



Will Opposition Protests Upend Parliamentary Elections in Dominica?

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The small Caribbean island nation of Dominica has been rocked by protests in recent weeks ahead of parliamentary elections that are scheduled for Friday. Demonstrators and opposition groups claim the current electoral system unfairly advantages Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit's government, which is refusing to implement needed reforms to facilitate a free and fair vote. In an email interview with WPR, Robert Looney, a distinguished professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, explains how the government's stance on electoral reforms is threatening the legitimacy of this week's elections.



Dominica's prime minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, addresses the United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters in New York, Sept. 23, 2017 (AP photo by Craig Ruttle).

WPR: What prompted the recent protests over electoral reforms? What are the main grievances of the protesters and the opposition?

Robert Looney: The recent protests in Dominica express a variety of grievances that have built up over the past several years. The main opposition United Workers' Party, or UWP, claims that Skerrit and his governing Dominica Labour Party, or DLP, are involved in corrupt practices and dragging their feet on implementing political reforms that the opposition believes are necessary to level the playing field.

Specifically, protesters are upset that the administration has yet to act on electoral reforms that the Organization of American States recommended earlier this year. In August, the OAS accepted an invitation from the Dominican government to carry out a joint mission to the country alongside representatives from the Commonwealth of Nations and the Caribbean Community, or CARICOM, an organization that promotes regional integration. The mission's aim was to examine Dominica's electoral process and procedures and make recommendations about potential avenues for reform.

Its resulting report (<http://dominica.gov.dm/notices/943-report-of-the-joint-caricom-commonwealth-oas-special-mission-to-dominica>) highlighted key areas of concern that the government needs to address to guarantee that future elections are fair, free, and transparent. Specifically, it recommended that deceased people, members of the diaspora who have been out of the country for more than five years, and other ineligible voters be removed from the current voter rolls. The report also called for issuing photo identification cards to ensure accuracy and accountability in the

voting process. The Skerrit administration rejected these recommendations (http://dominica.gov.dm/images/documents/RESPONSE_to_Joint_Mission_Report__26092019.pdf) as being costly and unworkable, prompting protests.

The opposition accuses the DLP of paying travel costs for diaspora voters

(<https://dominicanewsonline.com/news/homepage/news/linton-appeals-to-overseas-supporters-to-pay-your-passage-and-come-to-vote/>) so that they can return to the island to vote in the Dec. 6 election, though as far as I know, it hasn't offered any evidence to support that charge. The demonstrations worsened last month (<http://pridenews.ca/2019/11/18/dominica-elections-police-fire-teargas-disperse-protesting-crowd/>), after President Charles Savarin declined to meet with protesters to hear their complaints concerning electoral procedures. These are not new grievances: A year ago, protesters clashed with police as they demanded the Electoral Commission mandate voters use identification cards to avoid fraud.

The opposition is also concerned about corruption. For example, the UWP has demanded accountability for the disappearance of approximately \$500 million (<https://dominicanewsonline.com/news/homepage/news/attorney-holds-one-man-billion-dollar-protest-to-demand-accountability-for-cbi-funds/>) derived from the island's citizenship-by-investment scheme, in which Dominican passports are effectively sold for a minimum of \$100,000 (<https://cbiu.gov.dm/investment-options/>).

WPR: How has Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit's government responded to the protests so far? Is there a sign that he will compromise on any of the opposition's demands?

Looney: The Skerrit administration refuses to meet any of the opposition's demands, despite widespread support for electoral reform. According to a recent poll conducted by the Caribbean Agency for Political Advancement, or CAPA, a widely respected political consulting firm in Dominica, 72 percent of respondents (<https://dominicanewsonline.com/news/homepage/news/capa-pre-election-poll-puts-uwp-ahead-in-11-constituencies/>) believed that electoral reform was necessary. Instead of engaging with the opposition, the government condemned (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/police-fight-protesters-on-caribbean-island-of-dominica/2019/11/19/7413d448-0add-11ea-8054-289aef6e38a3_story.html) the "intrusion of violence into the election campaign," arguing that the protesters are not demonstrating for electoral reform, but rather to disrupt the electoral process. Skerrit has even accused the UWP and other reform advocates such as the Concerned Citizens Movement, a civil society group, of stymying his own electoral reform initiatives in parliament. The opposition counters that Skerrit's efforts are simply attempts to legitimize unlawful electoral practices.

More recently, Dominica's foreign minister, Francine Baron, dismissed the OAS' recommendations as biased. She denied the need for electoral reform (http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/speech.asp?sCodigo=19-0065), pointing out that the elections are being held under the same laws that have governed the democratic process in Dominica since the country attained independence in 1978, and that "both the current Labour Government and the UWP Opposition have been elected through this exact process and under these same laws." She added that the current system was in place when the UWP increased its representation in parliament during the last general elections in 2014.

As a sign of its disapproval, the Dominican government indicated it would invite CARICOM, the United Nations and other multilateral bodies to observe the elections, but not the OAS. At the same time, Skerrit has avoided the issue of electoral reforms on the campaign trail, instead stressing his positive record of overseeing rapid recovery

efforts on the island following the catastrophic damage caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

WPR: How might these issues play into the upcoming elections, including perceptions of how legitimate the vote will be?

Looney: Given the Skerrit administration's refusal to undertake electoral reforms or interact with the OAS, there is widespread apprehension that the election will not be legitimate. The UWP is gravely concerned that the government released the final list of eligible voters for this week's elections without adequately addressing the numerous claims and objections about potential fraud and other issues that its candidates submitted to the government office that oversees elections. The opposition contends that there are numerous names on the list that it objected to but are still there, and that this shows the election will not be free and fair. The UWP has thus requested a postponement of the election so that their objections can be resolved, but to no avail so far.

There is a widespread feeling among Dominicans that the election will not, in fact, be fair. Last month's CAPA poll found the opposition in the lead, with 46 percent of respondents saying they would vote for the UWP, while 36 percent supported the DLP. Nevertheless, many respondents believed that election results would favor the DLP, with 34 percent stating they believe the incumbent will win.

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