan 2020 *Supra*, sec 11; Singh, Renuka. 2020. *Rowley: Recount devised to delegitimise the PNM Government*. August 12. Accessed February 2, 2025. <https://www.cnc3.co.tt/rowley-recount-devised-to-delegitimise-the-pnm-government/>. Sec 4-7

<sup>35</sup> Kernahan 2020. *Supra*, sec 11

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2024. *Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Guyana*. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Geneva: United Nations. General Comment [GC] 14(a)-(b)

...every level of Guyanese society is permeated by a profound moral, emotional and political fatigue, arising out of the individual and collective impact of ethnic polarization. In 2008, the independent expert witnessed a continuing societal malaise that shows evidence of having deepened and transformed in some instances into despair, anger and resistance. This is particularly evident among Afro-Guyanese individuals and communities that reported feeling excluded, discriminated against and criminalized.<sup>37</sup>

Based on these criticisms, Trinidad and Tobago should be condemned for engaging in similar behaviour. In 2011, the former minister of national security stated, “the majority of crimes in Trinidad and Tobago are committed by Afro-Trinidadians against other Afro-Trinidadians, adding that this race also comprises the majority of the prison population.”<sup>38</sup> The UNC leader also equated young, working-class Afro-Trinidadian men to “groups of thugs.”<sup>39</sup> These examples reinforce a racial stereotype that Blackness and criminality are intertwined, which has contributed to the overpolicing and discrimination of Afro-Trinidadian men.<sup>40</sup> This demonstrates violations of ICERD Article 4 and 1 in that racial inferiority is being perpetuated toward Afro-Trinidadian men by political organizations based on racial stereotypes concerning the intersections of race and class, resulting in racial discrimination. The State continues to promote ethnic division via political campaigns, which adversely impact the attitudes each corresponding ethnic group holds toward one another. While these components contradict the contents of ICERD Article 4, there have been no interventions from CERD, or any other human rights committee to call out instances of racial discrimination.

Furthermore, there are criticisms from CERD which specifically make note of Article 4 concerning the content and form of speech (whether it is provocative), the position or status of the speaker, the reach the speech has, and the objective of the speech itself. The Committee specifically states “The Committee consistently draws attention to the role of politicians and other public opinion-formers in contributing to the creation of a negative climate towards groups protected by the Convention, and has encouraged such persons and bodies to adopt positive

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<sup>37</sup> McDougall, Gay. 2009. *Report of the independent expert on minority issues - Addendum: MISSION TO Guyana*. Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Geneva: Human Rights Council. Summary

<sup>38</sup> Kerrigan, Dylan. 2015. *Transnational Anti-Black Racism and State Violence in Trinidad*. June 29. Accessed March 2025. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/transnational-anti-black-racism-and-state-violence-in-trinidad>. Para 4

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

approaches directed to the promotion of intercultural understanding and harmony.”<sup>41</sup> This is to understand that politicians have the power to create negative perceptions of ethnoracial groups based on how they address the people and campaign, which is something Trinidad and Tobago has been doing. The absence of these critiques towards Trinidad and Tobago is problematic; it promotes the idea that racism does not exist within the State, thereby allowing the State’s government to continue to operate using racially divisive tactics to run their campaigns and stoke ethnic tensions amongst their voters.

### **Understanding Voter’s Allegiance**

Understanding the factors contributing to an individual’s voting choice is important to consider and explain the status of the political parties. The way political parties market their campaigns strongly influences which way voters are likely to sway. This can be understood through the two-party system. This is when two main parties get more than 95% of the seats, but have not had permanence in power; meaning that a political victory likely comes from one of the two parties.<sup>42</sup> One example of the two-party system can be found in Guyana between The People’s Progressive Party (PPP), which is primarily of Indo-Caribbean composition and support, and the People’s National Congress (PNCR), which is primarily of Afro-Caribbean composition and support. They are the dominant political parties in the country, and other parties that exist independently are the minorities in comparison. This mirrors the state of Trinidad and Tobago with the constant struggle for dominance between the UNC and PNM parties on both the basis of a two-party system and of ethnoracial tensions standpoint.

Because of this long-standing power struggle, both parties have garnered support based on their racial/ethnic makeup. The Black/African population votes for the PNM because it is a Black/African-led party, and the Indian population votes for the UNC because it is an Indian-led party. The segregated nature of the political parties being Afro-Trinidadian versus Indo-Trinidadian is a violation of the contents of ICERD Article 3, which asserts “States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation and apartheid and undertake to prevent, prohibit and

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<sup>41</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). 2013. *General recommendation No. 35 - Combatting Hate Speech*. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Geneva: United Nations. General Comment [GC] 15

<sup>42</sup> Siaroff, Alan. "Two-and-a-half-party systems and the comparative role of the half." *Party politics* 9, no. 3 (2003): 267-290. 272

eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction.”<sup>43</sup> State Parties are promoting party segregation via the demographics they cater to/attract as well as the composition of the parties themselves. Looking at how each party campaigns, the generated environment of racial hatred the parties perpetuate cements the divided nature of voters’ allegiances to the party that is not making racial comments against them. Voters do not want to align with a party that has profited off punching down on them. Similarly, politicians are less likely to enter a work environment where the party they represent will racialize them; thus, the parties remain largely separated based on ethnicity.

