



Yuniol Ramírez
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Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

YUNIOR RAMÍREZ

LATE ON A BALMY CARIBBEAN afternoon, in the Manoguayabo neighbourhood of Santo Domingo Oeste, police retrieved the submerged corpse of attorney and professor Yuniol Ramírez. Earlier the same day, 13 October 2017, the outspoken anti-corruption advocate had been kidnapped outside his office, driven to an unknown location and shot once in the face. His corpse was thrown into a tributary of the Río Haina, chained to a pair of cement blocks.

A visible social activist and president of the Dominican Republic lawyers' association, Ramírez, 45, was killed for investigating corruption in the national bus company, the Oficina Metropolitana de Servicios de Autobuses, or OMSA. Before his murder, fares on OMSA buses had been increasing by over two and a half times the standard rate.

Three days after the killing, the police had issued 24 arrest warrants. Several OMSA leaders were then arrested and charged with extortion, embezzlement and conspiracy to commit murder.

The death of Ramírez reverberated across Santo Domingo and the entire country, sparking an outcry from lawyers, professors, and citizens. Overseas, the European Council of Bars and Law Societies, which represents more than a million European attorneys, wrote to Dominican Republic president, Danilo Medina, to demand 'a full and impartial investigation'. At a press conference a few days after Ramírez's death, prosecutor Olga Diná told reporters

that OMSA assistant director Argenis Contreras and employee José Antonio Mercado had murdered Ramírez because the attorney had refused a RD\$4 million (about US\$76 000) bribe from OMSA director Manuel Antonio Rivas to end an inquiry into corruption practices in the transport company.

According to Diná, Rivas had told businessman Eddy Rafael Santana to pay Ramírez RD\$1 million in exchange for not revealing evidence of corruption at OMSA. The payment would have been an advance on the full bribe intended to be paid to Ramírez.

On 17 October, authorities placed Rivas, OMSA financial director Faustino Rosario (who was also a senior officer in the country's national police service) and Santana in pre-trial detention. Days later, Mercado, who, together with Contreras, had kidnapped Ramírez, was also arrested.

Many of Santo Domingo’s residents have their own Yuniol Ramírez stories. Three blocks from the city’s colonial zone, Raul, 27, described the attorney’s 5 a.m. jogs near the Playa Montesinos waterfront, which served an investigative rather than athletic purpose: ‘In the early mornings, child molesters used to go down to the beach,’ Raul said. ‘They would prey on the kids without families there or look for homeless children sleeping.’ According to Raul, Ramírez was doing surveillance while jogging – efforts that would later result in the arrest and conviction of several paedophiles.

Although many Dominicans emigrated to the United States, the country has become a migrant destination of its own. Since 2016, more than 30 000 Venezuelans have fled to the Dominican Republic following their country’s economic collapse. Before his death, Ramírez was part of a movement to protect the legal status of Venezuelan migrants by ensuring they could register for and receive residential documents upon arrival.

Ranzo Saavadra, 23, never met Ramírez but was just as affected by his reputation and life as those who had. Born in Acarigua, Venezuela, Ranzo moved to the Dominican Republic in 2016 as part of a recent wave of Venezuelan emigration. Although he once hoped to study criminal justice, Ranzo works at a Santo Domingo hotel. Each month, he coordinates with his brother, who migrated to Colombia, to send money back to their mother in Venezuela.

When asked about Ramírez, Ranzo’s face lit up with recognition and respect for a man whose legend was robust in life but has only grown in death. For Ranzo, the myth of Ramírez was not for his titles – influential lawyer; college professor; community leader – but because of what his sacrifices said about who he cared for. ‘Rich people don’t take the bus,’ Ranzo said, highlighting the reverence he felt for an influential man who died confronting a public transportation racket that preyed upon the poor.

That reverence was also apparent in a law student who was with Ramírez the day he died. ‘We were meeting in his office when he received a call. He walked down to the parking lot. Several people I

did not know were there,’ said the student, who prefers to remain anonymous because investigators have interviewed her multiple times and she fears her safety would be threatened if her identity were to be made public. The student was aware of OMSA’s attempts to bribe Ramírez, and assumed the conversation was related to the issue. ‘They spoke to him and then he got into a blue van.’ No shots were heard and, according to the student, Ramírez did not struggle.



‘RAMÍREZ HAD SOUGHT TO BREAK A CORRUPT SYSTEM’

In April 2018, six months after the murder, Contreras, who, prosecutors say, planned the assassination and shot Ramírez in the vehicle, was arrested in New Jersey by United States authorities, where he was in hiding with associates from the Dominican community. The same day, the assassin’s wife, Heidi Peña, was arrested in Santo Domingo as a co-conspirator. Contreras, whose asylum petition filed with American authorities was rejected in October 2018, has appealed the ruling, and remains incarcerated in the United States. If his appeal fails, Contreras will be extradited to the Dominican Republic and charged with murder.

‘The omission of truth legitimizes the lie,’ Yuniol Ramírez had proclaimed in his single-sentence Twitter biography. At the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, where Ramírez was a professor, his likeness remains a fixture at informational booths for FAPROUASD, the university’s association of professors, with whom he lobbied for increased teacher pay. The FAPROUASD community, which declared three days of mourning after the murder, upholds Ramírez as a martyr for the university and the association’s ideals. In June 2018, to honour Ramírez’s memory – and possibly to thwart any lingering questions about his own associations with the bus corruption – President Medina awarded the union’s teachers a five per cent pay increase.

Ramírez died because he had led an investigation that threatened the underpinnings of a criminal network that used political power to exploit millions of the Dominican Republic’s citizens and residents each day. After the arrest of the OMSA directors, bus fares returned to the ordinary price. Although Ramírez had sought to break a corrupt system through the rule of law, it took his murder for him to succeed in doing so. The OMSA conspirators responsible for the extortion scheme are jailed indefinitely. And, for the foreseeable future, the country’s bus fares are likely to remain unchanged.



The river where Ramírez's corpse was found
Above, the parking lot where he had been kidnapped