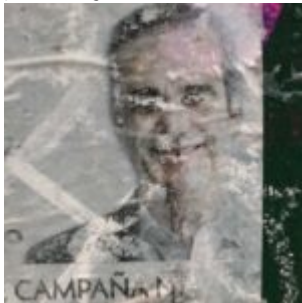


# Political Change and Continuity in the Dominican Republic

January 21, 2022



A defaced campaign poster of President Abinader. Credit: Amaury Rodríguez.

The presidential election of 2020 in the Dominican Republic—which took place within the context of the global economic and health crisis ignited by the Covid-19 pandemic—was the most significant since 1996. Seen as a referendum on democratization and an indictment of never-ending political graft scandals, the electoral defeat of the center-right *Partido de la Liberación Dominicana* (Dominican Liberation Party, PLD) by the liberal, catchall party *Partido Revolucionario Moderno* (Revolutionary Modern Party, PRM) marked an abrupt end to its twenty-year political dominance. Except for a short interregnum (2000-2004), the PLD controlled every sphere of political life since 1996 in close alliance with Washington and the Dominican far right led by former collaborators of the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961).

*Más de los mismo* (more of the same) is a popular expression within Dominican culture, which highlights the lack of political changes. This expression can easily apply to the economic policy guiding the current administration. When Luis Abinader ran as a candidate, he stressed the inequality that plagued the years of governance under the Dominican Liberation Party. His presidential platform highlighted how economic growth benefited the upper middle class and the elite. He also stressed that the Dominican Republic's development economic model provided economic growth to a small sector of the population. This message, combined with the message of

fighting corruption, catapulted Abinader to the office of the presidency in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, when Abinader commenced his presidential term, the first political decision he undertook was to appoint Héctor Valdez Albizu, who was instrumental in implementing the current neoliberal model in the Dominican Republic, president of the Central Bank. This economic model has three critical pillars: a) liberalization of the economy, b) growth via incurring into foreign debt, c) attacking the working class. Thus, the head of the Dominican Central Bank has similar powers as the dominant role other Central Bank presidents played in the hemisphere such as Domingo Felipe Cavallo in Argentina during the process of liberalization of the economy or Alan Greenspan in the United States.

Indeed, the real process of economic liberalization began when the PLD took power in 1996. At the time, neoliberal policies were sweeping Latin America, and the PLD did not hesitate to jump on the bus of this economic transformation with adverse consequences for the Dominican working class. The first target of the liberalization process was the state-owned enterprises such as the state electric company and others. The narrative used to enchant the population was that privatization would help to eradicate the inefficiency and corruption that plagued those companies. The reality was different, however, and it was to sell those companies to foreign multinationals or local business interests and for elected officials who participated in the process of selling, to enrich themselves with kickbacks. The current president of the Central Bank played a critical role in that process.

But the process of privatization also brought another reality regarding economic resources. The state enterprises represented a source of revenue for the state, and without that source of revenue, the state had to find new resources. One of the options was to tax the Dominican elite but that option was immediately discarded.

### **Dominican reformist politics**

The emergence of the PLD in the Dominican political landscape began in the 1970s when societies faced complex political, economic, and social challenges. Founded by Juan Bosch (1909-2001) in 1973 after leaving the nominally social-democrat Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), which he and others founded in Cuba in the 1940s, the PLD was, in all essence, a reformist bourgeois party. However, the party leadership concealed its true colors by making use of progressive language, a posture that would prove successful for party building as the crisis and divisions facing the Dominican left had no end in sight. Bosch built a base of loyal supporters due to his role in the anti-dictatorial resistance abroad, and his proven credentials as a democratic politician as he became the first democratically elected president in 1963 after thirty years of dictatorial regime. Overthrown in a military coup seven months later, Bosch's party at the time, the PRD, led the 1965 democratic revolution that sought to restore constitutional order and democratic liberties, playing a central role in the anti-imperialist resistance against the US military intervention that same year.

In a political landscape dominated by two main capitalist parties, on one side the right-wing Social Christian Reformist Party (PRSC) and on the other the center-left Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), the emergence of a third party offered a sense of respite from traditional politics, disrupting bipartidism in the process. The PLD's early reformist orientation eventually solidified the party as a left-wing pole of attraction during the 1980s. Early on, Bosch had envisioned the PLD as a political instrument to fulfill the task of national liberation under the leadership of the petit bourgeoisie class, a social class assigned a "historical role" in his political writings. The party's outlook did not only reflect Bosch's ideas about the origins of capitalism in the Dominican Republic and the implications in the fight for national liberation, but it also reflected the class interests of some of its leading members. In fact, the bulk of the PLD's membership had become—or were en route to become—young professionals who hailed from lower and middle-class strata. Among the party

membership were some conservative opportunists and former collaborators of the Trujillo dictatorship who cloaked their right wing, authoritarian sympathies under the guise of pseudo-progressive language.

