



Trinidad and Tobago — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Trinidad and Tobago, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

01/01/1889 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: The formalization of British control over Trinidad occurred on 03/25/1802, through the Treaty of Amiens between France and Great Britain. On 01/01/1889, Trinidad and Tobago were amalgamated as Crown Colonies of the United Kingdom. Until 1925 LIED underlines the absence of executive and legislative multiparty elections. For 1900-1916, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are not really present. For the rest of the assessed regime period, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI indicates in our interpretation an ambiguous state regarding political liberties. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are comprehensive. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

02/07/1925 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Electoral Oligarchy (Patriarchal)]: On this date the first general election for the Legislative Council was held. Suffrage was initially granted in 1925, allowing both men over 21 and women over 30 to vote, aligning with the United Kingdom full suffrage for women was achieved in 1945.¹ From 1946 to 1961, self-government was progressively granted.² Between 01/03/1958 and 05/31/1962 Trinidad and Tobago were part of the Federation of the West Indies (with Antigua, Barbados, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Christopher-Nevis-Anguilla, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Turks and Caicos Islands) (Lansford 2021: 1674). According to LIED, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period. No executive elections were present.. For the period until 1947, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties. Since 1948, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties were somewhat present. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

08/31/1962 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy: Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from the United Kingdom, however the Queen remained ceremonial head of state until 1976. General Elections were already free and fair before independence. The government of the People's National Movement leading Trinidad and Tobago into independence was elected indirectly through the parliamentary elections taking place on 12/04/1961.³ The position of governor-general was replaced with that of president. Rival parties consistently transferred power peacefully, with multiple changes in government through elections since the 1980s.⁴ Trinidad and Tobago operate as a parliamentary democracy with active media and civil society sectors. Nevertheless, organized crime fuels elevated levels of violence, and addressing corruption within public offices remains an ongoing challenge. Despite strides, discrimination against the LGBT+ community persists, alongside instances of violence against women, while human trafficking remains a significant issue of concern.⁵ Per FH's scoring for 1972, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. As per FH's classification for the rest of this regime period, the country is considered free with a

score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. However, according to LIED political liberties were present. V-Dem's PCLI also indicates somewhat political liberties until 1970. Ever since 1971 full political liberties are achieved. LIED scores the elections as competitive. For five years since 1962 the elections were classified with an ambiguous cleanliness. Since 1967 the country is reaching constantly a somewhat cleanliness (V-Dem CEI). Furthermore, the elections are acknowledged as somewhat free and fair following V-Dem's EF&FI. According to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power.

08/01/1976 Continuation Electoral Democracy (as a republic): On this date a new constitution was promulgated, and Trinidad and Tobago became a republic with a president as head of state. They remained a cooperative member of the commonwealth.⁶ According to LIED, the country scores electoral competitiveness during this period. During this period the elections score a somewhat cleanliness level by V-Dem's CEI. According to FH, for the assessed regime period, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. For the relevant period, LIED identifies political liberties as present, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties were present. According to the Polity5 indicator, from 1976 to 1980, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1981 to 1985, the executive's authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

12/15/1986 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: The 1986 general elections resulted in the first peaceful and competitive transfer of power since independence, with the opposition National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) defeating the long-ruling People's National Movement (PNM) in free and fair elections. This marked a transition from electoral to liberal democracy through improved electoral quality and genuine political competition. The institutional structure remained the same as in the regime period before. This election outcome was significant as it marked the first peaceful transfer of power through the electoral process in the postcolonial era of Trinidad and Tobago. The victory of the NAR is often seen as the beginning of an era where democratic norms, such as free and fair elections, became more firmly established. It also reflected the growing political maturity of the electorate, which opted for change after more than two decades of PNM dominance. In the 2015 general election, the PNM led by Keith Rowley, returned to power, winning 23 of the 41 seats. In August 2020, the governing PNM under Prime Minister Keith Rowley won the general election again.⁷ The general election on 04/ 28/2025, resulted in a decisive victory for the opposition United National Congress (UNC), ending the People's National Movement (PNM)'s 10-year tenure. Led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the UNC won 26 of the 41 seats, forming a majority government. Persad-Bissessar was sworn in as prime minister for the second time.⁸ According to LIED elections for the legislature and the executive were multiparty and competitive. Elections in this period could be classified according to V-Dem's CEI either as clean or somewhat clean and for the following two years as somewhat clean. Since 2003 the country gained back cleanliness for its elections (V-Dem CEI). Moreover, the overall conditions are free and fair until 2000. Between 2001 and 2006 the elections fall back to somewhat free and fair. Since 2007, the conditions are free and fair again following V-Dem's EF&FI. From 1987 onwards V-Dem's LDI has a so-called somewhat level. Most recent fair and free elections were held in 2020.⁹ According to FH, for the assessed regime period, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. For the relevant period, LIED identifies political liberties as present, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties were present. From 1986, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. Until 2002, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the remaining years, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as

indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Catón 2005)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1925_Trinidad_and_Tobago_general_election

² <http://countrystudies.us/caribbean-islands/40.htm>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1961_Trinidad_and_Tobago_general_election

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/trinidad-and-tobago/freedom-world/2022>

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/trinidad-and-tobago/freedom-world/2023>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_of_Trinidad_and_Tobago#Abolition

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Trinidad_and_Tobago#Cabinet_until_2025

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Trinidad_and_Tobago_general_election#

⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/trinidad-and-tobago/freedom-world/2021>

References

Lansford, Tom (2021): Political Handbook of the World 2020-2021. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press.