Haiti Sets October Date for New Presidential Elections

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Haiti Sets October Date for New Presidential Elections

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It has all the makings of magical realism, but it is no literary plot and lacks magic altogether: Haiti, in a seemingly endless institutional and political crisis, has taken a reverse jump in time. Declaring that irregularities in last year’s presidential election were insurmountable, Haitian officials have gone back to square one and called for a new vote.

An investigative panel set up to audit the October 2015 election recommended a full do-over of the vote, and the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council, CEP) immediately rescheduled the ballot. The flaws the panel found in last year’s process were blatant, and included violence in voting stations, ballot burning, multiple voting, and massive issuance of identity cards for mandataires (political party monitors).

During a ceremony held May 30 at the National Palace, François Benoit, the head of the Commission Indépendante d’Évaluation et de Vérification Électorale (Independent Commission for Election Evaluation and Verification, CIEVE), solemnly handed the report on the work group’s investigation to Haiti’s interim president, Jocelerme Privert. “We recommend that the presidential election be done over,” Benoit announced, summarizing the results of the commission’s month-long review of the election.

A long-running crisis
This starting point of the crisis dates back to the twice-delayed (2011, 2013) legislative election, which was eventually held last year. As a result of the delays, Haiti went through all of 2015 without a functioning parliament. It finally resumed work last January, but with a third of the Senate still to be elected, a scenario that left then-President Michel “Sweet Micky” Martelly to rule by decree (NotiCen, April 11, 2013, Aug. 15, 2013, and Jan. 8, 2015).

The crisis deepened late last year, when the official results of the Oct. 25 presidential election were contested by most opposition candidates. The official figures showed that none of the 54 presidential hopefuls obtained the minimum—50% plus one vote—needed to be declared the winner. According to the announced results, the runoff rivals would be Jovenel Moïse, of the then-ruling Parti Haïtien Têt Kale (Haitian Bald Head Party, PHTK), and Jude Célestin, of the opposition Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l’Émancipation Haïtienne (Alternative League for Haitian Progress and Emancipation, LAPEH). Moïse had managed to round up 32.76% of the vote, with Célestin in second place, receiving 25.29%, the CEP reported (NotiCen, Jan. 14, 2016, March 3, 2016, May 5, 2016, and June 2, 2016).

As did other opposition candidates, Célestin rejected those estimates, called the official results a “ridiculous farce,” and warned he would not take part in the runoff. The opposition parties alleged vote-rigging in favor of Moïse, Martelly’s hand-picked candidate, and demanded an independent verification of the CEP figures. However, members of the international community, including the US, argued that the irregularities were not serious enough as to warrant a ballot audit.
A series of runoff postponements ensued, so that when Martelly stepped down as scheduled on Feb. 7, he did not have an elected successor, leading to the congressional appointment of the new head of Haiti’s Senate—Privert—as interim president. Privert’s temporary term was set at 120 days, a period legislators deemed long enough for the second round of elections to be held and the new president to be sworn-in.

But the opposition kept up its demand for an independent check of the original vote, so a commission was set up on April 28, and the second round was again postponed for a month to allow the five-member panel to do its work.

The commission’s findings, according to the report, included that 628,000 votes—around 40% of the just over 1.5 million valid votes—were cast by unidentifiable or untraceable voters. The total of what became known as “zombie ballots” is higher than the number of votes obtained by the candidate at the head of the list and higher that the total number of votes obtained by the second, the CIEVE pointed out in its 103-page report. In addition, more than 180,000 forged national identification cards were used, more than 20,000 fingerprint registers were not valid, and multiple balloting occurred, mostly by mandataires whose accreditation cards were massively distributed.

New dates scheduled

Thus, CIEVE recommended “the rerun of the process, implementing dispositions that are necessary to guarantee the right of citizens to vote, and for candidates the right to be elected.” On June 7, a week after the commission’s report was made public, the CEP accepted the task force’s recommendations and CEP president Léopold Berlanger announced the new—hopefully definitive—date for the presidential makeover as Oct. 9, with a runoff, if necessary, on Jan. 8, 2017. The release of preliminary first-round results was set for Oct. 20 or 21, with final numbers to be announced Nov. 22. If a run-off is needed, preliminary estimates would be made public Jan. 14, 2017, and final figures would be known two weeks later, on Jan. 30. The new president would be sworn in Feb. 7, 2017.

During the upcoming presidential elections, Haiti’s voters are also to elect the still-pending one-third of the Senate’s 30 members, plus departmental (provincial) authorities. The entire election process should close April 2, 2017, with the release of final numbers for the local vote. By the June 22 filing deadline set by the CEP, half of the original presidential candidates—27 of the 54—had confirmed participation in the rescheduled exercise, including last year’s top two contenders.

Seven days after Benoit’s announcement, the countries and organizations seeking a solution to the Haitian crisis—the Core Group, made up of Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, the US, the European Union (EU), and the Organization of American States (OAS)—expressed major anxiety about restarting the election process from scratch. The Core Group group—which includes Haiti’s main international donors—let it be known in a press release that it remained “deeply concerned that the decision to rerun the presidential elections will have financial consequences and prolong the electoral process started in 2015.”

Adding that “it is the responsibility of an elected government to address the socio-economic and humanitarian challenges Haiti is facing,” the Core Group also called on “all Haitian actors to scrupulously respect the electoral calendar to organize transparent and equitable elections in an impartial manner.”
The Core Group helped cover last year’s $100 million election budget, with the US alone having chipped in about $33 million, including not only cash but a supply of vehicles for the country’s Police Nationale (National Police, PN) according to media reports. But in a June 6 Miami Herald article, Kenneth Merten, the US special coordinator for Haiti, warned it would be difficult for him to ask the US Congress for money to help fund a new election. The US daily also quoted an official of the UN Development Program as saying there were only $8.2 million left in Haiti’s election fund.

However, on June 23, Privert told the Agence France Presse (AFP) that $30 million of the $55 million needed for October’s vote were available, adding that, for the other $25 million, “if our partners, who are grappling with their own financial problems, do not have the means to do so, we must find the funds ourselves.”

**US stops financial aid**

US During a July 7 press briefing in Washington, D.C., State Department spokesperson John Kirby announced the decision to halt US financial aid to Haiti’s election process, while favoring what he described as priority aid for the people. “Suspension of US electoral financial assistance does not signal a reduction in US support for the people or development of Haiti,” he said. “Rather, we believe it allows us to maintain assistance in other priority areas such as health, economic growth, and infrastructure.”

The decision enables the US to retain humanitarian and development programs that help ordinary Haitians, Kirby noted. “We’ve made clear what our concerns were about the electoral process thus far,” he said. “We’ve been nothing but candid and forthright about that. But ultimately, these are decisions that they have to make, and we want to continue to urge them to make the right ones.”

Robert Fatton, a professor at the University of Virginia, said the US decision could have to do, precisely, with getting even at Haitian authorities for having hurt US pride in rescheduling the election against US advice. The move could be a “typical punishment” by the US, probably “feeling insulted by the decisions taken by the people in its so-called ‘backyard,’” Fatton was quoted as saying in a Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) article posted on the center’s Haiti: Relief and Reconstruction Watch blog. However, he added, “Haiti organizing its own elections with its own funds is a very good thing.”

Back in Port-au-Prince, Berlanger told reporters, “If you are a real sovereign country, you should get the means to fund your own elections.”

And presidential spokesperson Serge Simon told the Miami Herald, “We already made ourselves clear: Haiti will make all effort to find the $55 million to do the elections ... If no one comes to our assistance, we will manage, because the priority for us is the elections.”

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