In a 1986 interview, Bosch admitted that the PLD was leftist without a socialist program.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the old reformist PRD of yesteryear—a mass, left-of-center, populist, pro-capitalist party with active labor, radical and anti-imperialist wings—the PLD did not claim to represent the working-class or other popular sectors.

Over time, three critical factors eventually helped the PLD under Bosch's leadership consolidate its position as the "truly leftist reformist party" vis-à-vis the PRD. First, the Stand-by Arrangement of the Dominican government led by the Dominican Revolutionary Party, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), marked a period of discontent within the progressive segment of the coalition that first catapulted the PRD to power in 1978. The second factor was the attraction that the new reformist party had on Dominican leftists who gradually abandoned revolutionary politics: from renowned radical fighters and unionists to artists and intellectuals of great standing and political prestige.

Finally, the third factor that contributed to the rise of the PLD was the internal division of the PRD. Beginning in 1982, when the presidential candidate Salvador Jorge Blanco (1926-2010) won the election, a civil war erupted inside the PRD. Two factions emerged: one led by president Salvador Jorge Blanco, who represented the elite segment inside the PRD, and the other faction led by Jacobo Majluta, who served as vice-president to former president Antonio Guzmán Fernández and as interim president for 41 days after the president committed suicide. In 1986, as the PRD presidential candidate, Jacobo Majluta (1934-1996) lost the election against the Social Christian leader Joaquín Balaguer (1906-2002). In short, the weakness of the PRD within the Dominican political landscape—exacerbated by the loss of popular support after state repression quelled anti-IMF mobilizations in 1984—served the growth of the PLD in the late 1980s.

### **The PLD shifts to the right**

With the beginning of the 1990s, the shift to the right of the PLD began to be more noticeable. Two factors accelerated the internal transformation of the party. First, the loss of the 1990 presidential elections in which the PLD was perceived as the winner, but Joaquín Balaguer was able to retain power by manipulating the election results with the support of the Dominican elite and the United States, opened the door to question the so-called leftist tendency inside the party. Due to pressure from the conservative wing of the party, the PLD had to change its mantra from that of a center-left party to a centrist party that incorporated segments of the conservative elite if the party wanted not just to win an election but the recognition of that election by the elite.

The second critical factor was the tectonic change in the geopolitical sphere between the Soviet Union and the West led by the United States. In the 1990s and on the onset of the fall of the Communist regimes, the PLD leadership consolidated the shift of the party to the right when it openly embraced bourgeois ideology in a move that propelled it into the arms of Washington and local archconservative elites. For a segment of the party leadership, the world changed, and the struggle of ideology became an obsolete political tool of the past. This perception was in tune with conservative political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his now infamous book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he described the so-called victory of the West as the end of human beings' ideological evolution in support of Western values. This new realignment coupled with Juan Bosch's inability to lead due to declining health and his eventual death in 2001, posed a dilemma for the leadership: how to maintain party unity and preserve its "progressive" image for public consumption while engaging in political duplicity. Over the years, the chameleonic PLD leaders—who were

invested in restructuring economic and social relations in tandem with the free-market—adopted, as in a masquerade ball, multiple political colors, depending on the occasion, in the hopes of retaining and gaining support. Moreover, progressive language and periodical invocations of the deceased leader served the PLD as subterfuge to deceive, disorient and confuse both opposition parties and voters.

As the crisis of the left intensified, the PLD leadership began to position itself beyond left-right ideologies, preaching the virtues of capitalism at every opportunity. Aware of the particularities of Dominican politics, which is pretty much acute and sensitive to international political trends, the PLD leadership spent a great amount of time making vague references to Anglo-political conservative, neoliberal and anti-progressive realignments such as Clintonism and Tony Blair's Third Way. That is not to say that these two neoliberal heads of state did not influence the thinking of *peledeistas* (PLD members), but the seeds to embark on privatization of public holdings to further dismantle basic services like healthcare and education were already there.

Further, small but popular gestures like establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba were meant to appease the left while the leadership argued that the party's ideology was neither left or right; it continued to spew center-left and progressive rhetoric despite its alliance with fascists from the *Fuerza Nacional Progresista* (Progressive National Force, FNP), a minuscule far-right party whose influence (and resources) grew because of its alliance with the party in power. By the time those at the helm no longer felt guilt for espousing their reactionary ideology, the PLD leadership had already adopted a traditional, patriotic and nationalist identity.

