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Dominican Republic Hit by Corruption Scandals

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On July 30, Dominicans took to the streets bearing placards to protest against corrupt actions purportedly committed by members of the administration of President Danilo Medina, some of whom also served under the administration of his predecessor ex-President Leonel Fernández (1996-2000, 2004-2012).

This has not been the only public demonstration against corruption. In August, Dominicans again took part in a series of anti-corruption activities.

The Paren Eso (Stop That) campaign was launched by the Red Nacional de Acción Juvenil (RNAJ) and has been backed by the following organizations: Justicia Fiscal, Participación Ciudadana, Juventud Caribe, Articulación Nacional Campesina, Ciudad Alternativa, La Multitud, Alianza Dominicana contra la Corrupción, Foro por la Transparencia y el Desarrollo de San Cristóbal, and Juventud Alianza País.

On Aug. 6, the media published a document titled "An Album of Public Rumors: Corruption and Impunity Under the Danilo Administration." It featured corruption allegations that had been published in the media involving more than 20 public officials. The sources quoted included 7dias.com.do, Noticias SIN, Acento.com.do, a lawsuit launched by Guillermo Moreno, and the Cámara de Cuentas (the comptroller general’s office), among others.

Protestors demanded that the government fire and investigate the actions of public officials such as Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso, Youth Minister Félix Minaya, Public Works Minister Gonzalo Castillo, and Attorney General Francisco Domínguez Brito, among others. These officials have been accused of using their positions to engage in corrupt practices, embezzlement, influence peddling, and nepotism.

Those behind the campaign claim that President Medina has not kept his promise to investigate purportedly corrupt officials (NotiCen, Jan. 10, 2013, and Aug. 29, 2013). And, since August is usually the time of year when the president demands that officials resign, it was expected that several heads would roll. However, this never happened, and only a few low-ranking officials were fired.

Anti-corruption organizations will continue to exert pressure. For now, the debate has helped to highlight a number of events that evidence government corruption.

Corruption according to the World Index

The Dominican Republic ranks 105th of 148 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), which measures economic prosperity across a series of countries.

The report highlights that the greatest obstacles for investment in the country are corruption, which was given 17.7 points, and bureaucratic hurdles, with 11.9 points. Added to this, the Dominican Republic was ranked in 145th place regarding favoritism in decisions made by public officials and 143rd in the level of trust that people place in politicians.
One of the most striking cases is that of investment company Advent International, which complained to the US Embassy in Santo Domingo about the problems it had faced during the process of leasing the airport facilities in that city, as a Wikileaks diplomatic cable revealed.

The case was published by the media, and former President Fernández had to intervene so that the company could finally begin its operations.

Wikileaks also highlighted the Forbes Energy case. In 2008, the company had faced similar problems under the Fernández administration, when it attempted to build an ethanol production plant.

**The politics behind these corruption cases**

Fernández has been accused of a number of crimes and of being corrupt. However, the lawsuit launched by Guillermo Montano, leader of the Alianza País, was rejected by a court of appeals in mid-2013. Some analysts say the Montano case was a political maneuver as the court’s rejection was predictable.

Although President Medina has not been accused of any crimes, many of his Cabinet members have come under pressure from the media and from the RNAJ. Added to this, Fernández has also come under pressure from some politicians seeking to obtain favors during the elections.

This pressure has highlighted the role played by the media, its relationship with the RNAJ, and opposition groups linked to former President Hipólito Mejía (2000-2004).

It has become clear that well-known journalists in the Dominican Republic who have published corruption allegations have ties to the opposition. One of the clearest examples is that of Fausto Rosario Adames, of Acento.com.do. Fellow journalist Salvador Holguín claimed there was a plot to assassinate him.

Rosario Adames is a member of Participación Ciudadana, one of the most active members of the Paren Eso campaign, and a well-known Dominican journalist. One of the most frequently quoted sources in "An Album of Public Rumors: Corruption and Impunity Under the Danilo Administration" is Acento.com.do, owned by Adames.

As a result of Holguín’s claims, lawyer and political leader Vinicio Castillo Semán, the executive’s director of government ethics and drug policy advisor, said that Adames’ claims that Castillo Semán had slandered him were part of a strategy devised by former President Mejía to seek re-election.

Castillo Semán said that the fact that Mejía’s lawyer, Jorge Luis Polanco, is representing Rosario Adames in this lawsuit—the next hearing will take place on Oct. 10 in the Fourth Penal Chamber of the First Court of the National District—proves that the former president’s hand is behind the case.

Another journalist, Nuria Piera, has also talked about a purported plot to assassinate her after she published information regarding Félix Bautista, a governing-party senator accused of bribing Haitian politicians to obtain construction contracts in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.

For now, none of Medina’s Cabinet members have been fired, and Medina’s credibility has not yet been significantly eroded. It is likely that the media will continue to expose these corruption cases and that corruption will continue to be on the agenda of certain civil society organizations.

This will undoubtedly be a crucial issue for opposition groups that seek to boost their chances in the next elections by tarnishing the government’s image.