The notion behind these allegiances further stems from the feeling of representation within parliament; the ethnoracial group in power will presumably preserve the interests of the corresponding people group. This is reflected in the post-election analysis conducted in 2020. After the election, a statistical analysis was conducted on the voting demographics based on location and ethnoracial makeup. The findings supported the notion that politics and race are heavily intertwined. Laventille West and Laventille East/Morvant, which are where Afro-Trinidadians make up 79% and 71% of the residents, the PNM won by its highest margins at 72 and 67 points. Similarly, Chaguanas West, Oropouche East, and Naparima, where Indo-Trinidadians are the majority of the residents at 85%, 82%, and 77%, are where the UNC won its highest margins at 78, 60, and 66 points.<sup>44</sup> Race is further supported to be an overlapping factor amongst voters when comparing these percentages to the last census that was taken, which contended “There was a 92 per cent correlation between the proportion of Afro-Trinidadians in each constituency and the PNM’s vote share, and a 98 per cent correlation between the proportion of Indo-Trinidadian residents and UNC votes.”<sup>45</sup> A combination of Tobago’s votes and the votes of other ethnoracial demographics are what skewed the results in the PNM's favor.

As for the remainder of the population that is of neither Black nor Indian descent, or conversely, of both: their voting allegiance aligns in a different manifestation. They determine the winning party by acting as swing voters. In general, the PNM outperformed the UNC with mixed-race voters. The Afro and Indo-Trinidadian mixed population helped the party win in

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<sup>43</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 3

<sup>44</sup> Henry, Nigel. 2020. *The Race Factor*. August 16. Accessed November 15, 2024. [https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/the-race-factor/article\\_5d362dee-df61-11ea-942c-abf050b13744.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/the-race-factor/article_5d362dee-df61-11ea-942c-abf050b13744.html). Sec 2-3

<sup>45</sup> Henry 2020. *Supra* Sec 4

areas such as Arima, Toco/Sangre Grande, D'Abadie-O'Meara, Lopinot/Bon Air West, and La Horquetta/Talparo. This is where their populations are the densest. Other mixed-race demographics predominately reside in Diego Martin North/East, St Ann's East, Diego Martin Central, and Port of Spain North/St Ann's West.<sup>46</sup> Part of the contribution of race being a deciding factor amongst voters when looking at political parties can be attributed to racial stereotypes that have been previously discussed. For example, Afro-Trinidadians are hesitant to vote for the UNC because there is already the prevailing stereotype that Indians control everything. Afro-Trinidadians do not want to have a predominantly Indo-Trinidadian government as it would seem like they are giving over more power to an already powerful group. Furthermore, the sentiment that Indo-Trinidadians only look out for their own is also a factor of concern for the Black population; there is the worry that an Indian-filled government will abandon them and only support their fellow Indians.<sup>47</sup> These racial biases shape how the population feels compelled to vote. While the Indian population could say the same about the PNM only being interested in preserving the interests of the Black population, portraying Indo-Trinidadians to be controlling prompts other demographics besides Afro-Trinidadians to vote against them out of fear of being overpowered (based on prevailing racial stereotypes of Indo-Trinidadians being powerful, something Afro-Trinidadians have never been accused of having proximity to). In this context, CRT is useful for explaining how socialization plays into the perception of other races.<sup>48</sup> In this case, it extends to influencing how people are voting. So, racial stereotypes inhibit the progressive realization of the State as parties and their voters are more focused on race rather than the issues they must overcome as a collective.

