



Trinidad and Tobago

FREE

82
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	33 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	49 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

82 /100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



TOP

Overview

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is a parliamentary democracy with vibrant media and civil society sectors. However, organized crime contributes to high levels of violence, and corruption among public officials remains a challenge. Other security concerns center on local adherents of Islamist militant groups. There is discrimination against the LGBT+ community, though a 2018 court ruling effectively decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct.

Key Developments in 2019

- The government offered work permits to Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers during a two-week period in June. Those who did not successfully register remained vulnerable to detention and deportation, and some applicants did not receive registration cards until December.
- Several current and former government ministers and officials were accused of corruption during the year; former attorney general Anand Ramlogan was arrested for money laundering in May, while public administration minister Marlene McDonald was arrested and charged in August. Cases against both individuals were pending at year's end.
- Watson Duke, leader of the Progressive Democratic Patriots (PDP) party, was charged with sedition in August over 2018 comments he made over a labor dispute; the case against Duke remained pending at year's end.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

4 / 4

The president, the largely ceremonial head of state, is elected to a five-year term by a majority of the combined houses of Parliament. Paula-Mae Weekes, an independent former judge, was elected unopposed in January 2018 and took office that March.

The prime minister, who serves as head of government and is typically the leader of the majority party in Parliament, is appointed by the president. Keith Rowley became prime minister in 2015, after that year's parliamentary election resulted in a victory for his party, the center-right People's National Movement (PNM).

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

4 / 4

Parliament consists of the directly elected, 41-member House of Representatives and the 31-member Senate, with members of both houses serving five-year terms. Of the 31 senators, 16 are appointed on the advice of the prime minister, 6 are appointed on the advice of the opposition leader, and 9 are appointed at the president's discretion based on merit.

In the 2015 parliamentary election, the center-left People's Partnership (PP) coalition, which includes the United National Congress (UNC) and Congress of the People (COP) and was led by then prime minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, took 18 lower house seats. The PNM won 23 seats and formed the government. Election observers expressed confidence in the overall conduct of the balloting.

The semiautonomous island of Tobago has its own House of Assembly, with 12 members elected directly, 3 appointed on the advice of the chief secretary (the island's head of government), and 1 appointed on the advice of the minority leader. The PNM won 10 of the 12 elected seats and the PDP won the remainder in a 2017 election.

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Local elections were held in December 2019; results showed the PNM and UNC each winning control of seven regions on a turnout of 34.5 percent.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

3 / 4

Electoral laws are largely fair. The Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) is in charge of organizing elections, and it is generally trusted by the public to fulfill its mandate impartially.

After the 2015 election, observation missions from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Commonwealth recommended that officials take steps to strengthen the transparency and accountability of campaign funding processes, and ensure that adequate training is provided for polling officials.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

3 / 4

Trinidad and Tobago has a number of political parties. While the PNM dominated the political landscape in the decades following independence, it has weakened somewhat in the last two decades, allowing greater **TOP** competition. The national political arena is now largely divided between the PNM and the PP. Factors including the country's first-past-the-post voting system have made it difficult for less established parties to gain seats in Parliament.

PDP leader Watson Duke was charged with sedition in late August 2019, after Duke publicly stated workers must “be prepared to die” over a labor dispute in 2018. Duke received bail in August; the case remained pending at year’s end.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4 / 4

The country has built a record of peaceful transfers of power between rival parties, with multiple changes in government through elections since the 1980s.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

3 / 4

People’s political choices are generally free from external pressure. However, observers have raised concerns about lack of transparency in campaign financing, which may enable improper influence and disadvantage opposition parties.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

3 / 4

All ethnic groups enjoy full political rights, and political parties are technically multiethnic, though the PNM is favored by Afro-Trinidadians and the UNC is affiliated with Indo-Trinidadians.

Women's political participation has increased somewhat in recent years, but they remain generally underrepresented. In 2018, Weekes became the first woman to be elected president. Discrimination against LGBT+ people is widespread, affecting their ability to fully engage in political and electoral processes.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

4 / 4

The country's freely elected executive and legislative officeholders generally determine and implement government policies without undue interference.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2 / 4

Corruption remains a pervasive problem, especially within the police force and among high-ranking government officials and immigration officers. The government has sought to manage corruption through several pieces of legislation, but the laws are poorly enforced. In 2017, Chief Justice Ivor Archie was accused of pressuring the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) to provide housing to individuals tied to an acquaintance, and of steering work securing the Supreme Court to a firm tied to another acquaintance. The Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago (LATT) called for his impeachment in 2018, but the government declined in July 2019, citing insufficient evidence. In September, LATT members voted to challenge ~~the~~ government's decision, and those efforts were ongoing at year's end.

In May 2019, former attorney general Anand Ramlogan and senator Gerald Ramdeen, both of the UNC, were arrested on suspicion of money

laundering; Ramlogan was accused of routing kickbacks and legal fees to outside lawyers during his tenure, while Ramdeen was accused of receiving some of the funds. The case against Ramlogan and Ramdeen, who resigned from the Senate in May, was still pending at year's end. In August 2019, public administration minister Marlene McDonald and her husband were arrested on suspicion of misusing state funds between 2008 and 2009, and faced charges including money laundering and conspiracy to defraud that month. The case against McDonald, who was removed from the cabinet and from the PNM deputy leadership, was ongoing at year's end.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

3 / 4

Public officials are required to disclose their assets, income, and liabilities, but penalties against those who fail to comply are limited. The Integrity Commission, which is tasked with overseeing these financial disclosures, has been criticized for its lack of effectiveness.

