Haiti: New President Expected to Maintain "Business-as-usual"

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by Charles Arthur

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Michel Martelly, a music star known for his bawdy lyrics and lewd stage antics, has been elected president of Haiti, easily defeating Mirlande Manigat in a second-round runoff on March 20. Martelly, known to his music-business fans as "Sweet Mickey," captured twice as many votes as Manigat and will take over as president from incumbent President René Préval on May 14.

While Martelly's victory in the second round was comprehensive, his legitimacy is undermined by the very low voter turnout. Less than 25% of Haiti’s 4.3 million voters participated in the runoff, meaning that Martelly was elected by the votes of around 16% of the electorate.

Haiti’s voters have become increasingly disenchanted with the political process as successive governments have proven unable or unwilling to enact the structural changes needed to lift the 9 million-strong population out of crushing poverty. Much of Martelly’s appeal is based on the perception that he is a political outsider, with no ties to the largely discredited traditional political parties.

During the election campaign, Martelly promised to provide free education for all, to create huge numbers of jobs, and to build houses for the hundreds of thousands still homeless following the January 2010 earthquake (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010). For the poverty-stricken masses, and particularly the country’s youth, there is guarded hope that the new president will be able to implement some desperately needed changes. However, Martelly failed to provide any details about how he would accomplish such grand plans, and skeptics suggest that soon they will all be revealed as empty promises.

Progressive sectors doubt president-elect’s abilities

Statements by representatives of most of the country’s progressive civil-society organizations clearly articulate a lack of belief in the new president. Osnel Jean Baptiste, spokesperson for the national peasant-farmers organization Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen, said that Martelly’s election gave his members no reason for hope. "There will be no change in the living conditions of the poor majority," he said.

Camille Chalmers, who heads the alternative-development advocacy platform (La Plateforme Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif, PAPDA), believes that Martelly will implement the same policies that previous governments have followed. Chalmers specifically criticized the president-elect’s failure to provide "concrete answers to citizens' demands for basic rights," adding that he assumed that Martelly would follow the dictates of the international powers.

Guy Numa, a leader of the Mouvement Démocratique Populaire (MODEP), is equally convinced that Martelly will carry on in a business-as-usual fashion, stating that "policies are not going to change."
Numa said that the big decisions will still be taken not by the national government but by the Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti, a body headed by former US President Bill Clinton (NotiCen, March 25, 2010). The commission is nominally a partnership between the international community and the Haitian government, but in reality it is dominated by foreign diplomats. For Numa, the election of Martelly is "a change of driver, but it's still the same vehicle."

On taking office, Martelly’s first task will be to select a prime minister who is acceptable to the parliament. The prime minister will then select a Cabinet of ministers who will face the daunting task of trying to reconstruct a country still devastated by the earthquake disaster and a subsequent cholera epidemic.

Martelly lacks an organized political base, having only recently abandoned his musical career to mount an attempt to win the presidency. His party, Respons Peyizan, was hastily established following the announcement of his candidacy, and, in the legislative elections that coincided with the presidential election, it won just three seats in the 99-seat Chamber of Deputies and no seats at all in the 30-seat Senate.

**Former president’s party still strong in legislature**

The new parliament will be dominated by the INITE party of outgoing President Préval, which holds 48 seats in the lower house and 17 seats in the Senate. Martelly will need INITE to approve his choice of prime minister.

INITE’s national coordinator, Sen. Joseph Lambert, told Reuters, "President Martelly has the duty and the obligation to sit down with us to decide who will be in the government and who will be prime minister. There is nothing he can pass in parliament without our agreement."

However, Lambert and other INITE party leaders have indicated that they will cooperate with the new president. Levaillant Louis Jeune, an elected deputy and member of the INITE national directorate, said that the party would not oppose Martelly but that he should not interpret this sentiment as constituting "a blank check." In practice, this is likely to mean that, if Martelly grants ministerial positions to some INITE leaders, the party will, in turn, give Martelly the support he needs to pass legislation in the parliament.

Although INITE presents itself as a left-of-center party, in reality it lacks any discernible ideology and is likely to cohabit with the new president without much difficulty.

One issue that may cause friction is Martelly’s election-campaign pledge to reconstitute the notorious armed forces of Haiti (Forces Armées d'Haïti, FAd'H), which former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) disbanded in 1995. Martelly says he sees the return of the Army as a quick and easy way to create jobs for the nation’s unemployed youth, but older members of the population have bad memories of the military’s coups and fierce political repression in the 1980s and early 1990s. If INITE is to retain any veneer of being a progressive political force, it will have to stand up to Martelly on this issue.

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