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# Islamic Fundamentalism in the Caribbean (Dialogue #135)

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**ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN:  
THE ATTEMPTED COUP IN TRINIDAD**

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# ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN: THE ATTEMPTED COUP IN TRINIDAD

*by Ken I. Boodhoo*

It was shortly before 6:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon. The Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago was in session at the Red House. The debate focused on a government motion concerning corruption at the Tesoro Oil Company during the administration of the former Peoples' National Movement (PNM) government. Suddenly machine gunfire echoed through the parliamentary chambers. Members of Parliament dove under their seats in a futile effort to protect themselves. People in the packed public galleries scampered to safety. A few, including policemen on duty, were instantly killed in the initial gunfire. The Jamaat al Muslimeen had invaded the Parliament.

Stepped in the traditions of the British parliamentary system, electoral change in Trinidad, as in the rest of the Commonwealth Caribbean is traditionally effected peacefully. In Grenada, however, there was one instance of violent change--the overthrow of the Gairy government by the New Jewel Movement in 1979.

For the members of the Trinidad Parliament, the other hostages, and the public in general, these events were no less traumatic than the Grenada experience, and this was not only a consequence of the overwhelming violence involved in the governmental takeover. For within a few hours, the southern end of the capital, Port-of-Spain, and sections of the so-called East-West corridor, stretching east from Port-of-Spain to beyond the airport at Piarco became engulfed in widespread looting, plundering, and the burning of buildings. When the army and police sought to curb the violence, between 15-20 looters were killed. Damage to the Port-of-Spain area alone was estimated at more than \$300 million (US \$75 million).

Yet, despite the enormous physical violence, a death toll of at least 24, and tens of millions of dollars lost to looting and destruction, possibly what was most traumatic for the society at large was that democracy was held hostage for at least a week. Many saw the real possibility of being ruled by a group who would not only come to power by violence, but one that purported to reflect a value system, and appeared to want to introduce a political culture alien to that of the majority in the society.



## Background to the Crisis

### The Political Order

The twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, with a population of 1.2 million, gained its independence from Great Britain in 1962. The Westminster parliamentary system is the firmly entrenched political structure, while the norms, values, and traditions reflective of that system, are cherished and enjoyed by the electorate. From independence until 1986, the Peoples' National Movement (PNM), led for much of this time by Dr. Eric Williams, administered the government, having won all five elections since 1961.

To a large extent, politics in Trinidad is influenced more greatly by racial than by other factors. And this is primarily a consequence of the society's ethnic composition. Approximately 80 percent of Trinidad's population is almost equally divided between blacks, descendent of slaves from Africa, and East Indians, themselves a consequence of the very large importation of indentured workers from India at the termination of slavery 150 years ago. The remainder of the population includes descendants of the French, Spanish, and British colonizers, Chinese, Portuguese, and some who originated in the Middle East.

During most of its period in office the PNM received the almost unanimous approval of the black population with minimal support from East Indians. Some of these East Indians who supported the PNM were representatives of the 5 percent Muslim population. And in order to enhance its status with this religious group, 20 years ago the PNM provided lands in Port-of-Spain to the Islamic Guild, which land ultimately became the center of the controversy between the Jamaat al Muslimeen and the state.

Comprising the formal opposition in Parliament since independence was a political party perceived as representative of East Indians and led by East Indians. While traditionally representative of the Hindu religious interests, ultimately this opposition party came to represent all East Indians. Yet by 1970 opposition to the PNM arose from an unexpected source: the black lower class urban poor. Led by a small group of black university students, themselves, arising from this class, for the first half of 1970 Trinidad was buffeted by widespread protest, mass demonstrations, and occasional acts of violence. It culminated in a revolt by the army seeking to overthrow the government. The

latter responded with a show of force and a declaration of a State of Emergency that enhanced police powers and placed the population under a curfew.

The demand from the black urban dispossessed was for a share of the economic pie, and fortunately for the Williams government, some of this was satisfied as a consequence of the oil-generated boom of the 1970s. Yet, by 1981, the charismatic Williams had died leaving the PNM leaderless. The Williams legacy was sufficient for the PNM to win elections that year, but for the next five years they presided over a rapidly contracting economy as oil prices declined drastically after 1983.

For the decade 1975-85 petroleum revenues amounted to approximately TT \$28 billion (US \$6.5 billion at current exchange rates). Unfortunately, much of this revenue was frittered away in prestige projects, misguided attempts at diversification, and government handouts. By 1986, Trinidad was a debtor nation with declining living standards. Thus was the PNM soundly defeated for the first time in 30 years by the coalition National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR).