The public has the right to access government documents by law, although numerous public institutions are exempt. Furthermore, there is no enforcement of a provision that requires the government to respond to information requests within 30 days. A 2015 law regulating public procurements has not been fully implemented.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

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D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

4 / 4

Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed and generally upheld in practice. Media outlets are privately owned and vigorously pluralistic. However, those regarded as most favorable to the government receive the bulk of state advertising. Under the 2013 Defamation and Libel Act, “malicious defamatory libel known to be false” is punishable by up to two years in prison as well as a fine, but prosecutions are uncommon.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

4 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government generally honors this provision. The requirements for registration of a religious organization, which confers tax benefits and other privileges, are not considered onerous. Some restrictions are placed on foreign missionaries; up to 35 per registered religious group are allowed in the country at one time, and they cannot stay longer than three consecutive years.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally upheld.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

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4 / 4

Individuals are free to express their opinions in private conversations. The government has historically refrained from monitoring online communications; however, the national police launched a Social Media Monitoring Unit, which is charged with monitoring social media platforms to detect evidence of child pornography, prostitution, and human trafficking, in October 2019. According to Police Commissioner Gary Griffith, the unit is not meant to surveil citizens.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	4 / 4
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The constitution provides for freedom of assembly, and the government generally respects this right.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	4 / 4
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Civil society is robust, with a range of domestic and international interest groups operating freely.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	TOP 3 / 4
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Labor unions are well organized and politically active, though union membership has declined in recent years. Strikes are legal and occur frequently. The law contains a provision allowing the labor minister to petition the courts to end any strike deemed detrimental to national interests. Walkouts by workers considered essential, including hospital staff, firefighters, and telecommunication workers, are punishable by up to three years in prison and fines. The government threatened to impose criminal penalties in 2018 prior to a series of strikes in protest against the planned closure of the Petrotrin refinery.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	3 / 4
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The judicial branch is generally independent, but it is subject to some political pressure and corruption. Chief Justice Archie has been suspected of corruption since 2017, when he allegedly sought to influence the HDC.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	2 / 4
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Due process rights are provided for in the constitution, but they are not always upheld. Rising crime rates and institutional weakness have produced a severe backlog in the court system. Pretrial detainees and remanded individuals accounted for nearly 60 percent of the prison population as recently as September 2018. Defendants must wait many years for their cases to come to trial. Corruption in the police force, which is often linked to the illegal drugs trade, is endemic, and inefficiencies have resulted in the dismissal of some criminal cases. Intimidation of witnesses and jurors has been reported by judicial officials.

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F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

2 / 4

The government has struggled in recent years to address criminal violence, which is mostly linked to organized crime and drug trafficking. The national police reported 536 murders in 2019, compared to 517 in 2018. In 2017, the Organized Crime Intelligence Unit was established “to pursue, target, dismantle, disrupt and prosecute” organized criminal groups and networks. But the police have been criticized for excessive use of force, and many abuses by the authorities go unpunished.

As many as 130 Trinidadians reportedly sought to join the Islamic State (IS) militant group in recent years. Trinidadian security forces, supported by US military personnel, raided multiple locations in 2018 and arrested individuals suspected of planning a terrorist attack on that year’s Carnival celebration.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2 / 4

Despite legal protections against discrimination on various grounds, racial disparities persist, with Indo-Trinidadians accounting for a disproportionate share of the country’s economic elite. Women continue to face discrimination in employment and compensation.

Human rights groups have criticized the government’s unwillingness to address discrimination and violence against the LGBT+ community. However, in 2018, the High Court ruled that sections of the Sexual Offences Act, which prohibited “buggery” and “serious indecency,” were unconstitutional. Same-sex relations between consenting adults were decriminalized by the court later that year. The government vowed to appeal that ruling to the London-based Privy Council in late 2018; their case

TOP

remained pending at the end of 2019. Separately, Trinidad celebrated its second pride event in July 2019.

Immigration law does not adequately protect refugees, and Trinidad and Tobago specifically lacks a system to process asylum claims. As many as 40,000 Venezuelan asylum seekers and refugees have traveled to Trinidad and Tobago, but authorities regularly seek to detain and deport these individuals as illegal immigrants, including those who registered their status with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In June 2019, the government allowed refugees to register for a work permit during a two-week grace period. Over 16,500 Venezuelans applied for permits, which are valid for up to one year, though some applicants did not receive registration cards until December.

As many as 70 Trinidadians were among those held by Kurdish forces in the Al-Hol camp in Syria, after the IS lost its territorial holdings there in March 2019. In November, national security minister Stuart Young met with US officials to discuss the possibility of repatriating Trinidadians in Syria.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

4 / 4

Trinidadians and Tobagonians do not face significant constraints on freedom of movement or on their ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education.

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G2 0-4 pts

3 / 4

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	
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While the government actively supports both domestic and foreign investment in the country, factors including corruption and weak state institutions can make it more difficult to start and operate businesses. There are particular problems associated with registering property and enforcing contracts.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	3 / 4
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Most individual rights with respect to personal status issues like marriage and divorce are protected by law. The 2017 Marriage Act raised the legal marriage age to 18, officially making child marriage illegal.

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, and domestic violence is addressed by a specific law. However, enforcement of these provisions remains inadequate, with many perpetrators reportedly avoiding punishment.

Abortion is illegal in most cases, and there is reportedly little public awareness of legal exemptions for abortions to save a woman's life or preserve her physical or mental health. A woman can be imprisoned for up to four years for obtaining an illegal abortion.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	3^{PP} / 4
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The law provides basic protections against exploitative working conditions, though these do not apply or are poorly enforced for informal and household workers in particular. While the government has stepped up efforts to combat trafficking in persons, convictions have been lacking, and funding for services to trafficking survivors has been cut. Venezuelan women are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking.



On Trinidad and Tobago

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

82 / 100 Free

Other Years

2019

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