Some within the party, for instance, former president Leonel Fernández, claimed to be political heirs of right-wing strongman and close-U.S. ally Joaquín Balaguer whose regime (1966-1978) killed thousands including left-wing revolutionaries.

Furthermore, the PLD came to power in 1996 through an electoral alliance with Balaguer and other right-wing political actors. Calling themselves the *Frente Patriótico* (Patriotic Front), the PLD and the Right launched a coordinated racist campaign to derail the presidential candidacy of José Francisco Peña Gómez (1937-1998), a Black Dominican of Haitian origin who was one of the leaders of the 1965 democratic revolution that sought to restore Bosch to power after a right-wing US-backed military coup in 1963.

During its heyday in power, the PLD leadership accumulated immense personal wealth and built a massive clientelist base. A key pillar of their success was figuring out that money could buy loyalty. The party leadership was also willing to undermine the Dominican political system, if it suited them, by buying the leadership of opposition parties.

The formerly petty bourgeois, and now *nouveau riche*, millionaire PLD leadership thus announced their intention to perpetuate their regime. Following in the footsteps of Mexico's constitutional dictatorship under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) and reviving the local authoritarian tradition implanted by the Trujillo and Balaguer regimes, the *peledeista* political class expressed a desire to cling to power for forty years, that is, until the year 2036. The leadership's voracious greed and appetite for power accelerated what seemed like an irreversible authoritarian turn.<sup>3</sup>

## **Resistance from below**

Akin to a party-state electoral machine, and in some ways like its predecessors, the PLD used state violence to remain in power. However, what set the PLD apart was its reliance on other forms of social control aimed at creating consensus and legitimacy. For example, due to limited employment

opportunities in semi-colonial capitalist societies, government jobs, career advancement and scholarships to prestigious universities abroad are enticing to activists and intellectuals.

In that sense, the PLD co-opted some radical sectors but, at the same time, those who were able to repel the PLD's coercion and corrupting tentacles played a significant role in leading the popular resistance that over the years helped galvanize opposition to PLD governments under both former presidents Leonel Fernández (1996–2000, 2004–2012) and Danilo Medina (2012–2016, 2016–2020).

It took years of struggle, in fact, to bring the PLD to its knees. From the fight against the 2010 racist, sexist and homophobic constitution to labor and anti-austerity strikes and protests that challenged neoliberalism and the signing of unilateral U.S. trade agreements in the context of growing hemispheric resistance that slowed down the expansion of neoliberalism in the region; to what is perhaps the most durable social movement from those years, the civil rights struggle led by Sonia Pierre (1963-2011), a force to reckon with, as she defiantly challenged anti-Haitian racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, capitalist exploitation and sexism.

By 2017, widespread anti-PLD sentiment exploded into a mass anti-corruption movement known as *Marcha Verde* (Green March), mobilizing a large working and middle-class electoral bloc who continue to play a central role in shaping anti-corruption politics to this day.

## **Downfall**

Former President Danilo Medina's bid for re-election accelerated the PLD's downfall from power. Medina abandoned his attempt to run for a third time when it became more and more evident that widespread anger triggered by the regime's nepotism, abuse of power, authoritarianism and utter neglect of basic services, such as health care and education, had reached its boiling point. At the end, Medina handpicked a puppet candidate to remain the king behind the throne.

By the time the 2020 presidential election campaign arrived, the PLD was facing a nasty and bitter internal crisis accelerated by rigged primary elections stacked against Leonel Fernández, Medina's rival, who left the party shortly after and launched his own party (Fuerza del Pueblo or Peoples' Force), a "new" party as reactionary and corrupt as the PLD. This new crisis split the PLD voting base, a sign that the end was near.

With the defeat of Medina's candidate, Gonzalo Castillo, a new political cycle found one of the factions within the reactionary camp weakened as a result. This electoral defeat dealt a significant blow to the political and personal ambitions of former president Medina whose protégé and would be successor failed to garner support among the electorate even after running a ridiculously expensive electoral campaign that included distribution of cash to poor and unemployed young and adults voters alike, buying votes, hiring journalists and entertainers to spread propaganda, silencing dissent and forcing state employees to attend pro-government rallies at the risk of losing their jobs.

