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Preval Reestablishes Relations With The World As Legislative Elections Determine Fate Of His Presidency

by Mike Leffert

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Haiti is about to go through another election. With scarcely a couple of months to catch its breath since the presidential election won by Rene Preval (see NotiCen, 2006-02-16), the country faces another democratic exercise April 21, this time to pick a legislature. The vote is important for Preval, who takes office May 14, since it will determine whether he will have a friend or an adversary in the next prime minister, whom the parliament will pick.

Crucial as it is for the president-elect and the general governability of the country, indications are that the electorate is unaware of the stakes and is dangerously disinterested. Preval summed up the situation, saying, "Without support from parliament, there is not much a person can do." To be decided are 97 seats in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, and 30 seats in the Senate. These are runoffs; just two candidates, from rival parties, won outright in the first round in February. The Constitution requires that the party holding at least half the seats pick the prime minister, but no one party has enough candidates in the runoff to gain that majority on its own.

The prime minister is the chief of government. That person names all public administrators, forms the Cabinet, and conducts policies.

Of consummate importance in this violent and chaotic nation, the prime minister presides over the National Police High Council, the hub of state security and safety. In the weeks leading up to these elections, both Preval and his opposition have been meeting with candidates in quest of a majority. The push now is to get people to vote. Voting in February, for most Haitians, was an exhausting ordeal. Many had to walk miles to a polling place, many had to stand in line for hours, many were refused the franchise because of lost or erroneous voting lists. Now many are indicating that they are not ready to go through that again.

Provisional Electoral Council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) director-general Jacques Bernard has been on national radio trying to drum up enthusiasm. He has acknowledged the hardships and the tendency for people under the best circumstances to ignore runoffs. He has promised better security this time around. "We are calling on people to go to the polls and vote quietly," he told the mass audience. "We have been assured that MINUSTAH [the UN mission in Haiti] and the Haitian National Police (PNH) will ensure the safety of the voters." Bernard even promised to provide food for local election officials. Voting delays left these volunteers hungry and humiliated in February, some working more than 24 hours without water. He said the CEP had "made an inventory of all the problems we faced on Feb. 7" and solved them.

The international election observers have also been busy trying to improve the situation over that of February. Short-term observers, 130 of them, from the International Mission for Monitoring Haitian Elections (IMMHE) arrived in country April 15. They, along with 20 long-term observers,

have already been deployed throughout the ten departments. The IMMHE has studied the February experience and issued a report aimed at making changes in the process. "This report contains a number of specific recommendations to improve the electoral process for the second round," said Jean-Pierre Kingsley, chief electoral officer of Canada.

The IMMHE is the largest of the observer delegations and is coordinating with the others to monitor the opening of polling stations, the process, ballot counting and tabulation, and transmission of results. All these factors contributed to the deficiencies in the last election that led to dangerously delayed results that required extraordinary interventions to arrive at a winner, Preval.

The potential for violence, a prime mover of voter disinclination, has not abated and may have increased (see NotiCen, 2006-02-09). Angry candidates who have been disqualified for any of a number of reasons threaten to disrupt the election. Several incidents have already occurred in the provinces, belying assurances that the PNH will ensure voter safety. One of those incidents was the burning of a police station in Maissade in the Central Plateau, according to Mario Andresol, Haiti's police chief. The event robbed Andresol's statement of credibility when he said, "We know there is a potential for violence, but the Haitian police and UN troops are prepared to quell any violent attack against the election."

President-elect busy repairing political damage

Aside from trying to piece together a legislative majority from the myriad parties, Preval has been busy trying to demonstrate his ability to put the fractured country back together. He has met with Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) officials to get funding in a context where everything is a priority. Ruined institutions must be restructured, and others must be created. The judicial system is corrupt, impunity rampant. Without these institutions, security issues cannot begin to be addressed, say analysts.

There is at present, according to reports, little electricity in Haiti. High fuel prices have stalled the economy at every level. Water is in short supply. Roads are impassable, even with the interim government's claim that it has built more kilometers of road in two years than had the previous governments. In sum, said a national radio commentator speaking to the nation, "The country has nothing, almost. People are just surviving."

Preval recently spent five days in Cuba in search of help. He met there with Adan Chavez, Venezuela's ambassador to Cuba and brother of President Hugo Chavez. Preval came away from that meeting with a deal to join Petrocaribe, Venezuela's initiative to provide Caribbean countries with fuel on favorable and affordable terms.

With President Fidel Castro and other officials, Preval got a commitment from Cuba to send technicians to deal with the electrical system and doctors to shore up the deficient medical-service delivery system. Preval was accompanied on his trip to Cuba by 60 young Haitians who have scholarships to study medicine and 535 poor Haitians who will have free eye surgery by virtue of the Cuban program Operation Miracle. The new students join 600 Haitians already there studying to

serve their country's immense health needs. Preval has said that, in Haiti, Cuban doctors are of an order of importance second only to God.

Cuba maintains a cadre of doctors in Haiti and receives no compensation. They work in the poorest and most remote areas of the country and have performed more than eight million medical consultations and more than 100,000 surgical operations. Attending to other needs, Cuba has already sent engineers to help refurbish and operate a sugar refinery. Preval is uniquely positioned to benefit from Cuban expertise.

During his 1996-2001 presidency, relations with Cuba were warm, deteriorating only after the US-installed government took power two years ago. "President Preval had a good relationship with Cuba so he's going there to restart the relationship," said Preval spokesperson Voice Assad. "Cuba has done a lot to help Haiti and the president wants to see how we can make the relationship better."

During the Cuba trip, Preval appeared on national TV on the famed Mesa Redonda program. He said on the program that the international aid that Haiti needs now is like what Cuba is giving. He mentioned the 400 doctors, the Cuban veterinarians who work with the small farmers there, and the engineers working on the sugar plant. He mentioned the medical training that began in 1998 and already has Haitian doctors practicing in their own communities. He mentioned Haitians being trained in computer sciences by Cuba. He said he found this kind of aid superior to the billions of dollars in aid from elsewhere that seems to go up in smoke, if it ever arrives in Haiti at all.

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