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With Interim President in Place, Haiti Elections Now Scheduled for April

by George Rodríguez
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For Haiti, crisis has become a way of political life. From 1957 to 1971, the country lived under a dictatorship—as corrupt as it was vicious—headed by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. After his death, his son and heir, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, ruled for 15 more years, until a popular revolt put an end to the clan’s hold of this mercilessly impoverished country. A series of military regimes followed, and then came three interrupted administrations headed Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former Salesian priest with a popular stand (NotiCen, Dec. 7, 2000, Jan. 27, 2001, Sept. 8, 2005 and Feb. 23, 2006).

Political and social unrest continued, and then came the catastrophic, 7.0 earthquake of January 2010, which killed over 200,000 people, displaced another 600,000 and left 1.5 million more homeless (NotiCen, Jan. 21 2010, Feb. 18, 2010, and April 29, 2010).

Today, still struggling to recover from that devastating natural event, Haiti is yet again in political chaos. This French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean nation is now in a crisis-management scenario, with a caretaker government headed by Jocelerme Privert, who only last month had become the president of the country’s Senate.

As interim president, Privert—who was elected by a congressional majority and is scheduled to be in power until May—is in charge of putting together a provisional government and naming a caretaker prime minister. He is also charged with renewing the heavily criticized, nine-member electoral council, the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (CEP), and guiding the country through the three-times-postponed, critical presidential election runoff, now scheduled to take place April 24.

Delayed elections
This time, the crisis stems from repeatedly delayed legislative and presidential elections.

The postponement of the legislative vote—which should have taken place by Jan. 12, 2015, and would have chosen 20 of 30 senators and all 119 members of the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies—prevented the country’s Congress from working last year. Thus, then-President Michel Martelly was left to rule by decree (NotiCen, Aug. 20, 2015, and Jan. 14, 2016).

Finally, the last round of the congressional election was held Aug. 9—amidst major irregularities, including acts of violence—and parliament again went to work last month.

But the postponement of the runoff for the presidential contest, originally scheduled for Oct. 25, has further exacerbated the political crisis in Ayiti—as the country is known in Creole, the language spoken by its approximately 10.6 million nationals. Close to 80% of Haitians live in extreme poverty and barely survive on less than US$2 a day.
Electoral irregularities

Allegations of serious irregularities—including ballot stuffing and corruption by election authorities—followed the announcement of the official results, on Nov. 5, by the CEP. The allegations were voiced by the top presidential hopefuls, who gathered in what they have named the Groupe des 8 (G-8).

The CEP declared presidential candidate Jovenel Moïse, of the ruling Parti Haïtien Têt Kale (Creole for Haitian Bald Head Party, PHTK, after Martelly’s shaven-scalp), as the contestant showing the highest voter support, with 32.76%. Runner-up was Jude Célestin, of the opposition Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l’Émancipation Haïtienne (Alternative League for Haitian Progress and Emancipation, LAPEH), with 25.29%. The CEP also announced that a runoff between the two leading candidates was necessary, since none of the 54 candidates in the race had rounded up a majority to win the first time around.

The Moïse-Célestin faceoff was originally scheduled to take place Dec. 27, according to the electoral calendar. But the G-8 put the numbers to question. Many were outraged at Célestin being declared the runner-up, street demonstrations and violence erupted, and three postponements of the runoff date followed.

As the political crisis grew, Célestin described the official results as a “ridiculous farce” and announced he would not take part in the runoff. Regardless, the CEP announced the vote would take place Jan. 17, but tensions grew, the crisis kept deepening, and another date was announced, Jan. 24, only to be postponed anew.

The chaotic scenario led the United States as well as a special mission of the Organization of American States (OAS) to participate in the hectic search for a solution.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, then-State Department Counselor Thomas Shannon, and Haiti Special Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary Kenneth Merten visited Haiti, on different dates, and met with top authorities.

Besides having sent an electoral observation mission, the OAS deployed, upon Martelly’s request, a special mission to assess the critical situation as well as the steps that should be taken to overcome it.

In a communiqué issued Jan. 27, the OAS explained that the mission’s aim was “to collaborate in reaching an understanding among Haitians,” and added that, “to that end, the mission will establish a dialogue with the main political and social representatives in Haiti.”

Quoted in the press release, OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, a former Uruguayan foreign affairs minister, said that the solution to the crisis “must be agreed by Haitians.” Almagro also requested of Martelly and Privert—who was then president of the Haitian Senate—“that the mechanism of government adopted at the conclusion of the mandate of President Martelly be endorsed by the Supreme Court and that it remain in place as short a time as possible.” Martelly stepped down on Feb. 7, the day his term constitutionally expired.
Since no one had yet been elected to replace him, Prime Minister Evans Paul took the reins until the country’s legislators elected an interim president.

The senators and deputies participating in the lengthy, 12-hour congressional debate last month elected Privert from among three candidates, narrowed down from a list of over a dozen hopefuls. Privert’s election by the National Assembly—the joint meeting of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies—came at around 3 a.m. on Feb. 14, exactly a week after a political agreement was reached for an interim government to take over, filling the institutional vacuum caused by Martelly’s departure.

The provisional president must now assemble the agreed caretaker administration, which will in principle be in charge until May, and lead the country though the second round of the presidential vote, now set for April 24. According to the plan, the new president of Haiti should be sworn in May 14.

**Haiti must ‘construct democracy’**

In Almagro’s view, what Haiti urgently needs is to construct democracy. Unless democracy is built, Haiti’s development could hardly be attained, he told NotiCen during a short visit to Costa Rica the day after Privert’s election.

“If democracy isn’t constructed, if guarantees for people’s political and civil rights aren’t built, then none of the other development variables are likely to function” in the Caribbean nation, he said. “Haiti is a particular case in which we find that the construction of democracy, that the principles encouraging the rule of law, and the principles encouraging respect and full validity of rights, are essential instruments, not rhetoric instruments.”

Almagro stressed that Haiti’s “electoral system has serious deficiencies (…) which is what has led to people lacking the confidence to express themselves, to politically express themselves in electing a new president, or in voting for political change, or in expressing themselves politically as befits a system.”

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