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## Haiti Continues Without Government As Legislature Rejects President's Pick For Prime Minister

by LADb Staff

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Ericq Pierre seemed like a good pick for prime minister in 1997, and he seemed like a good pick again now to Haitian President Rene Preval. But the Senate thought otherwise in 1997, rejecting Preval's choice, and they have just done it again. On May 7, Preval chose Pierre to replace deposed prime minister Eduard Alexis (see NotiCen, 2008-04-17). Then as now, Preval was faced with a political crisis. He had lost his prime minister, his government had fallen, the country was falling into resentment toward a massive presence of foreign troops, and he called upon Pierre to form a new government.

Pierre is an agricultural engineer with potentially useful ties to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). It is the prime minister in Haiti, not the president, who sees to the day-to-day running of the country, and, with the loss of Alexis, there is no one to manage a crisis brought on by rising food prices in this, the poorest of the hemisphere's nations.

There is no one to manage the influx of tens of millions of dollars from abroad meant to forestall starvation and governmental collapse. "This is a country that can't afford to sit in limbo," Robert Maguire, director of Trinity College's Haiti program, told The Miami Herald. "Hunger is a real issue in Haiti. Addressing just the humanitarian immediate need is one thing. Addressing the roots of the problem is another. This kind of political limbo does nothing toward that." But with the country at the ignition point, the nomination lay untouched for a week before the Senate, whose constitutional duty it is to form a committee to ratify the nomination, took it up.

Some senators said they wanted to see Pierre ratified, but the senate was preoccupied by the need to pass an election law. On May 8, the terms of a third of the body's 27 members expired, leaving just 18, where 16 are required by law for a quorum. This was happening amid intense political positioning as legislators jockeyed to negotiate the makeup of the new government. Preval was seeking to have some of his ministers stay on, while many legislators wanted a fresh start with a completely new Cabinet.

Pierre's strength is as a technocrat, not a politician. His selection would facilitate the relationship between Haiti and the IDB at a time when the country is desperate for money, but he is not thought of as particularly adept at the business of horse trading with canny legislators. Said IDB president Luis Alberto Moreno, "The value of a guy like Ericq Pierre is he knows the reality on the ground in Haiti and he knows how donors think. That's going to be extremely important in marshalling the resources going forward." Pierre has been with the IDB since 1980. "He's been very much an actor and analyst of the global economic trends and how they affect Haiti," said Daniel Erikson of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue (IAD). "He's obviously extremely well-equipped intellectually and with the technical skills Preval needs right now."

At a late-night session of the Senate on May 7, it appeared Preval might get what he needed; the designee passed preliminary muster. He would have to appear again later with the government he had assembled for final approval, but the Senate action allowed his candidacy to pass to the Chamber of Deputies where he would need to prove he is Haitian, that he owns property, and some other legal qualifiers. The Senate, meanwhile, passed its electoral law, but was now reduced to 18 members. Pierre went about the business of assembling a potential government and letting the world know what he intended to do as prime minister.

He told the media he would back Preval's mandate to address food prices, increase national food production (see NotiCen, 2008-04-10), and get people working. "There is a lack of food but this is also a problem of cash. There is no money," he said. "The priorities in this country look very clear. We have to fight the high cost of living and try to create jobs. Jobs, jobs and jobs." Beyond that immediate goal, Pierre said he would hew to the president's poverty-reduction framework to build a functioning economy. Preval's plan had heavy input, and therefore approval, from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). That input recalled the perils of 1997.

One of the reasons for Pierre's rejection then was his commitment to a US-supported neoliberal plan calling for firing thousands of government workers and privatizing state enterprises. Pierre said he had asked Preval not to place his name in contention if he did not think he could prevail, and he came away from the discussion with a sense that he could become prime minister.

### *Grandparents' papers defeat Pierre*

But it was not to be. It all came crashing down in the Chamber of Deputies on May 12, when the 99-member chamber voted 51-35 against him, with four abstentions. Pierre was rejected on narrow technical grounds, having to do with documentation proving his grandparents were Haitian, just as in 1997. Even with 11 years to work on it, Pierre has not been able to come up with birth certificates or other documentation. Opposition Deputy Levaillant Louis Jeune of the Fusion des Sociaux-Democrates Haitienne party offered a somewhat realer reason for the rejection, "We didn't really believe in the plan that he had for the people of this country."

The documentary requirements, while somewhat absurd in a country where record-keeping is not a strong suit, have proved useful for keeping people out of government ever since they were written into the Constitution after the 1986 fall of the regime of dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971-1986). The outcome meant Preval had to start all over again. He could renominate with the hope of making a political deal that would rehabilitate Pierre's grandparents to native status or he could find someone else. A further complication is that, with only 18 Senators left, he has to get all but two of them to agree to sit as a quorum. The country is about to enter its second month without a government.

The shell of an administration that remains can barely deal with minor daily issues. Many officials, it has been reported, no longer show up for work. The people are displeased. Leaders in Les Cayes, the city where the food riots began last month, have said violent protests would resume if the legislature did not bestir itself to install a government, and it is not only the parliament coming in for criticism. Preval is drawing criticism for moving too slowly against the waves of misfortune

buffeting the country. "He's been a disappointment to a lot of people," said human rights activist Colette Lespinasse. "The government has had its head in the clouds while the country is stuck on the ground." Lespinasse faulted Preval for accomplishing little in his two years in office and for making poor use of the international aid he's received.

These criticisms served as further echoes of Preval's first term. It took him 21 months to get a government up and running after the 1997 resignation of prime minister Rosny Smarth. Within Preval's Fwon Lespwa party, fissures began to open as at least 20 deputies voted against Pierre. Deputy Saurel Francois warned, "Those who voted against Ericq Pierre should be held responsible for any trouble or unrest that may take place in the country in the coming days." Before anyone is held responsible, however, a coherent understanding of what happened might be in order and that was not available to the public in the immediate aftermath of the vote. For some, the rejection was a reaction against the neoliberal policies with which Pierre is associated and the perception that these policies have brought the already crippled country to ruin. For others, it was understood as a sanction of Preval.

Micha Gaillard of the center-right Fusion party took this view, asking rhetorically, "Why this separation between the chief of state and his political family?" Others are focused not on the intrigues that fueled the vote but on the consequences of a protracted absence of government while the country is held together, barely, by the foreign presence upon which it has resentfully depended. There is fear of more uprisings like those brought on by people's inability to afford enough food to sustain themselves. Joseph Jasmin is a government minister in charge of relations between the executive and the legislature. He told reporters, "Ericq Pierre is finished, and he [Preval] can relaunch the process to designate a new prime minister. There could be reactions in the street if we lose much time."

The foreign presence appears to have taken up the challenge of preventing more violence. A US-bankrolled temporary-work program may have done the trick for the time being in Les Cayes. Leaders who threatened a return to the streets in the event of failure to replace ousted prime minister Alexis have accepted work cleaning streets and drainage ditches but warned they are on a short fuse. "We want housing, government sponsored community restaurants and stores, professional schools and health centers," an unnamed worker told reporters. He said the temporary jobs were given by the mayor's office and paid for by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and would buy peace only for a short time. At US\$4 a day, the workers are getting more than twice the average wage, but only 40 of them have been employed. Another worker, Charlemagne Bien-Aime, said, "They try to buy us off when they distribute food and create a few jobs, but this will not solve the problems. We'll take to the streets again as long as our demands are not met." The mayor, Yvon Chery, acknowledged the fragility of the situation. "The government needs to pay more attention and also provide more means to help address the problems," he said. Technically, however, there is no government.

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