

The arrival of Jihadism in Latin America - Part II

The curious case of Trinidad and Tobago's Black Muslims

Emanuel Pietrobon



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**The arrival of Jihadism in Latin America – Part II
The curious case of Trinidad and Tobago's Black Muslims
and of its conversion in the largest jihadist hotbed
of Western Hemisphere**

A research by Emanuel Pietrobon for the Higher School of Economics in Saint Petersburg

INTRODUCTION

Trinidad and Tobago is a small dual-island state of the Caribbean that differs from the rest of Latin America because of its historically sedimented tradition of religious and cultural pluralism related to the heterogeneous ethnic composition. In fact, while most Latin American countries have been historically Catholic-majority, Trinidad and Tobago is characterized for having a multi-religious society since the 18 Century.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus have lived and worked together for the building and shaping of the syncretic Trinbagonian national identity, and this very peculiar multicultural model granted the country a peaceful coexistence until the late 1960s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America was overwhelmed by students and workers' protests demanding deep changes in society and politics as well as in the United States and in Western Europe. While in the rest of the continent the protests were addressed against American imperialism and the brutality of the US-backed military dictatorships, in Trinidad and Tobago only Blacks took part in the protests against the then-dominant cultural, social and political order.

Soon the protests showed their anti-democratic and subversive aims and the civil unrest was renamed the Black Power Revolution. Black protesters wanted to subvert the "White-centric cultural order" that according to them ruled over the country since the previous century to the detriment of the Black community.

The protests eventually ended due to the repression policy followed by the government but since then cultural and racial diversity has ceased to be a union factor and gradually has turned into a split factor.

After the civil unrest, order and peace were restored but only superficially, because Black leaders continued their culture war by spreading the teachings of US black nationalist revolutionary movements such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. If they could not change the system, they would self-segregate themselves by creating Blacks-only ethnic enclaves.

Racial hatred and subversive ambitions started spreading once again, on the background of a stagnant economy and growing social inequalities, and on July 27, 1990, the country was shocked by a coup attempt by 250 armed men belonging to an unknown terrorist organization, Jamaat al Muslimeen (JaM).

It was the first time in the Western Hemisphere that an Islamist and Black separatist terrorist group tried to overthrow a legitimately elected government. The coup plotters assaulted parliament and took hostages. The crisis ceased four days later with a death toll of 24.

Since then, ethnic tensions within the country have furtherly worsened highlighting the evident failure of the Trinbagonian multicultural model. Later with the emergence of Islamist terrorism, the country quickly but silently became the main recruiting ground in the Americas for notorious groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamist State.

The research question of this work is the following: How could a country historically built upon a multicultural identity turn into the largest Jihadist hotbed of Western Hemisphere where Black Muslims self-segregated themselves in closed communities?

Accordingly, the purpose is to show that the reasons behind the appearance of inter-ethnic hatred and Islamist terrorism date back to the 1960s and are closely connected to the then-wide spreading of Black nationalist and separatist movements which represented the first step towards the implosion of Trinbagonian nationalism.

A further goal is to provide a solution able to de-escalate ethnic tension and rebuild the historical multi-ethnic and multicultural national identity that has characterized the country for two centuries.

FROM BLACK NATIONALISM TO ISLAMIST TERRORISM: THE FALL OF TRINBAGONIAN MULTICULTURALISM

Historically, Trinidad and Tobago has been one of the most multiracial countries in the Americas. According to 1946 government census, citizens of Indian, African and mixed ancestry made up 96% of the total population; while in 2011 they made up 99%.¹

Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam are the largest religions and are officially recognized as the three foundation pillars of the Trinbagonian national identity. Christian, Hindu and Muslim holidays are celebrated as public holidays and each religious group has been traditionally involved both in politics and society to enhance interfaith dialogue, to solve social and economic issues and to strengthen the Trinbagonian pluralistic national identity.

According to the 2011 census, the religious landscape is mainly composed by Catholics (21.6%), Hindus (18.2%), Pentecostals (12.0%), Anglicans (5.7%), Baptists (5.7), Muslims (5%).²

Trinbagonian nationalism has never had civic connotations and it has been ethnically shaped since the formation of national identity has begun. Religious-motivated ethnic tensions date back to the arrival of Hindus and Muslims in the country in the 18th century, but it was specifically from these contrasts that eventually emerged a peculiar and syncretic multicultural integration model able to generate mutual enrichment and social cohesion until the late 1960s.

