



Hope Bellied: Crime and Insecurity in Trinidad and Tobago

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It was hoped that a new substantive Police Commissioner would be appointed and begin the process of reforming the police service in order to help anti-crime efforts in Trinidad and Tobago. These hopes have been dashed.

At the end of January 2018, the Police Service Commission (PSC) of Trinidad and Tobago, announced its recommendation for the post of Commissioner of Police (CoP). With the country experiencing high levels of crime and an apparent spike in murders, Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS), which has been without a substantive CoP since 2012, is in dire need of new leadership and strategic vision. Its last substantive CoP, the Canadian Dwyane Gibbs, resigned from the post in 2012 after being selected in 2010. Despite his efforts, Gibbs faced an uphill task to reform the TTPS and was undermined by elements within Trinidad. It was hoped that the new selection process would have allowed the process of improving the TTPS to begin anew.

The CoP, in a country in the grips in the spate of an almost intractable problem with violent crime, particularly murders – more than 130 of which have been committed for the year to date – occupies a position of extreme importance. The CoP is responsible for giving direction to anti-crime efforts and has the authority to discipline police officers, hold the commanders of the country's nine operational divisions to account and to be there to offer reassurance to a population that is worried by the high crime rate. The appointment of someone substantive to fill the position would also be a signal that the TTPS is being

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given due priority by the government of the day with the linked message that the government is serious about tackling the national crime problem.

However, these hopes were dashed as the choice for the CoP, Acting Deputy Commissioner of Police (Operations) Deodath Dulalchan, evoked a storm of criticism over allegations of illegal land occupation and unresolved disciplinary issues. Similar concerns were raised over the recommendation of Harold Philips for the substantive post of Deputy Commissioner of Police as his conduct in the malicious arrest and prosecution of a fellow police officer was severely criticized by a High Court Judge in 2016. This fiasco, at the time of writing, remains unresolved as Trinidad's Parliament has established a committee to examine the process and choices before voting on the recommendations of the PSC for the CoP and Deputy Commissioner of Police respectively. In the interim, Stephen Williams has received his thirteenth six-month extension as Acting Commissioner of Police.

Crime Problems – High Crime Rate but Low Detection Rates

The TTPS is viewed as a somewhat ineffective and this is despite an ostensible improvement in its crime detection rate and a reduction in the number of reported serious crimes between 2010 and 2017. When the number of serious crimes reported to the TTPS from 1990 to 2016 are examined in intervals, an increase of 6% is shown from 16,199 in 1990 to 17,134 in 2000. Thereafter, from 2000 to 2010, the number of serious crimes increased by 17% from 17,134 to 20,126. However, from 2010 to 2016, there was a decrease by 43% from 20,126 to 11,493. The current detection rate of 24% in 2016 is an improvement over the previous figure of 16% in 2010. However, it isn't clear whether the reduction is in part caused by an increasing reluctance among the

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general population to report crime owing to an expectation of no results being forthcoming from the TTPS.

Nonetheless, the statistical reduction in serious crimes is noteworthy. This, however, has not been the case with murders. From 1990 to 2000, murders increased by 43% from 84 to 118. From 2000 to 2010, it increased by 294% from 118 to 485. From 2010 to 2016, there was a decrease from 485 to 463. However, previously, from 2004 to 2005, there was an increase from 260 to 386 and from 2007 to 2008, the total jumped from 395 to 550. In 2017, there were 494 murders and for 2018, there have been at least 130 to date. The detection rate, for murders has been declining quite alarmingly. From 69% in 1990 to 16% in 2016, the fall has been precipitous decade by decade. From 1990 to 2000, the detection rate fell from 69% to 57%. Then, from 2000 to 2010, it slid from 57% to 23% and this worsened still further as from 2010 to 2016, the detection rate fell again from 23% to an abysmal 16%. It should be emphasized that this detection rate deals with charges being laid, not convictions secured.

The TTPS – Manpower Issues

The TTPS, on February 13, 2017, had a sanctioned strength of 7,884 full-time officers with the “actual strength” at that date being 6,768 a 14% or 1,116 deficit. However, even with this less than sanctioned strength, the police to population ratio for Trinidad and Tobago (population approximately 1.3 million) stands at some 1:192. This compares very favourably with the United Kingdom where the ratio stands at approximately 1:540. Like the British Special Constabulary, the TTPS has support in the form of the Special Reserve Police (SRP) which were supposed to be a reserve force but some 2496 are employed on a full-time basis with only 652 being part-time.

There is a total of 3,732 Regular Officers, 1,477 Full time SRPs and 626 Part Time SRPs giving a total of 5,835 officers assigned to the nine (9) Police Divisions and available for normal policing duties. The remaining 3,399 officers are assigned to the various special Units and Branches within the Service and comprise 2,354 Regular Officers, 1,019 Full time SRPs and 26 Part Time SRPs. It should be noted that the TTPS is an armed service with all personnel trained in the use of firearms, except for a proportion of the SRPs, including pistols, submachine guns and assault rifles.

