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Presidential and legislative elections held Nov. 28 were marred by fraud, voter intimidation, and the inability of untold thousands to cast ballots because of confusion on the voter rolls.

The international community had insisted on holding these elections even though the country is still reeling from January’s massive earthquake and is in the midst of a major cholera epidemic (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010) and (Nov. 18, 2010). The UN and the Organization of American States (OAS) have for months insisted that Haiti needs the elections to provide a new president and parliament that will ensure Haiti’s "reconstruction."

However, the election was so flawed that neither the president nor the parliament that will emerge from the process are likely to be regarded as legitimate. In the eyes of many Haitians, the result will be to plunge a country already facing a humanitarian crisis into a new political crisis.

During the preceding months, the election campaign had failed to produce a candidate or a political party proposing a comprehensive platform that addressed the needs and priorities of the country’s poor majority or of the 1.5 million still homeless more than 10 months after the earthquake. A huge number of candidates and parties merely mouthed vague promises about making things better. Serious political analysis and policies to confront Haiti’s myriad problems were totally absent.

Grassroots organizations pointed out that the political parties had not presented any kind of social platform or program for the country. Some called it "an election without substance" and "a selection, not an election."

On election day, the Haitian and international media, as well as local and international observer teams, noted the widespread inability of many voters to find the correct polling station, instances of the incorrect application of voting procedures, and instances of repeat voting by some voters, facilitated by complicit poll workers and unidentified party agents. Many polling stations opened late, some not at all, and at most there was barely any sense of control by the authorities.

Most candidates reject process, observers disagree

The election-day debacle prompted 12 of the 18 presidential candidates to issue a joint declaration at a press conference calling for the elections to be cancelled. These candidates blamed the government headed by incumbent President René Préval for rigging the election process in favor of the Inite party and its presidential candidate Jude Célestin.

Despite all this, Haiti’s electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) proclaimed the election satisfactory. "We cannot say it was a 100% success, but the day was successful," declared the CEP’s general director Pierre Louis Opont.

The international community’s verdict was just as astonishing. Edmond Mulet, the UN's top official in Haiti, declared it "a fairly good election in many ways."
Colin Granderson, head of the OAS/CARICOM Joint Mission, noted many irregularities including "deliberate acts of violence and intimidation to derail the electoral process both in Port-au-Prince and the provinces," but said "the Joint Mission does not believe that these irregularities, serious as they were, necessarily invalidated the process."

The US followed suit, with US State Department spokesperson P.J. Crowley calling the election "a significant step for Haiti."

The election results were announced Dec. 7, with no outright winner for the presidency or for most of the 11 Senate and 99 Chamber of Deputies seats being contested. A candidate must win more than 50% of the votes cast to win outright, and, if there is no clear winner, the two candidates with the highest number of votes will enter a second-round runoff scheduled for January.

The "preliminary official results" announced by the CEP said the runoff will be between Mirlande Manigat, the widow of former President Lesley Manigat (1988), who was Préval’s main challenger in the 2006 election, and Célestin, who edged out Michel Martelly, a kompas music star also known as Sweet Mickey. The prospect of winning the presidency apparently persuaded both Martelly and Manigat to disassociate themselves from the other candidates, and, within days of the election, both dramatically declared their faith in the election process.

**Runoff candidates offer little hope of change**

Neither runoff candidate is thought likely to institute the fundamental changes needed to improve the lot of the poor majority. Célestin is likely to continue Préval’s policies, widely considered inadequate for Haiti’s huge problems.

Manigat is the favorite of the upper and middle classes, and her political party, the Rassemblement des Démocrates Nationaux Progressistes (RDNP), is firmly rooted in the conservative, Christian Democrat strain that held sway in Latin America in the mid-20th century.

Third-place candidate Martelly is a singer, known for his bad language and irreverent stage persona. He is new to the political scene, and it is his lack of connections with Haiti’s largely reviled political elite that appears to have been his most valuable asset. His main campaign promise was to reform the Haitian Army as a way of providing jobs to unemployed youth.

Whichever candidate or party emerges in the best place to contest the January runoff elections, the opinion of one grassroots organization, Bri Kouri Nouvèl Gaye, would, sadly, seem most apt: "The Haitian poor, suffering inhumane living conditions since the earthquake, and most vulnerable to cholera, have long been invisible to those who have the power, influence, and means to determine the country’s future, and unfortunately this election has done nothing to change that."

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