Criminal Crossroads: Drugs, Ports, and Corruption in the Dominican Republic

#Cocaine    #DominicanRepublic
Criminal Crossroads: Drugs, Ports, and Corruption in the Dominican Republic

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The managers at Caucedo Multimodal are proud of their international connections. Running the biggest port in the Dominican Republic, located just east of the capital, Santo Domingo, is busy work.

“We have routes to every big port in every continent,” one former administrator told InSight Crime during a visit in 2021.

This message was reinforced by slick marketing videos found online and glossy posters that lined the walls of Caucedo's administrative buildings. The image being projected was of a fast-moving and futuristic port, surrounded by aquamarine waters and operating under the slogan “intelligent logistics solutions, covering every link in the supply chain.”
Transnational entrepreneurs have taken note of this promise. As have transnational drug traffickers.

This year has marked a serious uptick in cocaine seizures. By the end of June, the country’s antinarcotics agency (Dirección Nacional de Control de Drogas - DNCD) had seized almost 17 tons of cocaine. Just over 7.6 tons of that came in April alone, when authorities made five separate seizures in the Port of Caucedo. In the largest haul that month, just under 1.2 tons of cocaine were confiscated from a container on its way to Rotterdam. This was not business as usual. April’s seizures were higher than the total of all seizures made in 2018 and 2019.

Caucedo is by far the single biggest point of cocaine confiscation in the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, shipments seized out at sea or on uninhabited beaches where cocaine is brought ashore are usually on their way to Caucedo, to be temporarily stashed or to be moved on again in another container ship.
Right Place, Wrong Time

Part of Caucedo's appeal for traffickers is tied to the Dominican Republic's strategic location between South American producer nations, the ever-lucrative United States, and the increasingly popular European markets.

Apart from cocaine shipped directly to Caucedo in container vessels, the drugs can be brought onto the island's shores by go-fast boats and fishing vessels. Colombia and Venezuela are only about a thousand miles (1,600 kilometers) away. The crews, so-called transportistas, are often a mix of Dominicans, Venezuelans, and Colombians.

These transportistas dock along the empty beaches of the Dominican Republic's southern coastline, especially in the provinces of Barahona and San Pedro de Macorís.

In some cases, authorities tipped off to arriving boats end up confronting traffickers in forested areas or communities close to shore, suggesting the traffickers are quick to move off the open beaches.

While there are few seizures made on the highways and roads connecting the Dominican Republic's remote beaches with its international ports, drugs certainly move along them, according to evidence in a 2022 Italian Anti-Drug Directorate Report.

The report details how authorities have traced the journey of specific drug packages through the Dominican Republic by tracking the distinctive stamps traffickers use to identify the multiple drug bundles within large shipments.

In one case, authorities were able to connect two parts of a single shipment, separated after a partial seizure at sea, by matching the stamps at a later date. They realized that the unintercepted part of the shipment had been smuggled into the port on the very same day.

In another case, authorities used stamps to match an unidentified batch of drugs moving through the port's customs to another batch confiscated days earlier, suggesting it had been temporarily stashed.

Significant quantities are also regularly seized from commercial and private flights, and most US-bound cocaine is sent by sea from the Dominican Republic's eastern coast across the Mona Channel to Puerto Rico.

The vast majority of cocaine moving through the Dominican Republic is bound for the growing European market, where DNCD intelligence helped various governments seize 6 tons of the drug last year.
Caucedo – The Gateway to Europe

As the Dominican Republic’s major port, Caucedo stands out as a hotspot for drug shipments leaving the country for Europe.

In January, Dominican anti-narcotics agents at Caucedo made one of the country’s largest cocaine seizures after they discovered 1.2 tons, hidden inside a shipment of bananas. The container was in transit from Guatemala to Belgium, a fact that authorities said complicated their investigation.