This is another example of how voters' attitudes in Trinidad and Tobago strongly parallel the Guyanese voters in Guyana. The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues makes several comments about each ethnoracial group's concerns with the opposing homogeneous government ruling over them. In particular, it states

Ethnically based divisions and politics have created two separate and conflicting narratives and perceptions of reality in Guyana > on the part of the Afro-Guyanese, there is a widely held belief that they are discriminated against by an Indian-dominated and

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<sup>46</sup> Henry. 2020. *Supra*. Sec 6-7

<sup>47</sup> Brown 2020. *Supra*, 51

<sup>48</sup> Delgado et al. 2012. *Supra*, 8-9

supported Government that puts Indian interests to the fore, particularly in resource allocation, government contracts and employment > on the part of the Indian-Guyanese, there is a belief that an Afro-centric political opposition, if in power, would settle political scores and work solely in the interests of Afro-Guyanese >... rumours and conspiracy theory are rife and are being exploited by those who might seek to fuel ethnic tensions for their own ends.<sup>49</sup>

This comment encapsulates the state of Trinidad and Tobago's voter's allegiance, and it shows the ways Article 4 of ICERD is not being upheld in that political parties are using propaganda-like narratives to promote racial division. It additionally highlights the dangers of negative racialization in favor of political gain; provoking racial tensions between the two groups creates a harmful perception of one another. CERD once again holds comments that contend this to be a violation of ICERD. They state

Information campaigns and educational policies calling attention to the harms produced by racist hate speech should engage the general public; civil society, including religious and community associations; parliamentarians and other politicians; educational professionals; public administration personnel; police and other bodies dealing with public order; and legal personnel, including the judiciary.<sup>50</sup>

Again, we see the absence of these critiques from international committees being addressed within the State.

### **The Consequences of Ethnoracial Tensions in Politics**

#### **Social, Cultural, and Economic Rights**

Article 5(e) of ICERD contains social, cultural, and economic rights. These outline equal rights free of racial discrimination to work and pay, choice of employment, the right to housing, the right to public health/social security, the right to education, and the right to equal participation in cultural activities.<sup>51</sup> Human rights violations concerning economic inequality relate to the ordinariness of racism and the "white-over-colour" system in which white

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<sup>49</sup> McDougall. 2009. General Comment [GC] 83.

<sup>50</sup> CERD. 2013. GC 36.

<sup>51</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 5(e)(i-vi)

demographics remain above all others.<sup>52</sup> The closer you are to whiteness: the higher you stand economically. The continued use of this system has led to Afro and Indo-Trinidadians being economically lower than the rest of the population, as they are seen as the furthest from whiteness. For example, educationally, Black and East Indians yield the lowest average of years in school (between 6.26 to 9.26 years, and 5.79 years to 9.03 years, from 1980 to 2011), with East Indians falling below the sample mean of Kelly’s study.<sup>53</sup>

Marginalization extends to access to education. Primary education is divided into 3 sectors: government public, government-assisted (made up of schools owned by religious denominations), and private schools.<sup>54</sup> The focus of inequality stemmed from the differences between government public and government-assisted institutions. For example, schools that receive the most government-assisted funding and produce the highest quality education are Catholic. The majority of the Indian population does not practice Catholicism and therefore send their children to schools of other faith denominations. Afro-Trinidadians who emphasize centering faith, however, will send their children to catholic-based institutions.<sup>55</sup> This violates ICERD Article 7, which contends:

States Parties undertake to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education, culture and information, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnical groups, as well as to propagating the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and this Convention.<sup>56</sup>

This discrimination in the primary years based on religious affiliation (and by extension, ethnoracial background) leads to challenges in obtaining a secondary education. Institutions with higher-quality education have better access to materials for the Secondary Education Assessment

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<sup>52</sup> Delgado et al. 2012. *Supra* 7

<sup>53</sup> Kelly. 2023. *Supra*, 4

<sup>54</sup> Hewitt, Linda, Iris Hewitt-Bradshaw, and Stacey N. J Blackman. “Disparities in Education Outcomes in Trinidad and Tobago: A Sociohistorical Analysis.” In *Equitable Education for Marginalized Youth in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 1st ed., 1:79–102. Routledge, 2023. doi:10.4324/9780429276866-5. 88

<sup>55</sup> Bissessar, Ann Marie, and John Gaffar La Guerre. *Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana: Race and politics in two plural societies*. Lexington Books, 2013. 19

<sup>56</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 7

(SEA) entrance exam. Students from schools with better access to these materials scored extremely high on these tests. Schools with less or no government-funded assistance scored lower and would be placed in secondary schools of a lower ranking.<sup>57</sup> It should also be noted that the testing contents of SEA are highly colonial, being based on the British education system, which are contents a Catholic school curriculum is more likely to cover, thus making them more likely to score higher on the examination compared to school of other faith denominations that contain less colonial elements in their academic structure.<sup>58</sup> This demonstrates that a failure to assimilate to whiteness is detrimental to the education one receives; cultural differences produce different levels of education. It violates the contents of ICERD Article 7 in that the government is failing to provide equitable access to educational materials due to cultural differences in educational approach.

