



Corruption scandal drives historic mass mobilisation in Dominican Republic



CIVICUS speaks to Manuel Robles, a member of the Green March Movement (Movimiento Marcha Verde) in the Dominican Republic. Founded in January 2017 in the heat of popular outrage over the Odebrecht corruption scandal, which involved several senior officials of three successive Dominican governments. Marcha Verde encompasses a broad conglomerate of civil society organisations and focuses its strategy on street mobilisation. It demands the establishment of an independent inquiry commission, the identification of all people

involved and the filing of judicial cases against them, and the recovery of stolen assets.

1. How did the *Marcha Verde* Movement start?

In December 2016 a court in Brooklyn found construction giant Odebrecht guilty of corruption, and the company reached an agreement whereby it admitted that it had paid bribes in twelve countries around the world: two in Africa and ten in Latin America. Among the latter was the Dominican Republic, where bribes exceeded \$92 million. Bribes were an integral part of the way the company operated, as it routinely bribed politicians and officials in order to secure contracts, which of course included inflated prices and allowed the company to capture extra rent. Our country was the recipient of these bribes between 2001 and 2014, that is, under three different administrations: those of Hipólito Mejía (2000-2004), Leonel Fernández (2004-2012) and the incumbent Danilo Medina, first elected in 2012 and re-elected in 2016.

As happened in all countries in the region, the Odebrecht affair generated outrage in the Dominican Republic. At that point, along with some civil society partners that had already worked jointly in activities against corruption and impunity, we decided to get together to see what could be done. At the same time, a radio programme called *Gobierno de la Tarde* (Afternoon Government), in Z-101 radio station, had begun to spread the idea of marching to show rejection and demand justice in the Odebrecht case. So on 4 January 2017 a small civil society group got together and decided to hold a mobilisation later in the month. During the first meetings several decisions were made. First of all, the green colour was chosen in order to represent hope: we did not want to remain in the indignation phase but wanted instead to convey the feeling that this time we could in fact win. This made a difference with previous protests, which had opted for the colour black as a symbol of mourning for the death of justice. We chose green as the unifying element of the diversity of our movement, which included a wide variety of organisations with multiple flags and colours. The choice of colour was linked to our decision to state our claim in positive terms, that is, to not designate it as a struggle *against* corruption and impunity, but rather as a struggle *for* the end of impunity. The idea was that the Odebrecht affair would signal the beginning of the end of impunity in our country.

In those early moments all the leading organisations of recent processes were present, including *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizen Power), a conglomerate that in late 2015 was very active in holding so-called "[human chains](#)", a relatively successful precedent for an anti-corruption mobilisation; *Participación Ciudadana* (Citizen Participation), Transparency International's local chapter, which has produced important research on impunity; *Somos Pueblo* (We Are People), a youth organisation born in social media; and the branch of the Dominican Teachers'



Association led by María Teresa Cabrera. Cabrera had also spearheaded the *4% Movement*, which demanded an increase in public spending on education as required by law, and was one of the main precedents of successful social mobilisation in the country. In our first meeting we set the date for the first mobilisation: 22 January 2017.

2. How was the call for mobilisation disseminated?

To tell the truth, at first we thought this would be a modest event; in fact, the first goal we set for ourselves was to gather around 6 000 people – that was the number we thought we would be able to bring together. We only had a couple of weeks to organise this. We got in touch with all the civil society groups we had links with, and also with partisan groups. With the latter we held meetings and set the rules straight: we would keep a single colour, there would be no partisan leadership, and this would remain a citizen expression, so political activists would be allowed to participate as long as they did so in their individual capacity as citizens. They all accepted the rules, and therefore from the outset we worked along with a vast network of social and political organisations, and we did so in an atmosphere of relative harmony, which in view of our past experience is quite uncommon. This was indeed an impressive achievement, given the very broad spectrum encompassed by our coalition – which, for instance, included both LGBTI organisations and evangelical groups. These are groups that strongly oppose one another around other issues, but for this cause they agreed to sit at the same table.

Marcha Verde includes organisations with various strengths: some are more able to mobilise on social media, while others are better at handling more conventional channels. We spread our call in as many ways as we could. Social media played an important role, but radio and television were vital, in that they not only spread the word but some journalists also led the process with an activist attitude and a discourse along the same lines as ours. The issue was powered by the journalists of *El Gobierno de la Tarde*, which is transmitted by the radio station that has by far the largest audience in the country. Its anchors are well respected and the transmission, which reaches all social sectors alike, became an activist voice on behalf of this process. This allowed for rapid dissemination of our calls for mobilisation. The same happened with several television programmes; as a result, the process had authentic media leadership.

When we mobilised on 22 January we did not yet have a name, but people soon started calling us *Marcha Verde*. Because what happened was unprecedented: never before had so many people mobilised for a nonpartisan cause in our country. We ourselves were amazed at every march as we saw how we had been able to connect with people.

3. *Marcha Verde* appears to have many spokespersons but no recognised leaders. Why is this?

Having a group of rotating spokespeople as big and diverse as possible was a deliberate decision. There are people who, perhaps due to their previous trajectory, are more frequently sought by the media, but we decided to be proactive in rotating the role, both when attending radio or TV shows and when speaking at street events.