The PLD's debacle at the ballot box amounted to a resounding rejection of conservatism and a reactionary political and economic model based on extreme acts of nepotism, abuse of power, state violence, intolerance, impunity, paternalism, individualism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ecocide and the worship of money. Thus, the defeat of the PLD was a step forward, albeit a partial one, in the struggle to democratize Dominican society.

## **Neoliberal continuity under Abinader**

In the absence of left-wing and working-class electoral political alternatives, ordinary people eager to subvert the critical political situation after twenty years of right-wing rule under the PLD and its millionaire class, replaced one political class by another by throwing their lot with businessman-

turned politician Luis Abinader, from the Modern Revolutionary Party (PRM), a split from the PRD.

Abinader's win was a two-fold strategy: first, he and his party capitalized on the mass opposition to the PLD embodied primarily in the *Marcha Verde* anti-corruption movement; and second, Abinader put together a right-wing/center-left alliance that brought together a portion of the PLD voting bloc (represented by Leonel Fernández and his People's Force party) and other small right wing parties such as the PRSC and *Dominicanos por el Cambio* (Dominicans for Change, DXD) as well as the center-left *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front, FA).

Abinader also gained the support of middle-class progressive intellectuals and activists who saw the attempt by the PLD to perpetuate in power as a threat to democracy. But those progressive activists and intellectuals, guided by hatred for the PLD as well as their own anti-working-class politics and personal ambitions, ended up backing Abinader, conservative candidate to beat the incumbent, creating illusions among ordinary people. Left-wing journalist Lilliam Oviedo excoriates those who "out of naivety, crude pragmatism or opportunism, the [progressives] have thus crowned [their] desire to play cards in a dirty game".<sup>4</sup>

Public knowledge of Abinader's upper class and privileged background was not enough to deter progressive-leaning organizations and individuals from endorsing the PRM candidate. But the leadership of the PRM also engages in political duplicity, striking a progressive, left-wing pose as an opposition party with a social democratic lineage that once in power, swung to the right. That is why this last election was another cosmetic change.

While it is true that President Abinader appointed an independent prosecutor to persecute corruption as part of the popular clamor for justice embodied in the *Marcha Verde* movement, his government has shielded corrupt political allies from prosecution. Since taking power, Abinader has disappointed a large majority of voters, including the base of his party that tends to be more progressive, by stacking the Dominican state and his cabinet with capitalist moguls (like himself) and corrupt politicians from both the PLD and the PRM.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the private sector became more evident when President Abinader launched a public-private alliance to invest in tourism projects to the detriment of both the state (which will act as the main investor) and working-class people whose pressing needs include access to decent healthcare, Covid testing and vaccines, education, food and housing.<sup>6</sup>

During the presidential campaign, Abinader and the PRM expressed support for the struggle to decriminalize abortion, a polarizing issue that challenges the hegemony of religious conservatives from both the Catholic Church and the growing evangelical community. The PRM was the only opposition mainstream party to openly support therapeutic abortion during the presidential campaign and won the support of feminist organizations. However, Abinader and his party—in alliance with Christian right sectors—have betrayed their promises again and again by refusing to decriminalize abortion, serving as a catalyst for the launch of massive street mobilizations and occupy-like encampments.<sup>7</sup>

Abinader and his Christian right allies have also contributed to further criminalize LGBTQ+ people by refusing to persecute hate crimes based on sexual orientation.

A year into Abinader's presidency has only created more misery and exploitation for poor and working-class people in the Dominican Republic. To manage pandemic and the resulting economic crisis, Abinader has relied heavily on repressive measures including street militarization to enforce unpopular lockdowns. Poor neighborhoods bear the brunt of state repression. In 2021, Abinader declared a state of emergency from March to the first week of October. By doing so, his government

suspended free transit and democratic liberties. The state of emergency, backed by all traditional parties, granted Abinader special executive powers to rein in the state's finances with little or no oversight while re-opening the economy despite the rapid spread of the virus with the sole objective of keeping the tourist sector afloat at the expense of people's health. For the Dominican elite, the pandemic has been an economic bonanza long in the making. Abinader and the ultra-rich, financial capitalist class he represents, benefits greatly from tourism. According to a 2021 Central Bank report, 462,536 tourists entered the country by June. Additionally, other sectors that have grown during the pandemic included construction, free trade zones, local manufacture, transport and storage of supplies, mining and commerce.<sup>8</sup>

White supremacy and racism are key components of the white, Dominican elite that President Abinader represents. That is why it is not surprising that he has adopted right wing populist nationalism as a pillar of his regime, making his political positions more extreme than that of former PLD governments. His right-wing agenda clearly serves the interests of both local and US capitalists. By using racist, xenophobic anti-Haitian rhetoric (sometimes openly and sometimes in coded language), Abinader continues to scapegoat Haitian workers for social ills, polarizing the electorate and creating divisions between Haitians and Dominicans. His right-wing nationalist rhetoric—which portrays the political and economic crisis of neighboring Haiti as a threat to national sovereignty—is also meant to galvanize patriotic symbolism and national unity to slow down, and eventually derail class unity.

