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The Dominican Republic-- After the Caudillos

Abstract

The Dominican Republic played a major role in the early history of NACLA, and it is therefore fitting that the country be re-examined in one of NACLA's thirtieth anniversary issues. It was largely in response to the 1965 U.S. invasion and occupation of the island that a group of academics, clergy and radical activists organized a 1966 conference called the North American Congress on Latin America. The "congress" stayed together beyond the conference, and in February, 1967, began publishing the NACLA Newsletter, which evolved into today's NACLA Report on the Americas.

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The Dominican Republic

BY EMELIO BETANCES AND HOBART SPALDING

The Dominican Republic played a major role in the early history of NACLA, and it is therefore fitting that the country be re-examined in one of NACLA's thirtieth anniversary issues. It was largely in response to the 1965 U.S. invasion and occupation of the island that a group of academics, clergy and radical activists organized a 1966 conference called the North American Congress on Latin America. The "congress" stayed together beyond the conference, and in February, 1967, began publishing the *NACLA Newsletter*, which evolved into today's *NACLA Report on the Americas*.



Palace of dictator Leonidas Trujillo, now occupied by 92 squatter families in Santo Domingo.

Over the years, the magazine has devoted considerable space to the Dominican Republic, including country reports in 1970, 1974, 1975 and 1982. To mark the tenth anniversary of the invasion, NACLA sponsored a conference at New York University which, although temporarily delayed by a bomb threat, drew a capacity crowd.

The present issue is published as the Republic finds itself at a crossroads. The individuals who have dominated the political scene since 1963—Joaquín Balaguer, Juan Bosch and José Francisco Peña Gómez—have been eclipsed by a much younger figure, Leonel Fernández Reyna, who assumed the presidency last August. Fernández took office in the wake of three decades of profound economic, social and political changes.

For much of the last century, the Dominican Republic relied on the export of sugar, coffee, cacao and tobacco. Since the mid-1970s, however, in a move to protect domestic sugar producers, the United States has drastically reduced the Dominican sugar quota. At the same time, corn syrup began to replace cane sugar as a sweetener, and an increasingly health-conscious population in the developed countries reduced its consumption of sugar, coffee, and cacao. Consequently, in the late 1970s exports plummeted and agriculture entered into a crisis which continues today. This crisis forced thousands of farmers out of business and led many to migrate to the cities or abroad.

In the meantime, a 1983 currency devaluation resulting from negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) lowered the cost of doing business on the island for firms earning other currencies, and therefore attracted foreign investors who wished to take advantage of low wages. This led to a rapid expansion of *zonas francas*, or free-trade zones (FTZs)—areas in which foreign, export-oriented firms were granted tax and tariff breaks. The devaluations were part of a policy package which substituted a model of export manufacturing for the old economic model of import-substitution industrialization (ISI). The package was complemented by the Reagan administration's Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) which stimulated the production of apparel for export by allowing designated countries, including the Dominican Republic, to export certain goods to the United States under favorable circumstances. Today, FTZs employ over 180,000 people, and are responsible for a growing percentage of the country's exports. Helen Safa shows how these developments have worsened the lot of women, and reports that many women have turned to more individualistic solutions, forsaking collective actions. This is ironic given the fact that recent legislation and a push from U.S. labor has led to the first meaningful union organizing in the zones.

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—After the Caudillos

The 1983 devaluation, by lowering dollar-denominated prices on the island, also benefited the tourist sector. The Balaguer government had introduced legislation to promote tourism in the 1970s, and over the last ten years the government has dedicated significant state revenues to create needed infrastructure. Within a decade of the devaluation, tourism's contribution to the economy had nearly tripled.

While the Dominican economy underwent these transformations in the 1970s and 1980s, employment opportunities plummeted. The ISI model didn't create the jobs promised because it never got beyond the production of light consumer non-durables and assembly operations, and for the average Dominican, things worsened. As rural migrants poured into the cities they faced underemployment, unemployment or abject poverty. Increasingly, workers, peasants and even middle-income people began to emigrate to the United States or Puerto Rico. The 1990 U.S. census lists a half million Dominicans in the United States, but because of the large number of undocumented immigrants, this figure clearly underestimates the true population. Many Dominicans have made the United States—particularly New York City—their new home, and remittances by New York Dominicans alone have been estimated at nearly \$1 billion a year. This amount compares favorably to the contribution made by tourism and the FTZs.