The NAR began as a fragile alliance that brought together Robinson's, Tobago-based Democratic Action Congress; Hudson-Phillips' urban Organization for National Reconstruction; and Panday's East Indian-orientated United Labor Force. The only unifying force for this very diverse group was a common hostility towards the PNM, thereby tapping a widely held sentiment of much of the country's population by the mid-1980s. In the elections of late 1986, the PNM was overwhelmingly defeated, gaining a mere 3 out of the 36 seats at stake. Yet having destroyed the PNM as an immediate political force, the NAR, implicitly, destroyed itself. That is, no longer being able to vent its hostility toward the PNM, which kept the NAR together, the party turned upon itself. In less than a year the NAR coalition broke apart. The persistent issue of race re-asserted itself over the allocation of power among government ministries. A large East Indian faction led by Panday walked out of the party to form the United National Congress. This six-man group represents the official opposition in the Parliament. A few East Indians remained with the NAR and were rewarded with highly visible and somewhat symbolic government positions.

The break-up of the NAR became one of the major issues raised by Bakr and the Jamaat in their quarrel with the NAR government. For the latter the issue was one of legitimacy. The argument was straightforward, if not fully valid: since the electorate had voted in a particular group to form a

government, because the group had now broken apart, those who remained no longer comprised a legitimate government.

## **The Economic Condition**

Like most colonial economies, Trinidad's economy is open, dependent, and overwhelmingly dominated by one industry: petroleum. Agriculture in general, and sugar in particular, have played a much less significant role, especially in the post-World War II period. For the past 20 years, oil has provided the engine for economic growth, and more recently, the major contributor to the decline.

With the rapidly escalating oil prices after 1973, Trinidad's gross domestic product (GDP) doubled from TT \$4 billion in 1974 to \$8.9 billion by 1978. Real growth averaged about 8 to 10 percent during that period. The GDP that had again doubled to \$18.7 billion by 1983 peaked at \$18.8 billion the following year, but has steadily declined to about \$15 billion at the end of 1989. The six-year period of decline averaged -4.7 percent per year with a peak of -7.5 percent in 1987 and approximately -1.5 percent in 1989. Government revenues from oil alone declined from a high of TT \$4.3 billion in 1981 to \$1.6 billion by 1988.

The non-oil sector performed equally poor during the 1980s. Real output showed an average annual decline of -6.3 percent between 1984-88. Yet by 1988 the non-oil economic goods sector, construction, and agriculture all experienced positive economic growth, which continued into 1989. Overall unemployment, however, remains a persistent problem.

While petroleum accounts for about 25 percent of the real GDP and more than 80 percent of Trinidad's foreign exchange earnings, its contribution to employment, traditionally not large because of the capital-intensive nature of its operations, continues to shrink. Today, petroleum employs less than 12 percent of the labor force, a drop from 15.5 percent at the beginning of the oil boom. With the labor force growing at an annual rate of about 2 percent, at least until the late 1980s, the past six years of the economy's contraction, have exacted a punishing toll on the country's labor force. Unemployment has steadily increased from 10.5 percent at the oil boom in 1982. Unofficial estimates place unemployment at 22 to 25 percent by the time of the attempted coup in July 1990. Very significantly, unemployment among the age group 20-29 years has been estimated at a staggering 42.5 percent.

In the light of the fluctuating performance of the Trinidad economy, its impact upon living conditions for the population has been checkered. One traditional measure of an economy's performance is per capita income. Trinidad's per capita stood at US \$860 in 1970. Ten years later it has increased almost tenfold to \$5,700, peaking at \$6,700 in 1984. Per capita, following the economic contraction, steadily declined since then to about \$3,600 in 1990. Yet this latter figure must be viewed in the light of the 75 percent devaluation of the Trinidad dollar between 1985 and 1987.

A more direct measure of the welfare of a society is the innovative Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI). The PQLI brings together three variables: infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy, with a combined average of the three ranging from a score of 0 to 100. The latter is viewed as an indicator of progress or development. With an infant mortality of 13.7, life expectancy of 70 years, and a literacy rate of about 98 percent, Trinidad's PQLI is estimated at about 92 today. By comparison, Guyana stands at approximately 82 and Jamaica 88. Yet if unemployment is added to the original three-variable index, Trinidad's modified PQLI stagnated at about 88 in the 1980s. The rise in national debt can only exacerbate the already deteriorating living conditions for the broad under-class.

With the decline in petroleum prices by the early 1980s, Trinidad shifted gradually into the column of debtor nations. Thus when the NAR assumed office in late 1986, it inherited a situation of increasing national debt and a tenuous relationship to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was a relationship that meant acceptance of the IMF's structural adjustment program, which included policies designed to reduce the external fiscal imbalance, reduction in government expenditure, state subsidies, import controls, and its involvement in the private sector. Encouraged by the IMF, the NAR also further devalued the Trinidad dollar.

As a consequence of previously negotiated loans, a number of debt repayments fell due for the period 1988-91, amounting to US \$1.8 billion. Unable to meet these repayment schedules, the government returned to the IMF in 1988 to reschedule repayments and for refinancing. The IMF acceded to this request while extending its list of conditionalities. And it is this second round of conditionalities, when added to the first, which would exacerbate economic tensions, providing, in part, a foundation for the attempted coup. For in the minds of large sectors of the population, not only did the government seem somewhat unable to deal with the fundamental problems facing the nation, but to the extent that it did, its programs displayed a lack of sensitivity to the immediate problems confronting the broad under-class.



