

Background- Dominican Republic¹

The Dominican Republic occupies the western half of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, while Haiti occupies the eastern half. As a result, much of the Dominican Republic's history is intertwined with that of its poorer neighbor. It has a deeply hostile relationship with Haiti, including recent efforts to denationalize and deport Dominican-born ethnic Haitians.

Tensions between Dominicans and Haitians date back to the colonial era. Christopher Columbus reached Hispaniola during his first voyage in 1492 and the Spanish enslaved the native Taino to work in the mines. However, the Spanish largely abandoned the area after the Taino died from abuse and disease and the Spanish found more lucrative colonies in mainland South America. In the late 1600s, the French moved into Hispaniola's western third where they established sugar cane plantations worked by African slaves. French Hispaniola developed a large, predominantly Black population while Spanish Hispaniola developed a small, predominantly mixed race population. In the 1790s, the slaves in French Hispaniola rebelled, ultimately winning their independence from France in 1804, forming the country now called Haiti. In 1821, Spanish Hispaniola declared its own independence from Spain, forming the country now called the Dominican Republic. However, the Haitian army quickly swept in, occupying the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1842. This shared history caused Dominicans to develop both a strong sense of racial superiority and a deep resentment towards Haitians.

After the Dominican Republic forced the last of the Haitians out in 1844, it was ruled by a series of caudillos (military dictators), whose mismanagement and corruption led to the country's occupation by both Spain and the United States. Pedro Santana attempted to return the Dominican Republic to Spain in exchange for being named its governor-general, forcing the country to fight off a Spanish occupation from 1861-1865. Buenaventura Báez attempted to make the country a U.S. protectorate but the U.S. Senate rejected the deal by one vote. Ulises Heureaux built the Dominican Republic's infrastructure and economy but also murdered his enemies and massively indebted the country to U.S. businesses. After Heureaux's assassination in 1899, the country plunged into chaos and the U.S. first took over the Dominican Republic's customs in 1905, then occupied the entire country from 1916 to 1924. The U.S. pushed reforms benefiting U.S. sugar companies, built infrastructure, organized a modern military, and established democratic elections. However, the newly elected president quickly proved incompetent and corrupt and he was quickly overthrown by the newly organized military, under the leadership of General Rafael Trujillo.

From 1930 to 1961, Rafael Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic, either as president or as the puppet master controlling the nominal president. Trujillo created a functioning economy that attracted investment from the U.S. and other countries but he also appropriated as much as three-fifths of the country's gross domestic product for himself. Worse, he tortured and murdered political opponents and, in October of 1937, ordered the massacre of thousands of ethnic Haitians. Ethnically Haitian Dominicans had long lived in areas along the Haitian-Dominican

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border and, throughout the 1900s, increasing numbers of Haitians immigrated to the Dominican Republic seeking work. Unhappy with this situation, Trujillo sent his soldiers to sweep through ethnically Haitian communities, hacking victims to death with machetes, dashing children against rocks, and forcing over a thousand people into the sea to drown.² The massacre provoked international outcry, with one U.S. magazine describing Trujillo as a “miniature Hitler” and a U.S. Congressman describing the murders as “the most outrageous atrocity that has ever been perpetrated on the American continent.”³ Trujillo responded with a full page ad in the New York Times claiming that Dominican farmers had spontaneously risen up to defend themselves against Haitian squatters.⁴ Dominican officials were confident that the still-segregated U.S. would understand their need to protect themselves from Haitian “bandits” and preserve Dominican racial superiority.⁵ Finally, in 1960, Trujillo crossed a line the international community would not tolerate when he ordered an assassination attempt on Venezuelan president Rómulo Betancourt. The Organization of American States imposed economic sanctions and the U.S. abandoned its embassy in the Dominican Republic, deliberately leaving behind three M1 carbines for use in a Dominican conspiracy to assassinate Trujillo. On May 30, 1961, the conspirators ran Trujillo off the road as he drove to visit his mistress and then shot him to death with machine guns.⁶

Although the Dominican Republic has remained a democracy since the 1960s, Trujillo’s legacy of political repression and violence still lingers. Following Trujillo’s assassination, voters elected a leftist president but, fearing that the Dominican Republic would become a communist country like Cuba, the U.S. forced him out, occupied the country from 1965 to 1966, and helped former Trujillo puppet-president Joaquín Balaguer return to the presidency in 1966. Voters replaced Balaguer with a leftist candidate in 1978 but returned him to power in 1986, after an economic downturn and government corruption culminated in food riots. However, like Trujillo before him, Balaguer tortured and murdered his political opponents. Journalist Narciso González Medina disappeared after he wrote an article accusing Balaguer of using fraud to win reelection in 1994, leaving behind only reports of witnesses that they had seen González Medina covered in blood at government detention sites.⁷ Despite Balaguer’s violent attempts to repress opposition, the continuing accusations of election fraud forced him to leave office in 1996. Since 1996, the presidency has changed hands democratically but repression and violence continue. Press groups