In terms of personal income, as the years have progressed Afro-Trinidadians earn more than East Indians, but both earn significantly less than the other ethnic populations.<sup>59</sup> While the parties play a role in maintaining socioeconomic discord: the white demographic bears additional responsibility for upholding the current socioeconomic hierarchy.<sup>60</sup> White people comprise less than 3% of the labour force (due to accumulated generational wealth, they are not considered to be working-class). However, they have maintained control of private sectors, having the highest economic achievements.<sup>61</sup> They were/are responsible for the creation of the racialized and cultural division that is still implemented within the educational system<sup>62</sup> that the government upholds through the maintenance of the educational divide through colonial compliance.

Furthermore, the State has been criticized for its noted discrimination in healthcare. The Human Rights Committee highlights that the State has not amended the Offences Against the Person Act (1925), which criminalizes abortion under any circumstances. This includes instances of foetal impairment or pregnancy that resulted from rape or incest.<sup>63</sup> Actions that contribute to

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<sup>57</sup> Hewitt et al. 2022. *Supra*, 89; Bissessar et al. 2013. *Supra* 18-20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>59</sup> On average, Black people reported \$1804, Whites \$7230, East Indians \$1666, Mixed— others \$1976, Syrian/Lebanese \$4201, Chinese \$3616, and racial others \$3361 in monthly income in 2000; Kelly. 2023. *Supra*, 7

<sup>60</sup> Bissessar et al. 2013. *Supra*, 18

<sup>61</sup> Kelly. 2023. *Supra*, 2-3

<sup>62</sup> Biases within the educational system lead to barriers in career placement/advancement, which keeps the wage gaps of income in place.

<sup>63</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2023. *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Trinidad and Tobago*. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Geneva: United Nations. General Comment [GC] 23

the unlawful termination of a pregnancy result in imprisonment for four years.<sup>64</sup> The State has also failed to provide information about the risks of unsafe abortion. This is negatively contributing to women's health, as well as the maternal mortality rate.<sup>65</sup> Unequal access to healthcare, specifically for racialized women in the form of anti-abortion legislation, reflects a failure to uphold the contents of ICERD Article 5(e)(iv), which outlines freedom from discrimination in the healthcare system and affirming one's right to health.<sup>66</sup>

Overall: This demonstrates the ordinariness of racism in a socioeconomic context. Dividing status by race has been integral to upholding longstanding colonial structures that interconnect race and class. The closer you are to whiteness: the more successful you are in income, home ownership, and education (hence the higher status Syrian/Lebanese and Chinese populations have over the Black and Brown populations but remaining below the white population). White Trinidadians stay wealthy, and the Black and Indian populations remain at the bottom; fighting with each other to not be placed last. The welfare aids are being inadequately implemented, reflecting a failure of the parties to respect, protect, and fulfill the socioeconomic rights of their major populations in favour of upholding ethnoracial discord. Progressive realization is being denied due to these present inequalities; one cannot thrive with bias present within the economic structures of the State wherein equal opportunities for advancement are not being provided.

### **Gangs and Facilitative Politics**

Gang activity is deeply entrenched in Trinidadian politics. Crime benefits the parties because it serves as a form of facilitative politics. Facilitative politics refers to “activities carried out by politicians or policies that enable criminal organisations – such as gangs – to socially, economically, and territorially empower themselves.”<sup>67</sup> In short, criminals and politicians have a mutual understanding of operations, empowering each other and themselves by playing off each others' strengths. This began in the 1940s with what came to be known as The Steelband

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<sup>64</sup> Women on Waves. 2025. *Abortion law Trinidad and Tobago*. Accessed December 19, 2025. <https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/5163/abortion-law-trinidad-and-tobago>.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2023. GC 37

<sup>66</sup> ICERD. 1965. Article 5(e)(iv)

<sup>67</sup> Pawelz, Janina. "In bed with criminals: Gangs and politics in Trinidad and Tobago." *Urban Crime. An international Journal* 1, no. 2 (2020): 54-75. 55

Movements. Musical communities came together to play drums made from oil barrels, especially in the Laventille area. These musical rivalries quickly devolved into acts of violence by the 1950s. These vicious fights between the groups were labeled as gang activity, and the very idea of Steelband was rooted in violence. It was also attributed to the current climate of violence within the country. Gang members in the present day are the children of the “bad johns.” Their main jobs were to protect given Steelband groups by engaging in violence with rival gangs.<sup>68</sup>

