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President-Elect Jovenel Moïse Faces Tough Challenges in Haiti

by George Rodríguez

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Jovenel Moïse, who managed to emerge as the winner in Haiti's chaotic, year-long election process to become his country's 58th president, is faced with major challenges, including what is likely to be intense political tension in the form of fierce opposition.

Moïse was the top vote-getter in the original presidential vote, which took place in October 2015. But since none of the 52 contenders managed to obtain the necessary minimum of 50% plus one vote, and Moïse's margin over his closest rival was not above 25%, a runoff was scheduled. Then his rivals challenged the figures announced by the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council, CEP), alleging major irregularities, which led to the runoff being repeatedly postponed until the results were scrapped and a redo of the vote was set ([NotiCen, July 21, 2016](#), [Sept, 1, 2016](#), [Oct. 20, 2016](#)).

Preliminary CEP results of the final ballot, which took place on Nov. 20, again showed Moïse in first place with 55.67% of the vote, followed distantly by Jude Célestin with 19.52%, Jean-Charles Moïse (no relation to Jovenel Moïse) with 11.04%, and Maryse Narcisse with 8.99%. The four repeated the positions they took after the 2015 vote.

The fifth most voted in the October 2015 ballot, Eric Jean Baptiste (3.63%), did not take part in the final election, in which 27 candidates participated.

Moïse, of the center-right Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (Haitian Bald Head Party, PHTK), and Narcisse, of the leftist Fanmi Lavalas (Avalanche or Flood Family) were the only two with improved vote counts, having gone up from 32.81% and 7.05% respectively.

Célestin, of the center-left Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l'Émancipation Haïtienne (Alternative League for Haitian Progress and Emancipation, LAPEH), and Jean-Charles Moïse, of the center Platfòm Pitit Desalin (Child of Dessalines Party), saw their percentages reduced from 25.27% and 14.27% respectively.

These final numbers were also contested by opposition candidates, whose followers staged street protests that included the burning of tires and stone-throwing, as well as clashes between police and demonstrators. Originally set for Dec. 29, the announcement of the definitive official figures was delayed, due to opposition objections, until Jan. 3.

The final results—virtually the same as the preliminary figures—gave Jovenel Moïse 55.60% of the votes, followed by Célestin with 19.57%, Jean-Charles Moïse with 11.04%, and Narcisse with 9.01%.

Moïse's five-year term is scheduled to begin in February.

Chronic problems

The president-elect is conscious of his outlook as chief executive in a country where the usually scarce voter turnout marked a historic low last year, and where chronic poverty affects over 80%

of the population of just over 10 million. Haitians, on an average, survive on less than US\$2 a day ([NotiCen, April 21, 2016](#)).

Haiti's historically critical situation was worsened on Jan. 12, 2010, when a magnitude-7.0 earthquake ravaged the capital of Port-au-Prince, claiming over 200,000 lives, displacing some 600,000, and leaving another 1.5 million homeless ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010](#), [Feb. 18, 2010](#), [April 29, 2010](#)). Seven years after the earthquake, tens of thousands of Haitians are still living in camps.

At the end of 2010, the country was struck by a cholera epidemic that has since killed more than 9,000 people. Another 700,000 have been treated in hospitals ([NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010](#), and [March 28, 2013](#)).

In October of last year, Hurricane Matthew ripped through Haiti's southwest as a Category 4 storm with winds of up to 209 km/h, killing over 1,000 people, leaving more than a million in need of humanitarian aid, and destroying crops and infrastructure ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#), and [Nov. 10, 2016](#)).

During a press conference at a luxury hotel in Pétienville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, immediately after the preliminary CEP results were made public, Moïse called on fellow Haitians to support his effort to set the country on the road to development and activate its economy—to put “food on the plates of the people and money in their pockets.”

In a separate interview with international media, Moïse provided a glimpse at his plans, which he said included modernizing the country's agriculture and fighting the corruption that also plagues Haiti. He also made it a point to underline his independence from his predecessor, Michel “Sweet Micky” Martelly (2011-2016), who handpicked him as the candidate for the PHTK.

In a Nov. 30 article, The New York Times quoted Moïse as saying, “I have had 20 months of campaigning,” and “I am really ready.”

Governing priorities

Moïse also told The Times that his top priorities included tackling corruption, addressing climate change, accomplishing agricultural recovery, and the development of an organic food industry. (Moïse is an agricultural entrepreneur who was known throughout the election campaign as “Neg Bannan Nan”—Haitian creole for “Banana Man”).

Success in reaching such goals would keep nationals from going to the US or the neighboring Dominican Republic in search of the jobs they cannot find in Haiti, he told TheTimes.

Moïse was also quoted as saying, “Since I was a child, I've always wondered why people were living in such conditions while enormous lands were empty ... agriculture is the key to change for this country.”

Regarding opposition allegations that he answers to Martelly, he assured that “Jovenel is his own man.” But he added, “It is a good privilege for me to have a former president I can talk to about his success, and his problems ... For example, this morning I called him, because I needed some advice about something. But you know, I am 100% Jovenel Moïse.”

Shortly after The Times' interview, Moïse was quoted by Reuters as confirming his aim to strengthen agriculture, and pointing out that “if Haiti is not self-sufficient in food, it is because we

have stopped working." He also told Reuters that corruption is a major obstacle in Haiti's quest for development.

"Corruption is the main brake [to development] in poor countries," he said, noting that institutions responsible for fighting the phenomenon need reinforcing and restructuring. "At the highest level of the government, we have to set the tone and preach by example."

Reacting to the late-night announcement of the preliminary election results in November, Moïse wrote on his Twitter account: "The Haitian people have made their choice and voted for me in the first round. Thank you all for your trust. Long live Haiti!"

But in separate radio interviews the following day, his three closest rivals denounced the ballot count at the CEP Vote Tabulation Center, with Narcisse describing the preliminary results an "electoral coup d'état," and Leslie Voltaire, her campaign manager, warning, "Democracy is in danger in Haiti."

The voter turnout officially estimated at 21%, a historical low in Haiti's complex election history, was compounded by the fact that three of the nine CEP members refused to validate the preliminary results.

During the Nov. 28 press conference to announce the numbers, CEP president Léopold Berlangier, joined by Robinson Cherilus, head of the vote tabulation center, backed the center's work, and upheld the figures. But the voting figures revealed Haitian voters' apathy, reflected in the scarce turnout, triggering concern about Moïse's actual legitimacy and doubts regarding his ability to provide the political stability Haiti needs.

One such voice is that of local political analyst Fritz Dorvilier, who forecasts powerful opposition and fears Moïse will actually deepen instability in a country whose history is riddled with dictatorships, corruption, and violence.

"It will be difficult for Jovenel," because "a profound uniting of the opposition" is bound to occur, he pointed out.

The majority of the population "doesn't believe in elections and the instability will plunge the country deeper into poverty," Dorvilier predicted. Once in office, Moïse could be the target of daily opposition demonstrations, a situation that could "plunge Haiti deeper into political instability."

Moïse is about to take over the leadership of a nation whose critical reality includes, among other factors, economic growth of 1.4% in 2016 with a forecast of 1% for 2017, an inflation rate of 12%, and scant opportunities for its workforce.

Conscious of the challenges he is up against, Moïse posted on his Facebook account early in January that his term in office would be one of "active will and vigilant pragmatism."

And in statements to reporters shortly after the final figures were made public, he insisted that his administration would "work for all Haitians, without distinction," and would strive to "restore order and discipline in the country."

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