² Eric Paul Roorda, *Genocide Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy, the Trujillo Regime, and the Haitian Massacre of 1937*, 20 *DIPLOMATIC HISTORY* 301–319 (1996), <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article/20/3/301/427367/Genocide-Next-Door-The-Good-Neighbor-Policy-the>,

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ ‘I Shot the Cruellest Dictator in the Americas’, BBC (May 28, 2011), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-13560512>; Kirk Semple, *Antonio Imbert Barrera, Who Helped Assassinate Dominican Dictator Trujillo, Dies at 95*, N.Y. TIMES, (June 7, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/08/world/americas/antonio-imbert-barrera-who-helped-assassinate-dominican-dictator-trujillo-dies-at-95.html? r=0>.

⁷ *González Medina and Family v. Dominican Republic*, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 240 (Feb. 27, 2012), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/gonz%C3%A1lez-medina-and-family-v-dominican-republic>.

reported lawsuits and physical attacks against journalists who criticized the government.⁸ Human rights groups said that police no longer arrested political prisoners but continued to brutalize suspected criminals, extrajudicially killing over 180 people in 2016, arbitrarily arresting hundreds of residents of low income neighborhoods, and extracting confessions by beating detainees with objects and suffocating them with plastic bags.⁹

However, the Dominican Republic's largest human rights problem by far is continued racism against ethnic Haitians, including increasingly violent efforts to prevent Haitian immigration and to expel both Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent. In 2000, soldiers on border patrol engaged in a car chase with a truck carrying thirty would-be illegal immigrants from Haiti. The soldiers shot at the truck with machine guns, rammed into the truck to run it off the road, and then shot at the crash survivors as they fled on foot, ultimately killing seven people.¹⁰ Since the early 1990s, Dominican soldiers have deported thousands of ethnic Haitians at gunpoint, without money, food, water, possessions, or even the opportunity to prove that they are, in many cases, Dominican citizens.¹¹ Simultaneously, government officials refused to register the births of ethnically Haitian children born in the Dominican Republic, preventing them from enrolling in school and denying them their Constitutional right to Dominican citizenship.¹² When ethnic Haitians took their claims to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the Dominican Republic was defiant and, in 2013, a Dominican court retroactively revoked the Constitutional provision providing birth right citizenship, effectively stripping Dominican citizenship from over 130,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent.¹³ Following international outcry, the Dominican Republic established a program to naturalize ethnic Haitians' status but few succeeded in naturalizing.¹⁴ Ethnic Dominicans engaged in escalating threats and violence against ethnic Haitians, including hacking at least one Haitian man to death with a machete.¹⁵ Fearing mass deportations and a repeat of the 1937 massacre, many ethnic Haitians fled across the border to Haiti. Today, thousands of Dominican-born ethnic Haitians live in cardboard and cloth shanty towns just inside the Haitian border.¹⁶

More information

⁸ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016: Dominican Republic*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE (2016), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=265582>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Nadege Dorzema et al. v. Dominican Republic*, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 251 (Oct. 24, 2012), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/nadege-dorzema-et-al-v-dominican-republic>.

¹¹ *Expelled Dominicans and Haitians v. Dominican Republic*, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 282 (Aug. 28, 2014), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/case-expelled-dominicans-and-haitians-v-dominican-republic>.

¹² *Girls Yean and Bosico v. Dominican Republic*, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 130 (Sept. 8, 2005), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/girls-yeen-and-bosico-v-dom-rep>.

¹³ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016: Dominican Republic*, *supra* note 8.

¹⁴ Jonathan M. Katz, *In Exile*, N.Y. TIMES MAGAZINE (Jan. 13, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/magazine/haitians-in-exile-in-the-dominican-republic.html>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*; Lindsay Fendt, *'I Came Here with Nothing': Life in Limbo for Unwilling Migrants on Haiti's Border*, THE GUARDIAN (May 12, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/12/haiti-dominican-republic-migrants-makeshift-camp>.

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) and [BBC Country Profiles](#).

For an overview of the current human rights situation, see the [U.S. Department of State's 2016 Human Rights Report](#).

For information about human rights, including all relevant treaties and legal documents, see [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).