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The views expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, Department of Defense, US Southern Command or Florida International University.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite historical tensions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, Dominicans appear to have put aside their resentment in favor of supporting Haitians after the earthquake that devastated the neighbor nation in January 2010. Over the past several months, there has been unprecedented cooperation between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, with little evidence of a negative impact on domestic politics in the Dominican Republic. In fact, the high ratings of President Leonel Fernández and the results of the May Parliamentary elections may suggest that how the Fernández administration handled the Haitian crisis did not have a negative impact on citizens' perception. However, the issue of Haitian immigration remains very sensitive in the Dominican Republic, and has the potential to become the major concern on the domestic political front. As of June 2010, the Haitian crisis seemed to have little or no impact on Dominican politics, as the following points indicate:

- The May 16, 2010 Parliamentary elections increased President Fernández's political party to 31 out of 32 Senate seats, and 105 out of 183 Chamber of Deputies seats; this is a total increase of 18 seats from the previous term.
- Polls indicate that President Fernández has a 54 percent approval rating.
- Polls also indicate that Haiti is not among the most pressing issues of concern to Dominican citizens. Instead, 65 percent of the population identifies drug trafficking and corruption as the greatest concerns.
- The immigration debate will remain the major consideration in domestic politics in the Dominican Republic; 62.4 percent of Dominicans polled think that the military should be strengthened along the DR-Haitian border.

INTRODUCTION

The historically tense relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti raised questions as to whether or not the crisis stemming from the January 11, 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince has stressed the political climate in the Dominican Republic. The short answer is no, at least not yet. Instead, Dominican society appears unsettled by the destruction, to the extent that Dominicans have put aside their feelings, for the time being, to support Haitians in recovering from this disaster.¹ In fact, the crisis may have helped the current leadership to redirect some attention from other domestic pressures affecting the country, such as increasing crime and high unemployment. Polls released by “Iberobarometer” in June 2010 suggest that Dominican President Leonel Fernández has a 54 percent domestic approval rating; this is perhaps an indication of society’s support of his handling of the crisis in Haiti.² The manner in which the President’s political party swept the May Parliamentary elections indicates no major shift in the people’s preference of political party or elected government officials. That is not to say that Dominicans have completely let go of traditional concerns about Haiti, but rather, at this moment, they have accepted the humanitarian needs and continue to support of their government’s policy. Still, some visible trends have emerged in the Dominican Republic that are associated with the crisis in Haiti. These trends could

¹ John Burnett, "For Haiti, Some Neighborly Help from Next Door," National Public Radio, January 2010; and Garry Pierre-Pierre, "Hatian-Dominican Relations Warming After Quake," April 2010.

² Iberoamerican Consortium of Business Marketing Research and Consulting (CIMA) has published its annual study The Iberoamerican Governability Barometer, or “Iberobarometer,” benchmarking the institutionalization of democratic processes in Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. The School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University presented the findings of the 2010 report on June 8, 2010.

impact domestic politics for Dominicans in the years to come, and could exacerbate some of the traditional sources of tension between the two countries, such as immigration.

EVOLUTION OF DR-HAITIAN RELATIONS

Dominican-Haitian relations have been contentious as far back as the immediate post-colonial era. After a series of Haitian invasions with the objective of unifying the island of Hispaniola under Haitian rule during the early to mid-1800s, the Dominican Republic became the only former colony in the Western Hemisphere to reintegrate itself with Spain—though this reintegration was short lived. Nonetheless, this lends itself to the origins of how Dominicans perceive Haitians as a threat to the sovereignty and stability of the Dominican Republic—a perception that persists in Dominican society today.

