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Officials In Haiti Scramble To Meet Election Dates As Lavalas Participation And Voter Turnout Remain In Doubt

by LADB Staff

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An influential group in Haiti, driven by the need to establish some semblance of government in the ravaged country, appears to have hit upon a concept that might be called democratization-without-representation. The seven-member Council of Sages, which, backed by the US government, picked the interim government now nominally ruling Haiti, has recommended that the Fanmi Lavalas party of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) be barred from planned elections. The rationale for the disenfranchisement of Haiti's largest political party is, in great part, that Lavalas encourages violence.

In defense of the rationale, the Council of Sages accused the party and a likely presidential candidate, Gerard Jean-Juste, of the murder of a well-known journalist. The body of the journalist was found July 18, bearing signs of torture. The Council released a statement saying, "Political groups that identify themselves with Fanmi Lavalas, and particularly with Mr. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, continue to promote and tolerate violence." With that as prelude, the Council's statement went on to recommend the interim government "make the bold political and beneficial decision to disqualify the Fanmi Lavalas party from the electoral process."

Electoral Council overrules Sages

In an atmosphere where both the legitimacy and the timetable of the elections remains in doubt, Haiti's provisional electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) eschewed the Sages' advice. Said Rosamond Pradel, CEP spokesperson, "The election is for all parties of Haiti." Lavalas is the country's largest and most organized political force. The Sages' recommendation, while accorded little merit, may have stimulated prominent members of the party to express willingness to participate in the elections, however. The party had previously said it would field no candidates unless ousted President Aristide was allowed to return from exile in South Africa and other leaders were released from prison. Lavalas participation would seem crucial to any claim of legitimacy for a new government.

Former Lavalas senator Louis Gerald Gilles, a leader of what is called in the media the party's moderate wing, said they were conferring with Aristide, still head of the party, on a public statement calling for participation. "We have the obligation to join the elections and to win them," said Gilles. Former Lavalas deputy Rudy Heriveaux backed Gilles' statement. "Its 100% sure. We'll make the official statement in the coming days," he said. But Jonas Petit, a party leader in exile, saw it differently. He told reporters, "It's absolutely false. It's contrary to the official position of our party." Petit said the others were caving in to pressure from the interim government. The difficulty in mounting elections is not limited to party participation.

Edwin Paraison, ex-Haitian consul in the Dominican Republic, agreed that elections without the major party would not be "healthy," but he noted that, while there is an "electoral fever" within the ruling class, there is little enthusiasm in the electorate. Before elections, he said, "Haitians who are responsible for the destiny of the nation must agree on a development plan for the country and, at the same time, ensure democratic governability." The UN Development Program (UNDP), together with the interim government, organized a workshop on July 26 that seemed to reflect Paraison's view.

A UNDP press release said that the workshop brought together all the factions of all the parties planning to compete in the upcoming elections. "It provided a forum for in-depth consideration by the participants of such important issues as the national budget, implementation of the Interim Cooperation Framework (ICF) prepared by the Transitional Government with the support of the international community the environment, poverty reduction efforts, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In addition to members of the Government, the workshop also benefited from the participation of representatives of civil-society organizations and development-cooperation agencies," said the release.

Both Gilles and Heriveaux, as well as other Lavalas representatives, attended the workshop. A UNDP spokesperson said that over 200 people attended, representing, she stressed, more than 100 parties. But even while the parties are being schooled, the major problem continues to be the disinterested, violence-weary, or otherwise disengaged electorate.

With the first election in October fast approaching, only somewhere between 5% and 13% of eligible voters have registered. Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue said the Aug. 9 deadline would have to be extended to September, but he insisted the Oct. 9 and Nov. 13 elections would be held on time. Latortue said the government would begin to print electoral cards only after 1 million people registered. The most optimistic estimate now is that 600,000 have registered. "My experience in Haiti is that people always wait until the last minute to register," Latortue said.

Latortue said he was aware that his government would be judged by its ability to hold these elections successfully, and he disagreed with the Sages that Lavalas be excluded. "The government will not exclude anybody from the electoral process," he said.

Lavalas potential candidate jailed

There may be some reason to doubt that. The interim prime minister's comments came one day after Gerard Jean-Juste was jailed in connection with the murder of prominent Haitian journalist Jacques Roche of the Haitian daily *Le Matin*. Jean-Juste, a Catholic priest like Aristide when he first ran for president, is a contender for nomination as the Lavalas presidential candidate (see *NotiCen*, 2005-04-28). Jean-Juste was arrested after what authorities claimed was a "public clamor" for his apprehension by angry demonstrators at the journalist's funeral on July 23.

Reports, however, said the public only began clamoring after Haitian Minister of Culture Magalie Comeau Denis, in a speech at the funeral for Roche, told the crowd the decedent was killed by armed gangs loyal to Aristide. "They killed Jacques and abandoned his body on the streets for all of

us to see, in order to frighten us," said Comeau Denis. "We are not afraid. We will never be afraid." When Jean-Juste showed up to pay his respects at the funeral, Aristide opponents attacked him. Jean-Juste was thereupon led away by Haitian police and UN peacekeeping troops. Although he was in Miami at the time of the killing, he was questioned at the police station for much of the day and then locked up on suspicion of involvement, according to his lawyer, Mario Joseph.

Joseph called the allegation "ridiculous," while James Derozin, a Lavalas spokesman, said Lavalas had nothing to do with the murder. "If anyone committing violence and other criminal activities claims he is a member of Fanmi Lavalas, we say it is not true," said Derozin. "Those who believe in violence are our opponents because they used violence to overthrow President Aristide, a democratically elected leader."

Latortue called Jean-Juste's appearance at the funeral "a provocation," but the priest, speaking on the US radio program Democracy Now on his way to the funeral, said, "I'm going to show myself because his parents are from my town, and, at a certain time, one of his relatives saved my life. I was being attacked by a mob, and then Mrs. Roche came out, saw me, and...sheltered me at her house. So this is why I feel that I should be there regardless that they keep accusing Lavalas people of participating in the killings."

UN efforts to put a lid on violence could also be contributing to voter reluctance. On July 6, more than 400 UN troops stormed the Cite Soleil slum, a Lavalas stronghold, in an early morning raid against pro-Aristide gangs. Journalists were prevented from witnessing the events, making it impossible to verify residents' claims that the troops were responsible for civilian deaths. Residents said the troops opened fire, a charge that UN mission spokesman Damian Onses-Cardona denied. He said five gang members were killed, including Emmanuel Dread Wilme, leader of a pro-Aristide gang. Onses-Cardona said he has testimony that gang members killed several suspected informants after the raid.

Neighbors and relatives of five men, two children, and two women killed in the raid are furious at their deaths. Ali Bescnaci, head of the Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) mission in Haiti, said his hospital received 27 gunshot victims from the Cite Soleil raid. He said, "It's an enormous figure for a single day."

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