By 1989 state subsidies were further reduced. A 10 percent public service pay reduction was introduced. Some state enterprises were closed, others were restructured, and still others began a movement toward privatization. As far as the population was concerned, the climax of government's insensitivity was the introduction of the despised, almost across-the-board, Value Added Tax (VAT) of 15 percent on January 1, 1990.

Increased prices for basic consumer items as a consequence of reduced subsidies; the impact of devaluation upon import prices; increased cost of public utility services; unemployment ranging from 22-25 percent; and ultimately, the 15 percent VAT all became reflected in public opinion polls, which, by mid-1990, showed popular support for the government at less than 30 percent, and that was four years after an overwhelming victory in the national elections. It was this sentiment that Abu Bakr and the Jamaat assumed that they could tap into when they stormed the Parliament in July 1990.

## **The Social Order**

The modernization process in Trinidad, like that of many other societies, was influenced by both external and internal factors. With regard to the former, geography, and especially location vis-à-vis the United States has been significant. But it is the colonial history and with it the cultural and institutional modes introduced that laid the basis for much of present-day Trinidad society.

Affecting the modernization process, internally, has been an economic system, which, when compared to other Caribbean societies, promoted affluence and appeared fairly solid, based as it was, not upon agriculture but on petroleum. This is possibly one reason why Trinidadians have been accused of being a care-free people with a "carnival mentality." With the coming to office of Eric Williams and the PNM in 1956, the black under-class obtained a greater sense of identity and acceptance. Williams understood the aspirations of this sector of the society and his declaration of "Massa Day Done" in his fight for independence and his "Money Is No Problem," after the oil boom, must have influenced the minds and behavior of his supporters. With this increased money circulation came increased prices, and ultimately, pressures for increased wages. From 1975-80 wages on average increased approximately 25-30 percent per annum. With inflation ranging from a peak of 22 percent in 1974 to about 15 percent by 1980, it is clear that purchasing power increased dramatically during this period. Yet increased spending was not only a consequence of rapidly rising wages.

As government revenues increased tax relief for citizens, programs to reduce the cost of living were introduced. Tax relief included doubling of the personal allowance for the wage earner and increased allowances for dependents. Purchase tax on manufactured goods was reduced while excise taxes were lowered on particular items. Imported duties on large amounts of foods were completely removed by 1979, while subsidies were increased on other food items. Welfare programs were expanded and new programs initiated. How did the society respond to this government largesse and to increased wages?

It was earlier pointed out that the modernization process in Trinidad has been influenced greatly by external factors, specifically that in the advanced Western nations. Rostow has theorized in this stages-of-growth paradigm, that an economy achieves maturity when mass production and consumption have been achieved. A small and open economy like Trinidad faces inevitable problems in attaining the stage of mass production. Yet the sudden avalanche of oil wealth meant that mass consumption could be achieved almost instantly. Modernization for Trinidad, in the 1970s, therefore meant material advancement, especially as such progress is perceived in First World societies.

Possibly the most obvious manifestation of the instant affluence of the 1970s was the rise of a new middle class--the *nouveau riche*. This group attempted to fashion its lifestyle largely according to its perception of middle-class status, especially in the United States. This perception was nurtured by a steady diet of metropolitan-dominated media, the presence of satellite dishes, and weekend trips to New York, Miami, and Caracas. Individuals attempted literally to buy their way toward a new status in a social structure made mobile by wealth, by acquiring perceived symbols: large homes, expensively furnished from abroad, fast cars, lengthy foreign vacations, and an increased taste for imported foods. Simultaneously, there was a steady decline in the work ethic. The decade of affluence, 1973-82, came to an abrupt end with the dramatic fall in international oil prices by 1983.

As the Trinidad economy began to shrink after 1983, the government clearly became unable to finance its large array of welfare and other assistance programs to the general population. Economic shrinkage led ultimately to suppression of wages and, gradually, to increased unemployment. By the mid-1980s Trinidad began to experience dramatic social and economic unrest as it joined the growing list of debtor nations. The IMF's entry into Trinidad placed conditionalities upon the government for the receipt of international loans. These programs have had their greatest adverse consequences upon

the growing under-class in the society who had come to depend upon government largesse. Thus was the stage set for those who claimed to offer alternatives to policies presented by the state.

### **Modernization, Secularization, and Denominational Change**

Clearly the modernization process in Trinidad, since the end of World War II, was taking place in agreement with the long-established patterns followed by West Europe and the United States. The adoption of some of these modernizing traits was making Trinidad a less distinctive society. The rise of educational opportunity had increased social mobility. The movement toward independence had further hastened the process, in that the broader society became incorporated into national decision-making and the evolving national consciousness. Yet because this early process was fairly gradual, traditional values and the traditional church, for instance, were not seriously threatened. What the society was quite unprepared for was the sudden avalanche of oil wealth.

