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George Rodríguez

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Date Set for General Elections in Haiti; Voter Turnout Remains in Doubt

by George Rodríguez
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After years of delay and months of street protests amid political crisis—something Haiti is historically used to—dates for general elections this year have at last been established. Two voting rounds to elect 20 of the 30 members of the Sénat and the 118 members of the Chambre des Députés—the lower house of the bicameral Parlement Haïtien, until now made up of 99 representatives—are scheduled for Aug. 9 and Oct. 25.

Two-thirds of the senators are elected for six-year terms, while the other third’s period lasts two years, and the representatives’ term is four years. When meeting jointly, they work as the Assemblée Nationale.

In the schedule announced last month by the Conseil Electoral Provisoire (CEP)—whose nine members recently took office—the presidential election is set for Oct. 25, along with the single voting round for the 10 departments’ mayors and other municipal authorities.

In case none of the presidential hopefuls round up the constitutionally needed 50% plus one vote of the ballots cast to win, a runoff between the two with the highest numbers would take place Dec. 27. The approximately 5.1 million voters will be the target in the presidential campaign set to go on from Sept. 29 through Oct. 23, with 166 political parties—of an original 188—promoting their offer.

An additional month—from Nov. 26 through Dec. 25—was scheduled in case the presidential vote needs to be decided in a runoff.

Although candidates aiming for the different posts at stake are still registering, different unofficial estimates forecast hundreds of competitors, including as many as 60 presidential hopefuls.

The period for nominations in the legislative election runs April 6-19, while candidates in the municipal contests will be able to register May 4-24 and those seeking the nation’s top post are to submit their names May 11-20.

Official results for the legislative first round are expected to be announced Sept. 8, and results for the second vote should be revealed on Nov. 22. Definitive figures for the municipal election are scheduled for Dec. 31, while presidential results should be known Nov. 15. Should a presidential runoff be needed, those numbers would be announced Jan. 17.

This impoverished French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation—78% of whose approximately 9.1 million people survive on less than US$2 a day—saw its parliament dissolve on Jan. 12, the deadline by which the election of its members should have taken place (NotiCen, April 11, 2013, and Jan. 8, 2015).

Haitian President Michel Martelly—a local popular singer known to fans as Sweet Mickey—was then left to rule by decree until the new senators and representatives take on their responsibilities.
The parliamentary crisis resulted from the inability of Martelly and opposition legislators to agree on a date before Jan. 12 for the elections now set for later this year.

Meanwhile, in an effort to counter the low voter turnout for the 2010 elections, several grassroots organizations gathered under the umbrella of the civil society’s Observatoire Cityoen de l’Action des Pouvoirs Publics en Haïti (OCAPH) and came up with an action plan. Their idea is to double the numbers, from the 22% who participated five years ago, to at least 45%.

The voting schedule was announced March 13 by the CEP. "We're very pleased to communicate this calendar, which has been the object of deep reflection by the council," Yolette Mengual, one of the CEP's nine members, then told reporters. "We're working very actively to organize free, fair, transparent, democratic, and inclusive elections."

**Concern at MINUSTAH withdrawal**

But three days later, fellow CEP member Néhémie Joseph, as well as Minister for Election Affairs Fritz Jean-Louis, voiced concern regarding election security at what seems to be the imminent troop withdrawal from six of the country’s 10 departments by the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (MINUSTAH). The Police Nationale d’Haïti (PNH) is not up to the job, which has been effectively done by MINUSTAH soldiers in past years, they pointed out.

"The UN has been ... instrumental in election security and logistical apparatus in Haiti in past years," the reason why "this is very bad news for the election process," said Joseph. "We don’t see how we are going to do it without the UN."

Joseph explained that MINUSTAH personnel have secured and transported sensitive election material, including ballots, after the vote from voting centers throughout the country to CEP installations for the ballot count.

"The Haitian police do not have the adequate personnel, the vehicles, and the experience to succeed in such an operation," while MINUSTAH has "its own personnel with the necessary experience, and it uses its own vehicles and its own budget to do all that," Joseph pointed out.

In Jean-Louis’ view, "The withdrawal of UN troops from these regions during the elections is a big concern, not only for the government but also for several countries and other partners supporting the electoral process. It’s true that we want to nationalize the election process so that the country and its people may fully assume the responsibility of dealing with all the aspects of election organization."

"But this should be done in a way that allows us first to fill the deficiencies," Jean-Louis explained, weeks after a UN Security Council delegation visited Haiti and was asked by Justice and Public Safety Minister Pierre Richard Casimir that MINUSTAH soldiers not be withdrawn before this year’s vote.

**Effort to increase participation**

On the turnout front, OCAPH announced last month an action plan it described as a citizens’ mobilization program. "It’s going to be a civic education program to raise awareness among youngsters, people with disabilities, and women to vote," OCAPH coordinator Vernon Jean told a press conference.
To reach this goal, OCAPH has established the Alliance Citoyenne pour des Élections Réuissies—whose acronym, ACIER, is the French word for steel—which promotes the Projet Participation Citoyenne. ACIER has so far gathered a number of youth organizations, among them Future Generations Haït and Scout d’Haïti.

Improving voter participation from the previous 22% to the targeted 45% "is a major task requiring nationwide coverage. If it isn’t done, we run the risk of seeing Port-au-Prince vote for the rest of the country," Jean warned, since 42% of the Haitian electorate lives in the capital.

Guerda Prévilon, of the Initiative de Dévelopement des Jeunes en dehors du Milieu Soclaire (IDEJEN), said, "It’s going to be a matter of education and awareness-raising work aimed at improving the participation of youngsters, women, and the elderly in the elections."

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