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Center-Left Candidate Hipolito Mejia Wins Dominican Presidential Election

by LADB Staff

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Hipolito Mejia, candidate for the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), won the May 16 presidential election, promising to fight corruption and concentrate resources on social programs. Mejia's running mate Milagros Ortiz Bosch, niece of former President Juan Bosch, became the country's first female vice president. Mejia and Ortiz Bosch take office Aug. 16.

With all but a handful of votes counted on May 18, the Junta Central Electoral (JCE) declared Mejia the winner with 49.8% of the votes, defeating governing Partido de la Liberacion Dominicana (PLD) candidate Danilo Medina with 24.9%, and Joaquin Balaguer of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC) with 24.6%. Candidates from several smaller parties shared the few remaining votes. Though Mejia failed to get the 50% plus one vote required to win in the first round, Medina and Balaguer withdrew, canceling the need for a second round.

Mejia becomes the PRD's fourth president, following Juan Bosch, elected in 1961, Antonio Guzman Fernandez (1978-1982), and Salvador Jorge Blanco (1982-1986). Bosch was overthrown in 1962 by a coup and prevented from returning to power in 1965 by a US military intervention. Medina, a colorless campaigner, faced an uphill battle. The PLD was trounced in the 1998 congressional and local elections (see NotiCen, 1998-05-21), and he had to run on President Leonel Fernandez's economic record.

Fernandez presided over an economy pleasing to neoliberal economists, with GDP growth averaging close to 8% per year and foreign investment on the rise. But voters were not pleased with the privatized electric company, which raised rates even as services declined. Furthermore, little of the Dominican "economic miracle" trickled down to the poor. The healthy macroeconomic indicators masked a poverty rate of around 60%.

Balaguer, who has been president seven times, offered no extensive program to voters. Blind and frail, the 93-year-old veteran limited his campaign to infrequent short speeches in which he made vague promises of peace and security.

As for his lack of sight, Balaguer said, "I'm not going to the National Palace to thread needles." Though his presidencies were marked with charges of authoritarianism, human rights violations, and electoral fraud, Balaguer remained popular with the poor because of large government expenditures on subsidies and social programs. However, his chance of election this time depended on a second-round vote. Polls showed his electoral support never rose much above 25%, but if Mejia faltered in the first round, Balaguer counted on getting support from the PLD to win in the runoff.

Fernandez won in 1996 in a second-round vote with Balaguer's PRSC support, blocking popular PRD leader Jose Pena Gomez from office (see NotiSur, (1996-08-23). This time the PLD-PRSC alliance failed, as Balaguer said the day after the election that he could not guarantee that PRSC members would support Medina.

Immigration authorities detain blacks

Just before the election, the JCE started legal action against immigration authorities who admitted to having taken voter-identity papers away from anyone who looked black. As late as May 15, government immigration authorities were systematically detaining blacks and confiscating their documents, which effectively prevented them from voting.

The Comité Dominicano de los Derechos Humanos (CDH) said that Dominican citizens who appeared to be Haitians were being sent across the border to Haiti. JCE spokesman Wilfredo Alemany said the operation had been stopped and that immigration director Danilo Diaz had turned over to the JCE an unspecified quantity of confiscated documents.

Even after the JCE ordered an end to the practice, immigration officials tripled the number of confiscations, said JCE president Manuel Ramon Morel. Diaz said the operation began when Haitians living in the Dominican Republic near the border were found to have voter-identification documents of doubtful authenticity. He said the Haitians had received the documents illegally, indicating deficiencies in the JCE's methods of distributing them.

The JCE was already under fire as the PLD and the smaller Fuerza Nacional Progresista (FNP) launched a campaign to convince voters that the PRD had subverted the JCE, which was ready to throw the election to Mejia. \

Election judged fair

Despite such charges, election observers pronounced the election fair and transparent and praised the Dominican Republic for bringing out 75% of registered voters on election day. Nevertheless, observers from the Fundación Internacional de Sistemas Electorales (IFES) recommended some technical changes for future elections. Among the recommendations were a reduction of the time voters had to wait before casting their ballots and an improvement in measures taken to allow access to the polls for voters with physical handicaps.

The nongovernmental organization Participación Ciudadana recommended other changes including reducing the percentage required to avoid a runoff election from 50% to 45%. Mejia promises jobs and clean government. Mejia, a 59-year-old businessman and agronomist and a former agriculture minister, presents himself as a populist farmer, reformer, corruption fighter, and heir to PRD hero Pena Gomez.

During his campaign, Mejia promised to change Fernandez's free-market policies and concentrate on programs to improve health, education, housing, and agricultural production as well as to attack corruption. In an interview with The Miami Herald, Mejia said, "I can assure you that in the first year, we will erase 90% of this national blot that is corruption." However, questions remain about how much the policies of outgoing President Fernandez will change during the next four years.

In a review of Mejia's political background, the Herald said Mejia is more conservative than he appears and comes from the conservative wing of the party. He has close ties to the anti-Castro exiles in the Dominican Republic and Miami and opposed Fernandez's re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1998. Sergio Pino, a Cuban-American businessman in Florida, raised US\$77,000 for Mejia's campaign.

With Mejia's election, the PRD will have overwhelming control of the government since the party already has a majority in Congress. The PRD holds 83 of 149 seats in the Camara de Diputados and 24 of the 30 Senate seats. In a press conference shortly after his victory, Mejia said he would attack corruption with legislative initiatives and propose projects that would create 200,000 new jobs in agriculture and other jobs in duty-free commercial areas. [Sources: Associated Press, 04/29/00, 05/18/00; Notimex, 05/19/00; The Miami Herald, 05/15/00, 05/20/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 04/10/00, 04/13/00, 04/17/00, 04/26/00, 05/15/00, 05/18/00; Listin Diario (Dominican Republic), 05/17/00, 05/21/00, 05/22/00]

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