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Preval Says Aristide Can Come Home To Haiti; Internationals Fear The Worst

by Mike Leffert

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Haiti's new president, Rene Preval, took a sharp slap at the former interim government and the US policy that installed it with the announcement that former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) could come home. Aristide has been in exile since February 2004, after he was taken from the country by US operatives. Aristide has said repeatedly that his presidency was undermined by the US and that he was exiled against his will (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04, 2004-03-18, and 2004-04-01).

Preval has been relatively silent since the international community stepped in to give him the victory that Haitian electoral officials appeared intent on denying him after the Feb. 7 elections (see NotiCen, 2006-02-16). But on Feb. 22 he announced, "My position is simple on President Aristide and any other citizen who wants to come to Haiti. Article 41 of the Haitian Constitution says that no Haitian needs a visa to enter or leave the country."

In Pretoria, South Africa, where Aristide has been living, the ex-president said that he was ready to end his unconstitutional exile but that the timing would be up to "my president." He said the date would be determined in consultations with Preval, the UN, the Caribbean Community (Caricom), and the South African government. South Africa has said it wants assurances that Aristide would be safe in Haiti.

The relationship between Preval and Aristide is complex. At one time they called each other twins, but they had a falling out, and Preval was not among those who called for Aristide's return after his abduction. Preval was a protege of Aristide, serving as his prime minister for a time. Preval was elected president in 1994, when the Constitution forbade a second, consecutive term for Aristide.

It has been difficult for the media to assess the present relationship between the two. Aristide has declined to say whether he has been in touch with Preval, saying only, "It's a private issue." And, when asked directly about their relations, he would only say, "I care about democracy. I care about my president, so when you respect him, you pay attention to what he will be saying." But Aristide did, late in the campaign, ask his Fanmi Lavalas supporters to vote for Preval at a point when the party was considering boycotting the elections.

Lavalas is the nation's largest party and home to Haiti's poorest people, Preval's natural constituency, but still fiercely loyal to Aristide. Aristide was surely correct when he said, "Based on what I hear and based on what I see, the majority of the Haitian people wanted me to go back, wanted me to return. Haitian people expect that return." If and when he does return, Aristide will be the first ousted Haitian leader to do so. Baby Doc, Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971-1986), once president for life, still lives in France. Raoul Cedras (1991-1994) lives in Panama.

Aristide said he would enter Haitian society as a private citizen. "I don't need to be a politician," said the former Catholic priest, "to enjoy what I'm doing right now. Being involved in research, in education, this is a joy for me." He would continue along those lines in Haiti, where, he said, education is crucial for the development of a country where 80% are illiterate.

A question of governing Preval's announcement ends speculation, rife during the campaign, on whether he would allow it, but it opens other questions about the new president's ability to govern. Preval was the first president ever to serve out his constitutional term, but he was widely seen at the time as just holding the office until the more overt and aggressive Aristide could constitutionally return.

Already there are important differences between the two men. Unlike Aristide, Preval appears not to want to rest on his support among the multitudinous poor but to reach out to the privileged classes as well. Analysts have said that the next president would have to bridge the deep, cold crevasse that separates rich and poor. Preval has met so far with Chamber of Commerce president Reginald Boulos, peasant leader Jean Chavannes Jeune, who ran against him, and Rene Monplaisir, an activist from Cite Soleil, the Port-au-Prince slum that is a Lavalas stronghold.

The outreach seems to be bringing Preval some support from the business sectors. Pierre Leger, a vegetable-oil producer who employs 27,000 farmers in the south of the country, said, "He's going to be one of the best presidents of Haiti because he listens to people." There is the expectation now that Preval will get a lot of this kind of support in the early going, if only because there is little alternative. Confrontational politics at this low ebb in the country's trajectory could only bring more disaster to a country on the brink of extinction.

Lionel Delatour of the Centre Pour la Libre Entreprise et la Democratie (CLEDE) was thinking along those lines, too. "When you have such a polarized society, elements of the private sector are very important. Mr. Preval has some reaching out to do, but there is also an interest and a commitment on the part of the private sector to reach out to Mr. Preval." Delatour is, however, dead set against the return of Aristide. Speaking before Preval's announcement on the subject, Delatour predicted, "If he does try to bring Aristide back, Preval will not finish his presidency. I think Mr. Preval is smart enough not to do that."

Preval may turn out to be even smarter. His burgeoning alliance with Monplaisir could be sowing the seeds of change among the militant poor. Monplaisir, influential in Cite Soliel, has spoken on the radio recently, expressing a need for the new government to work with the business elite to create jobs and infrastructure.

As the new president threads his way through the minefield that is his country, the internationals look on nervously. Most foreign diplomats in Haiti have spoken out against a return of Aristide, using the familiar language of destabilization, foreign aid, and foreign investment.

And some in the business sector doubt that Preval can pull the balancing act off. "He's already spent five years in power and didn't do very much. I really don't expect very much from him now, either,"

said Charles Baker, a garment-factory owner who ran against Preval. But, said the businessman, "I'm hoping to be very wrong."

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