5-31-2012

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Danilo Medina Wins Dominican Republic's Presidential Election

by Crosby Girón

Category/Department: Dominican Republic

Published: 2012-05-31

On May 20, Danilo Medina and his running mate Margarita Cedeño of the official Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD) were elected as the Dominican Republic’s new president and vice president, overtaking the opposition with a narrow 5% of the vote. Medina will be inaugurated in October, ushering in the PLD’s third term in office.

The Junta Central Electoral (JCE) announced that Medina, a center-right candidate, obtained a total of 2,323,146 votes, 51.21% of the total number of votes cast. Opposition candidate and former President Hipólito Mejía (2000-2004) and his running mate Luis Abinader of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) came in second with 2,129,991 votes, 46.95% of the total.

The remaining candidates obtained few votes. Guillermo Moreno of Alianza País (AP) obtained 62,290 votes; Eduardo Estrella of Dominicanos por el Cambio, 9,340; Julián Serulle of the Frente Amplio, 6,550; and Max Puig of Alianza por la Democracia (APD), 5,064 votes.

After the elections, Mejía refused to acknowledge Medina’s victory and accused outgoing President Leonel Fernández of using government resources to fund the PLD’s campaign, especially given that Cedeño is Fernández’s wife and the country’s first lady. With tensions on the rise, the police and armed forces were instructed to remain on alert for five days after the result was announced, ready to quell any possible outbreaks of violence.

However, despite reports of a number of minor irregularities, such as candidates buying votes or ID cards, Organization of American States (OAS) observers said that, in general, the elections were fair.

Political analyst Rosario Espinal said, "The fact that the two main contenders did not compete on a level playing field, given that the government used its muscle to back the PLD, can be attributed to the failure of the parties that have alternated in power to organize more decent campaigns. Clientelism [the exchange of goods and services for political support] and money-driven politics have become entrenched in the system, as this campaign clearly shows."

Uruguayan ex-President Tabaré Vásquez (2005-2010), head of the OAS mission, admitted that "propaganda was distributed in a number of polling stations," but said that it was impossible to establish to what extent this occurred.

The politics of power and money

Espinal said these elections illustrate the way in which politics in the Dominican Republic has become dominated by money in the past few years. "Political parties are allocated a set amount of public funds, on top of which they receive an unlimited amount of private funding, and the official party blatantly uses government resources. Reducing the cost and length of the campaigns would be desirable but only the main parties can achieve this through political agreements."
The election campaign officially kicked off four months before the elections, although the main contenders unofficially have engaged in campaign activities since mid-2011.

Francisco Álvarez, coordinator of Participación Ciudadana, the Dominican Republic’s chapter of Transparency International (TI), added that the country’s lengthy campaign "had not been held on a level playing field and was therefore undemocratic."

A report published by Participación Ciudadana said that government spending on the elections was "excessive and out of proportion," to the point that the Fernández administration incurred a US$1.3 million fiscal debt.

Mejía issued a scathing attack on the government’s use of public resources to fund the official party’s campaign and told the press, "The results announced by the Junta Central Electoral were manipulated and do not reflect the will of the people. The government has abused its power."

A study published by Fundación Justicia y Transparencia (FJT), a local pro-transparency nongovernmental organization (NGO), said the PLD’s campaign totaled 74.7% of the entire amount spent on this year’s elections, while the PRD and its allies spent 25.2% and the four remaining parties spent 0.1%.

"The current practice of seemingly endless campaigns and unprecedented spending on elections has brought the national economy to a standstill and has created a sense of uncertainty that affects the country’s entire production system," said the FJT. "The increasing cost of election campaigns has been a major setback for democracy, generating various forms of clientelist practices that include exchanging food for votes as well as the odious practice of buying ID cards belonging to voters who registered to take part in previous elections."

**New government will have to tackle crime and economic stagnation**

The new Medina administration will enjoy an ample PLD majority in Congress as well as the support of a docile judiciary that toes the party line. However, it will also face a number of underlying problems such as unemployment and deficient public health-care systems.

In recent months, the country has been engulfed by waves of demonstrations as Dominicans have taken to the streets to protest against the rising prices of food, medicines, and fuel. Power cuts as a result of a deficient energy supply is another major problem.

Added to this, security has become a top concern of Dominicans, with recent studies showing that crime rates have doubled in the past decade, which has been attributed to the increasing availability of firearms as well as a surge in drug trafficking and violence stemming from the growing gap between rich and poor.

Amnesty International (AI) has reported that hard-line tactics used by the police have only worsened this situation, with 10% of the country’s murders attributed to the police.

So far, Medina’s statements have been confident and optimistic, and he has promised to implement economic policies that will attract foreign investment and support agriculture, tourism, and export processing zones. However, the Dominican Republic has dropped fourteen places in the Global Enabling Report published during this year’s World Economic Forum (WEF) and is currently trailing behind most Central American countries.
Regarding the energy sector, political analyst Maria Teresa Romero said that, under the Medina administration, the Dominican Republic is likely to remain part of the Petrocaribe initiative negotiated with Venezuela in 2005.

Petrocaribe is a regional energy-integration initiative sponsored by the administration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, under which Latin American countries can purchase oil and its derivatives at favorable prices. The PLD has historically maintained a good diplomatic relationship with Venezuela.

Cedeño, who will step out of her role as first lady and become vice president, will be in charge of running the Medina administration’s social-welfare programs. Will the new government be a continuation of the Fernández administration or will Cedeño’s increasingly prominent role inject a breath of fresh air into Dominican politics?

Economic experts have warned that a pending task for the new government will be to reduce dependency on the US economy. The US accounts for 60% of the Dominican Republic’s exports, and Dominicans working in the US send home US$1.5 billion in remittances.

"We need to strengthen our trade relations with Europe and other major markets, such as China. We need to end our country’s dependency on a trading partner that can run into difficulties again, which can have a detrimental impact on our economy," said César Cuello, director of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO).

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