Current Dominican perceptions of Haitians were not institutionalized within the Dominican political system until the forty-year regime of Dictator General Rafael Trujillo in the twentieth century. While the “Era of Trujillo” for Dominicans was a time of economic and social growth, and of dictatorial repression, for Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, it became one of ethnic cleansing. Trujillo incorporated the racism in Dominican society into the national political system. He preached Dominican racial and social superiority over the Haitians while simultaneously intensifying the race-based class divide among Dominicans. Resentment toward Haitians became so great that Trujillo used the Dominican Army in a campaign to expel Haitians from the country. It culminated with the infamous Parsley Massacre, in which roughly 30,000 Haitian civilians were murdered by the Dominican Army in October 1937. Thus,

hostility to Haitians is rooted in Dominican history, and is prevalent in its socio-cultural norms.³

After the collapse of the Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier regime in 1986 and the subsequent weak governments that have since followed, Dominicans began to view the Haitian threat as social in nature. In other words, while there was no Haitian State capable of threatening the sovereignty of the Dominican Republic, Haitian instability created a new threat, as Dominicans feared that Haitian migrants and refugees would attempt to assimilate Dominican society to mirror that of Haiti. As Mireya Navarro writes:

*Privately, many Dominicans speak of Haitians with both pity and disdain, stereotyping them as carriers of disease and practitioners of witchcraft [,] and blaming them for ‘blackening’ their side of the island, where the lighter-skinned population is mostly mulatto.*⁴

Furthermore, Dominicans feared that Haitians would be a drain on Dominican resources, given Haiti’s inability to provide even the most basic services to its citizens. Even after the disaster in Haiti, Dominicans worry that Haitians

³ Nancy San Martin, "Haitians Crossing into the Dominican Republic Seeking Jobs are Finding Abuse Instead," *The Miami Herald*, July 19, 2001, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/dominican/haitians-dr.htm>; and Clare M. Ribando, "Dominican Republic: Political and Economic Conditions and Relations with the United States," *CRS Report for Congress*, March 8, 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/46402.pdf>.

⁴ Mireya Navarro, "At Last in Hispaniola, Hands Across the Border," Webster University, July 11, 1999. Mireya is now a journalist with the *New York Times* focusing on race in Hispanic societies.

would be a burden on Dominican health services and exhaust food resources “that should go to Dominicans.”⁵

In response to the lack of stability in Haiti and the fear of Haitians integrating into Dominican society, recent Dominican administrations (beginning with President Leonel Fernández’s first term in 1996) have sought to address this concern by aiding in the stability of Haiti through improved relations in the areas of joint infrastructure and economic development. In 1996, President Fernández created a bilateral commission to facilitate dialogue on trade, immigration and tourism. Despite the efforts by the Dominicans to improve DR-Haiti relations, Dr. Johanna Mendelson-Forman argues that it was the recent earthquake that provided an opportunity to forge closer, more substantive ties between the two countries.⁶ Since the earthquake, both the Dominican and Haitian leadership have engaged in unprecedented cooperation. The earthquake made it imperative for the Haitian government to respond to overtures by the Dominicans, and the Dominican government has so far seized the opportunity to make the most of this cooperation.

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC POST DISASTER

The Dominican Republic’s response to the disaster was and has been perceived in a very positive manner by both its citizens and the international community.⁷ Immediately

⁵ Daniel Roth, "Tension Grows in the Border with Dominican Republic as Hatians Try to Escape," *The Miami Herald*, January 16, 2010, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/01/16/1428997/tension-grows-in-the-border-with.html>.

⁶ Interview with Johanna Mendelson Forman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. on June 3, 2010.

⁷ "Enemies: A Love Story," *Newsweek*, April 5, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/04/14/enemies-a-love-story.html>.

following the earthquake, Haitian President René Préval was flown to the Dominican Republic in order to communicate with the international community, and President Fernández was the first head of state to visit Haiti following the disaster. Paying little attention to historical tension, but with an eye on immigration concerns, the Dominican Republic was the first country to provide relief to Haiti immediately following the earthquake.⁸ The Dominican Republic opened its seaports and airports to facilitate and act as a staging ground for the delivery of international aid to Haiti, and Dominican authorities have demonstrated little tolerance for those in the country attempting to hoard aid going into Haiti.⁹ Although a sensitive issue, the Dominican Republic has also provided healthcare to Haitians along the border.

