The twin-isle Republic of Trinidad and Tobago with its reserves of natural gas, petroleum, and asphalt is one of the more prosperous countries in the Caribbean with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US$25,162 (2008), a 98 percent literacy rate, and an investment-friendly environment. Trinidad and Tobago are two small islands in the Eastern Caribbean, northeast of Venezuela, with a land mass of just 5,128 square kilometers and a population of nearly 1.3 million. The population is unevenly divided between the two islands with 96 percent of the population in Trinidad (4,828 sq km) and the remaining 4 percent in Tobago (300 sq km). Subsequently, Trinidad is the center of the country’s political and economic life and Tobago is the heart of the country’s tourism industry but is less developed and often underestimated in the ethnopolitical arithmetic. However, Tobago, with its two constituency seats, has proven (since 1995) that its votes cannot be taken for granted and anyone wanting to grab the reins of national power must court Tobagonians.

Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence from Britain in 1962 and became a republic within the Commonwealth of Nations in 1976. Tobago has increasingly sought and gained greater measure of self-government through the Tobago House of Assembly first in 1980 and expanded in 1996. The islands of Trinidad and Tobago have different political cultures, largely a result of the difference in population concentration. Tobago is more homogeneous with more than 95 percent of the population of African descent. Trinidad is more heterogeneous with the population almost evenly split between Blacks and East Indians, in addition to a sizable mixed population, and small Chinese, Syrian, and European populations. In Tobago, the political dialogue is more issue and personality oriented while in Trinidad the issues become ethnicized rather easily. Elections in Trinidad and Tobago have been regular and regarded as free.
and fair since independence, even though the People’s National Movement has dominated the political arena since it came to power in 1956, being out of office for only three terms (1986–1991, 1995–2001, and in 2010).

In Trinidad and Tobago, there are two main folklores—Creole and East Indian. In a cosmopolitan society such as Trinidad, these folklores should be and often are complementary. However, when it comes to identifying the national cultural symbols and identity, there is much contestation between the two. The Creole folklore is a mixture of African, Spanish, French, and English cultures. I would add that the Creole culture also incorporates aspects of the Indian cultural forms as can be seen in the music (the creation of soca and chutney soca) and food with the almost national place of roti and curry dishes among Trinidadians. The Creole culture is seemingly shared by Blacks, local Whites (colloquially called French Creoles regardless of their national origin), and the mixed populations. The East Indian folklores are those inherited from the indentured workers from Southeast Asia (India and Pakistan), specifically the Hindu and Muslim religions and cultures. Group tensions exist not only between the two dominant ethnic groups but also within them. Within the East Indian ethnic group, the tendency of Indian political leaders to define Indian identity in terms of Hindu identity and the general suspicion of Muslims have tended to leave Muslim and Christian Indians out of the fold. Similarly, the militancy of sections of the Black population—the Jamaat-al Muslimeen, for instance—has marginalized them from the Black (Christian) group who do not want to be associated with their tactics or politics. In addition, issues of color (shadism) and class further differentiate the Black and mixed populations.

Group competition and tensions can be seen in the cultural arena, specifically the activities surrounding Trinidad’s premier national cultural event, Carnival, with some Trinidadians (Black and East Indians for different reasons) asserting that Carnival is a “black thing” and with East Indian politicians calling on their population to not participate in the festival. These competing folklores are translated and superimposed onto the political arena as a Black versus East Indian competition for control of the government and state apparatus. The political dialogue is presented as a quest for ethnic balance in the political sphere, equality of opportunity in the economic space (including the public sector), and mutual respect and recognition in the cultural sphere. State–society relations in Trinidad and Tobago and consequently interethnic relations are flavored by these aspirations for equality, fairness, dignity, and recognition.

Ethnopolitics prevails in Trinidad and Tobago because of a struggle for cultural recognition and respect. The dominance of the Creole cultural forms and the late development of the Indian folklores at the national level have left Indo-Trinidadians feeling that the national identity of the country marginalizes them even though they account for 40 percent of the population. At the same