Socialism and Democracy
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713727607

Joaquín balaguer and contemporary dominican politics and society
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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2005

To cite this Article Betances, Emelio(2005)'Joaquin balaguer and contemporary dominican politics and society',Socialism and Democracy,19:1,33 — 47
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/0885430042000338417
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0885430042000338417

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Introduction

The death of Joaquín Balaguer on July 14, 2002 took many Dominicans by surprise despite the fact that he was 95. Many Dominicans thought that Balaguer had challenged the laws of nature “successfully.” Balaguer had been active in Dominican politics since the 1920s. He worked as a collaborator of Rafael Trujillo for thirty-one years and served as President of the Republic seven times. In the years when he was not president, he managed to occupy a center-stage position in Dominican politics as a broker whom politicians had to take into account. Presidents and politicians visited his house regularly to consult with him.

Balaguer was involved in Dominican politics until the day he died. In fact, he was actively engaged in the debate that led up to the recent revision of the Constitution of the Republic. The leadership of his Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC) had requested the National Congress to stop the debates until his health improved. On the eve of his death, he was still leading the drive for a constitutional amendment to permit re-election of the President—a measure that was passed soon thereafter.

Balaguer was undoubtedly one of the most important figures in Dominican political life during the twentieth century. We can place him next to Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the country from 1930 to 1961, next to Juan Bosch who became his nemesis in Dominican politics for the last forty years, or to José Francisco Peña Gómez, who never reached the presidency but who led the largest political party in the nation’s history and also distinguished himself as the most prominent black politician in Latin America. Unlike Bosch or Peña Gómez, however, Balaguer was always either close to power or in power. In his memoir he recalls how Trujillo asked him, in 1930, to join in the electoral campaign (Balaguer, 1989: 64). Balaguer accepted Trujillo’s request and became his speechwriter. Balaguer was on the government
payroll for the entire period of the dictatorship, occupying, among many posts, the positions of ambassador, secretary of education, foreign relations, secretary general of the presidency, and President of the Republic (Rodríguez de León, 1996). In fact, he was occupying that very position when Trujillo was assassinated in 1961.

In this article I propose to demythologize Balaguer by placing his political career in the context of Dominican society past and present. Was he the magician of Dominican politics, or was his career a product of the profound social and political crisis that resulted from the collapse of the Trujillo dictatorship and the subsequent U.S. military intervention of 1965? Was he really the father of Dominican democracy, as politicians and publicists claim, or was he an authoritarian modernizer who did not care much for democratic governance?

General conceptual framework

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx (1998:15) wrote:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Like Louis Bonaparte in France, Balaguer was the product of a concrete historical period and, as such, could not escape his own historical reality. He grew up in a society and culture that was basically authoritarian, where dictators served as models for politicians and the citizenry in general. In this sense, the Dominican Republic mirrors the larger reality of Latin America. The authoritarian tradition weighs heavily on Balaguer and any other Dominican politician. Dominican history is rich in an authoritarian culture that permeates the fabric of society and whose grip no one can escape.

As a leader and ruler, Balaguer emerged in special social and historical circumstances. The country went through the collapse of the Trujillo dictatorship, a civil war, and a foreign military occupation. The local oligarchy and bourgeoisie were unable to fill the political vacuum, and, with U.S. support, Balaguer became the undisputed authoritarian ruler. Marx called this phenomenon Bonapartism while Antonio Gramsci referred to it as Caesarism. Hal Draper (1997: 398–409) summarizes the concept as follows:

1. In order to preserve the bourgeoisie’s social power, its political order must be broken.
2. The state moves toward autonomization insofar as an unresolved class struggle balances the power of the contending classes against each other.

3. The state moves toward autonomization insofar as there is no other alternative to prevent society from shaking itself apart in internecine conflict without issue.

4. The autonomized state provides the conditions for the necessary modernization of society when no extant class is capable of carrying out this imperative under its political power.

