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## **President Leonel Fernandez Set For A Third Term In Dominican Republic Elections**

*by LADB Staff*

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Citizens of the Dominican Republic go to the polls May 16. If events go as predicted, they will give President Leonel Fernandez of the Partido de la Liberacion Dominicana (PLD) a third term in a first round. The polls indicate he will get between 54% and 57% of the vote. Most analysts credit Fernandez's economic performance for his popularity. The country is impoverished, but the economy grew during the last four years at an average rate of 8%. Fernandez governed from 1996 to 2000, when he stepped aside for four years during which President Hipolito Mejia (2000-2004) presided over a chaotic economic situation (see NotiCen 2003-05-29).

Opposition candidate Miguel Vargas Maldonado trails Fernandez in the polls at 34-37% and is considered only a minor threat. He has accused the incumbent and his party apparatus of manipulating the polls. He and his Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) have also alleged official chicanery in the vote-counting apparatus, but the Organization of American States (OAS), one of several international organizations that will serve as observers, has found no evidence to support the charge. Accusation of wrongdoing has formed the core of the PRD strategy.

Vargas has accused Fernandez of "abusing" public funds, and he has been dismayed that the president has seen no need to debate him. On the positive side, he has advocated increased investment in public works and incentives to foreign investors to produce jobs. Another plank in his platform is a constitutional amendment to prevent consecutive terms. This has failed to gain traction as an issue in a country that prides itself on presidential longevity in office (see NotiCen, 2008-04-24).

A third candidate, Amable Aristy, is only barely in contention, say the polls, which concede him 6% of the intended vote. He could come in handy, however, in the event of a poll-busting second round for which an outside possibility exists. Although pollsters Penn and Schoen, Noxa-Clave, Greenberg, and Gallup all have Fernandez comfortably above 51%, Hamilton said 48% and CID 40.6%. Aristy could be a kingmaker. Feeding the voters Despite his lead, Fernandez is taking no chances.

Dominicans are chafing under the high food prices plaguing poor nations, so, just ahead of the election, the president has expanded subsidies on food staples. The media have observed that "trucks loaded with milk, chicken, eggs, and other food staples have been rumbling across the Caribbean nation, where almost half of 9.5 million residents live in poverty." Subsidized prices are reported on average to be 30% below supermarket retail. The government sells a package for the equivalent of US\$3 containing a frozen chicken and 1.8 kg each of potatoes and onions. About 20,000 of these are sold daily, say reports.

Best of all, the government delivers. "It makes life easier on poor people said Vidal Rosario, resident of a working-class neighborhood where, he said, people have been rationing their food. The government packages arrive at a basketball court a stone's throw from Rosario's house. Voting starts at 9 a.m. on May 16 and ends at 6 p.m., and first results are expected the next day at 10 p.m. A president and vice president will be elected for a four-year term. There are 22 parties and seven candidates. In the event Fernandez disappoints, a second round is scheduled for June 30. About 5.7 million people are eligible to vote, including 154,788 who can vote from outside the country. The winner will be sworn in Aug. 16, 2008.

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