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Odebrecht Scandal Puts Pressure on Dominican Republic Presidency

by Crosby Girón

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The involvement of the administration of Dominican President Danilo Medina in the Odebrecht corruption scandal has continued to make headlines in the Dominican Republic, and President Medina has come under mounting pressure ([SourceMex, June 7, 2017](#); [NotiCen, March 9, 2017](#), and [March 23, 2017](#); [NotiSur, Jan. 13, 2017, Feb. 24, 2017, May 26, 2017](#)).

One of the most damning publications was an interview with Odebrecht's former lawyer, Rodrigo Tacla, published by the newspaper El País in July. In it, Tacla claimed that Odebrecht, the Brazilian engineering, construction, chemicals, and petrochemicals giant, threw lavish parties to which it invited top Dominican politicians.

"Odebrecht used to throw parties," Tacla said. "The company sent women from Brazil to parties with Panamanian and Brazilian politicians in the Dominican Republic. That was their way of expressing gratitude, although it also became a form of blackmail." Tacla also said that Odebrecht had a very close relationship with Medina and that it sent Medina an expert on election campaigns to act as his adviser when Medina ran for office.

Government corruption has been a long-standing grievance that has caused waves of protest in the Dominican Republic. Revelations that Medina's was the administration that received the second highest amount in bribes of all countries in the international scandal (US\$92 million) have fueled waves of protest. The Odebrecht case has ignited anti-corruption demonstrations, and opposition parties have seized the opportunity to score political points against Medina's party, Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD), as a number of high-profile government officials have been tarnished by the scandal.

The relationship was so close between the Medina Administration and Odebrecht that in 2015, according to Tacla, Odebrecht relocated the office in charge of bribing public officials in various countries, known as the Structured Operations department, from São Paulo to Santo Domingo. "The aim was to have greater control over possible police investigations," Tacla said.

Tacla was arrested in Spain in November 2016 and was conditionally released 72 days later. He is accused of bribery, money laundering, and involvement in organized crime. Spain has refused to allow his extradition to Brazil, but he will be tried for the crimes of which he has been accused. It is now up to the Brazilian authorities to provide the supporting evidence against him.

Tacla claims he and his family have been threatened because powerful individuals from governments and the private sector fear his testimony might provide damning evidence against them. The Odebrecht case involves more than 2,000 public officials in 12 countries who received, according to the Reuters news service, as much as US\$3.3 billion in bribes over a decade in exchange for construction contracts.

The fight against corruption

Marcha Verde, a local civil society organization, led an anti-corruption protest march on July 16 in which a number of opposition parties participated. Marcha Verde spokesperson María Teresa Cabrera said at the time that there were sufficient grounds to make President Medina stand trial for his involvement in the Odebrecht case. She added that other officials should also be investigated for their alleged involvement in the case.

At the march, Samuel Bonilla, secretary general of the Opción Democrática party, listed allegations that have been raised against Medina, including one made by Celso Marranzini, the vice president of the agency that administers the country's electrical plants (Corporación Dominicana de Empresas Eléctricas Estatales, CDEEE), regarding the fact that President Medina directly negotiated a contract with Odebrecht for a thermoelectric power plant in Punta Catalina ([NotiCen, March 23, 2017](#)). Bonilla also referred to Temístocles Montás, the former minister of industry and commerce who was arrested in the Odebrecht scandal, and who is alleged to have acted as an intermediary between Odebrecht and Dominican parties in order to fund election campaigns.

Those revelations, along with "Tacla's statements about Danilo [Medina]'s closeness to Odebrecht and the guarantees of impunity that his administration offered Odebrecht so that it could relocate its bribery bureau to our capital," Bonilla said, are "enough evidence for the Attorney General's Office to launch an investigation."

A few days before the march, however, Campos de Moya and Circe Almánzar, the president and the vice president of the Asociación de Industrias (Industry Association), charged Marcha Verde was funded by private sector interest groups, which has cast doubt over the organization's legitimacy. PLD Congressman Carlos Guzmán urged the coordinators of Marcha Verde to "apologize to the Dominican people for lying about how these protests were funded." Guzmán added that the organizations that have funded Marcha Verde should cease to provide such funding, as they have vested interests and have used the movement as "a political platform to further their electoral interests."

Under pressure from his administration's critics, President Medina has tried to convey the notion that his government will do all it can to prosecute those responsible. The Attorney General's Office, which is led by a close Medina collaborator, Jean Alain Rodríguez, has arrested a number of individuals allegedly involved in the Odebrecht case.

However, in a June 6 column in the Miami daily *El Nuevo Herald*, Roger F. Noriega, who was an assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs in the George W. Bush administration, wrote that the investigation into the Odebrecht case has been selective in terms of who gets prosecuted. He pointed out that those responsible for negotiating the contract for the Punta Catalina plant—which has had cost overruns of almost US\$1 billion—have not been prosecuted. Noriega noted the Dominican attorney general's close ties to President Medina and asked, "How do we know whether these individuals' names really appeared in the investigation if the tools to conduct the investigation are in the hands of the government that received the largest bribes from Odebrecht?"

Also in early June, the Brazilian chief prosecutor, Rodrigo Janot, requested that Brazil's Supreme Electoral Tribunal ensure that the information on the Odebrecht case remain confidential, so that each country's authorities can conduct their own investigations without outside interference.

Noriega argued that Janot was being naïve, pointing out that this measure has allowed attorney generals in other countries, who have their own political agendas, to launch witch hunts against political opponents.

Corruption and governance

Odebrecht left a trail of bribery all over the region. The company used a variety of methods, such as funding the election campaign of candidates—of different ideological leanings—who would reward Odebrecht with contracts once they were in office. For decades, Odebrecht obtained multi-million-dollar public works contracts in exchange for bribes.

Nevertheless, the Medina administration insist that it is still viewed favorably by voters. In early July, Ramón Tejada Holguín, director of Medina's information and strategic programming office (Dirección de Información, Análisis y Programación Estratégica de la Presidencia, DIAPE), claimed that over 50 percent of Dominicans approve of the Medina administration despite the impact of the Odebrecht scandal.

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