When applied to Latin America and the Caribbean, the concept of Bonapartism needs to be modified to explain the complexity of populist coalitions. Perhaps the most important additional factor is U.S. imperialism, which plays a determining role in Latin America, whether supporting or opposing any given political project. We should keep this factor in mind as we examine the circumstances that produce populist coalitions. Historical circumstances of Latin America are obviously different from those of France in 1848, but it is still the case that the crisis of the oligarchic/bourgeois regime demands a series of compromises within the dominant class in order to protect the broader interests of the political and economic system. This is the crux of Marx’s analysis of Louis Bonaparte. All dominant groupings are forced to recognize that the executive power of the state needs to be strengthened. They are basically forced to accept legislation that does not always favor the interests of particular sectors of the landed oligarchy or the industrial bourgeoisie. However, the expanded executive does implement measures that favor the general interests of capitalism. The restoration of authoritarian regimes through Bonapartist or Caesarist methods inhibits the development of liberal democracy. Bonapartist rule develops hegemony over and above the dominant classes. This was the case in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina,¹ and also in the Dominican Republic, where Balaguer behaved as leader who claimed to be above class interests.

1. Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas (elected in 1934) launched a huge program to modernize Mexico via a corporatist system that included the popular classes in a political alliance with the industrial bourgeoisie. Similarly, in Argentina Juan Domingo Perón was elected president in 1945 after he proposed an inclusive program that sought modernize Argentina. Getulio Vargas led Brazil’s so-called liberating revolution in 1930 and sought to build a new modern state. In all three cases, there was a significant attempt to launch progressive nationalist economic policies. In contrast to these leaders, Balaguer, as we shall see, was a right-wing populist.
Balaguer, Trujillo, and the Catholic Church

How do we explain the emergence and development of authoritarianism in Latin America and the Caribbean? Is it intrinsic in the culture Latin America inherited from Spain, Portugal, and the Roman Catholic Church, or is it a historical product of weakly structured and fragmented societies? I argue that while culture does play an important role in shaping political behavior and orientation, social and economic structures frame the circumstances in which individuals carry out their lives. Twentieth-century Latin American and Caribbean societies were led by tiny elites who generally felt more comfortable with Europeans or North Americans than with their own people. To protect their way of life they relied on the military and the police to control the population and to assure that their profits were not jeopardized by popular uprisings. These circumstances favored the emergence of authoritarian rulers. Such rulers brought a degree of cohesion to society that tended to restore the confidence of the elite.

The elite and the authoritarian rulers themselves needed intermediaries between themselves and the people, but also between the nation and the exterior. This is where the role of intellectuals comes in. Let us recall that Trujillo learned that Balaguer was a good speaker and a poet. He brought Balaguer, the intellectual, to his entourage as someone who could bridge the gap between himself, a rising dictator, and the population. Trujillo built on the Latin American and Dominican tradition of using intellectuals, poets in particular, to give a cultural veneer to the relationship between rulers and ruled. He surrounded himself with the best intellectuals of the country. He called on these intellectuals to rewrite the history of the nation and to advise him on economic, political, social, and cultural matters. As elsewhere in Latin America, intellectuals played a key role representing the nation or Trujillo as ambassadors. Balaguer is an exemplary case of what Antonio Gramsci called an “organic intellectual.” However, rather than an organic intellectual who served the working class, Balaguer served Trujillo and his political establishment. In his own words, he was “a courtesan of the Era of Trujillo” (Balaguer, 1989).

The Catholic Church, along with the intellectual establishment, was used to consolidate a pseudo-nationalist ideology that justified Trujillo’s rule over the country. Trujillo was thus presented as the end of chaos and the establishment of order. The Catholic Church legitimated the regime and, in turn, received huge financial resources
to carry out its evangelizing mission. Finally, Trujillo secured the support of the business elite who, unable to compete with the dictator, had to submit to his wishes. In short, the military, the intellectuals, the clergymen, and the business elite became the key factors of power that sustained the dictatorship.