Remittances from the United States, free-trade zones and tourism have all helped to buoy the economy. But they cannot resolve the social problems resulting from the process of economic restructuring. When the country relied on export agriculture, the state controlled a large sector of the economy through its ownership of state enterprises in the sugar sector, which generated over 50% of foreign exchange in 1970. The free-trade zones, on the other hand, only contribute in the form of very low wages paid to workers, while tourism is largely controlled by foreign tour operators and large international hotel

A POLITICAL CHRONOLOGY

May, 1961: Dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who had ruled since 1930, is assassinated.

December, 1962: Populist Juan Bosch is elected president as the candidate of the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD). He takes office in February, 1963.

September, 1963: A military coup ousts Bosch.

April, 1965: A "constitutionalist" uprising seeks to restore Bosch to the presidency. The uprising sparks a U.S. invasion and occupation of the country. U.S. forces reorganize the shattered military.

May, 1966: Joaquín Balaguer, the U.S.-backed candidate and a one-time vice president under Trujillo, is elected President.

May, 1970 and May, 1974: Balaguer and his Reformist Social Christian Party (PRSC) are returned to office in elections generally considered fraudulent.

August, 1978: PRD candidate Silvestre Antonio Guzmán, a conservative landowner, is elected. He is allowed to take office only after lengthy negotiations with Balaguer and the military, which had intervened to stop the ballot counting when Guzmán appeared to be winning.

August, 1982: PRD candidate Salvador Jorge Blanco is elected. His administration ends amid wide-spread charges of corruption.

August, 1986: Balaguer is elected on the PRSC ticket amid charges of fraud.

May, 1990: Balaguer narrowly defeats Juan Bosch, now of the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD), amid charges of fraud.

May, 1994: Balaguer narrowly defeats PRD candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez. This time the fraud is so potentially destabilizing that local and international pressure forces him to agree to new elections in two years, in which he will not be a candidate.

June, 1996: PLD candidate Leonel Fernández Reyna, with the support of both Bosch and Balaguer, defeats PRD candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez in a runoff election.

chains. The state has little direct control over these sectors. Consequently its economic power—and its ability to ameliorate social distress—has diminished.

Developments in the economic sphere will heavily influence events in the Dominican Republic. The ability of the country to attract foreign investment, the flow of loans from international and private institutions, levels of remittances from the community abroad, the continued growth—or stagnation—of the FTZs, the ability of the country to export, and a res-

olution to questions of regional—Caribbean as well as North American—integration all loom large. But political questions matter too. Economic growth as measured by the standard GDP indices have, in the past, done little to produce conditions for democratic development, and they will not do so as long as Dominican political culture remains unchanged. Any process of change must alter the way the Dominican political game is both perceived and played.

Joaquín Balaguer and his Reformist Social Christian Party (PRSC), with the

support of the political and economic elites, put an authoritarian political system in place after the 1965 U.S. invasion. From 1966 to 1978, Balaguer ruled with an iron fist, inhibiting the development of democratic institutions and popular participation. Elections in this period were neither free, nor fair nor competitive. As an authoritarian figure, Balaguer aimed to demobilize the opposition, and failing that, to repress it. Without the U.S. political and economic support he enjoyed throughout his reign, he would not have been able to preside over a system in which informal—frequently brutal—mechanisms of control proved just as important as the formal ones. U.S. immigration laws also helped him by allowing the mass exodus, which deflated social and political tensions.

Balaguer gave jobs and contracts to his followers and used government monies to fund his own particular projects. Dominicans have been socialized into seeing the state as the source of a patrimony to which they feel entitled. The national political parties have cultivated the same expectations. If one cannot find a job or make

a living in the informal sector, then joining a political party becomes a real opportunity which can perhaps provide a solution. This is key to understanding the present dilemma that the government faces. Members of Leonel Fernández's Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) demanded jobs after the party's victory, which they saw as a political right. So far Fernández seems to be giving in to their demands, despite PLD rhetoric of serving the people. This highlights the extent to which large segments of the traditional opposition to Balaguer's PRSC, organized both in the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) and the PLD, have been accommodated into what we term a "neo-patrimonial" political system. This pattern, so prevalent in Latin America, bodes ill for the development of democracy.

The elites recognized the need for change in the 1970s and 1980s, but they made sure that these occurred within rigid social and political structures that did not permit popular participation in decision making. When opposition groups tried to make their political presence felt, they were either crushed or else blocked from making any meaningful changes. In a promising, though limited, challenge to this authoritarian structure, Lilian Bobea examines the results of an energetic decentralization effort in the north-central province of Salcedo. She concludes that, to this point, the results are at best mixed, but that local efforts may hold some hope for the future of genuine popular participation.