According to academics at the basis of each form of nationalism lies a deep tension between civic and ethnic elements. Civic nationalism ties individuals within a community through their common adherence to the founding values of the nation-state, accordingly anyone can aspire to become a full member of the nation regardless of language spoken, cultural practices or racial origins.

Ethnic nationalism is very different because it emphasizes the importance of things such as the birthplace, the native culture, the religion; only a person satisfying all these cultural and blood-related criterias can be a member of the nation.

In Trinidad and Tobago's case, the three major ethnic groups have worked together to form a common ground in which collaborate for national well-being but without losing their respective identities – which sometimes have been the main cause of tensions and separatist ambitions.

Today as well as in the past, being a Trinbagonian means being Indian, Black or mixed-race and following and preaching Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. The multicultural model worked for more than a century but was also unable to appease the mandeering sickness among Afro-descent Trinbagonians, who always perceived themselves to be excluded from the society, and eventually it clashed against the powerful emergence of Black nationalism.

In 1968, political activist Makandal Daaga, born Geddes Granger, established the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC) at the University of the West Indies with the goal of challenging the then-ruling party People's National Movement, accused of pursuing the interests of the White minority to the detriment of Blacks and Mulattos.

Daaga credited influence from the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party and started preaching the anti-imperialist teachings of Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Tubal Uriah Butler calling on the Black community to revolt against the government and give birth to a new Black-centered cultural and political order.

Soon the protests became violent and between 1968 and 1970 the country was affected by frequent civil unrests resulted in several deaths and injuries among protesters

1 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/products/dyb/index.cshtml>

2 2011 census:

<http://www.cso.gov.tt/Census/TrinidadandTobago2011populationandHousingCensusDemographicReport.pdf>

and policemen. NJAC succeeded in pushing labor' unions to go on strike and by 1970 the economy was semi-paralyzed.

In the same year, the government proclaimed a state of emergency to restore order in the country by means of more repression, killings, and arrests, and the Public Order Act to reduce civil liberties and control protest marches.

The situation was about to detonate when Afro-Caribbean members of the Trinidad Defense Force decided to mutiny in protest against the zero-tolerance policy of the government, but the government managed through negotiations to make the mutineers surrender.

The Black Power revolution failed but the ideas behind it did not die, on the contrary they were first strengthened by the growing poverty, social polarization and economic inequalities, and later radicalized in the following decades due to the arrival in the country of Islamist ideologists and preachers.

This is the theory of political scientists John McCoy and Andy Knight, authors of a 2017 renowned study on the origins of religious radicalization among Trinbagonian Muslims. According to them Black nationalism would be gradually replaced by Islamist-Black separatist ideology during the 1980s and the 1990s due to the conversion to Islam of many Black leaders.

Black-only communities became Black Muslim-only communities, while endemic poverty and social exclusion were exploited by radical preachers to recruit new members for criminal organizations and later, with the rise of international Islamist terrorism, to recruit fighters to send abroad.

The most famous organization active in proselytism among Black youths was, and it is, Jamaat al-Muslimeen (JaM) which was founded in 1980 by Imam Yasin Abu Bakr, born Lennox Philip, to help Afro-Trinbagonian recover their racial consciousness by embracing Islam, considered the true and original religion of all Afro-Caribbean.

Soon, JaM became a notorious criminal group involved in illicit trafficking of weapons and drugs, prostitution, robberies and kidnappings, whose earnings were used to fund welfare programs and build mosques.

Some investigations by US authorities suggest that JaM was established with the financial help of Muammar Gaddafi's Lybia to spread anti-Western sentiments in America's backyard through the use of radical Sunnism. After Gaddafi's death, Saudi Arabia would take place of Lybia as shown by the spreading of Wahhabism and the reported presence of Saudi citizens visiting Black Muslim-only communities.

JaM gained international attention on July 27, 1990, when tried to overthrow the government with a 250-men armed squad which assaulted on parliament and took hostage several politicians, including former Prime Minister Arthur Raymond Robinson. After four days of negotiations, the government granted amnesty to Abu Bakr and his coup plotters with the promise that JaM would not be dissolved nor prosecuted.

The then-government feared that a repressive campaign against JaM could lead the country to a new season of racial uprisings similarly to the 1970s, but the lack of policies aiming at reversing the trend towards the definitive failure of the national multicultural model worsened the situation.

On the background of the Islamist insurgency, in 1993 American black separatist sect Nation of Islam (NoI) sent David Muhammad, a UK charismatic preacher, to Trinidad and Tobago with the purpose to take advantage of the resumed ethnic tensions to spread its teachings, recruit new adepts and make an alliance with JaM.