Laventille was heavily populated with slum-like conditions, which the government recognized to be part of attracting criminal behavior. Upon government recognition of the linkages between crime, poverty, and unemployment, the Prime Minister at the time conversed with the steelband gang leaders in 1957 to temper the violence and find solutions to the climate of crime in the area through means of employment. Thus came the creation of the Development Environment Works Division (DEWD) special works programme. This initiative aimed to provide financial aid for low-income individuals or families.<sup>69</sup> On paper, DEWD should have improved the economic status of those living in Laventille. In practice: this was not the reality. This was due to the government’s lack of commitment to solving the problem. Instead of using civil servants or government officials to facilitate the proper implementation of the program, it was left to community leaders to decide their course of action. One would assume the community would best be able to assess its own needs given that they are the ones directly affected by this issue. However, these community leaders were the same leaders who headed up violent gang activity. Instead of using the program to better their communities, they maintained a culture of violence and intimidation in the area; using the program to gain financial and now: political support.<sup>70</sup> Gangs were essentially legitimized instead of dismantled and have remained consistent in upholding the culture of crime. The way gangs accomplished this was through the misuse of social-welfare funds which they used to control job distributions within communities. The gangs would create fake workers who did not participate in the programmes, and the gang coordinators would keep the money the State was providing for these made-up individuals.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Pawelz 2020. *Supra*, 60-61

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>70</sup> Pawelz. 2020. *Supra*, 62

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

Other programmes took DEWD's place as time progressed, which were also produced under government contracts.<sup>72</sup> The finances earned from these welfare programs were used to purchase firearms (pictured in Figure 2.1 below), put hits on rival gang members, and hire more members,<sup>73</sup> all of which have influenced the other crimes outlined in Figures 2 through 2.2. The Human Rights Committee has highlighted their concern based on these statistics, stating "The Committee, while taking note of the State party's efforts to discourage membership of gangs, is concerned about the high rates of homicide and the increase in gang-related violence. The Committee is also concerned that the legislative framework for combating gang violence, including the Anti-Gang Act, has reportedly led to mass arrests and the escalation of violence."<sup>74</sup> Despite this concern, crime has remained high as affiliation with gangs has also served to be beneficial for the political parties. Gang leaders held a high level of influence amongst younger gang members, so politicians (specifically from the PNM) would use the leaders to get the youth to come out to rallies to support their party.<sup>75</sup> The negative social impacts that accompany this mainly target the youth, who are increasingly vulnerable to being socialized into gang culture and violent acts. Politicians collaborating with gang members sends the message that being gang-affiliated is acceptable because the government co-signs their behavior.<sup>76</sup> The Human Rights Committee directly recognizes this as part of their recommendations, advising that the State increase preventive and rehabilitative measures, including education and protection programmes for children and young people to deter them from joining gangs.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> I.e., the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) and the Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP). Pawelz. 2020. *Supra* 63

<sup>73</sup> The Joint Select Committee on National Security. 2020. An Inquiry into Crime: the Security, Safety and Protection of Citizens. Interim Report PARL No: 14/3/43. Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Available at: <http://www.ttparliament.org/reports/p11-s5-J 20200228-NATSEC-Ri-Crime.pdf>. Accessed January 15, 2025. 18.

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2023. GC 27

<sup>75</sup> Pawelz. 2020. *Supra*, 63-64

<sup>76</sup> Pawelz. 2020. *Supra*, 68-69

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2023. GC 28(c)