Although Balaguer lost the 1978 presidential election to the PRD's Silvestre Antonio Guzmán, he continued to exert considerable political influence during this period. Internal political divisions and the scandals that occurred during the subsequent PRD administration of Salvador Jorge Blanco opened the way for Balaguer's return in 1986. While in office, Jorge Blanco had agreed to unalterable arrangements with the IMF, which limited Balaguer's room to maneuver. Nonetheless, the old *caudillo* reaped great benefit from the splits that occurred between and within the two opposition parties.

In the early 1970s, for example, Juan Bosch, the founder of the PRD, left the party to found the PLD. This generated a fierce rivalry between Bosch and his successor as head of the PRD, José Francisco Peña Gómez. Political, ideological and personal differences all explain this rivalry. Enmity between the two prevented them from joining together against Balaguer and the PRSC, and in 1996, as Roberto Cassá details, the PLD actually allied with Balaguer against Peña Gómez to prevent his likely presidential victory. While the Bosch-Peña Gómez rivalry alone does not explain the PLD-Balaguer alliance in 1996, it helps to shed light on the fact that forces claiming to be democratic have

Elections under Balaguer were neither free, nor fair nor competitive. He aimed to demobilize the opposition, and failing that, to repress it.

proved incapable of ending the Balaguer authoritarian legacy—a structure which, in turn, was inherited from dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to 1961—and to work for real democracy.

The failure of the PRD and PLD to end *caudillismo* and lead the struggle against this authoritarian legacy is largely due to the underdevelopment of Dominican society. Democratic development can only occur on an historical continuum. And society must produce the political forces which will organize its political dimension, the state. The economic transformation that has taken place over the past three decades has not consolidated the social forces which could demand a more democratic society, but has polarized society and driven out many of those who might push for equity.

Middle-income groups, in particular, have seen their aspirations of upward mobility evaporate and have left the country in large numbers. A pervasive emigration mentality has developed among all those sectors of society which have not been direct beneficiaries in the past decade. Many, in fact, have transferred their political energies elsewhere, and Howard Jordan looks at the growing political involvement of the Dominican community in New York. He predicts that the political engagement of New York Dominicans will increase due to steadily rising numbers, heightened political consciousness as well as a growing estrangement from their homeland.

Two institutions, the Catholic Church and the military, will have a powerful voice in the Dominican Republic's immediate future. Recently, the Church has sought to mediate solutions to social conflict, labor disputes, government-business tensions and electoral impasses. In 1986, for example, Cardinal José de Jesús López Rodríguez led a group of influential citizens—called *los Notables*—to supervise elections when conflicts between the presidential candidates led to an impasse. Subsequently, Church leaders called for discussion among labor leaders, business associations and the government which helped defuse tense situations. During the 1994 electoral crisis, Church leaders brokered the “Pact for Democracy,” [see “Negotiated Elections,” p. 20] which resolved the crisis and led to the special 1996 elections.

In part, the Church assumed this new role out of concern over the recurrence of social violence in the country. Steady cuts in already deficient social services have left much of the population without access to sewage or potable water, and about half the population lives at or below the poverty line. In addition, evangelical churches have increasingly moved into geographical and social spaces where neither the government nor the Church has provided moral or material support for the population.

The Church's mediating role thus serves to boost its credibility as an institution.

The Dominican military is also a force to be watched. After the civil war and intervention of 1965, the United States set about reorganizing the armed forces, and relations between the U.S. and Dominican militaries have been close ever since. During Balaguer's first two terms (1966-78), the military profited enormously from the patrimonial political system. In order to control the military, Balaguer allowed them to become landowners, merchants and industrialists. This explains why they did not want to hand over power to the PRD in 1978 and were willing to pull off a coup—they wanted not only to protect Balaguer, but to preserve their access to government largesse. With U.S. support, Antonio Guzmán of the PRD retired some 40 pro-Balaguer generals and ini-



A campaign poster invites voters to choose “the new road” of PLD candidate Leonel Fernández.

tiated a process of military professionalization, but this experiment ended when Balaguer resumed power in 1986. He reintegrated the retired generals into the armed forces and, once again, allowed top officers to enrich themselves under government protection.

President Fernández made recent moves to professionalize the military last October when he retired 24 of 70 generals. This measure won him general approval, but he had to confront significant opposition from the pro-Balaguer factions within the officer corps, where he seems to lack a personal following. There is, however, a more liberal group of officers which ostensibly backs Peña Gómez, and their actions will be key. The way this tension unfolds will tell a great deal about the transition from the authoritarian Trujillo-Balaguer legacy to a more democratic state.

Developments in the economic, political and military spheres are all to be watched as the country, under a president whose intentions have yet to be revealed, forges what may be a new stage in its not-always-happy history. But as that president takes center stage, forces beyond his control may be waiting in the wings. ■