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Jean-Bertrand Aristide Wins Presidential Election in Haiti

by LADB Staff

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A decade after becoming Haiti's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide repeated his victory in the Nov. 28 elections. His election has not received support from the US, however, because of the tainted parliamentary elections that proceeded it in May. Aristide was elected president in 1990 but overthrown in a coup in 1991, then was returned to power through the US military intervention in 1994. Since the end of his term in 1995, Aristide has been viewed with suspicion as his Fanmi Lavalas party maneuvered to take control of parliament (see NotiCen, 2000-04-27, 2000-06-29).

On Dec. 1, Aristide was officially declared the winner in the presidential election. The electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) said Aristide received 91.69% of the votes. Four little-known candidates split the remainder. The lopsided victory was the result of a boycott by the opposition parties that said the parliamentary-election returns in May were improperly counted. Fanmi Lavalas gained undisputed control of both houses of the legislature in those elections (see NotiCen, 200-09-07).

Opposition parties dispute results

The opposition disputed the outcome of the November election and claimed the official estimate of voter turnout was absurdly high at 60%. Some accounts of the election set the turnout at 10% or less. Neither the US nor the Organization of American States (OAS) sent election observers, so the turnout has become a partisan guess.

Aristide said the turnout only seemed small because voters went to the polls in small groups to minimize the danger from bomb blasts, which had hit Port-au-Prince in the week before the elections. Bombs exploded in the capital Nov. 24 and 25 killing two children and wounding 16 others. Police made 19 arrests. Though no one claimed responsibility for the blasts, the opposition said the Chimere, a faction of Lavalas extremists, set them off. But Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis blamed the violence on the opposition. He said the bombings were part of an effort to dissuade voters from going to the polls.

During his campaign, Aristide promised jobs, increased spending on education and health, and improvements in the economy, especially in the agricultural sector. His program stresses import substitution and includes a five-year plan to boost production in agriculture and in industrial production for export. He has called for a national education plan guaranteeing universal access to schooling and a reduction of adult illiteracy. He also promised a national health program, reorganization of the judicial system, a war against impunity, and improvements in the national police force.

After the election, Aristide said he wanted to work with the opposition. "The opposition is indispensable" in rebuilding Haiti, he said. During a post-election news conference, Aristide

denied that Haiti was headed for dictatorship. "It is clear the government will have to reflect openmindedness if we want peace for Haiti, for all Haitians without distinction." After the election, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced that the UN International Civilian Mission to Haiti, which provides technical assistance, would be shut down Feb. 6, just before Aristide's inauguration. The mission has worked in Haiti for ten years. In his report, Annan said that, while Aristide had a broad base of support among the poor, there was a widespread belief that he would return Haiti to a dictatorship.

US will not support Aristide's government

In October, Peter Romero, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said the US would not support a government headed by Aristide. The remark was in response to the May elections, which Romero said were tantamount to an electoral coup because of the way the votes were counted. Voter turnout became the major indicator of the health and legitimacy of the presidential election since there was no real campaign or opposition to Aristide.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that, because the vote-counting process was defective in the May elections, the US government could not be sure how much support Aristide and Lavalas now had. Asked about a private observer team from the US that reported a 70% turnout, Boucher indicated that the figure did not square with reports from the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince. US humanitarian assistance to Haiti would continue said Boucher, but through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Opposition leaders generally predicted disaster because of the manner in which Aristide came to power. Evans Paul, leader of L'Espace de Concertation, said Haiti would be ungovernable if Aristide did not reach an accord with the opposition. [Sources: El Siglo (Dominican Republic), 11/14/00; Haiti Online (Miami), 11/24/00; Haiti en Marche (Haiti), 11/26/00; Agence France-Presse, 11/26/00, 11/27/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 10/27/00, 11/25/00, 11/28/00; US State Department daily press briefing, 11/28/00; The Miami Herald, 11/20/00, 11/28/00, 11/30/00, 12/01/00; The New York Times, 11/25/00, 11/28/00, 12/01/00, 12/03/00]

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