Two broad patterns of behavior became evident in Trinidad by the 1970s. For one large group, as previously observed, the sudden affluence resulted in the embrace of conspicuous materialism, not simply as a means, but somewhat as an end in itself. For that group, life's meaning was manifested and expressed through the acquisition of material goods. For some among this group, too, materialism was ultimately expressed in hedonistic tendencies as a final value. And for this the society will eventually bear a social cost. The second broad pattern of behavior was again related to the quest for the meaning of life. In the still traditional society of post-World War II Trinidad, the traditional church: the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, embraced by the black sector of the population, and Hinduism and Islam among most East Indians, appeared to meet the spiritual needs of adherents. There was also a relatively small, but vibrant Presbyterian Church attended by Christian East Indians. For the blacks in the Trinidad society, the two mainline churches represented tradition, authority, unity, and solidity. That these churches were largely impersonal and somewhat ritualistic in the form of worship simply added to the traditions revered by a traditional society. For the East Indian, Hinduism and Islam represented a connection to the past. It was a connection that was both religious and cultural, indeed serving to reinforce the traditional identities of East Indians.

Eventually, the modernization process, culminating in the affluence of the 1970s, seriously threatened the traditional society, its values and its institutions. One important institution of this

system, the traditional church structure, began to experience an erosion of its status of primacy in the Trinidad society.

That the primacy of the traditional church would be threatened in the changing social system is not entirely surprising. For while these mainline churches were able to meet the basic needs of its adherents in the earlier period, the changing social system gave rise to different needs, which traditional structures were unable to meet. For instance, modernized man was more highly individualized, and for such a person the established church, impersonal because of its emphasis upon the group, and steeped in tradition, did not encourage a personal relationship to God. Thus the second broad pattern, especially of religious behavior in Trinidad, was some movement away from worship in the mainline churches to the mushrooming charismatic-type organizations, and eventually, to the expanding non-denominational independent church congregations. This was also the period when the cult movement began to attract wider attention from the general population. The Open Bible Standard Churches is an appropriate example of the relatively recent rise of a charismatic-type organization in Trinidad.

In 1953 Scandinavians Kaare and Jean Wilhelmsen arrived in San Fernando and began holding open air street meetings. By 1956 property was purchased in San Fernando and church services were held in an annex. With a congregation soon of more than 200, a huge tent was pitched on the property and services continued there until the church building was completed. A Bible Institute was begun in 1956 and within a few years preaching points were established in ten surrounding towns and villages. By 1970 the church had sent missionaries to Grenada. An act incorporating the Open Bible Standard Churches as a national body was approved by the Trinidad Parliament in 1972. Today, this denomination includes 55 churches, a Bible Institute, and a high school in Trinidad, and four churches and a Bible Institute in Grenada.

The mother church of the Open Bible Standard Churches, in San Fernando, which began with a congregation of less than 100 in 1954 had a formal enrollment of approximately 3,000 by 1990. Actual church attendance was about 2,000, partly as a consequence of recent migration patterns. Yet there is a more compelling factor why overall membership in this denomination has grown more slowly in the past decade than during the earlier period. This charismatic movement has suffered the loss of a few member churches that have severed links with the Open Bible to establish independent organizations. The most dramatic example is Faith Centre.

In 1968 the main church of the Open Bible Standard Churches in San Fernando gained a national pastor, Rev. Carlyle Chankersingh. Membership of that congregation increased rapidly during the 1970s. Yet by the early 1980s, Rev. Chankersingh separated from the Open Bible, taking one half of the San Fernando congregation with him and establishing the independent Faith Centre with a membership of more than 1,000. Overall, the Open Bible's member churches have split into four or five independent congregations. This is about the same number that has separated from the other relatively large charismatic organization, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies.

On the one hand, what has been a major feature of religious behavior in Trinidad since the 1960s is the rise of the charismatic movement accompanied by the stagnation or decline in the membership of the mainline churches, illustrated in the following:

Percentage of Total Population

<u>Denomination</u>	<u>1946</u>	<u>1980</u>
Roman Catholic	34.5	32.9
Anglican	24.2	14.6
Presbyterian	3.6	3.8
Seventh Day Adventist	1.2	2.5
Pentecostal	--	3.5
Hindu	22.7	24.9
Muslim	5.8	5.9

Thus whereas the Pentecostal (charismatic-type) were not considered a category in the 1946 Census, because they were statistically insignificant, by the 1980 Census they comprised 3.5 percent of the total population. The most dramatic decline is evident in the established Anglican denomination, which declined from 24.2 to 14.6 percent between 1946 and 1980. On the other hand, especially within the charismatic movement, there has been steady growth of the independent congregation.

It may be hypothesized that the same phenomena that encouraged the rise of the charismatic movement: the demand of the individual for a personalized religious system structured to meet individual needs, is now evident even within the charismatic movement itself. Possibly, some adherents believe that after 30 years of existence, the charismatic movement itself is becoming traditional and impersonal, and have therefore sought meaning and purpose within the independent organization.