Despite the outpouring of support by the Dominican Republic, the immediate concern for most Dominicans was the threat of a major exodus of refugees into the Dominican Republic, and the immediate provision of relief supplies to Haiti. An initial offer by the Dominican government to the United Nations to deploy an estimated 150 to 800 Dominican soldiers under the command of MINUSTAH was reluctantly accepted by Haiti. The Dominican forces were integrated into the “Peruvian contingent of MINUSTAH, stationed along the Haiti side of the 370 kilometer-long border.”¹⁰

According to *The Miami Herald*, heavily armed Dominican soldiers were positioned along Highway 46, the primary road

⁸ "Dominican Republic Aid to Haiti Eases Historic Tensions," CNN, 13 January 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/13/haiti.earthquake.dominican.republic/index.html>.

⁹ "Enemies: A Love Story."

¹⁰ "Dominican Troops to Deploy in Haiti Despite Concerns," *DominicanToday.com*, February 5, 2010, <http://www.dominicantoday.com/dr/local/2010/2/4/34715/Dominican-troops-to-deploy-in-Haiti-despite-concerns>.

connecting Haiti and the Dominican Republic, in order to ensure Haitians stayed on their side of the island.¹¹ Despite the presence of Dominican forces some media reports suggest Haitians have been able to cross the border into the Dominican Republic.¹² However, a mass exodus has yet to occur, and this is the main reason the crisis in Haiti has not negatively impacted politics in the Dominican Republic.

INDICATORS OF THE IMPACT OF THE HAITI CRISIS ON DOMINICAN POLITICS

On May 16, 2010, the Dominican Republic held parliamentary elections for its Senate and Chamber of Deputies. The Dominican Liberation Party (referred to by the Spanish acronym PLD), the party of President Fernández, increased its parliamentary majority by winning 31 of 32 Senate seats, and 105 of 183 Chamber of Deputies seats. The overwhelming electoral success of the PLD can be considered an indirect referendum on the Fernández Administration's post-earthquake Haitian initiatives. Some also attribute the success of the PLD to the lack of organization and unpopularity of opposition parties in the Dominican Republic. Nonetheless, the clear mandate of the PLD reflects some degree of voter contentment with the PLD. The lack of debate during the elections over the country's role in assisting Haiti's recovery effort was a result of the less-than-expected effects on the Dominican Republic. According to Dr. Eduardo Gamarra, Professor of Political Science at Florida International University, the PLD's success was evidence of the small disapproval by the electorate with the government's disaster limitation and recovery policies; he believes the opposite would have severely limited the PLD's prospects for success.

¹¹ Roth, "Tension Grows in the Border with Dominican Republic as Haitians Try to Escape."

¹² Ibid.

Recent polling conducted in the Dominican Republic by the “Iberobarometer” project suggests that the crisis in Haiti is not among the top concerns on the minds of Dominicans; accordingly, drug trafficking and corruption are the major domestic issues, and account for 65 percent of those polled—46.6 and 18.3 percent, respectively.¹³ Dominicans also appear content with President Fernández. In the same polling project, 54 percent approved of President Fernández; 52 percent think he has done a very good job with foreign relations; and 55 percent think he has done a very good job with neighboring countries, particularly Haiti.

Although President Fernández’s popularity still remains positive after his handling of the earthquake in Haiti, concerns among Dominicans remain with regard to assisting the Haitian recovery effort. Nearly 60 percent of Dominicans polled felt that the Dominican Republic helped Haiti beyond the means of the DR, while, in a separate question, 23.7 percent believe that no more aid should go to Haiti. The polling results also suggest that the top issue with respect to the crisis in Haiti could very well center on immigration. In December 2009, the Dominican Congress paved the way for a constitutional amendment aimed at repatriating 800,000 Dominican residents of Haitian origins to include children born to illegal immigrants.¹⁴ Although the Dominican Republic eased its immigration policies for some requiring medical attention, 84.9 percent of Dominicans polled by “Iberobarometer” thought that the government should not grant Haitians temporary legal status, while 79.7 percent felt the government should not repatriate undocumented Haitians

¹³ The results of the “Iberobarometer” project were discussed in an interview with Eduardo Gamarra prior to the official release on June 8, 2010. The interview was held on May 17, 2010.

