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Haiti's New President, a Political Novice, Takes Oath of Office

by George Rodríguez

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A newcomer to the political scene, President Jovenel Moïse sees himself as a leader who will guide Haiti along the path of justice and stability, promoting national dialogue and prioritizing the people's well-being ([NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2017](#)). Such was the commitment he made shortly after being sworn-in as Haiti's 58th president, following two years of political chaos and repeatedly postponed elections ([NotiCen, July 21, 2016](#), [Sept. 1, 2016](#), [Oct. 20, 2016](#))

"I promise you, during my five-year period, to once again place the search of the common good at the heart of our priorities," Moïse told Haitians during his inauguration speech on Feb. 7. "I will be the guarantor of a just, equitable, and stable Haiti, the guarantor of dialogue with and between all sectors of national life."

In a 25-minute address during which he alternated between Créole and French, the country's two official languages, Moïse said he would focus on economic recovery in order to foster lasting growth, and promised that members of the new government would be appointed "following criteria of competence, merit, and probity."

The new president comes to politics from the business world. He is an auto parts dealer and agricultural producer known as "Neg Bannan Nan" (Haitian creole for "Banana Man"). And agriculture is, precisely, one of Haiti's critical economic sectors. It was drastically affected by last year's Hurricane Matthew, which ripped through the country's southwest destroying crops and infrastructure and claiming more than 1,000 lives. The storm left 200,000 people homeless and 1.4 million in need of humanitarian aid ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#), and [Nov. 10, 2016](#)).

This challenge adds to the earlier—and still unsolved—problems caused by the January 2010 earthquake. Thousands of the Haitians left homeless by that disaster are still living in emergency camps ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010](#), [Feb. 18, 2010](#), [April 29, 2010](#)), and the country is still suffering from the ensuing cholera outbreak, an ongoing epidemic that has claimed more than 9,000 lives ([NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010](#), and [March 28, 2013](#)).

UN leaving?

On the security front, Moïse's administration is faced with the possibility that the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti, MINUSTAH) is nearing the end of its repeatedly extended mandate. The mission's task is set to expire on April 15, and several Latin American nations that have contributed troops to the force have stated their intention to withdraw their personnel.

According to media reports, Hervé Ladsous, who was the UN assistant secretary general for peace operations until February, recently conducted an evaluation visit to Haiti in order to prepare a report to the UN Security Council. If MINUSTAH actually leaves Haiti, the new government will be faced with the additional challenge posed by gang violence in poverty-stricken communities such

as Grand Ravine, in the Martissant neighborhood on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, the country's capital.

In his inaugural speech, Moïse also assured Haitians that he would "demand that the rules of good governance be strictly implemented, that justice be impartial and equitable," in order to "allow the Haitian people be strong and face the future with confidence and calm."

And he was conciliatory. "Today, it is not about victory of one side over the other sides," he said. "It is Haiti's victory and that of all Haitians. All the members of my team must be motivated with the feeling to serve Haiti with love and selflessness."

The inaugural ceremony was held on the grounds of the National Palace, the government headquarters destroyed by the earthquake. It was attended by local and foreign dignitaries, including Cardinal Chibly Langlois, the head of the Conférence Episcopale d'Haïti (Bishops' Conference of Haiti, CEH), who delivered a powerful message to Moïse.

"Today, you are the one who has the huge honor and the moral duty to serve all Haitians, women or men," Langlois said. "You are the president of all Haitians without distinctions."

An apathetic public

But Haitians do not seem overly enthusiastic about the change of government, an apathy reflected in the low voter turnout on Nov. 20, 2016, when barely 20 percent of the 6.1 million registered voters cast their ballots. The lack of voter participation weakens Moïse's legitimacy, since he won with 55% of the ballots cast, which comes down to an actual 10% support.

Also eroding his standing is the fact that Moïse was the hand-picked candidate of former president Michel "Sweet Micky" Martelly (2012-2016), which has led opposition leaders to say that Moïse is likely to be used by his mentor as a proxy. Moïse ran for the center-right Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (Haitian Bald Head Party, PHTK), named after Martelly's shaven-scalp look.

Robert Maguire, of the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, said yet another difficult issue the new administration has to deal with is the constant flow of Haitian migrants who try to reach the US in search of the opportunities they cannot have in their home country. The new administration "will be pressed to take some responsibility for those Haitians who have piled up along the Mexican border," he warned.

However, Moïse's troubles could go beyond the governmental sphere, potentially reaching into the legal realm, and perhaps drag on for at least part of his presidential term.

In his inaugural speech, Moïse pledged that during his term in office "the justice system will never be used for political persecution," something he has alleged has been done against him. He was referring to the ongoing investigation on accusations of money laundering and having received favorable treatment in obtaining bank loans. Moïse has dismissed the allegations—which reach back almost four years—as politically motivated and aimed at tarnishing his image and creating instability for his administration.

"This is purely a political battle, and it has nothing to do with the truth," he told The Miami Herald on Jan. 24, two weeks before taking office.

As if those challenges were not enough, doubt has surfaced regarding the actual length of Moïse's presidential term. The uncertainty derives from the fact that the new president should have been sworn in more than a year ago, on Feb. 7, 2016, a date delayed multiple times due to the repeated postponements of the vote.

Moïse promised Haitians during his inauguration speech that he would "commit to work from the first to the last day of my five-year period so you will not be disillusioned." But experts have told local media that, according to Haiti's Constitution, Moïse's term officially ends on Feb. 7, 2021, which means he has lost a year of the regular five-year term.

Despite the obstacles Moïse faces, local politicians and analysts say there is reason for hope. Senator Youri Latortue, for example, who in his capacity as Senate leader headed Moïse's swearing-in ceremony, assured the new president that the country's legislators are ready to cooperate with him "for the benefit of the country."

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