Balaguer distinguished himself among the intellectuals not because he was a fine writer and the smartest among them, but because he always gave the impression that he was not interested in material things and did not show any ambition for power. Trujillo knew that all his collaborators loved money, but Balaguer was different. Balaguer was apparently only concerned with his books. In addition, Balaguer was a blood relative of Trujillo’s wife at the time (Bienvenida Ricardo de Trujillo); this was a crucial way to establish trust in Latin America, particularly in the Dominican Republic. This relationship certainly paved the way for Balaguer to be accepted as a member of Trujillo’s inner circle. On occasion Trujillo would complain about Balaguer’s artistic interests, such as when, upon his arrival from Spain in 1935, he gave a talk at an elite club on “Seville, the City of Grace.” The Minister of Education, Ramón Emilio Jiménez, received a letter from Trujillo complaining that one of his cabinet members had spent his time talking about Seville and other unimportant things, rather than praising the great achievements of the government (Balaguer, 1989: 75).

In general, Balaguer remained in the shadow of the dictator, never uttering a word that could create political friction. Trujillo trusted him when dealing with sensitive political issues such as the 1937 massacre that cost the lives of 5,000–10,000 Haitians. Balaguer represented the dictator in the negotiations that settled this thorny international

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2. There are at least two broad interpretations of why Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitian peasants. One view is that Trujillo’s motivation was racist. Accordingly, he drew on the history of political animosities between the two countries dating back to atrocities committed by Haitian soldiers in the invasions of 1801 and 1805, and the wars that followed the Haitian occupation of the Dominican Republic (1822–1844). Trujillo was settling old accounts with Haitians. The other interpretation suggests that while there may have been racial factors, the key issue was Trujillo’s need to control the national territory. During the first fifteen years of his regime (1930–1945), Trujillo implemented programs to exert political, economic, social and cultural control over the border region. Many Haitian peasants had been established on the Dominican side of the border prior to Trujillo’s regime, and their trade reached as far as Santiago (in the center of the Dominican Republic). Trujillo feared that the border region could be used as a base for guerrilla warfare. The massacre was aimed at controlling the national territory and the population within it. The secretive nature of the massacre makes it difficult for contemporary historians to establish a precise figure for the number of people killed.
issue (Vega, 1988; Cuello, 1985). He was Minister of Foreign Relations when the regime negotiated a concordat with the Vatican in 1954. This concordat framed church–state relations, recognizing the Catholic religion as the official religion of the nation. The state also took up the responsibility of providing financial resources to the Catholic Church. This concordat is still binding today despite the existence of other religions in Dominican society.

The level of Trujillo’s confidence in Balaguer reached a peak when Héctor B. Trujillo, the dictator’s brother, resigned from the presidency in 1960. Trujillo basically appointed Balaguer President of the Republic, an act sanctioned by the National Congress on August 3, 1960. The dictatorship was crumbling, and Trujillo faced overwhelming political problems both internationally and domestically. At the international level, the failed attempt by Trujillo’s secret agents to kill Rómulo Betancourt, President of Venezuela (who gave sanctuary to Dominican exiles), led to diplomatic sanctions from the Organization of American States and the consequent isolation of the country. At the national level, discontent was high among politically active people following the massacre of a guerrilla force that tried to land in the country on June 14, 1959. The Catholic Church became a critic of the regime after publishing a pastoral letter in January 21, 1960, in which the hierarchy promised special prayers that “none of the relatives of the Authority would ever experience, in their existence, the sufferings that now afflict the hearts of so many parents, children, so many mothers and Dominican wives” (Conferencia del Episcopado Dominicano, 1955–1990: 43). This letter marked a turning point in church–state relations. The regime pressed on with negative press coverage, profanation of temples, arrests of seminarians, deportation of priests, and harassment of two foreign bishops. In the midst of the crisis the regime promoted the idea of a plebiscite asking the Church to award Trujillo the title of Benefactor of the Church. What is interesting about this episode is that Balaguer played a key role mediating between the Church’s hierarchy and Trujillo. He served as intermediary between Lino Zanini, the nuncio, and Trujillo (Sáez, 1999: 14ff; Vega, 1999: 94ff), which shows that the dictator trusted Balaguer to the very end of his life. Ramfis Trujillo, the dictator’s son, also trusted Balaguer and was willing to share power with him following the dictator’s assassination in May 30, 1961. In fact, Balaguer was chosen by the family to deliver Trujillo’s eulogy, in which he once again demonstrated his allegiance to the regime. His identification with one of the cruelest dictatorships in Latin America and the Caribbean could not go any further.
The aftermath of Trujillo and the Civil War

