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Jamaica: Presidential Elections Scheduled For Feb. 9

by John Neagle

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On the evening of Jan. 15 at a nationally televised rally in Kingston, Prime Minister Edward Seaga announced that the first contested general elections since 1980 will take place on Feb. 9. Business leaders insisted on a short campaign to minimize the risk of disrupting the tourist season, and Seaga asserted that the campaign was the shortest allowed under law. The tourist industry earns about \$600 million per year, ranking as the country's largest foreign exchange earner. After \$1 billion in damage and 45 deaths caused by Hurricane Gilbert, which struck on Sept. 12, the industry has apparently recovered. According to government figures, visitor arrivals, down 42.7% in November, reached 1 million by December, and are currently running only 1.6% below last year. During the nine-month campaign preceding the last contested election in 1980, more than 700 people died in politically-related attacks. In August 1988, Seaga and former Prime Minister and socialist rival Michael Manley signed a "peace treaty" and agreed on a code of conduct for orderly campaigning. Manley's leftist People's National Party boycotted 1983 elections in a dispute over voter registration, leaving the Jamaican Labor Party with all 60 seats in Parliament. Manley has called for elections since 1983. Seaga is taking credit for Jamaica's recovery from the hurricane and its close relations with the US. However, a majority of Jamaicans favor Manley: critics blame the Seaga administration's economic restructuring and austerity measures for reductions in health and education services. For the last two years, opinion polls show Seaga behind Manley by 13 points. At the rally, Seaga railed against the policies of the 1970s Manley government. During his eight years in power, he said, his Jamaican Labor Party brought political stability, reversed economic decline and restored relations with the US. He said, "In these hands, your future is safe." Seaga claimed credit for having raised \$600 million in relief funds from the US, other western governments and lending institutions within one month of the hurricane. "It was possible because the international community trusts the government of Jamaica," he said. A poll conducted earlier this month by Don Anderson showed that 53% of respondents who have decided on a candidate favor Manley. Anderson, who has accurately predicted election results in Jamaica since 1972, predicted that Manley's PNP will capture at least 45 seats in the Parliament. The prime minister's standing in the polls improved slightly after the hurricane. Pollster Carl Stone of the University of the West Indies said bickering over alleged inequities and delays in relief distribution offset any gains. Jamaica has a population of 2.3 million and is located 90 miles south of Cuba. In the 1970s while Manley was prime minister, Jamaica caused alarm in Washington, result of overtures to Cuba and other "socialist" policies. (Basic data from AP, 01/15/89, 01/16/89; Xinhua, 01/16/89)

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