

10-6-2005

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## Recommended Citation

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## **International Pressure Forces Haiti Toward Elections**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Haiti*

*Published: 2005-10-06*

Haiti's national elections have once again been thrown into question as authorities have begun to doubt they can field a credible contest by Nov. 20. The date has been moved up twice already (see NotiCen, 2005-08-11), and now a member of the provisional electoral council (Conceil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) has said it may be necessary to delay balloting until late December or January. Authorities are under great pressure to have a president take office by Feb. 7 to comply with the provisions of the Constitution. The pressure is coming from several sides.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited the country to hasten the process along, while members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have expressed reservations about the outcome of any vote under the deplorable conditions that exist in Haiti. Secretary Rice arrived in Haiti on Sept. 27, having announced her trip only 24 hours in advance for reasons related to her own safety. She traveled about on the one-day visit under the tightest possible security precautions. She was reported to be under pressure to push authorities to get the elections over and done.

The US has invested US\$100 million in the country since it facilitated the removal under duress of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) in February 2004 and has, by its own reckoning, more pressing matters to attend to, both nationally and internationally. Yet, Rice's statements reflected a recognition that Haiti is in no condition to hold elections. She had come to praise Caesar, not to bury him.

In a pre-arrival announcement, US State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack said, "She wants to go down there and see what progress they have made and urge them to make continued progress." But dismay underlay her comments on what she saw. While no friend of Fanmi Lavalas, the nation's largest party, she was constrained to observe the inept way the justice system had dealt with the party's presidential candidate and other party officials. She cited the jailing of Fanmi Lavalas candidate Gerard Jean-Juste (see NotiCen, 2005-09-08) and the long-imprisoned former prime minister Yvon Neptune as cases in point. "Justice has to come in a timely fashion and it should not be the case that anyone can interpret that there is some kind of political motive here," Rice said, pressed perhaps by a letter signed by religious leaders from throughout the US to the State Department, the US Embassy in Haiti, and the interim Haitian government calling for the release of Jean-Juste.

Patrick Fequiere, a member of the CEP, speaking on Haitian radio, said Rice was getting the picture. He said that, in a meeting with the CEP, Rice understood the situation sufficiently to be forced to use "veiled words" in describing it. "She said that decisions could not be made, that decisions which should have been made could not be made. She said that the CEP did not lean enough on the foreign players." Scant resources undermine election planning Fequiere is chair of the CEP's electoral operations committee.

It is he who said an election would not be possible on schedule. "Because I am here, I know what resources are here," said Fequiere. "I tell you that there are no resources to allow the CEP members to deliver the goods when they say they will deliver them, unless they first reach an agreement with Minustah [the UN mission] and the Organization of American States (OAS) on logistical issues for the rest of the electoral operations." The agreements would be memoranda of understanding that would provide material resources, chairs, tables, buildings, ballots, to hold an election. Without them, Fequiere doubts a credible election could happen within a year or more if the country has to rely on its own resources.

Fequiere alluded to a dysfunctional CEP. "I have been sending out an SOS for a long time, saying that I do not have a competent general manager, that I do not have a competent director of electoral operations," he said. "They dismissed people here in November 2004 and never replaced them. People began to be hired here in July and I do not know on what basis they have been hired, whether it was on the basis of competence. Can you imagine how long it takes to set up BEDs [departmental electoral offices] and BECs [communal electoral councils]?"

A recent Americas Program Policy Report from the International Relations Center (IRC) provided some perspective on Fequiere's logistical problems. It noted that the insufficiency of polling and registration places mostly disadvantages the urban and rural poor. By mid-July, there were three registration places in Petionville, an upscale suburb, and only three in the entire Central Plateau department, a large rural district. There remain none in Cite Soleil with its 300,000 urban poor inhabitants, and just one in Bel-Air, another poor enclave.

Haiti's previous governments provided over 10,000 voter-registration offices and polling places nationwide, whereas, said the IRC report, the present authority plans to field 424. It compared the situation to Los Angeles County, in California, also due for a November election. There, with a slightly larger population but only 37% of the land area and infinitely better transportation and security, there will be 4,400 polling places. The broken electoral machinery is producing still more problems that, beyond putting an on-schedule election in question, will put the outcome of an eventual election in doubt.

Authorities have at this juncture no way to know who or how many will vote. At the close of the registration period, 2.4 million of 4.5 million eligible voters had registered, but that is largely because the interim government decreed that a voter card would be needed by any citizen who wanted to get a driver's license, national ID card, passport, or other official document.

### *Voters affronted by manipulations*

It is known, however, that prospective voters are put off by CEP manipulations that have resulted in striking many would-be candidates from the ballot, including Jean-Juste. The CEP has responded to the resulting outrage by declining to deal with the protests of the candidates, their organizations and supporters, and telling them they would have to seek recourse in the courts, effectively consigning them to nonparticipation. High on the list of potential walk-aways is Lavalas. After making it clear that none but Jean-Juste would be their candidate, the party has regressed to the turmoil it briefly overcame with his nomination. Moderates have provisionally registered former senator Luis-Gerard

Gilles, causing grassroots leaders to say that they and their constituents would abstain from voting. The CEP has until Oct. 7 to reverse its decision but has given no hint that it might do that.

On Sept. 20, Samba Boukman, of the Mouvmman Rezistans Baz Popile, told a news conference, "If Father Jean-Juste cannot run as the candidate of Lavalas, our party will not go to the polls." Boukman's organization encompasses about two dozen grassroots Lavalas organizations across the country. He called upon the international community to intervene to prevent the elections from becoming "an absolute failure." Apart from Rice's statement concerning the Lavalas prisoners, there has been no public indication the international community has gotten involved.

Boukman promised a resumption of protests and marches if the deadline passes without restoring his candidate, but left open the question of how Lavalas would deal with an eventual government. "We have not yet decided what actions we will take in the case that the elections are held, an elected government takes office, and that government starts working in favor of the poor people of Haiti. We don't know if we will support them or continue with our mobilizations." The new government, if it comes into existence under the present circumstances, risks being shunned not only by its own people but by neighboring states as well.

On Sept. 30, Barbados Prime Minister Owen Arthur, speaking in New York, said, "We do not believe CARICOM should recognize, or admit to our deliberations, a government that's not a democratic government." The Caribbean Community has refused to recognize the Haitian interim government, and Arthur said the current circumstances in Haiti are not acceptable to CARICOM. "Now, if you have elections where such a large proportion of the society has been disenfranchised, we could not honor the obligation in the Caribbean to recognize the government as a legitimate government, even though the process might have been gone through of an election having been called," he warned.

Arthur gave the interim government a prescription for recognition of a future regime: it must immediately release all political prisoners and desist from abusing people opposed to the government's policies. His statement came a week after St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves told the 60th Session of the UN General Assembly that CARICOM wanted to readmit Haiti, "but it would be a betrayal of all that we hold dear to ignore the interruption of democracy, the abuses of human rights, and the breakdown of law and order merely to appease perfidious power."

-- End --