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Fraud is a Major Stumbling Block in Haiti’s Presidential Election

by George Rodríguez
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Fraud allegations are pouring down on the Conseil Electoral Provisoire (CEP), Haiti’s electoral council, after the presidential vote in October 2015.

Candidates are denouncing serious irregularities in the voting process and the ballot count, as well as corruption at the highest level of the CEP.

The election followed the also-irregular vote on Aug. 9—one plagued by violence and ballot-rigging allegations—in the first round of parliamentary elections for the 119 members of the Chambre des Députés (the congressional lower house) and 20 of the 30 seats in the Sénat (the upper house). The députés are elected every four years. Two-thirds of the sénateurs are elected to six-year terms, and the other third for terms lasting two years (NotiCen, June 4, 2015, and Aug. 20, 2015).

The first round of the presidential election and the second round of the parliamentary vote took place, as scheduled, on Oct. 25.

The official announcement of the results in the presidential race was made on Nov. 5 by the much-criticized CEP. The council declared Jovenel Moïse, of the ruling Parti Haïtien Têt Kale (PHTK; its name is créole for Haitian Bald Head Party, after President Michel Martelly’s shaven-scalp), and Jude Célestin, of the opposition Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l’Emancipation Haïtienne (Alternative League for Haitian Progress and Emancipation, LAPEH), as the two candidates with the most votes, and thus the rivals in the—so far—twice-postponed runoff. Moïse received 32.76% or the vote and Célestin 25.29%.

Opposition accuses council of favoring Martelly’s candidate

The following day, several opposition candidates—Célestin among them—and other political leaders accused the CEP of having manipulated the figures in order to essentially favor Martelly’s handpicked candidate.

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Célestin called the results a “ridiculous farce,” and warned during a press conference, “This is not the people's vote... They are trying to steal the vote of the population... The results of the people have yet to be announced.”

Referring to both the Martelly administration and the violent incidents in the Aug. 9 vote (NotiCen, Aug. 20, 2015), the LAPEH leader said, “They have put in place a repressive force to crush the people, to kill the people, but they won't be able to kill all the people.”

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Like other opposition candidates, Célestin called for an independent commission to look into the much-questioned presidential vote, which was plagued by high absenteeism, with only around 1.6 million Haitians—about 26% of the country’s 5.8 million registered voters—having participated.

The candidate also made known that, days before the CEP announced the election results, he and seven other presidential hopefuls—a group that has come to be known as the G8—had addressed a letter to the top election officials denouncing massive fraud.

After he and other candidates held individual press conferences, angry followers of several opposition parties took to the streets in protests that were broken up by police using tear gas.

**Martelly appoints 'independent' commission**

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The work group was given the mandate to look into fraud allegations and to produce a report—in three days—with recommendations on how to right the wrongs of the first round and how to ensure the “transparency, credibility and legitimacy” of the ongoing election process.

The G8 and civil society organizations immediately rejected Martelly’s decision, pointing out that, among other things, the appointment of the commission did not respond to demands of an independent inquiry of the October ballot.

The G8 issued a statement calling the commission a “cosmetic solution” to the political crisis, which includes bribery allegations against the CEP. It also complained that the CEP and the government had imposed the commission on them as a solution to the problem, a move it called “inconceivable and unacceptable.”

Opposition leaders also argued that the evaluation commission appointed by Martelly did not answer the people’s nor the candidates’ demands, adding that it did not give credibility to the ongoing election process.

Rosny Desroches, a member and spokesperson of the commission, acknowledged that “a lot of people think three days is not sufficient” to produce a full report.

Regarding the opposition’s expectation that the commission would recount the votes cast in the first-round presidential ballot, he said, “We won’t have time for that.”

Meanwhile, University of Virginia political science professor Robert Fatton—an expert in Haitian politics who is closely monitoring the electoral crisis—said that the evaluation commission has the support of the international community, if not of Haiti’s opposition.