Balaguer began to look out for his own political interest after Trujillo exited the political scene. He skillfully negotiated with the United States for the departure of Ramfis and Trujillo’s brothers, who wanted to stay in power and rule the country. The United States made a show of military force to pressure the brothers to leave the country. Balaguer wanted to remain in power, but he too was forced to accept the creation of a provisional government called the Council of State, over which he presided. Balaguer wanted to run politics his way in the Council of State and allied himself with political groupings in the Armed Forces to overthrow the government. This political strategy failed and he had to take refuge in the Nuncio’s residence. Later on, he received safe passage to leave the country. The Council of State was reorganized without him to prepare for the election of 1962. Juan Bosch, a writer who lived in exile for over twenty-four years, ran as candidate of the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) and won the elections by a landslide.

Bosch’s democratic platform was never accepted by the local elite, who were incapable of producing a national leader. They tried unsuccessfully to portray Bosch as a communist. They did, however, make life difficult for Bosch once he was in office. They allied themselves with anti-communist groups within the military and the Church to mount a campaign that culminated with a coup d’état against Bosch on September 25, 1963 (Bosch, 1964). The regime that replaced Bosch, the so-called Triumvirate, was only able to remain in power by allowing widespread corruption in all the spheres of public administration. Again, the local socio-economic elite demonstrated that it was incapable of running an effective government. This provided the occasion for the political opposition led by PRD to organize a coup against the Triumvirate and its leader Donald Reid Cabral. The PRD did not enjoy the support of all branches of the Armed Forces, but it did have sufficient clout among the young officer corps to overthrow Reid Cabral on April 24, 1965. José Francisco Peña Gómez, spokesperson for the PRD, went on the radio to call party sympathizers to the streets to celebrate the coup. While this was happening, the military was split between two groups: the loyalists who supported the status quo, and the Constitutionalists who wanted to restore the Constitution of 1963 and Bosch to the presidency. On April 28, 1965, the U.S. government sent its Marines to crush the uprising claiming that communists controlled it. In a short period of time, the United States landed over 23,000 soldiers in the country.
The Dominican Civil War turned into a war of resistance against the U.S. Marines. The United States received support from the Organization of American States (OAS) to lead the occupying force and to negotiate a peace settlement. A settlement was reached in August 1965, and a provisional government was created. It was the responsibility of this government to organize free elections while U.S.-led forces occupied the country. The elections were held in 1966. Balaguer ran for the Partido Reformista (PR) against Juan Bosch for the PRD. Balaguer won by a landslide and shortly thereafter became the constitutional president, ruling for the next twelve years (1966–1978). He again was elected in 1986 due to political divisions within the PRD-led government and was re-elected in 1990 for similar reasons (Gleijeses, 1978; Jimenes, 1977).

The rise of the populist ruler and modernizer

What is peculiar about Balaguer is that while he emerged out of political crises like other nationalist and populist leaders, such as Lázaro Cárdenas, Juan D. Perón, and Getulio Vargas, he did not have a progressive nationalist agenda. Like these leaders, Balaguer promoted import substitute industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, but unlike them, his project did not include the working, middle, and peasant classes. Balaguer’s project was limited to the different fractions of the socio-economic elite, the military, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In short, Balaguer was a right-wing populist who wanted to impose a passive, but modernizing capitalist revolution from above.

Balaguer was the man the Dominican oligarchy and the United States needed to lead the country out of the crisis created by the demise of Trujillo. He was a statesman with a detailed knowledge of the functioning of Dominican politics. He was the leader of the Reformist Party (an organization descended from Trujillo’s Dominican Party), and he had political connections in the military and the government bureaucracy. Finally, his service under Trujillo guaranteed his anti-communism, which pleased the United States, the local elite, and the Catholic Church.

