

3-23-2017

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Recommended Citation

GirÃ³n, Crosby. "Dominicans Return to Streets to Protest Against Corruption." (2017). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10418>

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Dominicans Return to Streets to Protest Against Corruption

by Crosby Girón

Category/Department: Dominican Republic

Published: 2017-03-23

Corruption has once again led to a wave of indignation among the Dominican people.

Two years ago, anti-corruption protests were sparked by the case of Félix Bautista, who served as chairman of the Dominican Liberation Party (Partido de la Liberación Dominicana, PLD) and was appointed coordinator of the Bureau for Public Works, a position he used for his personal enrichment, his opponents claim. After being charged with corruption, money laundering, illicit enrichment, and falsifying public and private documents, the Supreme Court allowed him to walk free. As a result, Dominicans took to the street in 2015 to demand an end to impunity.

This year's demonstrations were set off by another corruption case—accusations by the US Justice Department that the Brazilian firm Odebrecht had bribed public officials in 12 countries in exchange for public works contracts ([NotiCen, March 9, 2017](#); [NotiSur, Jan. 13, 2017](#), and [Feb. 24, 2017](#)). Dominican officials reportedly received around US\$92 million, making the Dominican Republic the country that received the second highest amount in bribes, according to the charges.

Although the names of all those involved have not been revealed, Brazilian João Santana, an expert in political marketing who allegedly received money from Odebrecht to fund election campaigns in several countries, was arrested in Brazil in February 2016. He had just returned from the Dominican Republic, where he worked as campaign advisor for President Danilo Medina when he ran as a candidate of the Dominican Liberation Party ([NotiCen, June 2, 2016](#)), according to the television news channel Telesur.

The Odebrecht case has thrown the Dominican political scene into turmoil. President Medina has denied allegations that he received campaign funds from illegal sources, and his strategy has been to condemn corruption. "We are facing a regional and international epidemic," he said in a speech to the Dominican legislature in February.

On March 8, President Medina denied the corruption allegations and said that the Liberation Party had paid Santana for his services. Santana, for his part, has been given an eight-year prison sentence in Brazil for a corruption scandal involving Odebrecht and the Brazilian oil giant Petrobras, according to press reports.

According to the newspaper *El Día*, Guillermo Moreno, leader of the Alianza País party, was one of Medina's principal accusers. The allegations include Medina's purported ties to Santana and bribe payments from Odebrecht to public officials. Moreno also mentioned irregularities in the contract granted by the Dominican government to Odebrecht to build a thermoelectric power plant at Punta Catalina, which Medina defended in his February speech to the legislature.

The public works involved

In the Dominican Republic, Odebrecht is involved in the construction of roads leading from Piedra Blanca to Cruce de Ocoa and from Miches to Sabana de la Mar, as well as the Punta Catalina thermoelectric station. The contract totals US\$2 billion, which was later reduced to US\$1.9 billion.

This amount allegedly exceeds the offer put forward by Gezhouba Group Company Limited by US \$1.1 billion.

For now, it is known that a number of unidentified individuals have been questioned in the Odebrecht case, but little is known regarding the exact allegations. The only name that has been released is that of Dominican businessman Angel Rondón, who allegedly received bribes for a total of US\$92 million from Odebrecht. Rondón could put President Medina in a difficult predicament, especially because, since the scandal hit the headlines, there has been much speculation about his close relationship with Medina, who awarded him a medal for excellence in animal husbandry in 2013.

Media interest in the case has died down since Odebrecht announced it would pay the Dominican Republic a fine of US\$184 million for engaging in corrupt practices. Citizens, on the other hand, have continued to take to the streets to reject corruption. The opposition has also been relentless in its criticism of the Medina administration.

Indignation leads to protests

The Odebrecht case has revived the Marcha Verde citizen movement, which organized a demonstration carried on Jan. 22 and called for torches to be lit on March 13 as a symbolic gesture to mark the start of nationwide demonstrations on March 14. The movement demands that all those allegedly involved in acts of bribery be brought to justice.

Marcha Verde was born in the town of Capotillo, in the border province of Dajabón, which is where the Dominican Restoration War against Spain began in 1863.

“The green flame will cross the country’s main provinces and towns to light the way for this citizen mobilization as the only guarantee that the fatherland of Juan Pablo Duarte and the leaders of the Restoration War will rid itself of the corruption and impunity that is oppressing us,” Marcha Verde leader Mario Serrano told the local press.

Marcha Verde protests were simultaneously held across the country, in Barahona, in the southwest; Valverde, in the northwest; and Higüey, in the east, leading to a large protest in Santo Domingo on March 19.

Organizations such as the Fuerza Nacional Progresista (National Progressive Force, FNP) have also joined the protests. In a document titled “Odebrecht and Transnational Corruption,” the FNP encouraged citizens to hold those responsible to account, and asked that political parties not interfere with the march.

“Given the size of the Odebrecht scandal and its implications, there is an opportunity, we have the opportunity, to establish a turning point in the fight against transnational corruption and the impunity that allows it to flourish,” the document reads.

The FNP demanded that the US and Brazil hand over the transcripts of the confessions of the individuals arrested in those countries and any documents detailing the bribes that were paid. Other points that must be investigated, according to the FNP, include the execution of public works contracts in order to establish whether these projects were overpriced and to analyze the terms under which Brazil provided loans to finance these projects.

“The aim of these investigations should be the repayment of the resources squandered, which is why we deem it necessary to reach an agreement with the Brazilian authorities as well as Odebrecht regarding the compensation the country ought to be paid,” the FNP said.

The organization also said it is necessary to ascertain how transnational corruption practices in this and other cases have led to an increase in the Dominican Republic’s foreign debt.

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