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Haiti: Duvalier’s Return Overshadows Election Debacle

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On Jan. 16, former dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier unexpectedly returned to Haiti after almost 25 years in exile in France. His return has caused a sensation, with Duvalier supporters and opponents in Haiti trading claims about the impact and legacy of the dictatorships of Jean-Claude and his father, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who together ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1986.

The furor Duvalier’s return generated has diverted attention from an inconclusive election for a new president and legislature held in November (NotiCen, Dec. 9, 2010). Following the first round of voting, Haitian authorities issued results indicating that the two presidential candidates with the most votes—Mirlande Manigat and Jude Célestin—should go head-to-head in a second-round runoff. However, amid claims of fraud and vote-rigging, the official results have been hotly contested.

Supporters of Michel Martelly, the candidate deemed to have narrowly lost out for second place to the ruling-party candidate Célestin, insisted that in reality he had received far more votes. In December, hundreds of Martelly supporters staged violent demonstrations against the vote results in the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

In mid-January, the Organization of American States (OAS) issued a report detailing its investigation into the presidential-election results. The report confirmed widespread claims that the Nov. 28 vote was riddled with irregularities and fraud but maintained that the election process could still be deemed valid. Its main—and highly contentious—recommendation was that, based on its assessment of a sample of vote-tally sheets, Martelly and not Célestin should go into a runoff against Manigat.

Neither the Haitian electoral authority nor incumbent President René Préval have responded to the OAS recommendations, but the US and France—traditionally the two most influential foreign powers in Haiti—have both insisted on a Manigat-Martelly runoff.

The projected date for the second round has come and gone without any resolution of the contested results. Meanwhile, the outcome of hundreds of contests for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies has not even been discussed. There have been strident calls from numerous international-observer groups for the November election to be abandoned on the grounds of low turnout (only around 20%), widespread fraud and vote-rigging, and the absence of Fanmi Lavalas, which was barred from taking part by the election authorities on spurious grounds. These groups say only completely new elections with proper monitoring and full participation by the country’s main parties can lead to the advent of a legitimate government.

Duvalier’s motive unclear

While the arguments about the election remain unresolved, the political scene in Haiti has been turned upside down by the return of Jean-Claude Duvalier. Many Haitians are speculating that Duvalier intends to try and resume his presidency 25 years after he fled in the face of a popular uprising and the sudden withdrawal of support by the Haitian Army and the US.
But others are speculating that his appearance in Port-au-Prince is motivated by his desire to claim huge amounts of money currently frozen in Swiss banks. Journalists report that Duvalier, whom opponents claim stole hundreds of millions of dollars from the state coffers during his rule, is basically broke after squandering a fortune in exile on lavish living. However, if his return was a ploy to smooth access to those funds now frozen by Switzerland, it seems to have badly backfired.

Initially, Duvalier had apparently intended to visit Haiti for just a few days, but following the initiation of a barrage of corruption and "crimes against humanity" lawsuits, some filed by former victims of his notorious 15-year rule, his passport has been seized and he is prohibited from leaving Haiti by the authorities, pending the outcome of the legal processes.

In his first public statement after his return, Duvalier pledged to help rebuild his benighted nation after the 2010 earthquake and offered regret, but no apology, to victims of his rule. "No matter the price to be paid, the essential thing was to be with you," he said. He added he had come back to "show my solidarity in this very difficult period."

Peter Bouckaert, a Swiss-based lawyer who works as emergencies director for Human Rights Watch (HRW), told Reuters, "Rather than having the interest of the people of Haiti at heart, it seems like he was thinking about his wallet."

Michèle Montas, a prominent journalist who, together with her husband, Jean Dominique, ran the popular Haiti Inter radio station, is—like most Haitians old enough to remember the Duvalier dictatorships—indignant.

"It's mind-boggling that a man like Duvalier thinks he can come back after 25 years and nothing will be held against him," said Montas, one of four Haitians to file a suit against Duvalier. "Each of us filed a separate claim for arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and forced exile."

Montas said her case was based on the shutdown of Radio Haiti Inter in November 1980 and her and her husband's flight into exile, amid a general crackdown on the Haitian opposition.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International (AI) says that human rights groups are drawing up a chilling list of alleged crimes committed under Duvalier's rule, including "torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, rapes and other crimes of sexual content, and the persecution of members of political parties, members of civil society organizations, journalists, peasants, students, trade unions, men and women from Haiti."

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