



TRINIDAD & TOBAGO ALERT Snap Elections Put Panday to the Test Amy Coughenour Betancourt

Overview

- Prime Minister Basdeo Panday calls snap elections less than one year after his reelection last December.
- Three of Panday's government ministers, accusing him of corruption, defect the UNC to form Team Unity and contest the December 10 elections on an anti-corruption platform.
- Although some analysts hand the election to the PNM's Patrick Manning, the tight race is still too close to call. The real test for the electoral victor will be how to rein in the national budget in the wake of decreased revenues while delivering on promises for increased social and infrastructure spending.

Panday Dissolves Parliament, Calls Snap Elections

Trinidad and Tobago is facing a new round of elections on December 10, less than one year after Prime Minister Basdeo Panday's contentious re-election last December. Not unlike last year, the process is mired in allegations of government corruption, fraught with internal backbiting within the ruling party, and wrought with opposition claims of faulty electoral procedures. In mid-October, the embattled prime minister dissolved parliament and called snap elections four years early after his government fell apart on the heels of the departure of three of his own Cabinet ministers amidst their allegations of corruption and mismanagement in Panday's administration.

Entrenched Ethnic Politics

The latest political battle on this oil- and gas-rich Caribbean island of 1.3 million casts a cloud of doubt on the political future of a country deeply divided along racial and ethnic lines. Gone is the call for national unity that swept Panday into office in 1995, the first time an East Indian held that position. With an almost even split between the East Indian population and the African population at about 40 percent each, the country appears to be in a re-run of the 2000 deadlocked race, pitting the Indo-Trinidadian-led United National Congress (UNC) against the Afro-Trinidadian-dominated People's National Movement (PNM), led by long-time leader, Patrick Manning, who served as Prime Minister from 1991-1995. The only difference is the added intrigue of a rogue party made up of Panday defectors bent on discrediting his administration as corrupt.

UNC Ministers Defect

On October 1, Panday fired his attorney general, Ramesh Maharaj, a long-time ally in the UNC, who accused Panday and his administration of condoning corruption, including deals involving several state enterprises and an insurance company. Panday also fired his minister of food production, and the minister of information technology resigned in protest.

With Maharaj's dissident faction actually in control of the party executive, an internal struggle ensued over who had legitimate claim over the party machinery and logo. The independent Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) ruled in Panday's favor, making him the rightful leader of the UNC, which he founded in 1990, allowing him sole use of the party logo. With this decision, the EBC determined that it would accept the list of UNC candidates only from Panday on November 19 Nomination Day, forcing Maharaj's supporters to create and register under a new party-Team Unity. Maharaj is appealing the matter of party leadership in the courts-which includes a determination of who controls the party bank account-and has made it clear that his contingent has not left the UNC, but that it is using the Team Unity and its rainbow logo in order to contest the elections.

For its part, the elections commission has come under fire from Team Unity and the PNM, as it did in the 2000 elections, with claims of continued irregularities on the voter list and the contention that the short time between the calling of elections in mid-October and election day on December 10 has caused confusion, inconsistencies, and other problems. Heckled from all sides, the EBC struggles to repair its image and plod along with the preparations that will undoubtedly come under attack-justified or not-in the election aftermath.

Opposition Leader Promises Big Spending

The third player in the race, opposition leader Patrick Manning of the People's National Movement, (PNM), the traditional party of people of African descent, will need to play his cards carefully. He and his supporters have continued to hammer away at the EBC and the legitimacy of the voter lists, accusations similar to those that plagued the December 2000 general elections. Manning was quick to lay out his ambitious manifesto for government if elected, which promises to create 20,000 jobs a year, build 10,000 new houses, cut taxes, raise pensions, and create 10,000 new small businesses, much of which would be delivered as part of his "100-day plan." Other projects, such as highway construction, a drainage system, higher pay for teachers, and free health benefits for the elderly have also been pledged-a tall order during economic hard times and decreased government revenues.

Panday and Manning Main Contenders

Although Team Unity, in an alliance with the nearly defunct National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), have submitted 36 nominations (30 and 6 respectively), for the 36 parliamentary seats, analysts speculate that it will have little effect on the elections. With some projections showing Maharaj losing his seat, and a perception by many that his defection was more a power grab than a moral cause, there is little hope for any real wins for Team Unity, except to perhaps act as a spoiler in the event that it can wrest a seat or two from the UNC. The real battle will be played in the Manning-Panday rematch, which is by no means a solid bet for either side. And while some of the latest polls give the PNM the edge, the outcome is too close to call.

