

# Trinidad and Tobago: ethnic politics, economic dependence

BY HENRY SREBRNIK

THIS WEEK, MRS. SHASTRI ALI, HIGH Commissioner of Trinidad and Tobago, spoke at

1845 and 1915 to work in the sugarcane fields, and today comprise 40 percent of the population. They have retained much of the culture of their Indian homeland, and many speak Hindu and Urdu. Though

trained in politics and economics at Oxford. His National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) was truly radical departure in the country's politics: a party that aligned races, classes and regions with its slogan "one love".

With oil prices down to US \$15 a barrel and unemployment at 17 percent, the PNM was defeated by Robinson's coalition in December 1986. The NAR had received overwhelming support from the Indians -- over 80% -- and even the Creole and Coloured voters gave them more than 45 percent of their votes. It appeared that a new era had begun.

But internal strife, channelled along ethnic lines, soon emerged within the coalition, though Indians overwhelmingly supported the NAR, they received few cabinet posts. True, the island's leading politician Basdeo Panday, was now the NAR's deputy leader and the foreign minister, but Indian ministers charged that they were excluded from the inner corridors of power in government. Finally, in February 1988, Panday formed a new, largely Indian party, the United National Congress (UNC), and politics was once again largely divided along Creole-Indian lines. So it was only a matter of time before the NAR, now facing in opposition a revitalized PNM under the leadership of Patrick Manning, and Panday's UNC, would go down to defeat. Robinson's final downfall was, however, preceded by one bizarre political event.

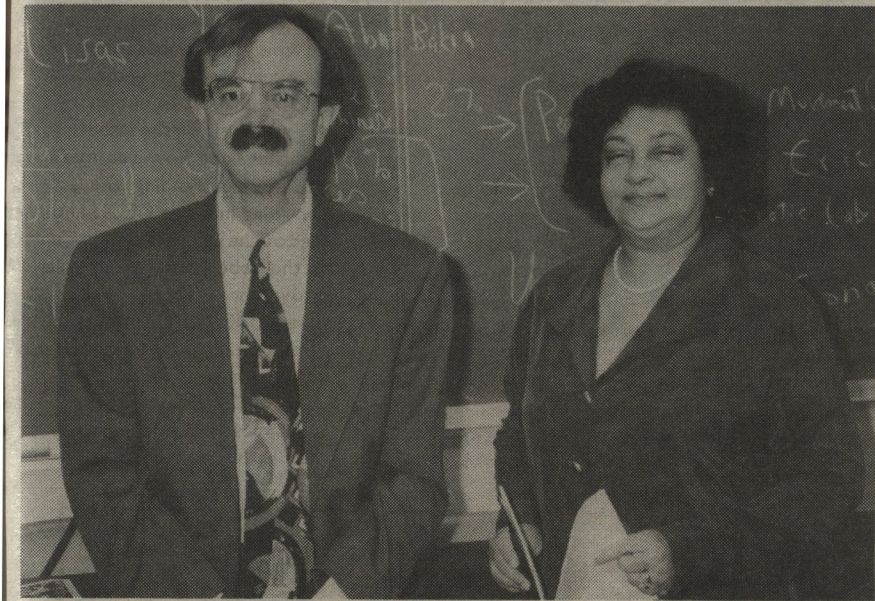
A firm believer in free market policies, Robinson had promised when elected to alleviate Trinidad's deficit and debt problem, and massive layoffs of

workers followed. By 1990, 23 percent of the population was unemployed, and severe social strains were in evidence.

That summer, a Black Moslem fundamentalist group, the Jamaat al Muslimeem (Society of Muslims), led by an ex-policeman, Imam Yasin Abu Bakr, who had converted to Islam while studying at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto in the early 1980's mounted a coup. They held Robinson and most of his cabinet hostage in Trinidad's parliament building for nearly a week, demanding an end to the government-imposed hardships.

By the time it was over, at least 38 people had been killed, some 700 injured, and much of the downtown Port of Spain destroyed or damaged in looting. The attempted coup also opened wider the breach between the business community, largely Indian, and the Creole political elite. In the December 1991 elections, the NAR was crushed, getting only 20 percent of the vote and retaining two seats. The PNM returned to power under Patrick Manning, winning 46 percent of the vote, good for 21 seats, while the UNC won 26 percent and 13 seats.

Manning has his work cut out for him. The country's debt stands at about US \$2.5 billion, and unemployment remains at 24 percent of the workforce. Meanwhile, the creation of the North American Free Trade zone may make it more difficult for small states like Trinidad to sell goods in the highly competitive North American Market. Henry Srebrnik teaches political studies at the University of Prince Edward Island



on the political economy of her Commonwealth, the southernmost of the Caribbean islands. Independent since 1962, the island republic, slightly smaller than PEI, is home to a large and ethnically diverse citizenry, which has not always managed to get along. Its 1.3 million people are heirs to a colonial legacy of economic dependence and a hierarchial social structure based on ethnicity. Whites and Chinese, though about one percent of the total population, enjoy economic and social benefits disproportionate to their numbers. The mixed or mixed races -- some 14 percent of the population -- occupy an intermediate position. Indians (the term for those whose ancestors originated in Africa) number about 43 percent and

15 percent of them are Moslem and many have converted to Christianity, a majority practise Hinduism. Most Indians continue to live in the sugar belt plains, though many are shopkeepers in the towns. The majority can be classified as middle income.

This ethnic cleavage has structured the political system of Trinidad and has resulted in almost continuous rule by the People's National Movement (PNM), the largely Creole-supported organization founded by the historian and the scholar Eric Williams. He served as prime minister until his death in March 1981. PNM governments were composed mainly of Creoles, with near-total exclusion of Indian Hindus.

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in socioeconomic terms about half middle and lower class. The Creole and Coloured middle class provides the country with its technocrats, professionals and administrators -- in other words, the political class. largely urban, they live in the Port of Spain, and other towns.

The other major ethnic group, the Indians, are descendants of indentured labourers who came to Trinidad from the Indian subcontinent between

Since oil accounts for 25 percent of Gross Domestic Product and 82 percent of export earnings, the huge increase in world oil prices after 1973 created boom conditions. But when Williams died, they had begun to decline, leaving his successors with mounting economic problems.

After William's death, a number of new parties emerged. Some of these had by 1983 united under A.N.R. Robinson, a Creole lawyer who had been





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