However, these numbers do not tell the whole story. An inefficient shift system and a high rate of absenteeism, poorly planned leave and sickness dramatically reduces the number of TTPS personnel available for duty at any given time. In addition to the 14% shortfall between actual and authorized strength, official information showed that a further 10% to 20% of officers are not on duty at any given time, reducing the number of daily available personnel to about 4700 full-time TTPS officers. The shift system cuts this number in half meaning that at any given time, the country has fewer than 2500 full-time police personnel on active duty.

Corruption – An endemic problem

That the TTPS is corrupt is widely known within the country. Whether through solicitation of bribes or through the use of undue influence to secure favours or obtain unfair advantages, the TTPS is perceived as thoroughly corrupt as an institution. Indeed, part of the reason for Trinidad's failure to tackle violent crime has been attributed to corruption in the TTPS, allowing illegal firearms and narcotics to become easily available and even running so-called "drug blocks". As far back as 1986 when Justice Garvin Scott prepared a groundbreaking report which severely criticized corruption in the TTPS, the

issue of corruption as one which successive governments have been unable to address. In the 1990s, an attempt to enlist the help of Scotland Yard failed because of a complete lack of cooperation and open threats to the Scotland Yard team from several police officers. Superintendent Sagram Bhagwandeem was suspended for his behavior towards the team. Despite the obstacles they faced, the Scotland Yard team concluded that there was a hard-core of corrupt officers who would do anything for **money**. As recently as January 2018, former Prime Minister and Minister of National Security bemoaned the lack of progress in fighting corruption in the TTPS. Without a substantive CoP, this fight is even harder as the Acting CoP is perceived not to have the requisite degree of legitimacy to effectively lead the TTPS.

Strategic Issues – Failed Plans, Ad Hoc Responses

There is debate over whether the TTPS actually has any anti-crime strategy at all. To date, the TTPS has been seen as responding to a threat rather than developing any coherent strategy. For example, the creation of a Rapid Response Unit (RRU) in 2014 came as a result of a spike in murders in 2013. In a bid to boost stronger ground level police intelligence and to provide a deterrent to criminals, a Community Comfort Patrol was also launched in 2014. However, this was inexplicably discontinued in 2017. Prior to this, and during the surge in criminality seen between 2001 and 2010, the TTPS attempted to stem the tide by launching a series of operations – grandiosely named “Operation Anaconda” (2001), “Operation Weed and Seed” (2002), “Operation Baghdad” (2003) and “Operation Clean Sweep” (2008) – in an attempt to apprehend known criminals and to improve their detection rate. These operations, launched with much fanfare, were abject **failures**. A much more drastic step came in 2011, when the TTPS supported a limited State of

Emergency (lasting from August 2011 to December 2011) which was declared in response, in part, to a spate of **murders**. While crime rates fell during the 106-day State of Emergency, it had no long-term impact.

Successive governments have attempted to use foreign consultants to assist the TTPS in formulating an effective anti-crime strategy. The government of the late Patrick Manning (in office between 2001 and 2010), spent over USD10 million on a team led by Professor Stephen Mastrofski of George Mason University to implement an organizational development **project**. More recently, the assistance of former New York City Police Commissioner, William Bratton was sought in **2013**. Unfortunately, neither effort produced any tangible results. A crime plan prepared by former New York City Mayor, Rudy Giuliani was rejected and though a subsequent series of recommendations made by former media magnate Ken Gordon were accepted, this merely involved increasing standing patrols and intensifying operations with the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force aimed at apprehending criminals and deterring crime. To date, the country lacks both a coherent anti-crime strategy and effective anti-crime tactics. The result is that the murder rate has continued to escalate.

Confidence Dented – Reforms Needed for Results

Trinidad and Tobago's high murder rate and, despite some progress, still high level of serious crime has given rise to a crisis of confidence in the TTPS in general and in its leadership in particular. It was hoped that a new substantive CoP would have been able to begin the arduous task of reforming the TTPS to improve accountability and results. Since the 1950s, Trinidad has seen the need for police reforms but, despite several studies and audits being commissioned – the latest being a 755 page manpower audit – there has been no significant change in the TTPS and certainly not in its systems of

accountability and discipline (these latter issues being handled by the PSC and the Police Complaints Authority -PCA).

However, for the population, results are what matter most. In this regard, the TTPS is in dire need of a review of its strategies as neither the statistics nor public perception of the TTPS are particularly positive. Even the aforementioned improvement in serious crimes has been greeted with skepticism owing to the public perception that fewer crimes are reported. The escalating murder rate fuels public concerns over their own safety and the inability of the TTPS to neither deter nor solve these crimes further lowers confidence in the service.

The way ahead promises to be rocky as the selection of a CoP is now mired in controversy with neither the PSC nor the individuals concerned emerging untarnished from the process. Yet it is absolutely undeniable that any improvement in results and for any reforms to succeed, the TTPS needs firm and stable leadership. At the moment, it looks as if it will have neither.

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