Even though most Trinidadians had shared in the oil wealth of 1970, one group, the black under-class, was able to do so only indirectly through state policies of tax allowances, subsidies, etc., which were designed to encourage income redistribution. Since these programs were abandoned with the rise of the national debt, the plight of the black under-class worsened as the 1980s progressed. Exacerbating this problem was the issue of identity and growing alienation.

While Eric Williams contributed much to increasing the aspirations of the black lower class, ironically, by 1970, this group arose in open confrontation to the Williams's government. The issue was one of full participation in the national society. Led by Geddes Granger and his National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), the cry was for "Black Power." It was a demand for a share in the nation's wealth. Significantly, by rejecting conventional politics and the established church, one of NJAC's first activities was an invasion of the Roman Catholic Cathedral; this group brought together masses of black urban dispossessed and alienated youth in social protest. Undoubtedly, Abu Bakr and his Jamaat al Muslimeen were able to build upon this movement, but to add an important new dimension --a theology of hope.

## **The Rise of the Jamaat and Abu Bakr**

Islam was introduced into Trinidad during the second half of the nineteenth century with the arrival of indentured workers from India. Yet it was not until the post-World War II period that a few blacks in Trinidad were converted to the Islamic faith. This was partly a consequence of the Black Muslim movement in the United States and its spill-over effects upon Trinidad.

While many among Trinidad's black sector were adherents of Catholicism or of the Anglican church, church membership among the lower class blacks was more diverse. Even though the elderly

among this group had remained with the established churches, some of the more youthful had gravitated towards the charismatic movements by the 1960s.

The group that remained essentially unchurched were the dispossessed and alienated youthful males. And it is this group that Geddes Granger and his Black Power movement was able to attract in large numbers. Lacking identity and marginalized by a repressive economic system, Granger offered the idea that "Black is Beautiful." As importantly, "Black Power" for Granger meant "Economic Power" to the lower classes.

Abu Bakr and the Jamaat appeared to offer even more to the few attracted to his movement. Not only did he offer a home. More importantly, followers believed that for the first time they had found hope and a purpose to a formerly meaningless existence. Whereas Granger offered the opportunity for economic power, for Bakr true power emanated from Islamic principles.

### **Establishment of the Mucurapo Center**

In May 1968, the cabinet of the Trinidad government approved an application for a lease of land owned by the state at Mucurapo, in western Port-of-Spain. The application had been made by the Islamic Missionaries Guild of the Caribbean and South America. The Guild, incorporated in 1966, was one of several such groups that had applied to the state for land. Their request was to construct a worship center, including buildings for social services.

Within a year, with construction activity on the site, the center became enmeshed in controversy. The Anjuman Sunnat UI Jamaat Association (ASJA), one of Trinidad's foremost Islamic groups protested to the state that the Guild itself did not represent Muslims in Trinidad, especially since the majority of its Board were non-citizens. Their protests continued through 1970 even as the number and size of the structures at Mucurapo increased. Apparently, the original intent of the Guild was to establish a site for the training of Islamic workers who would serve as missionaries to be sent throughout the region. Yet by 1972, these ambitious proposals were forgotten. Instead, the Guild assisted in the formation of the Jamaat al Muslimeen who took over the operation of the center and its

activities from the Guild. The legal status of this transaction remained unclear. What is important is the status of the Muslimeen within the context of the broader Islamic community in Trinidad.

## **The Rise of the Jamaat**

Like Christianity, Islam is not a fully homogeneous community with regard to the interpretation of the Quran by Muslims across the world. Not only have these divisions found their way into the Trinidad Islamic community, but other factors have accentuated the differences. Trinidad's initial Islam community came from India 150 years ago. This traditional Islamic community identifies with Pakistan today. Yet much of the focus of Islam has shifted to the Arab world. Members of the Jamaat had made visits and had received support from Libya. While most Muslims in Trinidad are of East Indian descent, a relatively small number black nationals are recent converts. The Black Muslim movement in Trinidad, to some extent, identifies with its counterpart group in the United States. The Muslimeen are but a small and somewhat separate group--even a sect--within the Black Muslim community in Trinidad.

Three major Islamic groups--the previously mentioned ASJA, the Trinidad Muslim League, and the Trinidad Islamic Association--form the Islamic Coordinating Council, the instrument of the dominant traditional East Indian Muslim community. The United Islamic Organization is the voice of 14 smaller and more radical Muslim organizations, some of which were formed as a consequence of missionary activity from Middle East Islamic groups. The Muslimeen is a member of this latter organization.

Having assumed "control" over the center, the Jamaat continued through the 1970s and into the earlier 1980s to build and expand the complex at Mucurapo. The buildings included a place of worship: the Mosque, a primary and a secondary school, a dormitory, a medical center, a dining and assembly hall and a multi-purpose complex that included Bakr's residence and some small stores. All of these properties were constructed without approval from the state's building and planning authorities who refused to consider building application from the Jamaat, since the latter was



unable to demonstrate legal ownership of the land. Thus in 1984 Bakr served a 21-day jail sentence for contempt of court for refusing to obey a judge's order to halt construction activity.

