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Hispaniola's Second Chance

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OVERVIEW

- **The reemergence of Haitian president René Préval and Dominican president Leonel Fernández's parallel presidencies gives some cause for hope for an improved bilateral relationship and for renewed attention to cross-border migration.**
- **There is good reason to believe that the migration conflict in Hispaniola could finally be on a serious path to progress.**

Optimism has long eluded the strained relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Neighbor relations in the island of Hispaniola reached low points in 1822 with the Haitian occupation of Dominican territory and in 1937 with the massacre of an estimated 25,000 Haitian sugarcane workers during the Trujillo dictatorship. Migration continues to be at the center of this historically difficult bilateral relationship. Hundreds of thousands of Haitians attempt to escape abject poverty and hopelessness in their own country by seeking work in the more prosperous Dominican Republic, where they are largely unwelcome and are often the subject of discrimination and abuse.

Yet, while the push-pull forces driving Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic remain well entrenched, the reemergence of René Préval and Leonel Fernández as presidents of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, respectively, gives some cause for hope for an improved bilateral relationship and for renewed attention to cross-border migration.

Documented and undocumented Haitians (including Dominican citizens of Haitian extraction) constitute some 15 percent of the 9 million residents of the

Dominican Republic. Most are unskilled migrants who have taken jobs shunned by Dominicans, who (ironically) also migrate in large numbers to occupy lower-end jobs in the more developed economies of the United States, Puerto Rico, and Spain. While Haitian migrants have traditionally been employed in the sugar industry, comprising up to 90 percent of laborers, they are in high demand in the manufacturing, construction, and service sectors, as well as in the coffee and rice harvests.

In addition to being an economic issue, migration is increasingly becoming a human rights concern. The push-pull factors of poverty and employment encourage the creation of an illegal labor market, resulting in increased demand for human smuggling services at the border and the persistent undocumented state of migrants. The undocumented status of most migrants and many of the estimated 280,000 "Dominico-Haitians" (born in the Dominican Republic to at least one Haitian parent) continues to feed a chronic cycle of deportation and illegal reentry that often tests the observance of human rights.

High unemployment rates in the Dominican Republic (at 17 percent) and a historical resentment of Haitians have similarly exacerbated tensions. The Dominican

response to migration has long been conditioned by the anti-Haitian policies of the Rafael Leónidas Trujillo dictatorship (1930–1961) and by the nationalist, semiauthoritarian governments of his protégé, Joaquín Balaguer—whose last term ended only a decade ago. Haitians have met strident discrimination, along both racial and cultural lines, sometimes leading to violence. Permanent and semipermanent Haitian communities continue to be collectively denied entrance into Dominican culture. A ruling of the Dominican Supreme Court in December 2005 to qualify persons born within Dominican territory to illegal foreigners as “persons in transit” under Migration Law 285-04, thereby barring most of the Haitian population born in the country from citizenship, underscores the enduring sour tone toward Haitians.

Remittances are a vital lifeline for the economies of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, further complicating the migration issue and the bilateral relationship. The total inflow of remittances by Haitians abroad (including those across the border from the Dominican Republic) reaches over a billion dollars yearly and represents 28 percent of Haiti’s GDP, outstripping all official development assistance. Migration offers the Haitian state relief from the pressure of providing employment and services to its impoverished population.

In contrast, migration from Haiti puts further pressure on the Dominican economy. Itself a developing country beset by its own challenges, the Dominican Republic lacks the economic capacity and the infrastructure needed to absorb a long-term presence of Haitian migrants. In particular, as it is still recovering from a banking crisis in 2003 that shriveled the national GDP by nearly 20 percent. At present, 42 percent of Dominicans live in poverty and 12 percent have migrated. The Dominican Republic receives the sixth-largest amount of remittances in the region (almost 3 billion dollars annually).

Préval’s visit to the Dominican Republic in early March of this year, his first international trip as president-elect, signaled urgency in restoring neighborly relations. It also forecasted hope in addressing the migration issue, with good reason to believe that the migration conflict in Hispaniola could finally be on a serious path toward progress. Préval and Fernández’s familiarity with the longstanding

realities of Hispaniola and the joint progress achieved during their first shared time as president of their respective countries (1996-2000), provide a foundation to build on.

Fernández’s landmark visit to Haiti in June of 1998 (the first visit by a Dominican president in 70 years) yielded an important “Protocol of Understanding” agreement with the Préval administration that set up regulations for the repatriation of migrants. The Protocol, an unprecedented bilateral accord between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, addressed the issue of the human rights of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. It is expected that Préval and Fernández will refine the Protocol to afford deportees due process in contesting deportations and to develop additional mechanisms through which the 10,000–30,000 Haitian migrants that are deported annually can exit the country with their property and with their earned wages.

Based on the potential of economic improvement during Préval’s term, there is a greater hope that job creation and improved social services could help to slow down migration. His first administration—the only in Haitian history to complete a presidential term—lowered unemployment rates and achieved modest GDP growth through a series of privatization reforms and structural adjustments. Likewise, there is hope that Préval can duplicate his previous efforts to provide more Haitians with identification cards, as required by Dominican authorities to issue a valid residence permit, a birth certificate, or citizenship. This would also strengthen border security.

The current political climate in Hispaniola is also reason for guarded optimism. Préval’s support both in the Senate and in the lower house opens the door to a coalition government and to averting political deadlock. Similarly promising is the proposal of Article 151 by the Fernández administration to the Migration Law 285-04. If approved when Congress resumes session in August, it would introduce a regularization plan for illegal foreigners who reside in the Dominican Republic,

The challenges remain large for Hispaniola. Unemployment has not subsided in either country since Préval and Fernández’s first shared time as president and neither has a fervent anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic. Current modes of deportation, such as arbitrary daily expulsions or

massive roundups (that often coincide with the end of the seasonal sugar cycle), have proved futile and will need to be replaced by a cooperative security bilateral policy that follows a more humane process for the exit and reentry of migrants. For now, however, bilateral relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic appear to be headed in a more positive direction, providing hope for progress on the vexing migration issue.

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