Balaguer continued to enforce the policies left in place by the U.S.-backed provisional government. As a Bonapartist ruler, proceeded to impose a semi-dictatorship to protect the material interests of the modernizing groupings of the dominant elite. In the context of the Cold War, he received U.S. economic and political support to carry out these goals. He expanded and strengthened the power of the
executive, a key feature of the Bonapartist regime, to implement economic policies that promoted a modern middle class and a strong bourgeoisie despite the opposition of the more backward groupings within the Dominican landed oligarchy. In a speech to the National Development Commission (CND), a consulting body to the president composed of business leaders and prominent citizens, he said:

What is special about this organism [the CND] is that it embodies representatives of all interests: banking, commerce, agriculture, cattle, etc., i.e., the so-called oligarchy, as well as the working class and those organisms dedicated to humanitarian enterprises or purely social activities. The National Government thus has the opportunity to learn what they think about the basic problems related to our development and seriously to balance their points of view. What is important is that the government attends this open debate as a simple spectator and...reserves the sovereign right to make a decision at the opportune moment without any kind of coercion or extraneous interference. (Balaguer, 1988)

Both the dominant and the dominated classes were subordinated to Balaguer as a broker in the political decision-making process. The executive thus developed as an entity which claimed to be above social classes and factions of classes, and in this sense, Balaguer’s persona took the place of political parties. The dominant classes had to entrust their interests to him, as he claimed to represent the “interest of the whole society” (Cassá, 1986, Lozano, 1985). In this sense Balaguer compares well with Perón, Cárdenas, and Vargas, who conceived the populist state as an institution above class divisions and social struggles. On the other hand, Balaguer’s brand of populism contrasted sharply with Latin American nationalist and progressive populism because the political alliance that brought him to power depended on the United States. The United States was an opposing rather than a supporting factor in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil.

National social and historical circumstances prepared the conditions for Balaguer to emerge as a strong right-wing populist ruler, but his success depended largely on the presence of the United States in Dominican politics. U.S. economic assistance reached $133 million every year from 1967 to 1969, most of it in the form of donations and long-term loans administered by the Agency for International Development (AID). Although such assistance declined from 1969 to 1973, on average it still amounted to $78 million per year (Moya Pons, 1992: 542ff). It remained essential to Balaguer’s survival during his three terms in office. It gave him a degree of freedom in relation to the traditional Dominican economic elite and made him the key
intermediary between the United States, the national elite, and the Dominican people.

Rising international market prices for Dominican export products was another factor that contributed significantly to Balaguer’s success at restoring the authoritarian state. These products included sugar, cacao, coffee, and minerals. Sugar sold at record prices ($0.61/lb.) in the early 1970s. The rise in market prices helped Balaguer to pay for the rise in oil prices without affecting his economic and social policies. These programs included an aggressive economic policy to promote import substitution industrialization, the construction industry, and a moderate agrarian reform. Balaguer used the agrarian reform as a tool to penetrate the countryside and demonstrate to the peasantry that he was on their side. He traveled in a government-owned helicopter deep into the country to inaugurate small and big public projects, such as schools, roads, hydroelectric dams, Catholic churches, hospitals, and projects of the Organización para el Desarrollo de la Comunidad (ODC, Office for Community Development). Using public resources, Balaguer built a constituency in the countryside unlike any other political party and, as a result, he received support from the peasants through the 1960s, and 1980s. Unlike the inhabitants of Santo Domingo, who experienced the Revolution of 1965 and were aware of political events following the overthrow of Trujillo, Dominican peasants were relatively isolated and conservative, and thus easily became loyal to an authoritarian ruler who highlighted anticommunism as a political banner. Neither the social democratic opposition led by the PRD nor the left were able to build any significant following in the countryside, which demonstrates Balaguer’s political success.