Drug shipments intercepted in containers at a transit point can be contaminated at several sites along their journey, including at their point of origin, the transit country, or somewhere in between, Alberto Arean Varela, Caribbean coordinator for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) Container Control Program, told InSight Crime.

The shipment seized in January “could have come from Guatemala or it could have been moved from one container to another within the port. Or it could have been smuggled into Caucedo by truck,” he said.

Trucks have recently been used to move cocaine within the port. One attempt to do so in March of this year ended in gunfire when anti-narcotics authorities surprised a group of Caucedo port employees and truckers in the process of moving cocaine from a container onto a truck. Realizing they had been caught, the criminals shot at authorities and fled to nearby woods.

The group was most likely using a sophisticated and increasingly popular method of cocaine concealment called “in and out.” Unlike the well-known “rip-on/rip-off” method, in which traffickers open the containers and add cocaine to existing cargo, traffickers using the “in and out” remove their cocaine from the port after its arrival and store the drugs in modified containers outside of the port. Later, traffickers reintroduce the cocaine to the port inside the modified containers with the help of complicit truck drivers.

Cat and Mouse

Caucedo port authorities admit that drugs get through and shipments are contaminated in spite of strong security measures. Port authorities told InSight Crime that they have spent millions of dollars on updating the port’s security and associated protocols. Increased drug seizures in 2021 led to the port of Caucedo being certified under the US Container Security Initiative and the Dominican Republic receiving public recognition from the US State Department for its “political will to reduce the flow of drugs into the country.”
Principal Cocaine Trafficking Routes
Through the Dominican Republic

Source: InSight Crime investigations & DNCD (Dirección Nacional de Control de Drogas) Seizure Data

insightcrime.org
But drug traffickers have managed to stay ahead at every turn.

“What we are seeing now is that drug traffickers are more creative,” a former port administrator told InSight Crime. For example, criminals have made rapid advances in cloning the single-use, heavy-duty seals that secure containers before they embark on each leg of their journey. Traffickers fake these seals when using the “rip-on/rip-off” method. Cloning a seal requires that drug traffickers have access to shipping documents and then gain access to the containers themselves. These steps almost always require the assistance of a corrupt port employee.

“When I started in 2010, cloning seals was unusual in the country. But now a seal can be cloned in less than one hour,” the former Caucedo administrator told InSight Crime.

**Corruption of Port Personnel**

It’s not infrequent for Caucedo employees to be linked to seizures. In January 2022, five Caucedo employees were arrested after authorities found 246 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the bottom of a container loaded with cacao destined for France.

Experts who spoke to InSight Crime confirmed that Caucedo is highly vulnerable to staff corruption, amid other security challenges.

“I’m not massively impressed with the X-ray machines in Caucedo,” a senior law enforcement official told InSight Crime. “It is not the most modern equipment on the market. And besides, who’s checking the X-ray images of containers for drugs? How vulnerable are they?”

DNCD officers, such as those checking X-rays at Caucedo, are paid an average of $450 a month. And while initiatives to raise public security force salaries are gaining momentum, low pay remains a glaring vulnerability. Drug traffickers have deep pockets and can pay far more than a month’s wage to corrupt officers.
“You’re not even being asked to do something active. You are [sometimes] being offered $10,000 to go to the bathroom for three minutes, at the right moment,” Arean Varela told InSight Crime.

“You need corruption to get the drugs off the container in Europe too,” he added, pointing to similar corruption challenges in other ports. The other challenge is Caucedo’s desire to be seen as an ultra-modern port that makes constant efficiency gains. Caucedo is in competition with the Port of Kingston in Jamaica for the title of the Caribbean’s leading maritime trading hub. To win that renown, it must handle more containers more quickly. But like other global ports, Caucedo cannot afford to scan every container passing through its docks.

“Everyone wants to facilitate trade. Stopping containers is not seen as a good thing. At some stage, though, we need to have a balance,” concluded Arean Varela.