Abu Bakr, formerly Lennox Phillips, the eighth of 15 children was the son of a soldier of the small Trinidad army. Born in 1941, Lennox, not yet 18, joined the Police Service in 1959, which provided him the opportunity to excel in sports. Becoming disenchanted with the Service and with Trinidad in general, he migrated to Canada in 1968, following the North American path previously taken by many in his family. He was converted to Islam while a student in Canada, and by the early 1970s returned to Trinidad as Abu Bakr, leaving his first wife and three children in Canada. Ironically, former policeman Lennox Phillips would have continuous confrontation with the law, throughout the 1980s, in his new role as Abu Bakr.

By 1985 the Trinidad courts ordered Bakr and the Jamaat to demolish its Mosque and the other structures on the site. Clashes with the police brought a threat from Bakr of a possible holy war. Numerous attempts were made to arrest Bakr and his followers in 1985. Police forces backed away when faced with the armed strength of the Jamaat. Relations with the Police Services further deteriorated when a leading member of the Jamaat, Abdul Kareem, died while in the custody of the police. Throughout 1986 the Jamaat's legal problems, and attempts at enforcement by the police, served to increase tensions between the two groups. Fears began to be expressed in the broader community as Bakr's threats to the state increased and the presence of arms at the center became more obvious. In late 1986 the PNM government was replaced by Robinson's NAR and almost immediately renewed attempts to resolve the relationship between the Jamaat and the state began.

### **Relations with the Robinson Government**

Having inherited a problem that had remained largely unresolved for 14 years, it appears that the NAR made a serious effort to "regularize" the occupation of the Jamaat on the lands at Mucurapo. Whether the motive was primarily political is another issue. During 1987 and 1988 Minister of Local Government Brinsley Samaroo held a number of meetings with representatives of the Jamaat. The

*Trinidad Guardian* reported that Dr. Samaroo was anxious to "see the issue resolved in their (the Jamaat's) favor and to regularize their position on the land." In a latter affidavit filed with the court, the minister claimed that his meetings with the Jamaat were "entirely fact-finding." But while apparent negotiations were being conducted with the government on one level, confrontation with the police continued at another.

In late 1987 Bakr was arrested having led demonstrations in Port-of-Spain, and served three days in prison. Later, the police raided the Jamaat's headquarters, arresting 43 members on various charges, including drug and weapons possession. Police raids continued through 1988 while the Jamaat continued construction of its site defying all court orders prohibiting such activity. By 1989 ministerial portfolios had been re-shuffled, and negotiations with the Jamaat were now led by Minister Carson Charles.

It appears that both Samaroo and Charles were concerned that the Jamaat had no legal status and encouraged the latter to be registered and incorporate as required by law. In November 1989 this status was granted by the attorney general, even though clashes with the police continued. Indeed by early 1990 the commissioner of police said, in an affidavit, he believed that trips by members of the Jamaat to Libya "have not been entirely innocuous."

During the first six months of 1990, tensions between the state and the Jamaat escalated when the minister of National Security ordered an occupation of the Jamaat's compound. This was done in late April after another order to the Jamaat to cease its construction activity was made by the state. The Jamaat filed for a judicial review of this order but was turned down by the court. An appeal was filed, but on July 25, Justice Ivor Blackman ruled against the Jamaat. It was two days later, on July 27, 1990, that members of the Jamaat stormed the national parliament seeking to overthrow the government.

## **Perspectives on the Six-Day Uprising**

The coup began with the explosion of a car, previously loaded with explosives at the police headquarters, Port-of-Spain, which ignited the building killing some policemen. This group of the Muslimeen joined another at the nearby Parliament building, storming a meeting of the House of Representatives. Among those taken hostage were Prime Minister Robinson and his deputy, Winston Dookeran, 12 governing party members and five from the opposition.

Another group invaded the nearby "Radio Guardian," but retreated to join the group at the Parliament. Abu Bakr was the leader of the third group that took over Trinidad's sole television station--Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) and the adjoining Radio Trinidad. Therefore, Radio Guardian remained the only public media not controlled by the Muslimeen during the crisis.

That Bakr would lead the assault on TTT was obvious. He had anticipated using the television to propagandize the national audience, assuming, somewhat naively, that they would rise up in support of the Muslimeen. Thus within the first hour of the coup and throughout the first Friday evening and on Saturday morning, Bakr made repeated appearances to state his case. Eventually, government technicians were successfully able to jam the TTT transmissions and established their own for communicating with the populace.

### **The Perspective of Abu Bakr and the Muslimeen**

In a 1985 interview with the Trinidad *Express* newspaper, Bakr emphasized that in the Koran there is the "golden rule" that mandates all Muslims to "stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses of God. Living in (Trinidad's) society," he asserted, is in "total contradiction" to Islamic principles. Somewhat prophetically, he continued, "and unless this is changed, this Golden Rule will put us into eternal conflict with the state."

