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Thousands of Candidates Will Vie for Posts in Haiti's Long-Awaited Elections

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Thousands of candidates are ready to enter the vote-getting battle in Haiti, gearing up for the much-delayed elections to fill high public posts ranging from the presidency to congressional and municipal positions.

After rejecting, for a variety of reasons, about one-quarter of congressional hopefuls, the morning of May 15, the nine-member Conseil Electoral Provisoire (CEP) posted online the names of the 1,500 candidates to fill 138 of the 168 seats in this French- and Creole-speaking, dramatically impoverished island nation’s bicameral parliament.

The 118 seats making up the Chambre des Députés (the congressional lower house) and 20 of the 30 seats in the Sénat (Senate) are up for grabs. The deputies' term lasts four years, while two-thirds of the senators are elected for six years and the remaining third’s term runs two years. Joint meetings of both legislative branches are held as the Assemblée Nationale.

Meanwhile, close to 12,000 candidates for the municipal vote have been green-lighted by the CEP, and, in view of a persistent demand by political parties, it decided to grant yet another extension to the deadline for online pre-registrations and for delivering documents. In a brief announcement May 30, the CEP stated that the new limit for online pre-registration is June 4, while the final date for document delivery is midnight June 7. The original deadline for municipal hopefuls was May 24, and the first extension postponed it for six days.

Regarding the fight for the presidency, succeeding President Michel Martelly is a goal for 70 contenders—and more are certain to join the group.

The road to the 2015 elections has been a bumpy one, with voting delayed for years, angry Haitians repeatedly taking to the streets in protest, and the parliament dissolved Jan. 12, this year’s initial deadline for renewing most of Congress (NotiCen, Jan. 8, 2015, and Feb. 5, 2015).

First lady loses bid to run for Senate seat

The CEP’s job has not been any easier, vetting more than 2,000 candidacies for parliamentary posts, 522 of which were turned down—466 for the lower chamber, 76 for the Senate. Among those rejected were such high-profile hopefuls as first lady Sophia Martelly, a senatorial candidate for her bald husband’s Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (Shaved Head Haitian Party, PHTK).

In a Twitter message April 23—the last day for congressional candidates to file their nominations—the first lady announced her registration as a senatorial contender to represent Département Ouest, the province where Port-au-Prince, the country’s capital, is located. Martelly thus put an end to speculation on whether she would go after a seat in the Senate or aim at replacing her husband.

But 19 days later, the elections-dispute bureau (Bureau du Contencieux Electoral National, BCEN) ended her bid, and the reactions did not take long.
Immediately after the May 12 official announcement on the decision, Gregory Mayard-Paul, the first lady’s attorney, was quoted by the US daily Miami Herald as saying, "We think that the law has not been respected and the civil and constitutional rights of the first lady have been violated."

Three days later, the PHTK issued a communiqué stating it was requesting the election authority to clarify "the real reasons" why eight of the party’s 23 Senate candidates and 23 of its 108 lower-house nominees were not accepted. The political organization added that it "asks its unlucky candidates as well as its numerous followers and the population to remain calm and serene."

The bureau stepped in because, immediately after Martelly filed to run, the validity of her candidacy was questioned—including an appeal by ex-Sen. Louis Gerald Gilles of the opposition Fanmi Lavalas (FL).

One argument was that, born in New York, she holds dual US-Haitian citizenship, which—according to the Constitution, later amended on this—made her ineligible to vote, as she did, in Haiti’s 2010 presidential election. But an immediate presidential document—which was questioned by local legal experts—indicated Martelly actually completed paperwork to renounce her US citizenship.

Another argument was that, as first lady, she headed the presidential anti-hunger group Coordination Nationale de la Lutte contre la Faim et la Malnutrition (COLFAM), thus needing by law, in order to run, a certificate stating that she had correctly managed the commission’s funds. The certificate is a requirement for all former high government officials seeking election posts.

Controversial candidate

Former officials successfully filing senatorial candidacies with the CEP include Guy Phillipe, who was a police chief in the capital suburb of Delmas and in the northern coastal city of Cap Haitien. The head of the paramilitary Front pour la Reconstruction Nationale (FRN)—a force involved in the 2004 coup against Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) and now a political party—Phillipe has been held responsible for human rights violations and faces indictment in the US for drug trafficking (NotiCen, Feb. 12, 2009).

The FRN leader is no newcomer to election battles, since he took part in the 2006 presidential race, when, after having been considered the front-runner, he obtained some 1.9% of the vote.

Meanwhile, the media reports that the only party promoting Senate candidates for the 10 Haitian departments is Fanmi Lavalas, founded in 1996 by twice-toppled Aristide, the former Catholic priest Haitians call "Titide." Banned from elections for a decade after the 2004 coup against its founder, on May 19 the FL registered coordinator Maryse Narisse as its presidential candidate.

In all, 70 names have been formally registered by the CEP as candidates to replace Martelly.

The CEP has scheduled the two voting rounds to elect 128 congressional representatives for Aug. 9 and Oct. 25. Meanwhile, the presidential election is set for Oct. 25, as well as the only voting round for the mayors and other municipal authorities nationwide.

In the presidential election, should no candidate collect the 50% plus one vote of the ballots cast as required by the Constitution to win, a runoff between the top two candidates would take place Dec. 27.