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Haiti Backtracks On Election Dates

by LADB Staff

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Haiti will postpone local elections, scheduled for Oct. 9, until after legislative and presidential elections. Those latter elections will be moved up to Nov. 6 from Nov. 13. A runoff presidential election, should it be necessary, will be held Dec. 11. In other changes, it has been announced that representatives of the party of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Fanmi Lavalas, have officially notified the provisional electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) that the party will participate. Interim Chief of Cabinet Michel Brunache said the CEP had decided to postpone the local elections until late December so that the country could better prepare for the national contests.

In a Reuters report, however, the postponement was taken as "a sign of the troubles that Haiti faces organizing a vote amid political and gang violence that has killed some 900 people since September." The changes will not affect the interim government's intention to hand over power by Feb. 7, government sources said. The date coincides with the official end of Aristide's term. But the changes in election dates have already contradicted official prognostications. Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue had insisted until very recently that the original Oct. 9 and Nov. 13 dates would not be altered (see NotiCen, 2005-07-28).

Preparation for the elections will be no small matter. Relative chaos continues to simmer on the streets, barely a quarter of those eligible have registered to vote, and, at last count, no fewer than 63 parties have signed up to field candidates. The international community has made efforts to get these parties to coalesce into a manageable number, but to no avail.

Legitimacy is on the line

The CEP has not yet concluded the work of determining the eligibility of all the parties in accordance with electoral laws. Encouraged by a recent upsurge in voter registrations, the CEP has, however, extended the registration deadline to Sept. 15, in the hope of getting a turnout sufficient to legitimize the exercise. Also putting legitimacy in question is the matter of the Lavalas registration. The party officials who registered the country's largest party, Yvon Feuille, Louis Gerald Gilles, and Rudy Heriveaux, are all members of its moderate wing. It remains unclear whether they acted for other factions, on record as opposing participation out of loyalty to Aristide, whom they still consider to be president. The moderates' motivations are also in doubt.

Heriveaux was the only one of the three to speak to the media following the signup, and he said they acted to "force the judicial authorities to liberate the political prisoners." Many Lavalas members have been jailed, most notably former prime minister Yvon Neptune, Catholic priest Gerard Jean-Juste, a potential presidential candidate and Aristide supporter (see NotiCen, 2005-04-28), and former interior minister Jocelerme Privert. All three are imprisoned in connection with murders, but none has been charged. Privert and Neptune have been in prison for many months.

A victory for Lavalas would be a setback for the US, which fomented and led international opposition to Aristide, and would open the way for Aristide to return to Haiti from exile in South Africa. Said Herivaux, "We registered to participate in the election, which we will win, in order to end the political persecutions, arbitrary arrests, and detentions and the summary executions our members have been subject to." Other members of the moderates have told the media that the decision to run was not unanimous but that they are in discussion with the more radical factions.

UN special representative and head of the UN mission in Haiti Juan Gabriel Valdes said he welcomed the Lavalas decision and warned that any attempt to prevent anyone from participating would not be tolerated. Valdes is reported to have asked the party to register, saying, "The registration of Fanmi Lavalas is essential for the elections." Valdes has said the participation of Lavalas and the announced extension would allow the country to reach the goal of 3.5 million registrations. So far the number stands at 1.5 million, approximately 25% of the electorate.

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