Time to improve the CARICOM-DR relationship

The View from Europe
David Jessop

In a few days’ time, Jovenel Moïse, will become Haiti’s forty second President. His swearing in follows his first-round victory in the country’s November 20 election.

A businessman from northern Haiti who has never held political office, Haiti’s President-to-be has said that amongst his first priorities will be the modernisation of Haiti’s agricultural sector, creating a viable organic food industry, new social programmes, climate change and addressing corruption. He has also suggested that his government would take long overdue action to address the sometimes-scandalous activities of all aid groups and foreign governments with a presence in the country.

His election, hopefully, will at least bring to an end the political instability that has prevailed ever since the failure of the original October 2015 Presidential elections that he also won but which, amid allegations of fraud and subsequent unrest, were set aside.

On taking office Mr Moïse, like his predecessors, will have to find ways to direct Haiti’s notoriously difficult to manage and impoverished nation. He will also have to deal with Parliament, where a small group of opposition politicians are willing for a variety of reasons to block legislation; will need to respond to the demands of those in the private sector who supported his election; and try to address the continuing problems associated with weak national institutions, widespread corruption, social exclusion, and consequent criminality and instability.

Mr Moïse must do so against a background of high levels of inflation (forecast at 15 per cent this year), slowing economic growth at possibly 1 per cent or less, a depreciating currency, and continuing public health and reconstruction issues. He will also have to address national security if the planned departure of the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSTAH, takes place this year.

Beyond the long-suffering Haitian people, most at risk from his success or failure is the Dominican Republic, where the Government and business community hope that Mr Moïse will bring stability, rapid social and economic change, and consistent levels of cross-border co-operation on issues from trade and investment to security.

Of potential significance in this respect was a visit to Santo Domingo on January 16-17 by Mr Moïse, in his capacity as President-elect. There, Mr Moïse could not have been clearer: once in office he intends to strengthen relations with the Dominican Republic, and consider adopting some of the social and economic programmes that Haiti’s much wealthier and successful neighbour has introduced.

“As President-elect I am sending a message to the whole world and the Dominican people. Together we can improve the conditions of our countries. The Dominican Republic and Haiti are two sister countries,” Mr Moïse told the media following a meeting with Danilo Medina, the Dominican President, at the Presidential Palace. Mr Moïse also said that he had sent clear signals to the Dominican Government and the international community that he intended to normalise relations.

In a further message that ought to have resonance in the whole of CARICOM, he told journalists that his government will “in a reasonable time frame” ensure that the large number of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic will receive the identity documentation necessary to regularise their status.
Under an extension granted by President Medina in July 2016, some 140,000 Haitian migrants who were granted a temporary migratory regularisation card have to obtain, for a fee, the required documents from Haiti by August this year if they are to renew their Dominican status and avoid expulsion.

That said, the process remains far from straightforward. To date, Haiti’s administration, despite having committed significant resources to the problem, has proved unable to deliver the documentation in a timely manner, and the process on both sides of the border remains expensive and bureaucratic.

Nonetheless, President-elect Moïse’s swearing in on February 8 offers CARICOM not just the prospect of renewing its relations with Haiti but, with the new Haitian President’s encouragement, the opportunity to consider the wisdom of maintaining its 2013 decision to exclude the Dominican Republic over what fundamentally is a bilateral issue between neighbours.

In a signal that such a change is possible, the Prime Minister of Antigua, Gaston Browne, and the President of the Dominican Republic, agreed in the margins of the recent summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in Punta Cana, that the Dominican Republic would establish an embassy in St Johns to strengthen bilateral relations.

The decision not only aims to promote trade and investment, and coordination in fora such as CELAC and CARIFORUM, but envisages Antigua becoming a platform for Dominican trade into the OECS and CARICOM markets. To develop the relationship, it is expected that the Dominican Republic’s Foreign Minister, Miguel Vargas, will visit Antigua.

As this column has noted before, there is a strong case for CARICOM establishing a strategic pan-Caribbean approach that fully embraces the Dominican Republic and Cuba, both of which have in recent months been discussing with Puerto Rico a much deeper Hispanic-Caribbean trade relationship.

As Antigua is proving, it does not take rocket science to overcome the misunderstandings and the mutual incomprehension that exists in some CARICOM and Dominican Republic circles about the other.

There is already a base of contacts to build on. Some companies, notably in the Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean are doing business with one another or have invested; the rum, sugar and tourism industries have fully embraced Dominican participation; and with cross investment there is then possibility of developing two-centre vacations that cross the linguistic divide.

The Dominican Republic is the largest and fastest growing economy in the Caribbean, with the capacity to support economic synergies and growth across the region. At a time of change and uncertainty, failure to find ways to heal the rift between the Dominican Republic and CARICOM would be an historic mistake, emphasising the smallness and vulnerability of the much of the region.

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