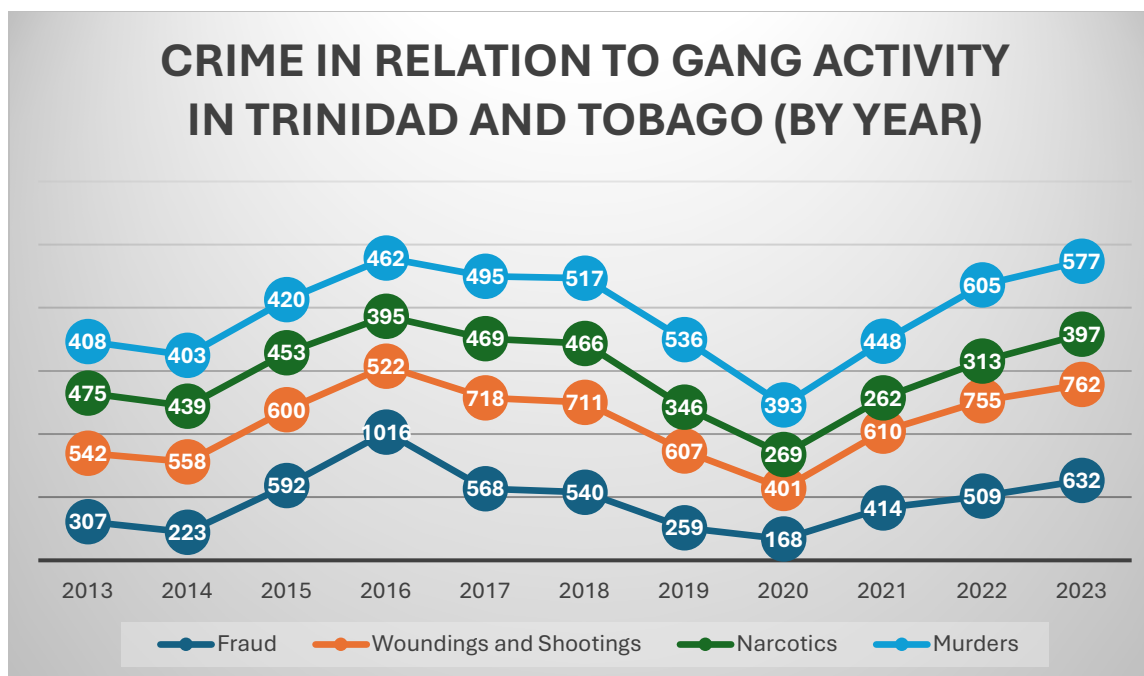


Figure 2: Crimes related to Gang Activity in Trinidad and Tobago: 2013-2023 ([Trinidad and Tobago Police Service \(tpps.gov.tt\)](https://tpps.gov.tt))

In 2020, the Joint Select Committee on National Security (an extension of the House of Representatives and the Senate) investigated politicians and crime, concluding that “(l)inks between politicians and gang leaders have proven to be the catalyst towards homicides in this country.”<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the Committee noted that gangs have maintained control over construction companies and by extension, land; taking part in multi-million dollar contracts at the government’s request. The Committee referenced that in 2019, the Minister of Housing and the former Managing Director of the Housing Development Corporation have in the past met with major gang leaders, promising them a \$40 million contract if they helped the UNC take office. In addition, a PNM member was seen affiliating with an alleged gang leader, Cedrick Burke, who owned a security and construction company. Instead of denying this claim, the member doubled down and stated that the leader stood as a true representative and patriot of the PNM.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> The Joint Select Committee on National Security. 2020. *Supra*, 17

<sup>79</sup> Pawelz. 2020. *Supra*, 64-65

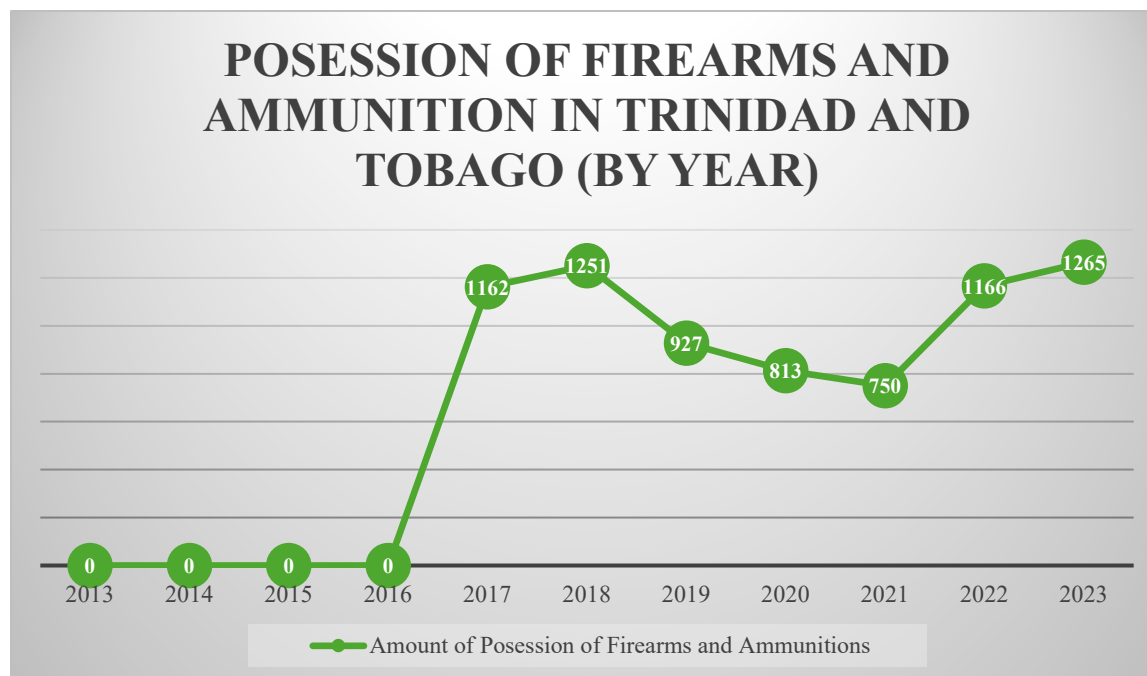


Figure 2.1: Firearms Ownership and Distribution in Trinidad and Tobago: 2013-2023. ([Trinidad and Tobago Police Service \(tpps.gov.tt\)](https://tpps.gov.tt))

Control of the gangs also implies control of land and construction to further some degree of structural advancement, as the gangs are the ones controlling the construction and security companies. The areas with the highest gang activity (Lavantille, Beetham, and Sealots) are located surrounding main highways and bus routes that lead in and out of the State's capital, as well as the international airport.<sup>80</sup> So, if gang leaders felt crossed, they could cut access to these areas until political leaders conceded to their demands. The insistence that both parties have to align with gangs to gain political advantage over one another shows how far this racial rivalry has gone. Prioritizing racial dominance in office by any means necessary has put the lives of innocent people in danger, and the government is complicit in handing over control of the State to criminals.

