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Aristide Placates the Opposition

by LADB Staff

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Newly elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has made a series of concessions to the US and the international community aimed at repairing his image, blemished by irregularities in two recent elections (see NotiCen, 2000-12-07). Aristide was declared the winner of the November 2000 election, taking more than 91% of the vote in a contest boycotted by the major opposition parties. He will take office Feb. 7. Unless Aristide can satisfy the international community that he is restoring democracy to Haiti, it is unlikely he will receive desperately needed foreign aid. Some US\$600 million in aid funds have been held up because of the political chaos in Haiti.

Aristide makes concessions to US One of the issues between Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party and the opposition is the lack of runoff elections to settle 10 disputed Senate seats. But in December, Aristide told US envoys that he would hold the runoffs, and he promised to revise the electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) to calm US anger over the questionable methods it used to count votes (see NotiCen, 2000-06-29, 2000-07-20).

Among other concessions made to US envoys, Aristide promised more cooperation on drug enforcement by permitting US Coast Guard vessels to pursue drug traffickers into Haitian waters. He also promised to press for approval in parliament of bills that would further enhance Haiti's standing with the US. The proposed legislation would crack down on banks engaged in money laundering and stiffen penalties for drug traffickers. Given the dire conditions in Haitian prisons, increasing the prison population would bring other problems.

Justice Minister Camille Leblanc said, "We can only afford to feed our prisoners 1,300 calories per day, while one needs 2,000 calories a day. When you get into jail here... you don't know how you're going to come out." Aristide also agreed to improve the police and judiciary, accept international monitoring of human rights conditions in Haiti, and accept an Organization of American States (OAS) commission to monitor improvements in democracy. Aristide wrote to President Bill Clinton in late December confirming the agreements made with the US team led by Anthony Lake. In the letter, Aristide said he was confirming those commitments, "confident that they will help strengthen the ties between our two nations where democracy and peace will flourish."

The outgoing Clinton administration appeared to accept Aristide's promises as a genuine opening, a White House official said, "I think Aristide is aware he has got a skeptical administration coming into Washington and sees the need to mend fences, and to at least commit to some significant things. If he follows through, they are very significant." Aristide also faces a possible hardening of US policy under the new administration of President George W. Bush. Republicans in Congress led by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) are pressing for a get-tough policy.

In December, Helms and two other influential Republicans issued a joint statement calling for an end to support for Aristide. "Narco-traffickers, criminals, and other anti-democratic elements who

surround Jean-Bertrand Aristide should feel the full weight of US law enforcement," the statement said. Opposition wants to set up provisional government To show the world that democracy is developing in Haiti, Aristide needs to demonstrate that he can work with the opposition. But much of the opposition, which was divided during the elections, has united in an anti-Aristide alliance pledged to bring down the new regime.

In early January, the opposition alliance Convergence Democratique (CD) met in the capital to plan an alternative provisional government which would replace the current CEP and call new elections. The CD plans to broaden its base through a national convention. Gerard Pierre-Charles, head of the opposition party L'Organisation de Peuple en Lutte (OPL) and a member of the Convergence, called the elections that put Aristide and his Fanmi Lavalas party in power "a farce." He has also not accepted Aristide's concessions to the US, describing them as "accommodations" to keep himself in power. "We want to reach a consensus to propose an alternative and provisional government to Mr. Aristide because we don't recognize his legitimacy," said Pierre-Charles.

Outgoing President Rene Preval said the Convergence plan was "political madness," and Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis called the CD leaders "lunatics." Meanwhile, the OAS has been mediating talks between Lavalas and the opposition. Lavalas representatives have suggested that they might concede one or more of the disputed Senate seats to the opposition. At the same time, Aristide is trying to split the opposition. He met with Marc Bazin, who was prime minister in the regime headed by Raoul Cedras. Cedras led a military junta that overthrew Aristide in 1991.

Observers say it is not likely Aristide would invite Convergence members into his government, but Bazin, leader of the Mouvement pour l'Instauration de la Democratie en Haiti (MIDH), is rumored to be under consideration to replace outgoing Prime Minister Alexis. To further placate the opposition, Aristide has proposed a commission to review the disputed elections, but the Convergence rejected the idea, convinced that Aristide would give up nothing.

At least two parties that have not joined the CD have held talks with Aristide and Lavalas, but the Convergence has refused to negotiate political peace in exchange for concessions. Hatuey De Camps, president of the governing Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) in the Dominican Republic, said that in a telephone conversation with Aristide in mid- January, the president-elect said he realized there had been problems in the elections and that he could not govern without reaching agreements with the Convergence. That same day, according to De Camps, Aristide invited CD leaders to meet with him at his residence. They declined the invitation and said they would only meet with Lavalas leaders at a neutral site and in the presence of national and international observers, but they did not back down from their demands for new elections.

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