5-5-2016

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Presidential Runoff Vote Postponed Again in Haiti

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Haiti
Published: 2016-05-05

If a good runoff presidential election is to be held in Haiti, it must be postponed—again. Such is the official reasoning behind the latest delay in a crucial vote for a country currently run by an interim government and in urgent need for normalcy to replace crisis as a way of political life.

The first round in the presidential election took place on Oct. 25, 2015. According to official figures released by the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Election Council, CEP), Jovenel Moïse, of the then-ruling Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (Haitian Bald Head Party, PHTK), received the highest voter support among the 54 candidates, with 32.76%. He was followed by Jude Célestin, of the opposition Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l’Émancipation Haïtienne (Alternative League for Haitian Progress and Emancipation, LAPEH), who managed 25.29%. A runoff was scheduled for Dec. 27.

But the official numbers immediately came under severe criticism from candidates of the opposition parties, headed by Célestin, who demanded a vote re-count and described the figures as a “ridiculous farce.” Célestin announced he would not be taking part in the runoff. The controversy triggered a series of further postponements, the latest to April 24 (NotiCen, Jan. 14, 2016, and March 3, 2016).

Meanwhile, Haitian political leaders—including former President Michel Martelly—agreed on Feb. 5 that Jocelerme Privert, who had been elected by Congress, would serve as the country’s interim president for 120 days until a new president could be elected and sworn in by May 14. But the runoff set for April 24 was delayed once more.

Ten days prior to that latest failed deadline, CEP president Leopold Berlanger told the international news agency Reuters, “It is clear that the elections won’t take place on April 24… It is also clear that the fact that the elections won’t take place this month means it is impossible to have a new elected president by May 14.” And he added, “If we want to organize good elections, it is necessary to create the conditions to make it happen.”

According to the online news outlet Haïti Libre (Free Haiti), Berlanger “clearly suggest[ed] that the electoral timetable for the upcoming elections would be ready by the end of May,” and said there was “much work to do,” citing problems with the electoral process, including defining procedures, training personnel, and reviewing the ethics code.

Calls for ‘a national effort’

Almost simultaneously, Sandra Honoré, head of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti, MINUSTAH), stressed the need for a national effort to step beyond the impasse.

“My wish, as regards to these elections, is that all stakeholders—the government… the Provisional Electoral Council, political parties and civil society—work for the success of these elections,” she told reporters after CEP members briefed her on the situation. “It’s these elections that will provide the country with an elected president. It’s these elections that will ensure that the country can
survive the current impasse. And it’s these elections that will be used to create a framework for the country’s socio-economic development. It’s important that the country can conclude this process with an elected president and a government, in accordance with the provisions of the Haitian Constitution.”

Referring to the Feb. 5 accord, she added, “My message to the authorities who will implement this agreement is to find a way to achieve consensus positions and demonstrate their commitment to acting in the interests of the Haitian people and in the best interests of Haiti as a nation.”

With the runoff process dramatically bogged down, US Secretary of State John Kerry told a Miami television station on April 14 that the international community could be close to running out of patience regarding the behavior of Haiti’s political class, and stressed the urgency for the runoff vote to take place.

The country’s “so-called leaders, need to understand there’s a clear limit to the patience, the willingness of the international community to condone this process of delay,” Kerry said. “The people of Haiti deserve an elected government, [and] they deserve it now.”

But Haiti’s interim president does not appear to agree. The day the runoff election was supposed to take place, Privert announced a new delay and predicted that the new date could be as far away as October. He said that conditions for the runoff vote were nonexistent, and that the causes for the earlier postponements had not disappeared.

“Have the reasons that caused the electoral council to postpone the elections been addressed and resolved?” he had asked during an interview with the US daily The Miami Herald published on April 23, where he added, “There is absolutely no way that you can assure political stability in Haiti without ensuring the credibility of the electoral process.”

Privert also told The Herald that an election evaluation commission set up in December by then-President Michel Martelly had found “a lot of grave irregularities” in the presidential first round, and had demanded that there be a profound verification,” but “none of that was done.”

**New commission**

One of the reasons for the delays has been the repeated demand by the opposition that an independent commission verify the official results announced for the first presidential vote. That commission was finally installed on April 28 byPrivert and interim Prime Minister Enex Jean-Charles. Privert said the commission would “not be a political commission but a technical one. And the people who will make it up are people who have credibility.”

The new commission, a five-member work group called the Commission d’Évaluation et de Vérification Electorale (Election Evaluation and Verification Commission) must complete its work in no more than 30 days. According to the decree issued at its creation, it must analyze, among other elements, voting center documents, ballots cast, and registered complaints. It must also determine whether the voting process was carried out in compliance with election legislation, and produce recommendations on how to correct flaws.

Immediately after his election as the commission’s president, François Benoît—a former CEP member (2005-2006)—delivered a speech to the nation. “It’s time that our country gets off to a start based on trust,” he said. “We have your trust, and we are going to earn that trust. It’s time to take on
our responsibilities in order to preserve the nation’s interests, and most of all, that the re-launching and the outcome of the election process are set within a climate of confidence

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