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President Danilo Medina Elected for Second Term in the Dominican Republic

by Crosby Girón

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On May 15, Danilo Plutarco Medina Sánchez, 64, was reelected as president of the Dominican Republic. His running mate was Margarita Cedeño, a lawyer who was the first lady during the administration of former President Leonel Fernández (1996-2000 and 2004-2012).

At the height of his career—Medina is a founder of the winning Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD) and has been active in politics since the 1970s—he is about to lead the country for a second consecutive period, amid favorable economic conditions and an array of unresolved social issues.

Along with the president and vice president, voters elected congressional deputies, municipal candidates, and deputies representing Dominicans living abroad. A total of 4,213 executive and legislative positions were up for grabs. The participation of 26 political parties was anticipated, including a provincial party, and seven municipal political movements.

At a national level, 32 senators and 190 deputies were elected: 178 by proportional representation, seven representing Dominicans living abroad, and five national deputies. Voters also elected 20 deputies to the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) and their substitutes.

At the municipal level, 158 mayors and vice mayors were elected, as well as 1,164 councilors and their replacements, and other municipal positions.

The PLD, allied with the remains of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (Dominican Revolutionary Party, PRD) and smaller parties, won 27 seats in the Senate and 116 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, achieving important majorities in both houses. The PLD-led coalition received 2,734,693 votes, over 60% of the total number of valid votes.

The presidential candidate with the second largest number of votes was Luis Abinader, who led the Partido Revolucionario Moderno (Modern Revolutionary Party, PRM), a splinter party that was created following a division within the PRD in 2013. With just over 1.5 million votes, this coalition now has five seats in the Senate and 55 in the Chamber of Deputies. The parties led by Guillermo Moreno and Elías Chávez barely won one deputy each.

In his second term, Medina will have to contend with allegations made by his opponents that public funds were allegedly diverted to his campaign coffers. And given the number of coalitions that took part in the elections, it would seem that the political landscape will be highly fragmented.

Long-standing problems persist

Medina, who was first elected president in 2012, will remain in office until 2020. He reached office at a time when the credibility of his predecessor, Leonel Fernández, had fallen to an all-time low, and one corruption case after another hit the headlines. The Fernández administration was also dogged by an unmanageable fiscal debt (NotiCen, May 20, 2004, and May 15, 2008).
During his first four years in office, Medina was able to steer the country despite huge problems such as poverty, drug trafficking, and the long-standing issue of Haitian immigration (NotiCen, Aug. 29, 2013, and Jan. 8, 2015). The fiscal deficit was so severe in late 2012—it reached 6.5% of the country’s GDP—that tax reform was required to obtain the necessary resources to fund the 2013 budget. While tax collection had decreased, the subsidy on electric energy had increased and fresh resources were needed to fund social programs. Medina forcefully argued that the Dominican Republic had the lowest tax burden in Latin America (around 13%), and that a fiscal reform was the only way forward (NotiCen, Nov. 8, 2012).

The reform hit the transfer of goods and services and broadened the tax base by including foodstuffs. The additional moneys collected as a result of the reform were used to fund government programs to support small- and medium-sized businesses as well as agricultural projects. Resources were also invested in developing the tourism sector and improving education. By late 2013, the government’s fiscal debt had been reduced to 1.7%.

A persistent problem for Medina’s administration, with no short-term solution in sight, is the immigration issue. In September 2013, the Tribunal Constitucional (Constitutional Court) issued Decree 168 stating that children born in the Dominican Republic after 1929 whose parents were foreigners temporarily living in the country did not have the right to claim Dominican citizenship. This left 458,000 people—mostly of Haitian descent—stateless, and sparked a crisis of such huge proportions that Haiti pulled its ambassador out of the Dominican Republic (NotiCen, Nov. 21, 2013, April 10, 2014, June 26, 2014, and March 19, 2015).

Instability on the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti is high. In February, toward the end of the administration of former Haitian President Michel Martelly (2011-2016), the Dominican government mobilized up to 2,256 soldiers and military equipment to the area, according to local press reports. Dominican authorities also acknowledged that border patrols had intensified. The issue hit the headlines after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) published a report on human rights violations committed against people of Haitian descent born in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican military presence on the border has been an ongoing concern for Haiti. In 2013, the Dominican government added 1,500 troops to "reinforce security" along its border with Haiti (NotiCen, Oct. 24, 2013)

**Short-term forecast**

The Dominican economy appears to be in good shape. Despite a downward trend, the strongest pillars of the economy—among them tourism and exports—are expected to remain stable. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) attributes this to the fact that the Dominican economy is closely intertwined with the US economy. However, the global economic crisis will have an impact on the price of commodities, which could cause the region’s economies, including the Dominican economy, to contract. Drug trafficking is another cause for concern (NotiCen, May 22, 2014, and Feb. 26, 2015).

Meanwhile, at an international level, in February, the Dominican Republic received the pro tempore presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). This is significant due to the fact that the US has a strained relationship with several left-leaning South American governments that are part of CELAC. Additionally, the Organization of American States (OAS) will hold its 46th assembly in the Dominican Republic in June. The budget and human rights will be among the top issues on the agenda.
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