¹⁴ Fred Grimm, “A Look at a Dominican Republic,” *The Miami Herald*, January 26, 2010. In an interview with Johanna Medelson Forman of the Center for the Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

and earthquake victims. The polling data suggests that although an overwhelming majority of Dominicans do not want to grant Haitians temporary legal status, the majority remains apprehensive about repatriating Haitians and earthquake victims under the current crisis. Dominicans do not want Haitians immigrating to the Dominican Republic under other circumstances, given that 62.4 percent believes that the military should be strengthened along the DR-Haiti border. According to Gamarra, the results of the “Iberobarometer” project suggest that, while immigration remains the concern among Dominicans, its impact on domestic politics is minimal at best, and at least for now will not result in shifts in the current political landscape.¹⁵

¹⁵ Interview with Eduardo Gamarra, Professor of Political Science at Florida International University and DR Special Envoy to Haiti on June 7, 2010.

CONCLUSION

While the crisis in Haiti has not been a major strain on domestic politics in the Dominican Republic, immigration will emerge as a national issue as the number of Haitians in the DR drastically increases and the sympathy of Dominicans over the disaster wanes. Some Dominicans are already taking notice of the increased visibility of Haitians in urban sprawls like Santo Domingo.¹⁶ Combined with high unemployment rates, crime, and the burden on government services, increased numbers of immigrants coming across the DR-Haiti border (exacerbated by the disaster in Haiti) will become a major issue on the national agenda. According to Dominican Army Colonel Frank Mauricio Cabrera Rizek of the Dominican Ministry of the Armed Forces, as the aid to Haiti gradually decreases, more and more Haitians will attempt to leave; many of them will choose to go to the Dominican Republic for better opportunities and basic needs.¹⁷ Another consideration affecting immigration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic is the threat of a major storm during the 2010 hurricane season. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) the 2010 season could experience between 14 and 24 storms in the Atlantic and Caribbean.¹⁸ Given that most of the infrastructure in Haiti was destroyed by the earthquake, a major storm could trigger a mass exodus into the Dominican Republic and create a conflict between Haitians and Dominicans over relief supplies. An event like this would certainly put pressure on the Dominican government to

¹⁶ Interview with Coronel Frank Mauricio Cabrera Rizek, Deputy Director of Plans and Operations in the Ministry of Armed Forces and Advisor to the Security and Defense Commission of the Senate on May 26, 2010.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "State of the Climate Annual 2010," NOAA, National Climatic Data Center, 2010, <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/2010/13>.

respond. Colonel Cabrera Rizek and others argue that, over time during this period of crisis, the current tolerance of Haitians by Dominicans could produce a significantly larger Haitian community in the Dominican Republic, and create a clash on the domestic political front in the future.

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Brian Fonseca is a Senior Political and Security Analyst at Florida International University and coordinator of FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. Brian Fonseca has authored various reports for United States Southern Command, among them “*Energy Outlook: Brazil*”, “*Emerging Relationships: Iran & Latin America*”, “*Emerging Relationships: China and Latin America*”, “*Identifying Opportunities for U.S.-Cuba Military Cooperation*”; and “*Human Smuggling and the Terrorist-Criminal Nexus*”. Mr. Fonseca authored a chapter titled “*Globalização e Contrabando de Seres Humanos no Hemisfério Ocidental*” in the recently published book *Segurança E Governança Nas Américas* (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, (2009, ISBN: 857716571). He is an Adjunct Professor of International Relations and the Principal Investigator the U.S. Army Western Hemisphere Security Colloquium series.

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