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Despite Violence and Irregularities, Haitian Parliamentary Elections Seen as Strengthening Democracy

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In yet another chapter of difficulties in Haiti’s history of political setbacks and natural disasters, the first of two scheduled rounds of the long-delayed parliamentary elections (NotiCen, April 9, 2015, and June 4, 2015) actually took place, with violence and a variety of irregularities as its predictable framework. Ranging from armed attacks on voting centers—including destruction of election materials—to people’s names not on voter lists, incidents plagued a day characterized by tension. Nevertheless, with national authorities as well as international observer missions—such as those of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU) and the diplomatic Core Group that includes world powers—admitting things didn’t run as smoothly as necessary, they approved the process as a step in strengthening Haiti’s battered democracy.

Endless reports of flaws in the voting process nationwide revealed that dozens of voting centers were closed because of violence by armed groups ransacking the installations and destroying ballots, voting booths, and other elections materials as well as threatening voters. Other reports mentioned ballot centers opening late because voting materials had not been delivered on time and referred to people being unable to cast their ballots because their names were not on voter lists. Electoral officials have stated that disturbances and irregularities could have prevented as many as 299,000 registered voters—of a total of 5.8 million—from casting their ballots. Preliminary figures indicated that at least two people were killed during armed incidents and at least 20 persons were arrested for illegal possession of weapons. Such incidents followed months of violence prior to polling day.

In a report issued four days before the vote, the nongovernmental human rights organization Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH) stated that partisan violence during campaigning had created a "climate of terror."

Violence despite large police presence
On election day, more than 7,000 officers of the Police Nationale d’Haiti (PNH)—backed by some 2,500 UN police and more than 2,300 members of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (MINUSTAH)—were deployed nationwide.

Violence is considered a major cause for the day’s low voter turnout. Although the nine-member Conseil Electoral Provisoire (CEP)—this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation’s top election authority—has not issued any results, pre-election polls predicted that the turnout would not go over 15% of the 5.8 million registered voters.

"The problem is that the violence this round deterred voters and will likely deter voters in October," said Nicole Phillips of the Boston-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), referring to the next voting day in the present electoral process—the congressional runoff and

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the presidential election, both scheduled for Oct. 25. "Low voter turnout combined with violence, intimidation, and ineffective security can contribute to massive fraud, which could greatly influence poll results in tighter elections in October."

After balloting ended, CEP president Pierre-Louis Opont expressed satisfaction with the election process, despite irregularities, and reported that 54 of the 1,508 polling centers—4% of the total—were forced to close because of violence, not enough to invalidate the vote. "Globally, I am satisfied with the performance," he told reporters, acknowledging that "a lot of acts of violence" were carried out and promising punishment for those responsible.

Opont said, "We're taking this seriously," and added that corrective measures would be implemented for October.

But some four hours after voting closed, the Observatoire Citoyen pour l’Institutionalisation de la Démocratie (OCID) issued a brief, six-point assessment of the election day, stating, among other things, that not 4% but 14.22% of voting centers were closed.

After voting, Haitian President Michel Martelly told reporters, "I hope that the election officials are better organized for the presidential elections in October."

And, with balloting centers closed, Prime Minister Evans Paul’s balance in the evening was, "I’m neither happy nor angry but relieved after the voting day, which for me is a success. The incidents that happened today will serve the authorities so that the second round of legislative and first round presidential run smoothly. Whenever it has been necessary ... the authorities concerned have moved the skilled resources to identify problems and provide a solution."

**International observers generally positive**

The day after the vote, and coinciding with Opont’s view, OAS Electoral Observation Mission (OAS-EOM) chief Enrqiue Castillo told a press conference, "The process took place and was taken to the end. We can’t assess whether the problems ... could disqualify the process as a whole. Our impression, up to today, is they don’t. It’s up to the (electoral) council to evaluate that."

"Yesterday's election was a step forward in strengthening Haitian democracy," added Castillo, a former Costa Rican ambassador to the OAS and former foreign minister.

In a two-page report titled "Preliminary Observations of OAS Electoral Mission to Haiti," presented during the press conference, the 28-member work group said it "particularly hails the fact that this first round of legislative elections was held and highlights that most Haitian political forces have participated."

The mission added it "notes the CEP’s efforts in the area of electoral education. However, enhancements could be made in this regard in order to increase Election Day turnout. It would be particularly helpful to carry out a civic education campaign on how to vote targeting eligible voters."

Unlike what voters told reporters at ballot centers, the mission said that its "observers were able to ascertain on the ground that voter lists were posted at polling stations, a practice which greatly contributes to increased transparency. Our observers witnessed certain confusion as to voting procedures. ... This problem could have been avoided by posting instructions at all polling stations in plain sight. Due to the fact that the voting procedure in the next round of balloting will be even
more complex, it will be essential to make sure that information is more readily available. One way to alleviate this problem would be a greater presence of CEP monitors and public outreach workers."

The mission added that it "has noted that a significant number of polling stations opened later than the scheduled time. However, it recognizes that the CEP made a significant effort to allow most voters affected by this delay to vote in any case."

Differing from media reports, the group said, "It was also established that the necessary voting materials were available at the beginning of Election Day at polling stations."

Along the OAS-EOM’s assessment line, the EU’s observation mission head Elena Valenciano told reporters, "Although there have been incidents in some polling centers, these problems have generally been corrected."

However, Valenciano pointed out what she describes as poor logistics, referring to voting centers that were in general too small for voters to be able to secretly cast their ballots from behind makeshift cardboard booths or openly at tables in front of election officials.

Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and head of MINUSTAH Sandra Honré and the ambassadors of the Core Group of countries and organizations—Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, the US, the EU, and the OAS—also praised Haitian authorities for the vote and, at the same time, regretted the reported violence and irregularities.

In a written statement, the group expressed satisfaction at "the holding of the first round of legislative elections on 9 August. The organization of this first round of the elections reflects the efforts of the Provisional Electoral Council, the Government of Haiti, and the Haitian National Police in assuring a conducive framework for these elections."

"While commending the citizens who exercised their right to vote across the country, the ‘Core Group’ deplores interruptions of the polls in certain areas, acts of violence, and the loss of human life. It encourages the Haitian authorities to investigate these incidents without delay and to bring the perpetrators to justice," the group said. "The Core Group calls on all parties to await peacefully the results of this first round and to pursue the electoral process in compliance with the law."

**Parliamentary runoff, presidential elections next up**

The present electoral process consists of parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections. This month’s vote is to be followed, Oct. 25, by the second round in the congressional vote, and, the same day, the election of the country’s next president, as well as its municipal authorities.

The parliamentary vote aims at electing the 118 new members of the Chambres des Députés (the lower house) and 20 of the 30 members of the Sénat (Senate). The lower house was made up, until now, of 99 members, but electoral legislation in force since March this year increased the number to 118. The deputies are elected every four years, while the term of two-thirds of the senators lasts six years, with the other one-third renewed every two years. When they hold joint meetings, legislators of both chambers function as the Asemblée Nationale (National Assembly).

Parliament stopped working Jan. 12, because of a disagreement between the government and the opposition on a date for the congressional elections now in progress.
In the presidential vote, if none of the 55 candidates vying for the job obtains 50% plus one vote set in the Constitution to win, the two most voted candidates go to a runoff set for Dec. 27. The municipal election has no runoff.

The 5.8 million registered voters are to choose, for the three elections, from among a grand total of 41,000 candidates promoted by 128 political parties. The cost of the election process runs at US$74 million.