The most recent nationalist propaganda serves as a political distraction that only benefits the ruling class. Interestingly, it is not a coincidence that President Abinader went on a right-wing nationalist tirade right around the time his name appeared in the Pandora Papers list of presidents and public figures who hide their fortunes in tax havens.<sup>9</sup>

Further, the Dominican state under Abinader continues to serve the needs of capitalist exploitation as his government prioritizes funding non-essential public works at this perilous time such as the construction of a Trump-inspired fence alongside the Dominican-Haitian border while poor neighborhoods suffer blackouts, and the housing crisis widens.

## **What's Next?**

The social justice movement has a bright future, but it must deal with practices undermining past social justice movements on the island. While it is true that the Dominican Republic moved away from extrajudicial killings of activists, it is also true that the economic coercion of leaders of those movements continues. The PLD demonstrated the political and economic tentacles of the clientelist states and its willingness to provide economic "gifts" to social justice leaders in exchange for loyalty to the party. Already several former leaders of the Green March movement have abandoned social struggle after accepting lucrative government jobs.

Meanwhile, the struggle against the PLD's authoritarian turn and its electoral fraud during the municipal elections in 2020 as well the impact of youth and women mobilizations in Haiti, Chile, Argentina and the United States politicized and radicalized young people for an entire generation, leading to a resurgence of feminist, queer, black/afro-Dominican struggles. Bearing in mind that the PLD's ultra-reactionary legacy will continue to have political and cultural ramifications, its long-term impact and survival will depend on whether progressive, labor, feminists, anti-racist and anti-capitalist sectors continue to organize and fight the right.

In the Dominican Republic many workers are not organized, and labor unions remain weak across the country. As long as there is a conservative leadership at the helm of some of the largest labor unions such as the *Confederación Autónoma Sindical Clasista* (Autonomous Confederation of Classist

Unions, CASC), labor unions cannot become instruments of class and social struggle.

Nevertheless, the prospects of working-class struggle look promising. In recent months, teachers, healthcare workers and professors and staff from the *Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo* (Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, UASD), the public university, have led important labor struggles. Under the leadership of a socialist, members of the professor's union (FAPROUASD) won a 15% salary increase in November of 2021 as a result of mobilizations. As important is the labor struggle led by sugar cane workers of Haitian origin fighting for their pensions. Moreover, large segments of the population comprised of peasants and unorganized workers also challenge mega-mining extractivism on an ongoing basis.

The revolutionary left is small, but it continues to be the only political force that can mount a serious opposition to state repression and capitalist exploitation as reformist center-left parties have moved to the right. Known for its endless sectarian strife, the Dominican left is also known for its rich history of struggle. The more prominent organizations are rooted in some of the political tendencies that were the backbone of the international left: Maoist (*Movimiento Popular Dominicano* or Dominican People's Movement, MPD), Stalinist (*Movimiento Caamañista* or Caamañist Movement, MC) and Trotskyist (*Movimiento de las Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Socialistas* or Socialist Workers Movement, MST). Despite their different origins, these revolutionary organizations share a deep commitment to internationalism and anti-imperialist politics rooted in the 1965 revolution and subsequent anti-imperialist war against US occupying troops. The left has potential to grow and contribute to re-building the student movement and strengthening feminist, labor, environmentalist and peasant struggles. Finally, it is important that the left continues to denounce the Dominican ruling class attacks on people of Haitian descent, and offer realistic, concrete solutions to working people at this moment of crisis while rejecting nationalism.

International solidarity with the Dominican people will be crucial to defeat the latest ruling class offensive. The progressive and revolutionary sectors from the Dominican diaspora in the US have played an important role in Dominican politics and will continue to do so in years to come. As the Dominican elite consolidates its power under Abinader and continues its relentless attacks on the working class, the revolutionary left must unite to organize workers regardless of national origin, fight racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, and ultimately, build a strong working-class led left-wing political alternative to fight the battles to come in the ideological and electoral terrain as well as in the streets.

*The authors dedicate this article to the memory of Dominican revolutionary socialist Hancy Martínez (1991-2021). The authors also thank Amín Pérez for revising an earlier draft.*

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