<sup>80</sup> Pawelz. 2020. *Supra*, 67-68

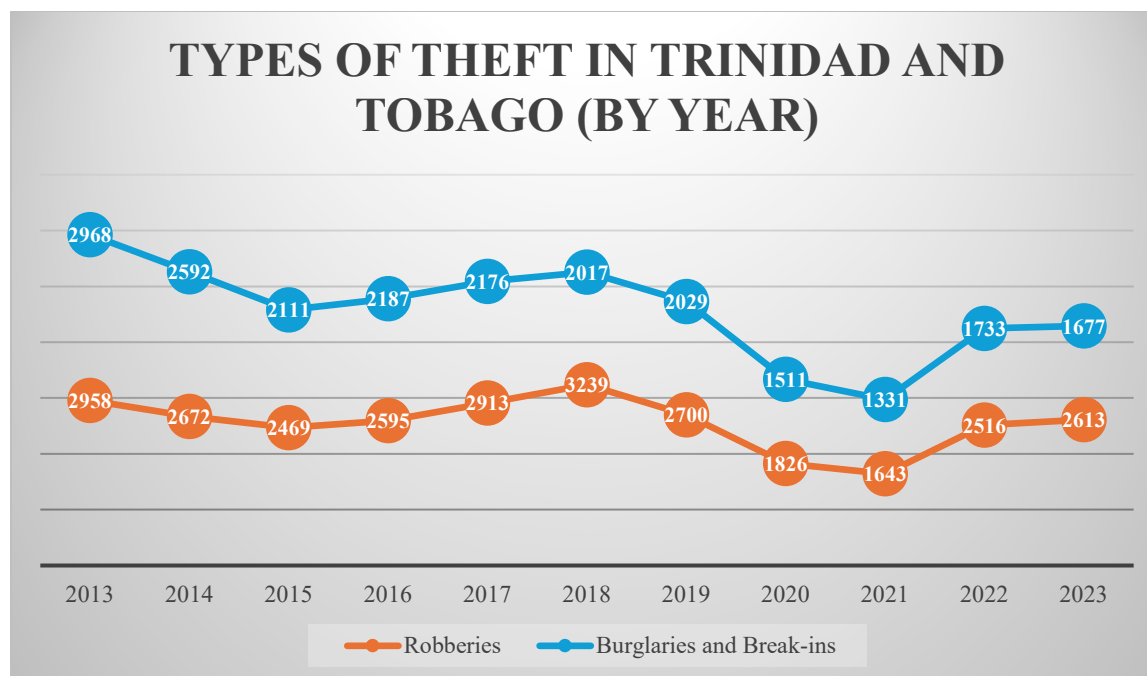


Figure 2.2: Theft in Trinidad and Tobago: 2013-2023 ([Trinidad and Tobago Police Service \(ttps.gov.tt\)](https://www.ttps.gov.tt))

The climate of crime and the government's involvement with gangs oppose the parties' aims and obligations outlined in UNC Article 2 (iv) and PNM Article 2.6.<sup>81</sup> However, crime is structurally embedded within the political framework. The occurrence of crime is inherently beneficial to reigning political parties. The presence of underdevelopment creates a sense of reliance the people have on the government to provide for them through social insurance programs. The government gets the credit for initiating these programs, but fails to uphold their progression and ensure the funds reach those in need. Instead, they allow corruption to persist and give gangs leeway to use the money however they see fit as long as it serves the parties in the long run. The existence of gangs serves the narrative the UNC specifically tries to convey during their campaigning (even though they are also complicit in engaging with the gangs). It reinforces racial stereotypes concerning Blackness and criminality being the same (because the gang members are predominantly Afro-Trinidadian men),<sup>82</sup> allowing their voters to carry the same mindset and creating fear of Afro-Trinidadians. This relates to the contents of ICERD

<sup>81</sup> Pandey. 2013. *Supra*. Article 2 (iv) covers anti-corruption; The People's National Movement. 2023. *supra*, Article 2.6 looks at eliminating conditions that contribute to rises in juvenile/anti-social behaviour

<sup>82</sup> Adams, Ericka B., Patrice K. Morris, and Edward R. Maguire. "The impact of gangs on community life in Trinidad." *Race and Justice* 11, no. 4 (2021): 543-566. 546

Articles 1 and 4; the UNC equates criminality to Blackness and uses it to racialize Afro-Trinidadians in a way that fosters racial hatred towards the group.