Balaguer used revenues derived from increased international market prices of Dominican export products to finance his political machine in the urban setting. He launched a huge government-sponsored construction program to broaden the streets of Santo Domingo and Santiago and to build new avenues to speed up traffic. Along with government-owned enterprises—all of Trujillo’s sugar mills and multiple other holdings were nationalized and the state became a huge administrator of public assets—the construction industry created new jobs, which partially helped to calm urban protests. Despite his efforts to win political support in the urban settings, Balaguer was never able to become popular in the capital, which had the largest population concentration in the nation. The capital city was the political dominion of the PRD and the various leftist political groupings.
Balaguer’s right-wing populist regime began to decline as the international economic and political environment changed. Two important events determined the political fate of Balaguer in 1978: the dramatic decline in the international market prices of Dominican export products after 1976, and the fact that Balaguer was no longer useful at either the national or the international level. The fall in international market prices left Balaguer without financial resources to sustain his clientelistic political machine, and the election of Jimmy Carter left him without the political backing of the United States. Bosch left the PRD in 1973 for political and ideological reasons, and the new leadership, then under José Francisco Peña Gómez, began cultivating a political relationship with the Washington liberal establishment. This relationship began to pay off as Jimmy Carter won the 1976 election and started to implement a human rights-oriented foreign policy. These conditions were not favorable to Balaguer, whose regime was known for gross human right violations. Despite Balaguer’s massive use of state resources to stay in power, he could not get the support of the electorate. Notwithstanding the victory of PRD candidate Silvestre Antonio Guzmán (Guzmán and Balaguer received 53% and 41% of votes, respectively, while the remaining 6% went to smaller parties), Balaguer retained control of the Senate through political negotiations. This shows that the conservative sector that had supported him during his twelve years in office was still important and its interests could not be easily pushed aside.

Bonapartist regimes are ephemeral, and Balaguer’s was no exception. The profile of the Dominican state changed as a result of policies that led to expansion of the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the working class. The unanticipated consequence of Balaguer’s policies is that Dominican society became more plural and modern. The Dominican bourgeoisie no longer needed a right-wing populist regime and thus it was willing to support the liberal democrats who led the PRD. Balaguer’s subsequent terms (1986–1990; 1990–1994; 1994–1996) did not have the Bonapartist characteristics of the first twelve-year period (1966–1978). The consolidation of the PRD as a modern democratic party, the emergence of the PLD as a mainstream political organization, and the non-existence of a revolutionary left prepared the conditions for consolidation of a fragile, but stable democracy.

Balaguer: modernization and democracy

Bonapartist or Caesarist regimes promote modernization at the cost of undermining the consolidation of democracy. They carry out
tasks that the ruling elite cannot undertake due to social and economic weakness. For example, under Balaguer’s leadership the Dominican state rebuilt and expanded a national road network and broadened streets in the major cities of the country, built various international airports, major government office buildings, hydroelectric dams, hospitals, and school buildings. The development of these public facilities gave rise to a national construction industry that continues to thrive today, providing services for the public and private sectors. Balaguer also pushed legislation that laid the groundwork for the tourism industry and the free exporting zones, the two most dynamic sectors of the economy today.

Bonapartist regimes undermine development of the institutions of democracy. Balaguer is an exemplary case. For example, he exercised control over Congress, the national budget, and security forces, and skillfully manipulated the political process. A succinct review of his handling of the Central Electoral Commission from 1966 to 1978 can serve to illustrate my thesis. In this time period, he won general elections using public resources and heavy-handed methods that prevented the emergence of a viable opposition. Among many other strategies to inhibit the development of democracy, he used all means available to prevent the consolidation of a strong Central Electoral Commission that could implement free and fair elections. It is worth noting that almost all the elections he won were plagued by massive fraud allegations. In 1966, he ran and won while the United States occupied the country militarily. These elections were considered “demonstration elections” by a group of U.S. scholars (Herman & Brodhead, 1984). In 1970, he ran nearly unopposed because the PRD withdrew its presidential candidate claiming that it was impossible for its campaign workers to do their jobs due to government repression. Again, in 1974, the PRD withdrew its presidential candidates for similar reasons. On these two occasions, small right-wing political parties, ostensibly with Balaguer’s approval, ran candidates to legitimize the elections. In 1978, the PRD won the elections by a landslide, but in order to assume the presidency it had to accept Balaguer’s conditions, namely, to give up four provinces where it had won so that Balaguer could control the Senate. In 1990, Balaguer ran and won by a small margin against Juan Bosch, presidential candidate of the Dominican Liberation Party. It took the Central Electoral Commission about two months to produce a winner due to fraud allegations. Again, in 1994, the Central Electoral Commission itself had to admit that there were enough irregularities to account for the margin by which opposition candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez was defeated.
This situation forced Balaguer to accept a political compromise that shortened his period in office from four to two years (1994–1996). This political compromise, known as “The Pact for Democracy,” led to the abolition of re-election for president. It also separated presidential elections from congressional and municipal elections. Balaguer opposed this measure wholeheartedly and fought, to the end of his life, to get the re-election of the president established in the Constitution of the Republic. As noted above, the re-election was established shortly after his death.