Our coalition includes many well-respected personalities, but we are organised basically around working groups. We have four committees: one for content and analysis, which puts together our arguments and discourse; one for communications, made up mostly of young people and in charge of setting the media agenda; one for organisation and networking, which



organises mobilisation and extends our network through the territory; and one for funding and resourcing. This has allowed the movement to become operational. And there is a coordination forum that is formed with two representatives from each committee: this functions as our leading team, and we also hold weekly assemblies both in the capital cities and in the regions.

4. What was so special about the Odebrecht affair? Why did it cause a different reaction compared to past corruption cases?

In the Dominican Republic, impunity is almost as old as the republic itself. There have barely ever been any exemplary sanctions against administrative corruption, and over time this has caused great frustration. So why something that has been happening for so long is only causing outrage now, is indeed a good question.

Historically, when polls asked about the country's major problems, corruption always came among the first few mentions. But people believed, and many still do, that there was nothing that could be done about it. In this specific case, though, an important differential element is that the information was coming from abroad, from the United States and Brazil, and that once it began to pour in, the flow of data did not stop. Information about what was happening in other countries, including Brazil of course, but also Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela, also disseminated rapidly. In those countries, investigations were opened and hundreds of businesspeople and public officials were charged, including former ministers and even former presidents.

In that context, many people thought that this time the Dominican government would not be able to manipulate the case, unlike so many times in the past, and that they would have no choice but do something about it, even if unwillingly. Many people are convinced that the government would rather maintain impunity, but that this time they will simply not be able to, particularly if social pressure increases.

Besides, this mobilisation did not come out of nowhere; there were some precedents of successful mobilisation on other issues such as education, and we are building upon those foundations. Although it is true that the issue of corruption and impunity had so far never moved the masses, but just small groups of people.

Once started, however, the process fed on itself. The first mobilisation success, on 22 January, definitely raised the mood. In addition to the usual activists, many people who had never marched in their lives, particularly middle class citizens, marched. And when they arrived at the gathering points they realised they were many. The reality of seeing so many people together fuelled participation: in fact, after the first mobilisation the willingness of people to cooperate was overwhelming.

A few weeks later Gallup conducted a survey according to which 92% of the population supported *Marcha Verde*. At the same time, the government's approval ratings, which were quite high when the process started, began to decrease. In fact, President Medina had possibly been the better rated president ever, in part due to some social measures and particularly because the economy has grown at quite high rates. With a divided opposition, President Medina was re-elected in 2016 thanks to a Constitutional amendment that was introduced with the sole purpose of enabling him to run again. According to available data, however, his approval ratings began to fall shortly after the 22 January march. But unlike it used to, the government has not published any poll results lately. While the political opposition is still in disarray, *Marcha Verde* has become the true opposition, despite the fact that we keep



insisting that we want *all* corrupt officials to be punished, whether they served in this administration or in previous ones. Of course, although we do not have favourites, we are putting pressure mostly on the incumbent government because they are basically the ones in a position to respond to our demands.

Other countries involved in the Odebrecht case have more reliable judiciaries, or governments that are showing a more proactive reaction than ours. But in our case an unprecedented citizen reaction has taken place. The Dominican Republic usually lags behind in this respect, but this time we are taking the lead. This fills us with pride and satisfaction.

5. What are *Marcha Verde*'s concrete demands, and how have you carried them forward?

Our first demand is that a commission of independent prosecutors be formed to carry out the investigation and prosecution in the Odebrecht case. We insist on this because we do not believe in the Public Prosecutor's Office, since the Prosecutor is a member of the ruling party who worked for the president's electoral campaign, and we do not think he could ensure an impartial investigation. We actually asked that the commission be formed under the auspices of the United Nations, within the framework of the Convention against Corruption to which our country is a signatory party. We knew that it was unlikely for this to happen, but we needed to highlight the high levels of government complicity involved.

We also demanded that all officials who received bribes and all Odebrecht executives who paid them be identified and judicially charged, that all current Odebrecht contracts be cancelled, that all public works done by the company be audited, and that all the money in bribes and overpricing be recovered. We also requested an investigation on illicit funding of electoral campaigns.

To circulate our petition we launched a "Green Book" that people could sign in street corners and town squares throughout the country. We got a massive response: within a few weeks we collected [more than 300 000 signatures](#). Signing implied a greater commitment than simply attending a march, since people had to provide their name, ID number and other personal information. It was an empowerment process; people committed to keep fighting until we achieved our goals. On 22 February we handed the president a notarised document certifying that 312 415 signatures had been collected, and so we made our request official, and instructed the president to respond no later than his annual accountability address to the nation on 27 February.

The process was successful because it helped multiply the organisation, which expanded through the establishment of "green nodes" in various municipalities. Thus the movement grew out of the capital city and got roots in every locality. And the president did pick up the topic in his [speech](#). He assured that he supported the fight against corruption and that all those involved would fall – he literally said that there would be no "sacred cows". But he insisted that the process would be carried out by the Public Prosecutor's Office. That is why we rejected the speech and denounced what we viewed as a contradiction between what the president said and what he did.

