

7-18-2002

Ex-president Joaquin Balaguer Dies

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Ex-president Joaquin Balaguer Dies." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8985>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Ex-president Joaquin Balaguer Dies

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Dominican Republic

Published: 2002-07-18

Joaquin Balaguer, former president of the Dominican Republic, died July 14 of cardiac arrest at the age of 95. Balaguer was an ally of former dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961) and was elected president six times after Trujillo's assassination in 1961. Balaguer was the oldest active politician in Latin America. In addition to being a politician, Balaguer was a composer, poet, and writer who published 53 books.

Balaguer had been hospitalized since July 4. On that day, he entered a private clinic and underwent a blood transfusion after suffering from gastrointestinal bleeding. While hospitalized, Balaguer received visits from President Hipolito Mejia of the social-democratic Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) and ex-President Leonel Fernandez (1996-2000) of the centrist Partido de Liberacion Dominicana (PLD).

During the last years of his life, Balaguer remained a powerful leader of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiana (PRSC) and continued to be consulted on political matters by prominent political figures, including Mejia. Balaguer collaborated with strongman Trujillo and the US Balaguer, who served as vice president from 1957-1960 during the Trujillo dictatorship, became president in 1960 when Trujillo's brother was forced to give up the presidency under pressure from the Organization of American States (OAS). Balaguer did not hold real power until after Trujillo's assassination in 1961.

In January 1962, Balaguer was overthrown in a coup and replaced by a civil-military junta. He went into exile in Puerto Rico. Balaguer returned to the Dominican Republic in 1965, at which time a US military force was occupying the island nation to put down an uprising by supporters of the leftist politician Juan Bosch. Bosch, the founder of the PRD, had won the first democratic presidential election in Dominican history in 1962, only to be overthrown by a three-man military junta in 1963 (see NotiCen, 2001-11-08).

In 1966, Balaguer won a presidential election against Bosch amid denunciations of electoral fraud. Because of the US backing of Balaguer and the repressive conditions under which the election was held, Bosch did not even campaign.

The Dominican daily El Caribe points out that the rise of Balaguer, a hard-line anti-communist, was the product of the Cold War environment and concerns about the "syndrome of a second Cuba." With the PRD's electoral abstention under conditions of political repression, Balaguer was re-elected in 1970 and 1974. Balaguer's 1966 to 1978 rule a period known as "the 12 years" was characterized by repression of the opposition, especially leaders of leftist organizations, the majority of whom were assassinated by police and paramilitary groups.

In 1986, after having lost two previous elections to the PRD, Balaguer won by 40,000 votes against the PRD's Jacobo Majluta. By 1990, Balaguer had become almost blind but won another term by a narrow margin against Bosch. Bosch, who had left the PRD in 1973 to form the PLD, accused Balaguer's supporters of "colossal fraud" in the election. Balaguer won again in 1994 against the PRD's Jose Francisco Pena Gomez. The PRD claimed that 200,000 PRD supporters were prevented from voting because their names had been erased from electoral registers (see NotiSur, 1994-05-20). The scandal led to a democracy pact (Pacto de Democracia) between the parties, whereby the next presidential election would take place in 1996 and Balaguer would not be allowed to run (see NotiSur, 1994-08-19).

Although Balaguer could not run, his political maneuvering was instrumental in determining the outcome of the 1996 election. He opposed Pena Gomez, who had edged out the PLD's Fernandez in the first round and who was considered the furthest left among the candidates (see NotiSur, 1996-07-12). Balaguer joined forces with his historic rival Bosch in swinging the second-round vote to Fernandez. In 2000, Balaguer made his last run for the presidency, placing third. Asked during the campaign whether his blindness would hinder his abilities, Balaguer responded, "I'm not going to the National Palace to thread needles" (see NotiCen, 2000-05-25).

Balaguer's brand of conservatism pre-dates neoliberal era Balaguer represented a brand of political conservatism that has largely disappeared from Latin America in the current age of technocrats and economic neoliberalism. Throughout much of his political career, Balaguer combined hard-line anti-communism with populist public-works projects and patronage politics. He created jobs through public works as a means to galvanize political support (see Chronicle, 1988-04-12, 1988-05-17).

In 1989, Balaguer proposed that debtor nations should band together to obtain better payment conditions in negotiations with international financial institutions (see Chronicle, 1989-02-14). Nonetheless, under pressure from those international financial institutions during his last two terms in office, Balaguer agreed to cut state subsidies for consumer goods and begin a process of privatizing public services (see Chronicle, 1994-02-17, 1995-03-30). El Caribe described Balaguer as a man of "extraordinary ability and eloquence" who oversaw "a coherent conservative political project which, in accord with tradition, maintained that our people because of their lack of political maturity rather than a lack of institutions required authoritarian caudillos."

Some analysts believe that Balaguer's death leaves a political vacuum that could develop into a leadership crisis within the PRSC. Dominican sociologist Pedro Catrain says Balaguer blocked the emergence of new leadership within his party. Catrain argues that Dominican political parties will be fortunate not to have such "absolute" leaders who subjugate party prerogatives to their will.

-- End --