Although on the surface, Trinidad and Tobago seems unable to recast its political landscape beyond ethnic fault lines, Panday may be able to survive on the basis of sheer public charisma and leadership skills, however tainted he may be, and the general perception of his party as more forward-looking than the PNM, which hails back to the good-old-days of three decades of political dominance from 1956-1986.

For his part, Manning is considered a less charismatic figure on the political platform, despite having fought off contenders within his own party. However, the PNM's persistence in contesting seats in the sister island of Tobago-which could prove invaluable in a head-to-head race-and his ability to capitalize on the internal UNC fallout may be enough to lead Manning to electoral victory, presumably without an alliance with other parties, which Manning has rejected in the past.

Panday Cites Accomplishments

Panday is fighting back hard to retain his leadership position and regain ground. He has accused both the PNM and Team Unity opponents of inciting violence with their warnings of social unrest and a public eruption in the case of a Panday victory. High crime rates and the nagging corruption questions during his administration may end up tipping the scales in the several marginal constituencies to deliver an opposition win. However, despite a local poll claiming that 49 percent of voters believe Panday's administration has probably been marred by corruption, Panday still commands a healthy base of support. The only prime minister since 1981 to be reelected to a second term, Panday is still able to point to the accomplishments of an economy that has grown for seven consecutive years, with record growth rates of 7.9 percent in 2000 and nearly 7 percent in 1999.

Among the world's largest exporters of ammonia and methanol, and the second largest recipient per capita of U.S. direct investment in the Western Hemisphere, Trinidad and Tobago has consolidated its role as one of the most competitive nations in the region, and has positioned itself as a regional leader in anticipation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Since his 1995 election, Panday's push to modernize the country has also included the construction of a new airport, redevelopment of the main port, privatization of the mail system, a modernized telecommunications sector, and expanded technical skills training programs. This time around, if re-elected, Panday vows to continue on the same track, with more or less the same budget plan. However, not content to be outshone by his opponents' stunning array of political promises, Panday presented his "Vision for 2010," which includes increasing pensions, increased medical choice, coastal projects, and other crowd-pleasing social measures.

Future Test

Regardless of the ultimate victor, the real test for Trinidad and Tobago, however, will come after the elections. Hopefully, a repeated or alternative rendition of last year's electoral battle in the courts that contested the eligibility of two of UNC's seat winners will not arise, although both Manning and Maharaj have already alleged vote-padding, inconsistencies, and favoritism within the electoral commission. Barring that eventuality, the next leader of the country will be faced with a severely compromised government budget, due to falling oil prices and a global economic recession. Although not as vulnerable to the tourism slump or bleak economic outlook as are other Caribbean nations, Trinidad and Tobago will undoubtedly be faced with difficult decisions on how to reshape its spending priorities.

Whoever is in office after December 10 will likely be faced with a narrow political mandate, a shakier economic base, and an electorate with more stringent expectations about government performance and accountability. The country's future will depend on the ability to transcend its own political quagmire, heal political wounds, and build a more unified national strategy. Only then can Trinidad and Tobago look beyond the current economic downturn and political turmoil toward a continued bright future.

About the Author

Amy Coughenour Betancourt is deputy director of the Americas Program, where she is responsible for the program's financial management, resource development, and programmatic activities on the Caribbean. She directs the Caribbean Leadership Group—a network of young, emerging regional leaders who work on a broad range of social, economic, and political issues—and the U.S.-Caribbean Executives Club, a high-level business group concerned with policy and business issues that impact the region. Prior to CSIS, Coughenour directed the Washington office of the Center for Occupational Research and Development, for which she also led the development of educational projects in Latin America. Coughenour has held various positions in nonprofit organizations serving refugees and low-income immigrant populations, and has been active on several grassroots organizations' boards. She also served as vice president for North America for the International Vocational Education and Training Association (IVETA). Coughenour holds an M.A. in International Policy Studies from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, a B.A. in German, and has lived in Germany, Mexico, Austria, and Central America.