

Dominican Elections

Jorge Luis Romeu
P. O. Box 6134
Syracuse NY 13217
Agosto 16 de 2004

Latin American relevant political events seem to follow me. For example, in 1994, while a Fulbright in Mexico, the Zapatistas revolted, candidate Colosio was murdered and president Zedillo was elected. In 2000, the election of Vicente Fox, the first opposition party candidate to access the presidency in 70 years in Mexico, occurred. In 2003, Mexican first free midterm elections showed extremely interesting aspects. And now, in the Dominican Republic, the flawless change of power from President Mejia to President Elect Leonel Fernandez has just occurred.

The salient aspect of this transfer of power is the sad economic condition of that nation. For, electrical power comes, intermittently, at most 6 or 8 hours per day, in the entire country. The middle class, and big institutions like the Universidad Catolica de Santo Domingo, where I am teaching faculty development workshops, have either small electric power plants or have “inversores” (converters). These, transfer the public AC power into DC and stores it. Then, it transfers the stored power back to AC and releases it, when the power goes off. Converters can move a fan and nightstand lamp light up to a refrigerator and air conditioning unit, for several hours.

Then, there is the lack of gasoline. Most cars are now running on gas and have gas tanks installed in the trunk. Jobs are scarce and wages are low. For many undocumented Haitians, escaping poverty and political instability in their own country just across the border, are willing to work for almost nothing. In addition, the Dominican peso has devaluated, during these past four years, from 15 to a dollar to 45 to a dollar. No wonder the president elect, whose previous period, from 1996 to 2000, was one of the most prosperous in the country's recent history, obtained a landslide victory.

Interestingly enough, both the current and the previous president's political parties were founded by the same politician, left-of-center writer Juan Bosch. To better understand how the country arrived to this stage, let's review some of its modern history.

The Dominican Republic, like Cuba and Puerto Rico, have similar histories up to the French Revolution of 1789. At that time, the island of Hispaniola was divided between the French, who operated their richest colony in America (Haiti) and the Spaniards who owned the languishing colony next door (Santo Domingo). The slave revolt brought the establishment of the Haitian Republic, which invaded the eastern (Spanish) side and incorporated it for 22 years. In 1844, Dominicans revolted and became an independent republic. But chaos and mismanagement drove the country into bankruptcy and in 1850 the conservative party negotiated the annexation to Spain.

The war against Spain (Restauracion) brought back the republic, the infighting between conservative and liberal “caudillos” and economic chaos. Default of the foreign debt and civil unrest brought (as in neighboring Haiti) the American intervention in 1916, which lasted eight years. Americans created a new army out of which came strong man Rafael Leonidas. Trujillo, who governed the Dominican Republic with iron hand from 1930 to his assassination in 1961.

Trujillo is a basket case, to put it mildly. He had no regards to civil liberties or democratic formalities. The story of his government excesses is well documented in the excellent novel “La Fiesta del Chivo” of Peruvian writer Vargas Llosa. However, he paid off the foreign debt, which got the Americans out of the country, created the Dominican currency, reorganized the government and built the modern Dominican economy where the very poor found jobs and stability. This is the sad story of many Latin American countries, where dictators (like Castro in Cuba) provide tremendous material advances at tremendously high social and political costs.

One of the most important of Trujillo’s regime ideologues, Dr. Joaquin Balaguer, was acting president at the time of the dictator’s assassination. Balaguer, a poet and scholar, undertook the difficult task of dismounting the Trujillo regime and restoring democracy. In the first free elections, Prof. Juan Bosch and his Revolutionary Party came to power. But this was shortly lived, as the military staged a coup and deposed him. After that, Bosch and Balaguer, which represented the two (liberal and conservative) political trends, became the undisputed ideological leaders of the country for the second half of the XX Century. The country regained pluralism but declined economically.

For contemporary Cuba, however, the Dominican Republic carries a big lesson. Just as Trujillo did, Cuba’s Castro has governed with iron hand and brought large advances at high cost. But Castro, now 78, may disappear soon. And perhaps, like with Balaguer, one of Castro’s closest allies will bring political pluralism back to the country.

Note: Jorge L. Romeu is a Fulbright Senior Speaker Specialist working in the Dominican Republic and directs the Juarez Lincoln Marti (<http://web.cortland.edu/matresearch>) international education project.