1-8-2015

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Lack of Parliamentary and Municipal Elections Leads to Demonstrations in Haiti; Prime Minister Resigns

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Category/Department: Haiti
Published: 2015-01-08

The long-overdue election of senators, deputies, and mayors in Haiti—a vote initially scheduled to take place in 2011—sparked, yet again, popular anger, only this time the effect was decisive.

In mid-2014, thousands of demonstrators demanded that elections be held without further delay and that both the country’s President Michel Martelly and Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe resign.

In a massive, 5,000-strong march on June 5, protesters complained mainly about widespread governmental corruption, as well as incompetence regarding improvement in the education, health, and labor fields in this impoverished French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation where daily income, for 78% of its approximately 9.1 million people, is below US$2 (NotiCen, July 3, 2014).

The anti-government march—one of many held last year—was broken up by police firing tear gas against the angry protesters, who blocked streets and burned tires as some carried signs calling on countries such as France and the US to "help Haitians get rid of the leaders in power."

Crucial deadline looms

As the political clock ticks away, what voices from different quarters warn could be a fatal deadline draws near: Jan. 12, which marks the end of the term for the 99 members of the Chambre des Députés—the lower house of Haiti’s bicameral Parliament—and one-third of the Sénat. Opposition sectors state that, if elections are not held before then, Parliament will be dissolved, Martelly will start ruling by decree, and Haiti will be perilously close to a dictatorship.

The Senate consists of 30 members elected by popular vote, two-thirds to sexennial terms and one-third for two-year periods. Senators may be indefinitely re-elected. Following the February 2004 coup (NotiCen, March 4, 2004) against President Jean-Bertrand "Titide" Aristide (1990-1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004), the Haitian Senate did not meet for just over two years, until it was restored in April 2006.

The Haitian Chamber of Deputies is made up of 99 members elected by popular vote to four-year terms, and, like the Senate, was inactive for the two years following Aristide’s second overthrow—the first having taken place in 1991.

Both chambers hold joint sessions as the Asamblée Nationale.

Against the backdrop of the Jan. 12 deadline, voices of concern became stronger, street protests were stepped up, and the calls for the resignation of Martelly and Lamothe grew louder.

In November, more than a dozen human rights organizations issued a strong, lengthy statement titled "Haitian organizations for the defense of human rights say no to governance by decree".

The "organizations ... publicly express their categorical refusal to see the executive run the country by decree, and they invite all sectors of society, without exception, to speak out against
this neodictatorship and organize by all democratic means to defeat this macabre project," said the statement. They "urge the executive to reconsider its dictatorial ambition, take the path of democracy, exercise wisdom, and live up to its responsibilities."

The groups also expressed their belief that "it is the duty of all sectors of society to assume their responsibilities to prevent any project that aims to challenge decades of the fight for democracy in Haiti."

"Indeed, there is no need to remember that democracy is, above all, respect for the law and the given mandate. It therefore implies an obligation that some results are incumbent on the government, including the president, who is responsible to ensure the proper function of institutions," added the human rights groups.

"The Haitian organizations for the promotion and defense of human rights that are signatories to this note find that the sociopolitical situation in the country is deteriorating and becoming very worrying. This greatly impacts decades worth of efforts to put Haiti on the path of a democratic rule of law," the statement added.

"It is a general principle that the executive is responsible to ensure the function and stability of institutions, according to … the 1987 Constitution. This requires it [the government], among other things, to take up the task of organizing parliamentary and local elections, a task which it has not performed in three years," the document said.

"It is the responsibility of the executive to ensure that the Parliament, one of the pillars of the republic, be operational, but the executive has said on the sidelines of the 69th UN General Assembly, and during interviews with journalists in Europe, that it would lead the country by decree after Monday, Jan. 12, 2015," the groups warned.

"This attempt to prepare minds for the unacceptable is an affront to democratic gains and a maneuver that is becoming more and more disturbing. The executive cannot claim a right to lead the Republic by decree merely because it has failed its fundamental and constitutional mandate. This would be a flagrant violation of the 1987 Constitution, a challenge to republican values, and a serious undermining of the foundations of a state based on three powers: namely the judicial, legislative and executive," the signing organizations further warned.

"If, by Monday, Jan. 12, 2015, elections are not conducted in the country, then this will merely prove that the executive has not fulfilled its constitutional mission to deliver specific results and respect the letter of its mandate. Faced with the imminent dangers posed by the failure to hold elections," the organizations, "assuming their responsibilities as one of the pillars of democracy and the rule of law … denounce the impending return to presidentialism as being the sole authority in the country."

**Lamothe replaced by Evans Paul**

As demonstrations increased last month, Lamothe’s announcement that he was resigning came the night of Dec. 13, when, in a televised statement, he told Haitians, "I leave the position of prime minister this evening with a feeling of accomplishment."

Lamothe’s resignation was among the recommendations presented to Martelly by a work group assembled to find a solution to the worsening political crisis. His decision also followed calls of
attention by the UN, as well as countries such as the US, of imminent political chaos—once again—in Haiti.

Lamothe’s replacement is Evans Paul. The presidential announcement of the appointment via decree—in advance of parliamentary ratification—came on Christmas Day.

Paul is no newcomer to Haiti’s political stage, and his career dates back to the 1980s, when, as a political activist, he was a member of the movement that was instrumental in the downfall of the ruthless and corrupt dictator Jean-Claude "Bébé Doc" Duvalier in 1986. Jean-Claude was the son—and heir—of the also ruthless and corrupt Haitian dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957-1971, president for life since 1964), who started the dictatorial dynasty that came to an abrupt end when Bébé Doc was toppled by a popular uprising.

The heir went off to luxury exile in France, eventually returned—apparently broke—to Haiti, where, while facing charges for corruption and human rights violations for which he was never sentenced, he died last year (NotiCen, Nov. 6, 2014) in a case similar to that of Chilean military dictator Gen Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Paul was also mayor of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, and was labeled as close to Aristide, an image that led to his arrest in 1988 under the military régime of Gen. Prosper Avril (1988-1990), a former and highly trusted member of Papa Doc’s Presidential Guard and a later adviser to Bébé Doc. Various sources say the Duvaliers trusted Avril to the extent of having him manage, among other ill-gotten overseas assets, their bank accounts abroad.

Avril took part in two brief de facto military régimes, from 1986 to 1988, until he staged his own coup against former ally and military dictator Henri Namphy. He repressively ruled Haiti from September 1988 to March 1990, and, according to an Amnesty International report, his régime was "marred by serious human rights violations."

Paul’s new job starts in a scenario of concern, as the much-delayed elections seem to be, at best, unlikely in the immediate future.

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