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Short on Funds, Haiti Prepares for October Elections

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A year after the presidential elections were rendered null by multiple irregularities in Haiti, a provisional president remains in office, and funding for the new vote, scheduled for Oct. 9, is not altogether certain (NotiCen, March 3, 2016, May 5, 2016, and June 2, 2016).

Interim President Jocelerme Privert, whose 120-day mandate expired just over two months ago, stayed on after the nation’s parliament repeatedly failed to either extend his term or appoint a replacement.

In one of his most recent official actions regarding the ongoing election chaos, Privert signed the decree calling on Haitian voters to go to the polls on Oct. 9, the date set by the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council, CEP) for the rerun.

‘Unavoidable challenge’

During the signing ceremony held on July 19 at the Palais National (National Palace), he stressed the need to comply with the new date, and described the re-scheduled ballot as an “unavoidable challenge for the country’s political and democratic future.”

He also said that, despite the fact the Assemblée Nationale (National Assembly)—the joint meeting of the two parliamentary chambers, the Sénat (Senate) and the Chambre des Députés (House of Representatives)—has failed four times to decide on his mandate, he remains at its disposal.

The political agreement reached early this year established the appointment of a provisional president who, within 120 days, would lead the country through a successful election process, among other duties. The accord, signed on Feb. 5 by Privert, then the Senate president; Cholzer Chancy, the president of the Chamber of Deputies; and outgoing President Michel Martelly, also empowered the National Assembly to make “the necessary arrangements” for the provisional presidential term.

But the inability of parliament to act promptly on Privert’s expired mandate, and the repeated postponement of the presidential election runoff—before the election itself was annulled—led Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Luis Almagro to warn, in July, that “Haiti can no longer afford to be the hostage of dilatory tactics and other ploys.”

And in an Aug. 11 statement on the electoral process in Haiti, the OAS Permanent Council called on all Haitian actors in the election process to once and for all finish the delayed voting process, nevertheless adding its willingness to help strengthen the island nation’s election system. “At the request of the authorities in Haiti, the Permanent Council will remain seized of the situation for strengthening the electoral institutions and processes in that country,” it said.

US ‘regrets decision’

But electoral setbacks keep piling up, one of the latest of which is the US’ refusal to earmark new funds for the new elections. On June 8, US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner told
reporters in Washington that the US “regrets the decision by the Provisional Electoral Council to restart the presidential elections from the first round,” because “the Haitian people deserve to have their voices heard, not deferred” (NotiCen July 21, 2016). In Toner’s view, the massive irregularities that marred the original vote in October of last year were problems that “can be addressed without ... restarting the entire process.”

Meanwhile, Kenneth Merten, the US State Department special coordinator in Haiti, told the Haitian news outlet Le Nouvelliste, “We still do not know what position we will adopt regarding our financial support.” He pointed out that US taxpayers had already spent $33.4 million in the process, around a third of the $100 million that the failed vote actually cost, adding, “We can ask ourselves what was done with the money or what guarantees are there that the same thing will not happen again.”

On June 14, as Privert’s temporary presidential term was ending, the US Congress passed a bill declaring that “it is the policy of the United States to increase engagement with the governments of the Caribbean region, the Caribbean diaspora community in the United States, and the private sector and civil society in both the United States and the Caribbean.” The policy seeks to “advance cooperation on democracy and human rights in the Caribbean region,” according to the bill.

**Doubts and concerns**

But the US attitude regarding new funds for the election process has sparked doubt and concern in Haiti.

CEP president Léopold Berlanger said it was “bizarre that they don’t want to support the democratic process,” adding, “I don’t see how their behavior is rational,” since it makes the US seem to not want the vote to take place.

The US refusal to provide new money puts Haiti in the position to fund the elections itself. Privert said the elections would be “an act of national sovereignty,” leaving it “up to us to do all that is possible to respond to our responsibilities as a people and as a nation.”

Robert Fatton, a Haiti expert based at the University of Virginia, told The Miami Herald that “Washington is basically engaged in an effort to discipline Port-au-Prince,” adding that “it remains to be seen if this will force Haiti to ultimately cry uncle, or instead fuel Haitian nationalism to happily ‘go it alone.’”

Meanwhile, Joseph Baptiste, president of the US-based NGO National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians, worried about the US reaction once a president is elected in the new vote.

“My biggest fear is that we find the money, we do the elections, and they do not recognize the elected president,” he said. “If they don’t ... we are in bigger trouble than we are now.”

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