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Obama and Dominicans

By Silvio Torres-Saillant (November 19, 2012)

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The re-election of President Barack Obama for a second term arguably means more for Dominicans politically and socially than for most other Latino subgroups. As an African-descended and mixed-race individual, the president looks like someone one might encounter at the end of a meeting walking out of the Club Juan Pablo Duarte in Manhattan's Washington Heights.

This resemblance did not escape the malicious genius of some Obama opponent in Puerto Rico back in 2008 when he and Hilary Clinton competed for their party's nomination. A poster circulated on the Internet showed a photo-shopped image of Obama wearing a *guayabera*, and an inscription at the bottom of the picture read: "Do you really want a Dominican to govern you?"

Pedro Rivera, a young Dominican historian at the time completing a doctorate at Howard University, forwarded the poster to me with an eloquently laconic comment: "insulting but funny." The insult obviously refers to the stigmatizing of things Dominican, a phenomenon that many prominent men and women of letters from Puerto Rico have for years openly critiqued, including Yolanda Martínez San Miguel, Jorge Duany, César Rey, and Luis Rafael Sánchez. But who can deny the funny part? The doctored photograph made the President look like a man who could any Saturday afternoon be holding a *Presidente* beer outside a *colmadón* in a Santo Domingo barrio.

Inheriting a disastrous economy from his Republican predecessor, the President in his first term faced an inimical Congress that refused to support measures that they feared might earn him brownie points with the population. No president in American history suffered greater indignity while in office. He stoically swallowed Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* cartoon editorial depicting him as an ape, disrespectful jokes about his mother, a shouting congressman calling him a liar in the midst of his State of the Union address, offensive characterizations of First Lady Michelle Obama, and countless Negrophobic slurs.

During the reelection campaign, US politics plummeted to the slimy pit of vulgarity and deception. Voter suppression sponsored by the Bradley Foundation and other influential organizations targeted districts suspected of sympathy for Obama. Retrograde conservative sectors repeatedly questioned the President's Americanness or patriotism. The Tea Party and Fox Television led the way. So did vociferous pundits of the sort of Donald Trump, Dinesh D'Souza, Rush Limbaugh, and Ann Coulter. The defamation notwithstanding, voters chose to bring President Obama back to the White House for four more years, suggesting that retrogressive ideologues do not have the ear of the population. They cannot stop the country's socially transformative momentum.

As the country's political culture changes, its democratic ethos growing to fit in the diverse visage of the population, Dominicans win. They can achieve belonging less stressfully. They can see the space they inhabit becoming hospitable to their presence and the influence of their collective voice *vis-à-vis* the white mainstream as well as other minority groups.

Before Obama's reelection, some auspicious signs of legitimate belonging in the public sphere had appeared. Suffice it to mention the contest over New York's 13th congressional district in June 2012. Adriano Espaillat, a state senator of Dominican ancestry, gave a fright to U.S. Representative Charles Rangel, an incumbent who had hardly ever had to campaign during his forty-two years in power. Congressman Rangel realized that this time he could not rest on the laurels of his long career. He campaigned vigorously, even adding such "Dominican" or "Hispanic" issues to his platform as immigrant advocacy, breaking with the record that in 1992 found him as a cosignatory of a bill that, if passed, would have denied US citizenship to the US-born children of undocumented parents.

He had the backing of Mayor Bloomberg and the upper echelons of the Democratic machine-including its Latino subsection. He may even have benefitted from convenient irregularities at the New York City Board of Election.

The incumbent defeated his Dominican-American contender but with a margin of less than a thousand votes. Some speculate that the minuscule margin may have soured the taste of the incumbent's victory, leading to resentment. Otherwise, they could not understand why the Congressman would prevail upon the Capitol Hill Visitor Center staff to revoke a previously granted permission allowing the Dominican American National Roundtable the use of the Congressional Auditorium this year on July 27th for the screening of *The Dominican List*, a film celebrating Dominican accomplishments. Be that as it may, the small margin that allowed the incumbent to remain at the helm of the 13th congressional district suggests that voters in New York now regard Dominicans as legitimate inhabitants of the political space.

Dominicans are beneficiaries of the Obama victory in another way, in what it does for increasing the degree of integration of quasi-segregated Latino political spaces in the country's geography. Take, for instance, the state of Florida, a region long perceived as off limits to Latinos who were not phenotypically white and ideologically ultra-conservative. Rabidly anti-Communist Cuban-American state legislators, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, and his brother Mario Diaz-Balart enjoyed enormous credibility with the Republican Party as brokers of the Latino vote. They benefitted from the backing of the White House during the presidency of Bush father. They retained that high-level support with the ascent of Jeb Bush to the governorship of Florida and that of his brother George W. to the White House. The power of their backing in the White House and Capitol Hill enabled Ros-Lehtinen and the Diaz-Balart brothers to create a rigid ideological climate that effectively stifled liberal and progressive Latino voices in the state.

The illusion that they could deliver Florida to the Republican Party invested them with incontestable authority. In the eyes of the conservative machine they could do no wrong. They could get away with murder. So, they actually did, literally.

Witness their unconditional and highly publicized backing of murderer Valentín Hernández and convicted terrorist Orlando Bosch. While the United States had pledged to fight terrorism, the state of Florida offered asylum to mass murderers.

The Cuban American legislators justified the crimes because they targeted Cuban society or people who sympathized with the Cuban revolutionary government. They endangered the credibility of the United States as a champion against terrorism. Republicans in Washington must have seen the moral contradiction as the price they had to pay to retain the control of Florida.

However, in 2008 Obama carried Florida, including the Latino portion of the state electorate. Obama prevailed in the state again in 2012 both among Latinos and voters overall. The Ros-Lehtinen and Diaz-Balart confederacy has shown itself incapable of delivering neither the Florida electorate nor its Latino portion. Most devastatingly still, they have shown they cannot even fully deliver the Cuban vote. Witness the triumph in the 26th congressional district of José García, the first Cuban-American Representative to win in Florida as a Democrat. Garcia unseated none other than incumbent David Rivera, who fiercely opposed any initiative aiming to improve US-Cuban dialogue and who boasted the enthusiastic support of Ros-Lehtinen as well as that of Senator Marco Rubio.

Now that the mirage has cleared again, the Republican leadership in Washington will have to realize how little return their investment in the ideological aberrations of Florida's tropical conservatism has yielded and will have to think twice about sustaining such an infertile and costly relationship. As the extreme right and phenotypically white power structure loses its tight grip on Florida's Latino politics, Dominicans and other Latinos will be able to join moderate and liberal Cubans, to help bring to the fore the diverse visage that has long existed but has long been silenced in the state.

Dominicans have much to celebrate on the occasion of Obama's reelection. With their rise in visibility in the political spectrum of New York and the apparent defeat of stifling conservatism in Florida, they can now look forward to an ideologically and racially diversified Latino space. Similarly, they can relish the verification of a national electorate that, in spite of powerful efforts to delegitimize the President, has shown it has no problem with giving a vote of confidence to a commander-in-chief who looks like a Dominican. Perhaps now more than ever before, Dominicans have reason to feel that they belong in this country no less than anybody else.

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