In response, a spokesperson for Caucedo said the port has maintained high-security standards and has worked with authorities to prevent illegal activities, but declined to discuss specifics, citing security and reputational concerns.

Recent seizures speak to Caucedo officials’ efforts. But like almost every other port in the world, authorities there are being outsmarted by the cunning of criminal networks.
César Peralta, the Best Middleman in the Dominican Republic’s Cocaine Trade

On Christmas Eve 2018, the dancefloor was packed at Kuora Club, one of Santo Domingo’s most popular nightclubs. Hundreds had turned up to party that night with reggaeton star Arcángel, the evening’s headlining act. The partygoers likely didn’t realize that holiday bash would be one of the club’s last.

Kuora was owned by César Emilio Peralta, alias “El Abusador” (The Abuser), allegedly once one of the Dominican Republic’s most innovative and powerful drug traffickers. He owned or controlled at least four other nightclubs in Santo Domingo, among almost two dozen businesses.
The club’s dancefloor had served as a who’s who of Dominican society for years. Angel, a former employee, told InSight Crime that on any given night, politicians could be found rubbing shoulders with athletes, movie stars, and drug traffickers.

Peralta’s nightclubs were also known for extravagance. A local patron of another Peralta club, called Flow, said that in its heyday a table there cost around 10,000 Dominican pesos ($185), and a bottle of liquor cost five times more than at the corner store. “Luxury sports cars packed its parking lot,” he said.

Those days are long gone. One lonely guard, paid by the Dominican authorities, has replaced the expensive cars outside Kuora. Another one of Peralta’s clubs is now an office building, while a third has been abandoned altogether, with ‘For Sale’ signs fading in the harsh sun. Through the cracks at the boarded-up Kaprich, another club once owned by Peralta, piping can be seen hanging from the ceiling with bits of insulation strewn about the floor.

Peralta was at the top of the Dominican Republic’s criminal underworld for several years, but by mid-2019, the tide had turned against him. All his businesses closed after he was formally identified as a significant foreign narcotics trafficker under the United States’ Kingpin Act. He was arrested in Colombia in December 2019 and extradited to Puerto Rico in December 2021, where he is currently on trial for drug charges.

Cocaine Trafficking Networks in the Dominican Republic

It is not known exactly how and when César Peralta entered the drug trade. But he first drew attention as a drug trafficker in the 1990s and soon joined the network of a noted kingpin, Rolando Florián Félix.

At the start of that decade, Colombian traffickers began using the Dominican Republic as a stopping point along the route to the United States. The Colombians needed contacts with local knowledge and resources to receive the shipments, stash them, and send them onwards later. Florián Félix fulfilled this role for the then-powerful Cali Cartel and regularly transported loads of cocaine through the island. He became the first of the Dominican kingpins.

Despite Florián Félix being jailed in 1996 and later murdered in prison, he inspired a generation of Dominican traffickers that became progressively more sophisticated, brokering their own deals with Colombian counterparts and selling shipments on to American and European clients.
The man Peralta chose to work under, Quirino Paulino Castillo, was a standout among this new generation. An army captain and entrepreneur who owned dozens of gas stations and other businesses, Paulino Castillo successfully trafficked many tons of cocaine into the United States and collaborated with a number of other important traffickers before his arrest in 2004. Peralta rose through the ranks of Paulino Castillo’s organization, and likely learned enough to fill the void left by members of Castillo’s upper management team as they were apprehended by authorities.
By 2015, Peralta had firmly positioned himself as one of the main drug traffickers in the Dominican Republic and the entire Caribbean. By the time he was arrested in 2019, he was reportedly moving around 25 tons of cocaine a year, as well as laundering money and trafficking Colombian women. Such quantities led US federal authorities to compare him to infamous Mexican cartel boss, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias “El Chapo.”

Peralta’s success rested on three principles: collaboration with other crime groups on the island, cooperation with foreign organized crime, and the appearance of doing legitimate business.