“What seems clear is that the international community is supporting this initiative,” Fatton told The Miami Herald on Dec. 17. But as long as Célestin opposes it, the commission is “completely useless.
because it will certainly not satisfy ... key members of the G8,” he added, while pointing out that the commission was an evaluation, not a verification, work group.

“It is difficult to see the opposition accepting this proposal. It may serve as the basis for further negotiations, but this means that the [runoff] election will certainly not take place on Dec. 27,” Fatton predicted in The Herald.

And he was right.

On Dec. 21, the CEP issued a communiqué saying the runoff would be postponed, without setting a new date.

New runoff date scheduled

Eleven days later, in a New Year’s Day speech marking the 212th anniversary of the country’s independence on Jan. 1, 1804, Martelly said the new date for the runoff would be Jan. 17 and urged Haitians “to vote en masse, like they should” to elect “the person who best represents them.”

Eleven days later, in a New Year’s Day speech marking the 212th anniversary of the country’s independence on Jan. 1, 1804, Martelly said the new date for the runoff would be Jan. 17 and urged Haitians “to vote en masse, like they should” to elect “the person who best represents them.”

The commission’s report—signed by four of its five members—came on Jan. 3. Gédéon Jean, who represents Haiti’s human rights sector in the commission and is the group’s secretary, refrained from signing the 14-page text, arguing that a recount of the ballots was necessary because the serious irregularities reported could influence the outcome.

According to the document, among other major flaws in the presidential vote, 57.1% of ballots had no voter signature or fingerprint, while voter registration numbers were incorrectly written in close to 50% of the cases or were missing in another 31%.

The commission basically said in its report that serious irregularities had marked the presidential first round, but it did not reach the conclusion that the runoff could not take place. Instead, it proposed a series of “immediate measures” aimed at “the continuation of the election process.”

“The commission recommends that the CEP reinforce the supervision, control and sanction system regarding the essential mechanism of the election machine and all the phases in the process,” the report said.

The group also encouraged the CEP “not to open voting centers inside private houses,” and to “completely review the issue of recruiting and training voting center members,” according to the text. It pointed out as well that the CEP “is not listening to the Haitian people for whom it works.”

But two days after the evaluation commission’s document was made public, media reported that, in a letter sent to Martelly, CEP president Pierre-Louis Opont said the runoff vote had been yet again postponed and would now be held Jan. 24.

The new delay further increased worries about Haiti’s political crisis within the international community, including the seven-member Core Group made up of Haiti’s major donor countries (Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, the United States), plus the European Union and the Organization of American States.
Diplomats of the Core Group called on “state institutions and political actors alike to take all steps necessary to ensure a peaceful transfer of power to a newly elected president by the constitutionally mandated date” of Feb. 7, when Martelly’s five-year term ends.

**US visit yields no results**

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“Their visit takes place in the context of ongoing efforts in Haiti to complete the electoral process,” it explained in a brief communiqué. “The elections will allow a new government and parliament to address the other challenges Haiti faces in achieving economic growth and sustainable development.”

Shannon and Merten left Haiti the following day without any results reported on their talks, which included conversations with the two presidential candidates slotted for the runoff.

The campaign period for the runoff began Jan. 7 with only Moïse actually on the campaign trail. Célestin—who had said in December that he would not be campaigning unless an independent commission was appointed to look into the many fraud and corruption allegations—now said he would refrain from taking part unless the CEP implemented all the evaluation commission’s recommendations.

And, according to media reports, besides demanding that CEP members resign for what it describes as corruption and vote-rigging, the G8 says a transition government should take over so the chaotic ongoing election process is correctly concluded in more time than the present two weeks.

Congress, which had ceased to function a year ago because of the blatantly delayed vote to renew most of its members, resumed work on Jan. 10 ([NotiCen, Jan. 8, 2015](#)).

But far from being solved, the Haitian crisis over presidential politics worsens, with no solution in sight.

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