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Haiti Holds Elections After Four Postponements; CARICOM Weighs Recognition

by Mike Leffert

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Haiti held its presidential elections Feb. 7. The event started chaotically, but, in the end, large numbers of people voted. Preliminary results indicate that former President Rene Preval prevailed, but it remains unclear whether he won outright with more than 50% of the total or whether a second round will have to be called.

The national scene was tense, and five people died in incidents, but an anticipated explosion of violence did not happen. In one incident, a policeman shot into a crowd and killed a person. The crowd then lynched the officer. International observers remain concerned.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appealed to Haitians to respect the election results. "As the new authorities assume their responsibilities," said Annan in New York, "it will be essential that all political and social actors come together in a spirit of national reconciliation and dialogue."

It was a primitive affair. In rural areas, voters walked for hours to arrive at a spot where they squatted in the dust behind cardboard barriers less than a meter high to fill out their paper ballots. When it was all done, counters worked overnight by candlelight, having received the collected slips by mule. Helicopters then flew the tallies and ballots to the capital. Turnout seemed high and might be the highest in the country's history. Even this outcome is not without its problems.

Candidate Charles Baker, who ran second to Preval in polls, said, "People were voting three, four, five times. Was it widespread? We don't know yet." He said the process was unable to cope. Voters in some places had to wait hours until their polling stations opened.

In some places poll workers tore off stickers used to identify designated stations. "I went to the first line and they took it off. Then I went to a second line and they told me I could not vote because I didn't have it. This is not fair," said Gertha Estira, who still had not voted after waiting six hours.

The election had been delayed four times (see NotiCen, 2006-01-05), and the internationals were glad to have done with it, their own reputations somewhat tarnished along with those of the local officials by the repeated failures, the violence, and the juridical irregularities that led up to it. But, despite the congratulations all around, it is uncertain whether these elections will be seen as free, fair, and legitimate.

Caricom wary

The Caribbean Community (Caricom) withheld recognition of the interim government under whose aegis the elections were held. Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue appealed to Caricom leaders,

who are scheduled to meet in Trinidad on Feb. 8 for their intersessional summit, to recognize the election. Latortue said hopefully, "The people of Haiti have voted. They will return to democracy and the new government, the transfer of power, will be made on March 29, which is Constitution Day, and Haiti will be able to rejoin the Caricom family." There is no great certainty that will happen.

Prime Minister Kenny Anthony of St. Lucia called that same day for changes to the Caribbean Community Charter on Civil Society specifically in light of the Haitian elections. "We need to include provisions that would make it absolutely clear that any member state that breaches the fundamental principles of the charter will become eligible to be withdrawn from the corridors of the institutions of Caricom," he said. St. Lucia was one of the Caricom countries that refused any relationship with the US-backed Latortue administration following elected Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) overthrow (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). Caricom has not allowed Haitian participation in its deliberations since.

Anthony said the charter changes would ensure that in the future a decision to exclude a country would not be susceptible to question. Of the election, he said he would be willing to have Haiti re-enter Caricom if the Feb. 7 exercise turns out to have been free and fair, but he added, "Obviously we would have to await the pronouncements of the OAS [Organization of American States] and UN observers, but it seems to me that they do have some very real challenges as there continues to be sporadic violence." Anthony was concerned to verify that no one had been disenfranchised because of party affiliations or candidate preference. This seemed to be aimed at charges that there had been systematic efforts on the part of the interim government to exclude members of Fanmi Lavalas, the party of Aristide.

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