The Art of the Deal

Peralta wasn’t the first trafficker to build ties with domestic rivals. While the island has seen some violent drug feuds, criminal networks in the Dominican Republic have been cooperating with each other for decades.

“What I have seen in judicial cases is that the drug traffickers are good friends. They party together, go to clubs together,” a judge who wished to remain anonymous told InSight Crime.

Peralta’s string of party venues served him well, offering his kingpin peers places to socialize and finalize business deals.

“They all know each other, and if necessary, they all work together,” said a senior law enforcement official in Santo Domingo, who also wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

This collaboration reached such levels that specialized criminal networks could provide specific services to the top traffickers. For example, Peralta retained the services of Rámon del Rosario Puente, alias “Toño Leña,” who specialized in moving vast shipments of drugs between South America, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and New York. del Rosario Puente was extradited to the United States to face drug trafficking charges in April 2021.

César Peralta is arguably the most successful Dominican trafficker in recent decades but he did not operate in a vacuum. He built his operation on top of those pioneered by his predecessors, forged business contacts within the Dominican diaspora, and learned his craft from some of the country’s most prominent criminal figures.
Who’s Who in Dominican Republic Drug Traffickers

César Peralta is arguably the most successful Dominican trafficker in recent decades but he did not operate in a vacuum. He built his operation on top of those pioneered by his predecessors, forged business contacts within the Dominican diaspora, and learned his craft from some of the country’s most prominent criminal figures.

International Appeal

The Dominican Republic’s geographic location makes it a natural platform connecting criminal economies in South America, North America, and Europe. Peralta used this to his full advantage.
In Colombia, he reportedly brokered a successful partnership with the Urabeños, one of the most important criminal groups in the country. The group calls itself the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), but authorities refer to it as the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo). Peralta's lawyer, Joaquin Perez, told InSight Crime that he did not believe Peralta was connected to the Urabeños.

Peralta exploited strong connections to criminal networks within the Dominican diaspora in the United States, and according to US authorities, his organization also trafficked drugs to Europe, now arguably the biggest market for cocaine smuggled through the Dominican Republic.

European organized crime groups who don’t have direct contacts with Colombian suppliers often reach out to traffickers from transit countries like the Dominican Republic, Alberto Areán Varela, Caribbean coordinator for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Container Control Program, told InSight Crime.

European crime groups don’t even have to travel to the island. “Madrid is where meetings often take place,” Areán Varela explained.

Beyond Peralta, the Dominican Republic's reputation as an international oasis for drug trafficking has attracted plenty of criminals.

The country “has a lot of pull factors: not just the climate, the roads, and a cheap city, but also the access to luxury, the ability to change your identity, to be able to be seen, or to disappear,” the senior law enforcement official told InSight Crime.

Recent cases of foreign criminals in the country include a Dutch national, who was shot three times but survived in the resort town of Las Terrenas in January 2022. In another example, eight members of Italy's Clan Contini mafia were arrested in 2020. They had been living in the country for years, owned businesses, and sent their kids to Dominican schools.

“Most people entering the country just want to enjoy it, but some settle here as liaisons for international criminal structures,” Diego Pesqueira, spokesperson for the Dominican national police, told InSight Crime.

In fact, the presence of criminal expats may be growing, in part due to the early reopening of the Dominican Republic's tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There has always been European organized crime in the Dominican Republic. But with the country being one of the few places to remain open during the pandemic, there has been an increase in organized crime figures settling down here,” said the law enforcement official.
Make Money, Not War

The Dominican Republic has relatively low levels of organized crime-related violence, especially compared with many other waypoints for the cocaine trade.

Of the 841 murders recorded between January and September 2021, only 83 were linked to drug trafficking and drug use. The Dominican Republic’s 2021 homicide rate was estimated to be 10.3 per 100,000, lower than that of most of its neighbors in the region.

The business-first attitude of the island’s underworld may provide an explanation for the relative peace.

