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Stalemate Between Government and Opposition

by LADB Staff

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The political warfare between Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the opposition has centered on the question of calling new elections. Aristide agreed to hold special elections for Senate seats in dispute, but the multiparty opposition alliance Convergence Democratique refuses to go along. The resulting stalemate threatens political stability and the already feeble economy.

The crisis stems from last year's elections in which Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party won a majority in both houses of parliament in May, and Aristide won the presidency by a wide margin in December (see NotiCen, 2000-12-27). However, election observers said the electoral council (Conseil Electoral Provisoire, CEP) had used a faulty method of calculating majorities in the May legislative elections (see NotiCen, 2000-06-29). Although most observers and some in the opposition agreed that Lavalas would have won the elections without fraud, the questionable vote counting threw the entire election outcome into doubt.

The US and the Organization of American States (OAS) have pressed Aristide to reach a negotiated settlement with the opposition and hold new elections. In the meantime, the international community is holding back US\$500 million in foreign aid and the OAS threatens sanctions. The government position on the elections is that the voters overwhelmingly chose Aristide and Lavalas parliamentary candidates. While willing to compromise on the handful of seats the OAS said Lavalas won through improper counting methods, it does not accept the claim that the entire election was fraudulent and must be replayed.

Minister of Communications and Culture Guy Paul said it would be "almost immoral for the nations of the OAS to impose sanctions on a people for having voted." Aristide first proposed new elections for the disputed seats to the OAS in March, a month after he took office. At the same meeting, the OAS permanent council resolved to set up a commission to work out a settlement, focusing on resolving the election issues. But the Convergence maintained that Aristide's proposals were aimed solely at placating the OAS and getting the release of foreign aid without making real reforms.

A Convergence communique said, "President Aristide's maneuvers to negotiate with the international community without the participation of the main political actors, as well as with the opposition, will contribute only to complicating the crisis."

In June, Aristide sent the OAS a letter proposing to hold elections to fill seven disputed Senate seats voluntarily vacated by Lavalas senators and to hold general parliamentary elections two years early. He also agreed to a Convergence demand for a new CEP, saying he would set it up by June 25 and it would include representatives from opposition parties and the churches. The proposal appeared to concede considerable ground to the opposition, but the Convergence backed off, first demanding the release of jailed opposition leader Gabriel Fortune. After Fortune's release, however, the Convergence again backed away from talks with the administration.

Complicating the crisis is the Convergence strategy of first boycotting the 2000 presidential election, then demanding new elections rather than special elections for just the disputed Senate seats, and then declaring an alternative government and naming Gerard Gourgue as its provisional president. Though he says he is the president of all Haitians, Gourgue denies any unconstitutional pretensions, calling himself a symbol. But a Senate resolution in March called for Gourgue's arrest for treason. He and other Convergence leaders went into hiding. Riots and confrontations between Lavalas supporters and alternative-government supporters caused three deaths in March.

On March 19, government supporters attacked Convergence headquarters and the next day attacked with firebombs the school run by Gourgue while 200 children were inside. No injuries were reported. Other conflicts took place in the town of Leogane, 35 km from Port-au-Prince, and in Gonaives, about 90 km from the capital. Aristide condemned the acts of violence but said there could not be two governments in Haiti. While the government considers Gourgue a traitor whose alternative government violates the Constitution, the US Embassy says Aristide must respect the Convergence's rights of peaceful assembly and political expression. Following his March offer to the OAS, Aristide began a crackdown against the Convergence, whose supporters he called "enemies of the republic." Minister of Communications and Culture Paul said, "We have to draw the line somewhere....If there is no change, Mr. Gourgue will be arrested unless the two sides can come to some sort of agreement."

In June, the government arrested several Convergence leaders on charges of treason and terrorism. Meanwhile, the OAS has continued to press for a breakthrough. In April an OAS mission led by Luigi Einaudi visited Haiti to review the crisis. Convergence leaders told Einaudi they were willing to talk with the government, and Gourgue appointed a negotiating committee. But when Aristide called a meeting May 3 with representatives from the private sector and opposition parties, Convergence representatives did not attend.

In a statement after the meeting, Aristide said the participants criticized Convergence for its absence and agreed that the serious social and economic issues should take precedence over the electoral ones. The participants also agreed to accept as the basis for negotiations a proposal made in March by the private sector, which called for new parliamentary elections while accepting the outcome of last year's local and presidential elections.

Later in May, the OAS and representatives of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) formed a joint mission to seek a negotiated solution. The mission was a response to Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien's call for an end to the crisis during the April Summit of the Americas in Quebec. But the mission's visit at the end of May, led by OAS secretary general Cesar Gaviria and former Prime Minister of Dominica Eugenia Charles, produced no results. Before leaving Haiti, Gaviria said they were unable to bring the two sides together, though there was less antagonism between them.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned before the mission's trip that Haiti could be placed under UN sanctions if the crisis were not soon resolved. But the success of any international mission depends on successful negotiations between the government and the Convergence, the prospects

for which are not promising. A scheduled meeting of the two sides May 9 was canceled because they could not agree on a neutral site. Rejecting the national palace, the Convergence then refused Aristide's offer to meet at a museum, saying it was not neutral enough.

An administration spokesperson said the Convergence was using dilatory tactics to avoid talks. By June 1, Lavalas had adjusted its proposal, rejecting early general elections as too costly. Paul told a news conference that Haiti could not go on constantly negotiating with the opposition and the international community, though Lavalas was willing to hold a dialogue with the Convergence on such issues as education, health, and the infrastructure. He also said the government was still willing to reform the CEP and hold new elections for the seven disputed Senate seats.

Former general's arrest becomes new obstacle

The crisis received a new element in June with the arrest of former Gen. Prosper Avril, who headed the 1988-1990 military dictatorship. Avril, a Convergence supporter, was arrested May 26 at a book signing in a restaurant. Gourgue cited the arrest as the reason the Convergence refused to meet with the OAS-CARICOM mission, and he is now demanding Avril's release as a condition for negotiations with the government. Gourgue has also demanded the reinstatement of the Haitian army. The government has accused Avril of human rights violations during his de facto presidency and charged him with planning a coup against Aristide.

In 1994, a Miami court issued a US\$41 million judgment against Avril in a civil suit that alleged numerous acts of torture and other abuses. Following the judgment, Avril fled to Haiti saying he did not get a fair hearing in the US.

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