Once the signing process was over, in March we launched our [Green Flame campaign](#), which basically consisted of lighting a torch that would travel through the main provinces and towns of the country. This activity was less successful than the signing of the Green Book but it nonetheless allowed us to keep consolidating the movement's structure. As a result of this



outreach, regional and even sub-regional marches started taking place in all three regions of the country. Each of these marches became the biggest mobilisation event ever to have taken place in these localities' history. We even managed to hold a relatively big march in the Eastern region of the country, the historically least mobilised one and organisationally the weakest.

In recent months we have also focused on an action that we have called "[green neighbourhoods](#)", aimed at bringing the struggle for the end of impunity to the poorest sections of the population, which are in fact the most affected by the appropriation of public funds, the payment of bribes and the overpricing of public works. This is an educational and mobilisation campaign that we run in the poorest neighbourhoods, in the course of which we distribute flyers and talk to residents in order to show them what the relationship is between corruption and the lack of services that they experience. We use "bomb data", that is, estimates of the things that could have been done in terms of education, health care, and assistance to mothers or local roads if the stolen money had been invested in improving public services. The idea we try to convey is that impunity rewards thieves while it punishes honest, hard-working people who pay their taxes, because when bribes are paid in order to secure the implementation of overpriced contracts, both the private company and the corrupt public officials are in fact stealing from honest citizens. That is why we insist that the stolen money needs to be recovered and invested in a way that helps meet people's needs. This is how we have increased awareness of the evils of corruption among the most impoverished sectors of society.

Nothing really happened until May: the government had reached an agreement with the company, which we rejected and described as an impunity agreement, and no court cases had been filed. In exchange for the provision of information that would allow for the prosecution of local officials and a \$184-million fine to be paid in instalments, the company would be able to continue operating in the country and would not face any legal proceedings. But in mid-May the Attorney General's Office received documentation from Brazil regarding the bribes paid by Odebrecht in our country, and shortly afterwards [arrest warrants](#) were issued and executed against fourteen high-profile politicians, officials and former officials. Although the investigations showed that the largest amounts of bribes had been paid after 2012, however, most of the offenders were former officials who had served under previous administrations. Odebrecht's largest project, the [Punta Catalina](#) thermoelectric power plant, was left out of the investigation. This is actually the current government's flagship public works initiative, and there are reasons to suspect it is also the Odebrecht project that most incriminates it. When proposed, it received much criticism from civil society and the political opposition, for both environmental and overpricing reasons, and it was awarded to Odebrecht even though the company had made the highest bid. Also excluded from the investigation were the crimes of illegal funding of political campaigns, and public works overpricing. So the government is obviously hiding part of the truth. They are excluding from the investigation the most controversial projects, the most compromising issues, and the people with the closest ties to the president; instead, they are only investigating those they find it impossible to exonerate because of the amount of evidence against them.

As a result, our position was to treat the arrests as a victory brought about by citizen pressure, but also as not good enough, given that not nearly all those who had received bribes were arrested, neither those who had paid the bribes, provided illicit campaign funding or inflated public works costs. In media terms we already won the debate, but in order to maintain the pressure we are currently planning another national march for 16 July, in which we are going to address our list of demands directly to the president.

It should be noted that an additional demand has been added to our list since the arrests: we want a clean-up of the judiciary. We have specifically singled out some judges who have



shown to be complicit with impunity and demanded that they do not intervene in the Odebrecht case. In the course of the process, in combination with our main tactic – street mobilisation – we have also filed a number of lawsuits, and a depuration of the justice system is our only hope that they will run their course. For now they have not progressed much, but we think that we will eventually see some gains in the judicial terrain as well. Not all those who are guilty will be punished, but still many more will fall.

6. Have you faced any kind of restriction on the freedoms of association, expression or assembly that would hinder activism?

So far we have not experienced any major obstacles. Our marches have been peaceful and well organised, and there has been no repression. In the case of the big march we held in the capital, we had to divert our route a bit: we wanted to march by the National Palace, but we were forced to take a detour and we accepted that in order to avoid causing trouble. Throughout the process there were just a few isolated incidents worth mentioning. In the town of Moca, in the department of Espaillat, one of our activists was arrested for alleged drug possession, but it was later proved that the police had planted the drugs in order to incriminate him, and he was released without charges. But we had to demonstrate to demand his release. There was also a situation of violence, although not targeted against *Marcha Verde* directly but against a group of youths who take part in our marches. This group wanted to mount a camp across the street from the Attorney General's Office, and was evicted with tear gas. There were also arrests, but we protested and the detainees were soon released.

We take great care that there is no violence in our demonstrations, not just because it is an excuse for repression, but also because we know that violence drives people away. We want citizens to feel safe while marching with us. So we have a security team in charge of demonstrations, and we take good care not to damage anything and leave everything clean.

- Civic space in the Dominican Republic is rated as “obstructed” in the [CIVICUS Monitor](#).
- Get in touch with Marcha Verde through their [Facebook](#) page, or follow [@CeroImpunidadRD](#) on Twitter.