“The people at the top don’t look like drug dealers. They take on the role of businessmen and are credible, they do business with banks and even with the government,” one money laundering expert, who requested to remain anonymous as she was not authorized to speak on behalf of her organization, told InSight Crime.

César Peralta’s clubs and other businesses allowed him to launder drug proceeds but also gave him an introduction to the Dominican elite.

In phone calls recorded before he fled to Colombia in 2019, Peralta complains about how powerful figures, including former president Danilo Medina Sánchez, had betrayed him even though he helped them achieve their positions of power.

Peralta can be heard saying in reference to Medina, “if he is going to continue with the persecution of my people, of my family and everyone else, I’ll also talk.”

The links between Peralta and Medina are clear. Medina admitted in July 2020 that he had received electoral campaign contributions from Peralta but said he did not know that the money came from illicit activities. This was despite the fact that Peralta had already been arrested for drug trafficking on multiple occasions.
Peralta’s connections could not save him once the United States took an interest. While US authorities had been investigated Peralta since 2017, his time began to run out following his designation as a significant foreign narcotics trafficker under the Kingpin Act in August 2019. His businesses were seized and he fled to Colombia. Using a false Colombian ID with a different name, he operated in both Venezuela and Colombia for months, allegedly having a direct relationship with the Urabeños.

It’s not clear exactly why, but Peralta’s luck ran out. By the time Colombian police arrested him in Cartagena in December 2019, he wasn’t just hiding from authorities. Having escaped an attempt on his life in Barranquilla just weeks before, he was also on the run for other criminal networks, possibly the Urabeños.

The Void Is Filled

Peralta’s arrest does not appear to have reduced drug trafficking through the Dominican Republic. Other networks have taken over, and the continued discovery of record quantities of drugs on the island show the Dominican route remains popular.

The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that Dominican transnational criminal organizations “have expanded their capabilities to have command and control originating in source zone countries and orchestrate the transportation of multi-ton quantities of drugs through the Caribbean with final destination of Northeastern cities in the United States and in Europe.”

“They are no longer simple transport networks,” Areán Varela told InSight Crime. “They buy, they stockpile, and they sell.”

The Dominican Republic’s president, Luis Abinader, has declared war on drug trafficking in the country, and record seizures during his administration have been applauded, including by the US State Department. However, corruption and collusion between elites and organized will complicate Abinader’s campaign to squash the drug trade.
Santo Domingo’s imposing courthouse, the Palacio de Justicia de Ciudad Nuevo, buzzes with activity and urgent conversation. Attorneys and judges stride through the halls in spotless black robes and bobble-headed caps, while defendants shuffle past with heads bowed, guided by police.

In a small office on the second floor, cramped between shelves of dossiers, a judge, who asked to remain anonymous, told InSight Crime about the high-level corruption cases that have dominated the country’s headlines in recent years. These seem to mark an unraveling of the impunity long enjoyed by high-profile individuals in the Dominican Republic, the judge said.
“We come from a culture where certain crimes were largely invisible. Street crimes, robbery, and the like were prosecuted. But corruption? Almost never,” she said. “This is a new moment. Anti-corruption prosecutors have more resources now and the people want accountability.”

The Attorney General’s Special Prosecutor for Administrative Corruption (Procuraduría Especializada de Persecución de la Corrupción Administrativa - PEPCA) has been busy. Since President Luis Abinader took office in 2020, PEPCA has brought a number of cases against government ministers, security force officials, and close family members of the former president, Danilo Medina.

The ex-president himself hasn’t faced charges. But PEPCA’s prosecutors have shown they aren’t afraid to take on politically powerful suspects. And in a legal effort dubbed “Antipulpo” (Anti-Octopus), they have mounted cases against many tentacles of alleged corruption stemming from Medina’s administration.

