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Hurricane Forces Latest Delay in Presidential Elections in Haiti

by George Rodríguez

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A year ago, it was major ballot irregularities. This month, a phenomenal hurricane got in the way, and the repeatedly postponed presidential vote was again delayed in Haiti. Elections have now been re-scheduled for Nov. 20 (NotiCen, Jan. 14, 2016, March 3, 2016, Sept. 1, 2016).

In the past six years, Haiti has endured the devastating 7.0 earthquake of January 2010, an ongoing cholera epidemic, and now the most destructive weather event in years—the Category 4 hurricane Matthew, whose aftermath has given new force to the cholera epidemic. Beyond extending the political crisis, Matthew has worsened conditions for the millions of people—more than 80% of the population—who live in extreme poverty, barely surviving on less than US$2 a day (NotiCen, April 29, 2010, Nov. 18, 2010, Jan. 10, 2013).

Matthew’s winds also caused severe infrastructure damage, including the destruction of a key bridge as well as schools and other buildings that were to be used as voting centers. According to preliminary reports, thousands of victims were taken to 224 temporary shelters in the country’s southwest, the region most severely affected by the storm, particularly in the departments of Grand’Anse and Sud.

On Oct. 5, as Matthew was leaving Haiti, the nine-member Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council, CEP) announced the new postponement of the presidential vote: The CEP “informs the population in general, the parties, political groups, and candidates in particular that, after the damage caused by the passage of hurricane Matthew, significantly affecting the Electoral Council’s activities on the ground, notably in the Sud and Grand’Anse departments, the vote that was to be held on Oct. 9, 2016, is postponed. A new date for holding the vote will be announced next Wednesday, Oct. 12.” But even the announcement of the new rerun date was postponed for two days.

Haitian voters have seen the presidential election delayed and re-scheduled several times since October 2015, when major flaws in the first voting exercise to replace then-President Michel Martelly—massive issuance of identity cards for political party monitors, multiple voting, violence in voting stations, and a host of other issues—led the CEP to postpone the presidential runoff.

After Matthew, CEP President Léopold Berlanger reported that before deciding on the new date, the CEP had held talks with political leaders, and emphasized that the CEP wanted “acceptable elections in all of the departments, so that the person elected has legitimacy and the country can find political stability.” He said this was why the CEP had not accepted the suggestion that the vote be held only in regions where the storm had no impact.

According to a report by the Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (EOM/OAS), the contents of which were quoted by The Miami Herald, the group’s 125 members visited 1331 of the country’s 1534 voting centers. The observers found that in the southern city of Les
Cayes, where Matthew cut through, 71% of the voting stations were unusable and another 18% were isolated due to road infrastructure damage.

‘Safety challenges’

The EOM/OAS reported that the road and building infrastructure in the area was seriously battered, and that “holding the vote in the urban regions that were very affected—for example, Jérémie—poses safety challenges.” It added that “the structures most difficult to repair—voting centers, for example—are the ones that were damaged by wind and debris,” and “the greatest challenge for the election authorities will be related to holding the election in centers that are accessible only by secondary roads.”

It pointed out that the success of the voting process in the affected areas “will demand a concerted effort. Citizens’ access to their identity document and to detailed information on the development of the election—under extraordinary conditions—could become vital to guarantee a pacific ballot day.”

The damage the roads, and the needed mobilization of the Haiti National Police (Police Nationale d’Haïti, PNH) in response to the hurricane, “has upset their deployment and the dispatch of convoys carrying election materials throughout the territory,” the commission noted.

“In the Sud peninsula, several public school facilities that should house voting centers are being used... for provisional shelter,” it pointed out, and “in other cases they have been severely damaged or are not in a functional state because of the loss of roofing, which was ripped away by the hurricane’s violence.”

Placing the victims as the priority in the present emergency, the CEP’s Berlanger said during the Oct. 5 the press conference, “We stand in solidarity with them, and we will not leave them behind in the electoral process.”

Haiti’s election authority received immediate support from the country’s top opposition presidential candidate, Jude Célestin, who said the CEP had made “a wise decision.” Célestin took second place in last year’s questioned presidential election, after government-backed rival Jovenel Moïse.

“It’s difficult to ask people to go vote, given what we’re dealing with right now,” Célestin told local media, stressing that “getting assistance to the population is more important than elections right now” even though, he stressed, “elections are important.”

In a press release issued immediately after the postponement was announced, the EOM/OAS said the decision stemmed from the damage caused by the hurricane. Mission chief Juan Raúl Ferreira reassured the public of the organization’s continued support for the process.

The EOM/OAS “expresses its deepest sympathies to all those affected by Hurricane Matthew, while supporting at the same time the Provisional Electoral Council’s (CEP) decision to postpone Election Day,” it said on Oct. 5. “The decision takes into account the logistical and technical difficulties of holding the vote in those regions impacted by the passage of the hurricane.”

In the four-paragraph press release, Ferreira guaranteed that the mission would “continue supporting the Haitian democratic process and will redeploy observers when the relevant authorities decide they are ready to hold elections.”
Delay criticized
But the rerun delay was immediately criticized by Moïse, whose spokesperson, Renald Luberice, blamed Haiti’s interim president, Jocelerme Privert. He charged that Privert “wants to take the opportunity to postpone [the elections] indefinitely,” thus remaining in power.

Privert, the former head of Haiti’s Senate, was chosen on Feb. 5 to serve as the country’s interim president, since as a result of the postponement of the runoff, President Michel Martelly had to step down without an elected replacement. Privert’s original 120-day mandate expired in June, but he has stayed on after Parliament repeatedly failed to either extend his term or appoint a replacement.

Immediately reacting to the CEP announcement, the US government expressed the hope that the vote will be held soon, and that, this time, it is a credible vote. “Our interest is that they do have elections... in the not-too-distant future [and] that they have elections that are fair, transparent and credible,” said Kenneth Merten, deputy assistant secretary of state and US special coordinator for Haiti.

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