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Haiti's Major Political Party Pulls Off Another Successful Electoral Boycott

by LADB Staff

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A Haitian election has come and gone, to little notice. The June 21 election was the runoff of the first round in April to fill 11 vacant seats in the 30-member Senate. Few contend these days that Haiti, shorn up as it is by a massive UN peacekeeping presence, enjoys anything resembling a functioning democracy, but the turnout in this election seems to indicate that most people are done with even the pretense. If anyone can claim victory, it is the largest of Haiti's political parties, Fanmi Lavalas, which organized a boycott of this election. This is the second of two successful poll-shunning exercises, the first being the April first round; hence its name, Operation Closed Door II. Lavalas organized the boycott in response to the party's exclusion from the process. Now, says boycott leader Rene Civil, "They have to hold the elections again and allow Fanmi Lavalas to participate or face having a parliament that is not recognized as legitimate by the Haitian people. They will swear them into office, but no one is going to take them seriously." No government or international official has indicated that a rerun under more transparent circumstances is likely. It is unclear whether President Rene Preval is concerned with perceptions. His government has failed to produce for the people on many issues, and he needs the runoff to put his Lespwa-party candidates in the Senate or continue to fail on matters of interest to the people. It is also probable that he would fail on other issues including economic reforms and some constitutional amendments that the international community has urged. Even with the Senate at his back, there are no guarantees Preval will become a people's president. When the parliament passed a minimum-wage bill last week that would boost the daily wage from US\$2 to US\$5.14, Preval refused to sign it into law, stirring up student protests that persisted up to election day. Peacekeepers and police met the rock-throwing protests with tear gas. The pro-boycott local press took a markedly different view of the election than did the international media. They burlesqued the performance of Brazilian Ambassador Igor Kipman, who, arriving with a massive security staff at a virtually empty polling station, told reporters, "These are great elections. I'm very happy with the results." Brazil heads the military component of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), a 9,000-person force widely resented in the country and thought brutal in its dealing with Haitians. The Brazilian newspaper *Folha* played up assertions of Conseil Electoral Provisoire (CEP) president Gerard Frantz Verret that turnout was low because boycott leaflets "contained death threats against citizens who dare to vote." Verret called upon the Ministry of Justice to move "against all those who undertake to invite the people to abstain from voting and against those who intend to endanger lives and property." No leaflets matching Verret's description turned up, but they were alleged to have been distributed at the June 18 funeral of Catholic priest and Lavalas militant Gerard Jean-Juste. Witnesses reported that Brazilian soldiers fired weapons and killed one of the mourners. The UN dismissed the eyewitness accounts and claimed the decedent had been felled by a thrown rock. Like his Lavalas fellows in these Senate elections, Jean-Juste, too, was denied the right to run for political office. He was arrested by the US-installed de facto government of Gerard Latortue (2004-2006) on the grounds that he was a terrorist involved in a destabilization plot. In 2005, he was jailed again, this time accused of murder. He was never charged, freed only after his running for president had become impossible and he was dying

of cancer, for which he went untreated while in jail (see NotiCen, 2005-09-08, 2005-09-22). It will be some days until the votes are collected and counted. As late as June 24, officials continued to maintain the hope that the turnout would not be as bad as the April round, scarcely 11% of eligible voters, but, even if it is, reports from the hinterlands indicate it will not reach credible levels. Even if the boycott movement's achievements are overblown, there are plenty of other reasons for people to ignore the polls. On the minimum-wage issue, for instance, Preval reportedly consulted the business community before snubbing the legislation, giving in to maquila owners who wanted their workers exempted from the minimum wage and given a maximum of US\$3.25/day instead. Preval's own constituents saw this as a betrayal. Said one factory worker, Mark Harris, "Preval put his head together with the elites to make the poor suffer. If he had voted for the [US\$5.14], I could have voted today, but he didn't go, so I won't either." Despite the low turnout, some violence and irregularities were reported, but these were within parameters acceptable to officials. CEP director general Pierre-Louis Opont said only 10 of 9,271 polling places saw any problems. These included unspecified electoral fraud, officials permitting individuals to vote several times, ballot theft, a stabbing, a shooting and related firearms violations, and fights between partisans.

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