The Many Tentacles of Corruption

Juan Alexis Medina, the former president’s brother, stands accused of using his family ties to build a vast embezzlement network involving at least 22 government agencies and a number of former ministers. Another sibling, Carmen Magalys Medina Sánchez, has also been arrested on charges of embezzlement. According to PEPCA’s formal accusation, the criminal-political network stole millions in state funds.

“That’s why it’s called Antipulpo,” Heiromy Castro, an economist and expert on combating money laundering, told InSight Crime. “The case touches basically every ministry. There was a culture of impunity that allowed it to happen.”

The accusations of other big cases now before the courts indicate that corruption during Medina’s administration went far beyond the president’s office.

Prosecutors in a case known as Coral, and its offshoot Coral 5G, describe a separate corruption and money laundering network that operated during Medina’s two terms in office (2012-2020) and was run by high-ranking security officials, including generals of the country’s army and air force. The network reportedly stole millions of dollars from the state, in part by handing out contracts to fake companies. The loot, which was laundered through real estate, luxury vehicles, and other goods, was valued at 4.5 billion Dominican pesos ($84 million).

According to prosecutors on yet another case named after marine life, Medusa, the Dominican Republic’s former Attorney General, Jean Alain Rodríguez (2016-2020), ran a similar setup out of his office.
The Medusa indictment states that Alain Rodríguez “turned the Office of the Attorney General into the command center for criminal operations.” Along with several of his staff, he allegedly used his position to commit fraud and steal resources meant for the country’s investigative, justice, and prison systems. PEPCA estimates that the corruption network appropriated more than a billion Dominican pesos ($18 million). There are indications that the former attorney-general won’t go quietly, however. In March, prosecutor Wilson Camacho accused defendants in the Medusa case of trying to intimidate and coerce witnesses from behind bars. Rodríguez’s attorneys told InSight Crime that their client is a victim of political assassination.

“In the Dominican Republic, justice is being used as a weapon to attack political opponents,” they wrote in response to a request for comment.

But the anti-corruption drive hasn’t just targeted the former president and his party. Prosecutors have also gone after officials in current President Luis Abinader’s own administration, accusing them in a case dubbed Operation 13 of defrauding Dominicans of over 500 million Dominican pesos (around $9.1 million). The now-dismissed director of the National Lottery, Luis Dicent, faces charges that he masterminded the fraud scheme and, according to local media outlet Diario Libre’s coverage of the case, pressured his co-defendants into participating.

The string of high-profile prosecutions has given many Dominicans hope that their justice system is serious about rooting out corruption. Transparency International’s 2021 Corruption Perception Index reflected this positivity, attributing it to recent convictions of the country’s political elite, and several locals across the island expressed optimism about the anti-graft drive, even if they disagreed with other aspects of the Abinader administration.

But international organizations and experts say that corruption is still deeply ingrained in every aspect of public life and will prove hard to tackle. The same Transparency International report that touted improvements in perceptions of corruption ranked the Dominican Republic 128 out of 180, warning that its public institutions remain fragile and the current progress could “quickly be lost.”
An April 2022 report by the US Department of State also found that real change is still out of reach. The report concluded that while “the attorney general pursued a number of cases against public officials, including high-level politicians and their families...government corruption remained a serious problem.”

Experts suggest that this administrative corruption trickles down and has created an environment of impunity in the Dominican Republic, where the line between the upper and underworld elite is blurred.

“They all go to the same places,” a senior international security expert told InSight Crime. “You’d be amazed at how many criminals drink together with politicians and businessmen. They all find each other within two minutes.”

**Stumbling Blocks**

Accusations made in a string of recent court cases illustrate these links across the political spectrum.

In September 2021, congressman Héctor Darío Félix Félix hid alleged drug kingpin, Juan José de la Cruz Morales, alias “Wandy,” in his car as investigators arrived to arrest him, according to official reports.

Félix Félix cannot be arrested due to his political immunity. This seems to have been a quality Wandy looked for in his friends, since according to prosecutors his drug trafficking network directly contributed to the political campaigns of Dominican legislators. Prosecutors also linked two other congressmen from Abinader’s Modern Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Moderno - PRM) to the same drug trafficking network.