Since then, JaM and NoI have been working together to set up new mosques, to feed "black business", to get more public and media space to discuss interracial tensions, their activities, and to spread Islam in the country. Particularly, NoI preachers are active in penitentiaries where they distribute Qurans and approach Afro-Trinbagonian inmates to let them know about Islam, NoI, and JaM.

Over the years, black separatism let the space to religious terrorism and JaM gained the attention of the United States after the 2007 failed terroristic plot on JFK Airport in New York City, planned by JaM members living in the United States. According to US inquiries, JaM has established business ties with Colombian FARC and Venezuelan drug cartels, and it is used since the post-9/11 as a recruiter of fighters by the most dangerous Islamist terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, Hamas, and recently, the Islamic State (IS).

The JaM and NoI-led fast-growing radicalization has had an upsetting impact on the small Muslim community whose depth has been more clearly understood only after the 2014 official establishment of the IS caliphate in the Syraq. Since then from 100 to 400 citizens left the country to the join the IS army making Trinidad and Tobago the largest IS recruitment center in Americas with an estimated rate of 36 foreign fighters per capita, which it rises to 616 per capita if considering them only in relation the national Muslim community.

Abu Bakr and JaM have voiced support for Islamist terrorism in several public speeches, but despite the outrage sparked no action has been taken by the authorities to stop radicalization among Muslim citizens and to annihilate definitely JaM, a clear threat for national security. Furthermore, anti-American, anti-White and anti-Christian rhetoric is also increasing among other Islamic organized groups, such as the Trinidadian Islamic Front, as denounced by academic Barry Rubin.

According to Rubin, another famous author interested in Trinidad and Tobago's case, the nowadays Islamist insurgency in the country would be the natural continuation of the anti-system and counter-culture revolt begun in the late 1960s by the Black Power revolutionaries. He agrees with McCoy and Knight about the conversion of the past Trinbagonian black nationalism into a dangerously powerful ideology combining racial segregationism, anti-White and anti-American hatred, radical Islam, and black supremacy.

According to anthropologists and sociologists such as Dylan Kerrigan, most of the Trinbagonians who left the country to join the IS were illiterate youths aged between 16 and 25, recruited in the criminal underworld and in the poorer ghettos with the promise of an economic return. Even if it could be true that some fighters left for money and not for religious beliefs, on the other hand it is impossible to deny the existence of a widespread phenomenon of radicalization among Muslims led by JaM and NoI and fed by foreign countries. The numbers are clear and furthermore, the story of Tariq Abdul Haqq, the most famous Trinbagonian foreign fighter, refutes this weak theory.

Haqq was a famous boxing champion, medallist at the Commonwealth games, and a public person, who decided to leave his promising sportive career in order to join the IS army. How, when and by who he was radicalized is still today a matter of discussion, but his story is useful to understand that radical Islam does not take roots exclusively on poor but also on rich and wealthy individuals.

After appearing in a propagandistic video destined to attract fighters from Latin America, Haqq was killed on a battlefield in Syria, year and place of death and the location of his body remain unknown.

CONCLUSION

The research has tried to show how the Trinbagonian multicultural model has slowly failed, first repressing and unhearing the demands for social justice of the Black community and then underestimating and disregarding the dangerousness coming from Islamist groups tied with the international terrorist network.

Today the IS has been almost defeated and in Western countries have opened public discussions about the destiny of the returning foreign fighters, on the background of the

claims by Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel about the failure of European approach to integration and multiculturalism evidenced by the numerous and bloody terrorist attacks and by the widespread radicalization of second and third generation Muslims.

In Trinidad and Tobago there is no such discussion, JaM and NoI are still operative and the country is being isolated by its neighbors, including the United States, due to the rising fear of citizens traveling to commit terrorist attacks.

Currently, JaM is trying to use its influence among Afro-Trinbagonians to give birth to a political platform able to challenge the mainstream political parties. Hatred rhetoric has become the normality in the political discourse of Islamist organizations, while Christians and Hindus have publicly denounced the growing ethnic and religious tensions within the society.

It will not be easy to restore order and peaceful coexistence among religious and ethnic groups, but it is the only walkable way if politicians want to avoid a civil war scenario. JaM and NoI must be banned and their respective members involved in criminal and terrorist activities must be jailed.

At the same time, the major political forces and civil society should work together on fighting the economic and social problems that made possible the emergence of ethnic divisions, hatred-feeding ideologies, and terrorism.

Lastly, with the help of foreign experts, the government should start de-radicalization programs destined to all those who have been exposed to teachings of NoI and JaM.

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