### **Assessing Solutions Towards Political Harmony**

#### **Desegregating Parties – Modeling Habits of Decolonization**

As previously discussed, the segregated nature of Trinidad and Tobago’s political parties violates the contents of ICERD Article 3, which affirms that State Parties are to condemn racial segregation. Both parties contend that racial and cultural integration is the way toward progressive realization. In practice, however, they are not modeling the contents of their constitutions. The parties should strive to be inclusive, as it aligns with their aims and obligations. One cannot say they are for racial equity and then have parties set up in a segregated fashion. This is not to say that parties should essentially recruit candidates solely for the sake of diversity, however, they should be fostering an environment in which both identities feel welcome to participate in their politics in an equal manner (in line with Articles 1.1, 3, and 5(c) of ICERD).<sup>83</sup> To uphold their constitutions and the contents of ICERD: The State should adopt recommendations like the ones given to Guyana by the Human Rights Committee regarding the same issues. The targeted recommendation here would be “take the steps necessary to prevent, condemn and combat hate speech and incitement to racial hostility, including by public officials and politicians, directed at the groups most exposed to racial discrimination”<sup>84</sup>, with other supplementary recommendations such as adopting intersectional anti-discrimination legislation, and creating an environment that fosters interethnic harmony to end ethnic divisions and combat negative stereotypes/prejudices.<sup>85</sup> CERD additionally emphasizes that high-level officials reject hate speech to promote racial tolerance and respect.<sup>86</sup> Implementing these aspects will aid in decreasing the level of racial hostility that is currently being exhibited.

When you remove race as a focal point in campaigning and solely look at the aims and obligations of each party, you will see they are virtually the same. The decision for voters would

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<sup>83</sup> ICERD Article 1.1 discusses the definition of racial discrimination. Article 5 (c) states “Political rights, in particular the right to participate in elections-to vote and to stand for election-on the basis of universal and equal suffrage, to take part in the Government as well as in the conduct of public affairs at any level and to have equal access to public service.” ICERD. 1965.

<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Committee. 2024. GC 15(c)

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 15(a)-(b).

<sup>86</sup> CERD. 2013. GC 37

then be left to who they believe would best deliver on these obligations, rather than looking at the parties under a racialized lens. A lack of party segregation would also promote more cohesive collaboration. Ultimately, desegregation is a form of decolonization. It not only breaks down racial barriers present throughout the State and within the parties, but it also leads to an understanding of varying cultures, which is an element of using CRT to combat structures built on white supremacy.<sup>87</sup> It allows both parties to uphold the contents of their aims and obligations which are anti-discrimination and pro-cross-cultural exchange. Both groups' diversified cultural experiences can be equally considered when moving toward progressive realization.<sup>88</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The state of Trinidad and Tobago's political system is heavily reliant on the ordinariness of racism. The segregation of parties and weaponization of race within political discourse has served as a means of distracting voters from legitimate issues facing the nation, keeping ethnic tensions circulating throughout the State. This has resulted in the violation of various ICERD Articles, and failing to align with general criticisms from human rights committees. The Afro and Indo-Trinidadian populations remain behind other ethnic groups despite making up most of the population and being the demographics most represented within the government. The racialized rivalry between the PNM and the UNC has allowed gangs to become a legitimized presence through political aid. Gangs control the mobilization of the youth and social-welfare programs to further their forces, increasing crime and corruption within government spaces.

All these elements illustrate the parties' failure to respect, protect, and fulfill their obligations to the people, which is thereby inhibiting the nation's route toward progressive realization due to ongoing ethnoracial tensions. The root of this issue lies in the ordinariness of racism and a lack of understanding of each group's position within a colonial context. This is to be amended with de-homogenizing parties by applying varied CRT tenets to destabilize ethnoracial discourse. Rejecting segregation is embracing decolonization, taking out the ordinariness of racism within Trinidad and Tobago's political structure. A diverse government ensures equal representation to target issues using the cross-cultural knowledge an inter-ethnic

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<sup>87</sup> Delgado et al. 2012. *Supra*, 10

<sup>88</sup> Nota Bene: It is to be acknowledged that conversations surrounding solutions are much more in-depth and complex than what can be encapsulated in this paper.

party would bring. This approach will uphold the set aims and obligations each party has put forth, and it will improve the State's progress towards change on a systemic and social level.

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During my time in the MHR Program, I completed my practicum placement at the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (MARL). MARL is a non-profit organization that specializes in human rights education. It was here that I adopted educational approaches to my recommendations. A special thank you to Sandra Krahn and the rest of the MARL team for furthering my educational journey and giving me the experience of working within an NGO.

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