Félix Félix’s case is far from an outlier. Another lawmaker, Rosa Amalia Pilarte López, is married to alleged drug trafficker, Miguel Arturo López Florencio, alias “Miky López.” Prosecutors accuse Miky López of having led a network that not only trafficked ecstasy, but also provided money laundering services for other criminal networks. Some of his alleged «clients» are linked to Puerto Rican drug trafficker, José Figueroa Agosto, and the Odebrecht corruption scandal, according to the indictment.

In some cases, Dominican political figures have reportedly crossed the line from associating with criminals to becoming directly involved in crime.

In 2021, active congressman for the province of Santiago, Miguel Gutiérrez Díaz, was arrested at Miami airport and charged with trafficking cocaine. He was not the first. In 2020 authorities extradited a congressional candidate and...
indicted a seasoned electoral campaign director, both on drug trafficking charges. The latter was accused by the US Attorney General’s Office of working directly with Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel.

What’s more, criminal networks have allegedly infiltrated the very justice system meant to hold them accountable. In 2020, two judges were dismissed following accusations they received payments from a convicted drug trafficker.

The country’s top drug traffickers are suspected of also seeking influence with former presidents and presidential candidates.

Accused drug trafficker César Emilio Peralta, alias “El Abusador,” was recorded claiming to have financed the 2016 campaign of former President Danilo Medina, who admitted he took the money but said he didn’t know it had come from drug trafficking.

Similar allegations stretch back years. Accused drug trafficker Figueroa Agosto allegedly helped finance the 2008 presidential campaign of another center-left candidate, Miguel Vargas Maldonado, who ultimately lost the election. Vargas denied having any ties to the man.

Another of Peralta’s former employers, Quirino Paulino Castillo, claimed that, between 2002 and 2004, he spent millions on the electoral campaigns of President Leonel Fernández. Leonel Fernández responded by praising his own administration’s achievements, but did not directly address the allegations against him, according to a copy of his response published in Dominican media.

These repeat claims of drug money supporting presidential candidates indicate a systemic problem and shine a light on the country’s weak campaign financing laws, which can be used to provide broad cover for those seeking to buy political influence at the highest levels of the executive branch.

**Police For Sale**

Elements within the Dominican police, who are charged with investigating crimes, may also be compromised.

In 2014, the then-attorney general revealed that former police officers participated in contract killings, often for drug traffickers. The same year, the head of the now dismantled Central Antinarcotics Directorate (Dirección Central Antinarcóticos - DICAN), was accused of stealing almost a ton of cocaine and was eventually sentenced to 20 years in prison.

A year later, Yeni Berenice, then-chief prosecutor for the National District, where Santo Domingo is located, claimed police and military were involved in
90 percent of organized crime cases. In the years leading up to this claim, hundreds and sometimes thousands of officials were dismissed at a time for allegedly having connections with crime groups.

Evidence suggests that little changed after 2015. Both Miky López and his son were on the National Police’s payroll until 2020, according to the National Police itself. More recently, in November 2021, authorities arrested over a dozen police officers who were charged with participating in a tumbe de droga (a robbery targeting other drug traffickers), according to a press release by the Attorney General’s Office.

“Many policemen participate in organized crime. This is due to the low salary they receive and a lack of clear rules,” the president of anti-corruption watchdog, the Dominican Anti-Corruption Alliance (Alianza Dominicana Contra la Corrupción - Adocco), Julio César De la Rosa Tiburcio, told InSight Crime in August 2021.

“There is no way for organized crime to be successful without the participation, support, and involvement of authorities,” he added.

*InSight Crime attempted to reach out to all named defendants or their representatives for comment. Apart from the representatives for César Peralta and Jean Alain Rodríguez, all either declined to comment or could not be reached.
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