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Haitian Voters Cast Ballots for President, National Assembly

by LADB Staff

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On Dec. 16, Haitians went to the polls to elect a president, 110 members of the bicameral National Assembly, 134 mayors, 268 municipal council members and 1,695 county officials. The president has a five-year term, National Assembly senators six years and deputies four. The new government will replace the administration of provisional president Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, a Supreme Court justice appointed in March. According to the Provisional Electoral Council, 2.97 million citizens or about 90% of the electorate, were registered to vote. In the event no one of the 11 presidential candidates obtained 50% of the vote, a runoff was scheduled for Jan. 20.

Events surrounding the election are summarized below.

Nov. 25: At Cap-Haitien, located 260 km. north of Port- au-Prince, about 60,000 supporters attended a rally for Catholic priest Jean Bertrand Aristide, candidate in the Dec. 16 presidential elections. Aristide, 37, told the poor during his campaign that they were following God's will to fight for their rights. Msgr. Petion Laroche, bishop of Hinche and head of Haiti's Episcopal Conference, reiterated the neutrality of the Catholic Church in the presidential campaign. Laroche also pointed out, however, that church law prohibits priests from holding public office. Aristide, who was ousted from the Salesian Order for allegedly inciting class hatred, has said he would renounce the priesthood if elected president to comply with the Vatican policy against priests holding political office.

Dec. 3: A poll based on a sample of 1,208 voters conducted by the Logos polling firm and Radio Metropole indicated 58% support for Aristide. Next in the ranking were Marc Bazin, former World Bank economist, 13%; Christian Democrat Sylvio Claude, 5%; Thomas Desulme of the National Workers Party, 4%; Louis Dejoie Jr. of the National Industrial Agricultural Party and Hubert de Ronceray of the Mobilization for National Development Party, each with 3%.

Dec. 5: Radio Metropole reported a grenade explosion and gunfire during a blackout following an Aristide campaign rally in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville. Media reports later set the number of casualties at seven dead and 53 wounded. In nearby Delmas, three men broke into and looted the headquarters of the Movement to Organize the Country, a party that supports Aristide. A guard was injured by the attackers.

Dec. 6: In an interview with Radio Antilles, Aristides said the Tonton Macoutes were responsible for the violence in Petitionville. According to the candidate, the incident could have been prevented if authorities had arrested Roger Lafontant, the Macoutes chief who returned from exile to run for president. Lafontant was barred from participating in the race by the Provisional Electoral Council.

Dec. 7: Unidentified Haitian political sources in Montreal cited by Notimex said the Haitian Supreme Court, which is linked to the Duvalier family dictatorship, may declare the electoral process null and void by claiming that the Council and the process itself were unconstitutional. Such an outcome would be possible in a suit filed before the court by deposed president Leslie Manigat. The Council issued a decision prohibiting Manigat's candidacy in the Dec. 16 race.

Dec. 9: The New York Times reported that Roger Lafontant issued what appeared to be a last-minute rallying cry to prevent a victory for Aristide. Writing in a Duvalierist magazine, Lafontant said, "Attila is at the doors of Rome." Aristide returned to Port-au-Prince from a visit with Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, described as a possible mediator for the priest with the US.

Dec. 11: Police in Port-au-Prince said 10 persons were arrested in connection with the Dec. 5 attack on the Aristide rally. The only detail released was that one of the suspects had 35 filled-in ballots with him when arrested.

Dec. 12: Joao Baena Soares, secretary general of the Organization of American States, called on member-nations to contribute funds or send representatives to support the OAS election monitoring effort in Haiti. On the following day, Soares arrived in Port-au-Prince to head the OAS delegation. A 200-member observer team was expected from several nations, including the US, Canada, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Brazil and France.

Dec. 15: The government issued an order barring civilians from carrying weapons through Dec. 18, and announced that the country's border with the Dominican Republic would be closed until Tuesday. The government also prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages during the weekend, and restricted election day traffic to cars with election permits and a few bus and taxi companies. Ismael Diallo, spokesperson for the UN's 130-member election monitoring team, told reporters that monitors had not received confirmed reports of irregularities at any of the 14,500 polling stations being prepared across the country. The Associated Press reported that about 800 foreign observers, including former US president Jimmy Carter, were scheduled for election monitoring.

Dec. 16: Long delays were reported in many areas due to logistical difficulties in delivering ballots. Violence was avoided in an incident that occurred in the Cote Soleil slum, an Aristide stronghold where only one of 50 polling stations had been opened five hours after the polls were to open. About 50 police blocked a highway to prevent a march downtown by hundreds of angry residents, many waving cut branches, a traditional symbol of protest or celebration. No clashes were reported. About 200 Aristide supporters celebrated his anticipated election victory with chanting and street dancing in downtown Port-au-Prince. AFP reported that exit polls conducted by observers showed Aristide the likely winner in Port-au-Prince.

Dec. 17: Dancing and cheering Aristide supporters continued to celebrate their candidate's expected victory. Shops were closed in the morning for the official Election Day holiday. The government barred radio and television stations from broadcasting partial vote returns. The international airport reopened to arriving flights, which had been canceled Dec. 16 in case of disturbances. Although official results still were not available, Bernard W. Aronson, US assistant secretary of state for inter-

American affairs, said a US delegation met with Aristide and congratulated him on his victory. At about mid-day, police opened fire as hundreds of people gathered outside the gutted remains of Saint Jean Bosco Church in the La Salines slum of the capital. Witnesses said that as the people sang a patriotic anthem, six police drove up in a pickup truck and began firing, killing a pregnant woman.

The Agence France Presse reported that another person was wounded. Lannis Waters, photographer for the Palm Beach (Fla.) Post, said it was not clear why the police fired. In September 1988, Aristide escaped unharmed when thugs armed with machetes, knives and pikes attacked the same church during Mass, killing 12 parishioners and wounding 70 others. The assailants burned the church to the ground. The first official election returns based on slightly more than 1% of the total showed Aristide with 70.6% of the vote. (Basic data from AFP, 11/25/90, 12/03/90, 12/05/90, 12/06/90, 12/11/90, 12/12/90, 12/17/90; AP, 12/06/90, 12/15-17/90; Notimex, 12/07/90; EFE, 12/09/90; New York Times, 12/09/90)

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