Balaguer did not believe in the democratic method of governance. He was a man who did not have friends, but collaborators. He spoke like a democrat but, as U.S. Ambassador John Bartlow Martin notes in his memoirs, did not act like one (Martin, 1975). Balaguer’s main concern was to be in power regardless of the means necessary to achieve it. No one has claimed that Balaguer killed anybody with his own hands, but he certainly praised Dominican security forces when they fired at his opponents who were demonstrating in the main plaza in Santo Domingo while he was practically a caretaker President following Trujillo’s death. He was also complicit in political assassinations when he was the President of the Republic. It is worth recalling that page 333 was inserted blank in the Balaguer’s memoirs. That page contains Balaguer’s version of events concerning the assassination of Orlando Martínez, a distinguished intellectual and journalist. Martínez was assassinated in 1975. Balaguer published his memoirs in 1989 and no government leader had the courage to bring him to court to reveal what he knew about Martínez’s death. Page 333 contains the following message:

This blank page is inserted here. For many years it will remain mute, but it will speak one day so its voice can be heard by history. Silent, like a tomb whose secret will loudly reveal itself and accuse, when time permits the lifting of the gravestone under which truth is lying. Its content lies in the hands of a friend who for reasons of age will probably outlive me and who has been charged by me to make it public some time after my death. (Balaguer, 1989: 333)

This page shows Balaguer’s arrogance and lack of respect for the rule of law. During his lifetime, he refused to talk to the judge who investigated the assassination of Orlando Martínez. The judge offered to go to his house to question him and Balaguer refused to receive him. Neither President Leonel Fernández (1996–2000) nor Hipólito Mejía (2000–2004) or their attorneys-general exerted any political pressure to force Balaguer to make a statement regarding the Martínez assassination. In the end, after years of court proceedings, Martínez’s
assassins were tried and found guilty, but they received relatively light sentences. This situation obviously demonstrates that Balaguer was a powerful authoritarian politician to the end of this life who believed himself to be above the rule of law. Regrettably, his political opponents owed him favors and consequently did not make any political move that could threaten him.

Conclusions

The study of Balaguer and the course of Dominican politics and society show that if we make the necessary adjustments to account for the specificity of Latin American political reality, the concept of Bonapartism can be useful to explain the emergence of both nationalist/progressive populist coalitions and right-wing conservative coalitions. The incorporation of U.S. imperialism as a factor is the most important conceptual readjustment. U.S. imperialism is a key factor whether it opposes a nationalist populist project or whether it promotes a conservative Bonapartist type of regime like that of Balaguer.

Balaguer’s Bonapartism, or right-wing populism, was the result of a political vacuum created by the inability of Dominican elites to face the rise of a contentious society. This provided the occasion for Balaguer to emerge in Dominican politics. For the United States, Balaguer was the right kind of ruler to promote in the context of the Cold War in societies that lacked credible political parties and government institutions. Thus, Balaguer was not “an instrument of destiny,” as he used to say, nor the magician of Dominican politics. Like Vargas, Cárdenas, and Perón, Balaguer was the result of special social and political circumstances, but unlike them, he was a conservative who installed a regime that excluded working, middle, and peasant classes from the mainstream of society.

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