For Bakr and the Muslimeen, the Trinidadian society was riddled with injustice and corruption. He claimed to have proof that the Police Services was corrupt. He believed that the court system was unjust since it was unable, at least until 1985, to resolve the legal problems of the Jamaat with the state. He believed that one of his followers, Abdul Kareem, was killed while in police custody. Yet that issue remained unresolved. He further argued that injustice existed at the broader levels of the economic and social systems. He asserted that as long as "people have mansions and others have no where to sleep," and while some possess "fast speed boats and others do not have their basic needs" then, he said, "this (golden) rule must be enforced." These basic themes were replayed when Bakr addressed his audience on TTT during the first few hours of the coup.

Justifying the overthrow of the government and the "arrest" of Robinson and his cabinet, Bakr argued that the government had: permitted and participated in widespread corruption; encouraged the widening racial cleavages that were destroying the society; and allowed its Police Services to engage in drug trafficking and harassment of the population. To add insult to injury, Bakr said was a government announcement two days earlier that a TT \$500,000 monument would be erected in honor of Gene Miles, a thorn in the side of the former PNM government, apparently driven to suicide some years earlier. "Imagine," Bakr raged, "people cannot afford to buy food to eat in this country and they are talking about spending half a million dollars on a concrete statue!"

Later the first evening, and in subsequent statements, it became clear that the social revolution proposed by Bakr and the Muslimeen had its basis, and would be built upon principles emanating from the Koran. Not unlike Saddam Hussein one year later, Bakr declared, "we have not depended on anybody but the Creator." Indeed, he emphasized, it was "God (who had) brought an end to the continued oppression of the poor people" of Trinidad, through the overthrow of the government. Thus, he repeatedly asserted, God was on his side and would see him through this ordeal since "God was looking down and judging the actions of everybody." At the Red House one of Bakr's lieutenants, Bilal Abdullah put the issue more succinctly. "What we are seeking to do," he asserted, "is to Islamize the society." While these may have been the objectives of Bakr and Abdullah, what

remains unclear is how many of their 110 followers engaged in the coup attempt supported the apparent objectives of their leaders.

## **The State's Perspective**

The agencies of the state were in obvious disarray in the immediate aftermath of the takeover of the Parliament. While most government officials were held hostage a few cabinet ministers were on the outside. Government response remained uncoordinated for the first 24 hours. Further, the titular head of state, the president, was on vacation in Europe, and the acting president was apparently unsure of the role expected of him. To compound the problem was disarray among the security services. The Police Services were under significant pressure with the destruction of their headquarters and the killing of some policemen. The small Defence Force remained at its barracks for some hours after the takeover awaiting coordination with an uncoordinated government. On the first evening, therefore, lower Port-of-Spain and into the eastern corridor degenerated into widespread chaos, as groups roamed the area looting and burning in an unrestrained frenzy.

Within the Red House, negotiations began on Friday evening, led by Dookeran representing the government and Abdullah for the Jamaat, seeking to resolve the situation. Two major points of discussion included the creation of an interim government and the issue of amnesty for the hostage-takers. On the outside, Anglican priest Knolly Clarke served as mediator.

At least five notes and agreements were formulated during the discussions. Essentially, they included the resignation of the prime minister and his replacement by Winston Dookeran; the establishment of an interim government with input from the Muslimeen; elections to be held within 90 days; and an amnesty for the Muslimeen. Robinson's resignation was prepared by Rep. Toney and signed by the prime minister. In the earlier hours of Saturday morning acting president Joseph Emmanuel Carter signed an amnesty agreement.

Politically, it would appear that the Muslimeen were tricked into believing that an agreement had been reached, while the government, for its part, had no intention of honoring any agreement

prepared under distress. Indeed, within hours of the release of the hostages, acting prime minister Dookeran declared that "no deals" had been made and that the hostage-takers must answer to the courts for their actions. The ultimate legal status of the amnesty agreements remain unclear. The military aspects of the confrontation remain equally unclear.

With the Police Services in some disarray, at least initially, the Defense Services by Saturday morning sought to consolidate its forces to confront the hostage-takers. Two issues became immediately clear. First, the security forces possessed insufficient manpower to confront both the immediate standoff at the Red House and at TTT and also control the widespread looting and burnings. Second, even if manpower were available, support services, including equipment and transport were in short supply. It became quickly obvious that resources were needed from within the region and even beyond to supplement the local effort.

Barbados apparently served as the major contact point for discussions with CARICOM partners and the staging ground for assisting Caribbean troops. The US Embassy in Barbados also appeared to serve as the contact point for coordination with the US troops from Barbados and Jamaica were quickly assembled and were ready to move into Trinidad. Though denied officially, it is believed that some 40 US elite and secret Delta forces were flown into the darkened Trinidad airport that first weekend. What is most interesting is that though needed, Caribbean forces did not arrive into Trinidad until many days later and then, only provided perfunctory services on behalf of the state.

