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Haiti's Legislative Runoff: A Bit Tarnished And Poorly Attended, But Good For Preval

by Mike Leffert

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Haiti's April 24 legislative runoff elections went off without major problems, and the results spelt moderately good news for President-elect Rene Preval. With 98% of the votes counted, Preval's Lespwa party had won at least 11 of 30 seats in the Senate and about 20 in the lower house, easily beating the opposition parties. Without a majority, however, Preval still needs to form a coalition government because no party had enough candidates to win a majority in either house of parliament.

Turnout was sparse, but not as bad as first reported. Early estimates were that only 15% of voters showed up to cast ballots, but later tabulations put the number closer to 30%. Some smaller-party leaders have indicated support for Preval in the legislature, another good sign.

Evans Paul, whose Parti Alliance Democratique won a Senate seat and 11 deputy positions, said, "We cannot demand that he share his victory with us; it is he who won." Micha Gaillard of the Fusion des Sociaux-Democrates Haitienne, with three Senate and 12 congressional seats, said, "We are going to support the government of President Preval; there will be no obstruction."

Paul Denis of the Organisation de Peuple en Lutte (OPL) said, "We have no interest in opposing President Preval. He has shown himself to be open and all the conditions for governability are in place. We want success for the Preval administration. We will contribute to that."

The vote totals are important because Preval won the February election in the first round only after international officials prevailed upon the Conseil Electoral Provisoir (CEP) to alter its counting methodology. To put him over the 50% mark needed to prevent a runoff, the election authority scrapped blank ballots suspected to have been fraudulently added to the totals. The blanks amounted to 4.7% of the ballots. Once they were subtracted, Preval ended up with 51.15%, enough to put an end to a seriously marred process.

The problem for the new president is that this intervention violated Haitian election law, leaving him subject to charges of illegitimacy (see NotiCen, 2006-02-16). It was thought that a big turnout in this election, together with a big win for his party, would mute those charges. This outcome does not unequivocally accomplish that.

Another hope of those invested in seeing democracy return to Haiti was that the elections would be carried off without violence. Here again, the process flowed with less violence than feared, but there were some incidents.

In Tiparis, Moron, individuals forced their way into a polling station and ordered two police officers to take off their clothes and surrender their weapons. The station was closed after the incident. In the Marie Kerothe area of Beaumont, unidentified assailants fired on a polling station. Elsewhere across the country, isolated incidents resulted in death. One person was killed in Grande-Saline when a candidate's bodyguard shot and killed his own cousin. Cousins though they were, killer and victim supported different candidates. In this case, too, voting was halted.

There were other incidents. Some wire services had it that "confusion reigned" during the vote, while the international community put a brighter face on the exercise. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the calm atmosphere was a crucial step toward placing the country on the path to peaceful and stable development. He said that excellent cooperation between Haiti and the international community resulted in an exemplary logistical and technical process. Juan Gabriel Valdes, senior UN envoy to Haiti said, "I am very satisfied with the way these elections have been held," and Haitians have restored democracy to the country. He called the local confrontations that prevented voting in some places "very regrettable."

The International Mission for Monitoring Haitian Elections (IMMHE) reported that many necessary improvements had been made after the February elections. The IMMHE report enumerated, among the improvements, making it easier for results to be reported, adding annexes to polling centers, recruiting more than 3,000 election officials and enhancing their training, clarifying procedures and improving logistics with respect to the transmission of sensitive materials, and implementing new security measures. They also noted problems that "should not be overlooked."

Some voters who had voted in the first round were prevented from doing so in the second, even though they had ID cards, because their names were not on the lists. Half the stations did not have enough seals to safeguard against tampering. There were no nationwide campaigns promoting the importance of the legislative elections. Political parties did not adequately promote their candidates. The report conjectured that this might have been the reason for poor turnout.

Finally, party representatives did not respect official election guidelines. The report recommended legislation delineating the division of powers and responsibilities among election officials and conferring upon the CEP the mandate to establish rules and policies. The IMMHE report promised a more comprehensive report in the coming weeks that would make further recommendations.

A massive task ahead

Meanwhile, Preval still faces the task of putting together a legislative coalition that will enable him to govern. Added to that, he has, says veteran Haiti commentator Michael Deibert writing in *AlterPresse*, "a massive task ahead of him: depoliticizing and professionalizing a police force that was intentionally infiltrated with gang members and criminal elements during Aristide's reign, reversing deforestation estimated at over 98% and its attendant environmental catastrophes, and making a more equitable and open economic system in a country where 80% of the population is mired in chronic poverty."

Deibert appealed for rallying round Preval and sharply criticized "self-described progressive forces outside of Haiti" for their flagging support of the Haitian electoral process "in deference to short-term political goals." He cited as example the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) for a statement asserting that "the elections, which are central to the Bush administration's desire to get the island off its foreign policy agenda, are unlikely to offer a way out of the current nightmare of instability, chaos, and violence."

The COHA statement quoted the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) as saying that the election would suffer a "lack of democratic legitimacy." From there, Deibert's article turns to attack these and other progressive organizations for undermining the election, but in the end he settles down and admonishes, "It is high time that some in the progressive movement give up their illusions about Haiti and set about helping the millions of brave and resilient people who are struggling daily to improve their lot there in substantive and demonstrative ways. The time for ruling-class activist fantasies about Haiti is finished. The time for concrete action is at hand."

-- End --