Even though the joint military and police services present in Trinidad were unable to deal with the magnitude and wide nature of the crisis, it is clear that local security officials were opposed to receiving assistance from CARICOM forces. The acceptance of such assistance would have been an acknowledgment of the inability of the local services to perform effectively. Indeed, it is believed, security forces threatened to stand aside if regional troops were invited in by the state. To that extent, it may be argued that the government was held hostage not only by the Muslimeen but also by its own security forces. If nothing else, this demonstrates the vulnerability of micro-states to any group

with even a limited supply of arms. Not only was there disagreement on the size of forces necessary to confront the crisis, there also appeared to be conflict between security officials and others concerning the method for resolution of the problem. This became evident even to the hostages themselves.

### **The View from Inside the Red House**

From within the Red House, Prime Minister Robinson constantly pleaded on the telephone with those outside to exercise caution in the use of force. According to one hostage, the security officials responded with screams of their determination to destroy all the Muslimeen within the building. This hostage was convinced that if the defense forces and police had stormed the building all those inside would have been assassinated immediately by their captors. One is left to wonder if the security forces were willing to sacrifice the lives of government officials in order to resolve the crisis. And if that was the objective was there a political agenda involved, or were the security services simply determined to prove that they were capable of resolving the problem.

Thus throughout the first full day of the crisis, the bombardment of the building by the defense forces was heavy and continuous. If one assumes that US Special Forces arrived on the first night, it is then understandable why the tactics for resolving the crisis changed abruptly, from the use of force to a long drawn out period including apparent negotiations.

The discipline of the Muslimeen during the siege at the Red House, and their apparent commitment to their principles, was especially noted by one former hostage. This hostage emphasized that in his conversations, primarily with Abdullah, he was struck by the determination of the group to restructure the social and political order, replacing it to some extent, with one built upon Islamic principles.

It is clear that the Muslimeen were motivated by some degree of fanaticism, which caused them to seriously misjudge the reaction of wider society to their attempted coup. Thus by seeking to

instantly and probably completely restructure the Trinidad political culture, the action of the Muslimeen were, at best, naive, and, at worst, in complete disregard for the legal norms of the state.

## Conclusion

For the most part, political change in English Caribbean democracies has been effected peacefully. Yet, especially over the past 20 years, there has been sufficient evidence to indicate that the violent threat to the Westminster system of change must be taken seriously. In Jamaica, for instance, some level of violence has become associated with the election campaigns. In Guyana, coercion, including some violence, has marked the rulership of the Peoples' National Congress for the past quarter century. And then of course, there is the case of Grenada, where Gairy, having elevated intimidation to an instrument of rule, was himself overthrown by an armed coup in 1979, with the replacement government itself ending in the bloody carnage of 1983. This returns us to the case of Trinidad.

Multi-ethnic Trinidad has traditionally enjoyed relatively peaceful electoral change. Even the most significant upheaval since post-World War II, the Black Power demonstrations of 1970, though massive in terms of the numbers of the population involved, was largely non-violent--though its termination in the revolt of the army was. And in the immediate aftermath, the state became embroiled in confrontation with the small, but violent National Union of Freedom Fighters.

What 1970 did demonstrate was that conventional politics was simply unable to assimilate the demands and pressures arising from among the black urban dispossessed, who felt increasingly marginalized by middle-class political leadership and a dependent economic system. For them, the achievement of national independence, which they had expected would impact positively upon their status in the society, indeed had resulted in regression of their living conditions. Ironically, the decline in their quality of life occurred with a "black" government in office.



The oil boom of the 1970s, and until the early 1980s, contributed much to meeting the demands of the dispossessed. This was achieved through social welfare and taxation policies of the state, which sought to redistribute the accumulated oil wealth. And this was not surprising, since the ruling PNM government obtained substantial support from among the black lower class. Government largesse continued until oil prices collapsed, and with it, the inability of the state to fund its welfare programs.

Indeed, one of the IMF's first demands upon the state was a sharp curtailment of government expenditure. Thus, living conditions for the black lower class steadily deteriorated as the IMF conditionalities began to impact upon the wider society.

The assumption to political office of the NAR government in late 1986 only served to exacerbate the social and economic problem. This was a consequence of the legacy of the PNM; the misguided expectation of the populace that the new government would improve upon the performance of the previous government; the fact that large international loans came due during the first years of the NAR; and an increasingly widespread sentiment that the government was uncaring and insensitive. Moreover, IMF conditionalities eventually began to be felt by the middle class as well in terms of retrenchment, cost of living, and ultimately the 15 percent VAT. Public opinion polls by mid-1990 showed government supported by about 25 percent of the electorate.

Grounded in Islamic principles, Abu Bakr and the Jamaat al Muslimeen believed that they alone could save the society from itself. Unfortunately, they sought change by violent means, succeeded in only pushing the society much further back into despair, and themselves into possibly very lengthy prison terms.