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Haiti's Election Debacle: A Coup Legacy



A Haitian man holds up a banner of presidential candidate Michel Martelly during a protest following presidential elections in Port-au-Prince, December 8.

By Roger Annis and Kim Ives

EVER SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF HAITI'S DUVALIER dynasty in 1986, the country's popular movements have waged a brave struggle to hold free and fair elections. Although the Duvalier family fled the country, the repressive apparatus of Haiti's wealthy elite remained intact, and what followed was a tumultuous, four-year struggle to hold a national vote. Washington and the Haitian bourgeoisie, working through the Armed Forces of Haiti and death squads, tried every trick in the book to control the electoral process, including violence, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. The struggle culminated in the 1990 election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who won with 67% of the vote, heading a broad, unstructured, popular movement called Lavalas (meaning "the flood").

Since Aristide's election, the United States and its Haitian allies have done everything possible to undermine Haitian democracy, including car-

rying out two coups d'état against Aristide in as many decades (1991, 2004). The shattering of Haiti's political and social institutions by coups, together with political instability and United Nations military occupations that followed, have made the country exceptionally vulnerable to a string of natural disasters, including hurricanes in 2004 and 2008 that all but destroyed Gonaïves, the country's fourth-largest city, and, of course, the January 12, 2010, earthquake. Cholera inadvertently spread by the UN military occupation's Nepalese contingent has killed more than 3,600 people since the outbreak in October.

In the political arena, meanwhile, there has been to date no clearer evidence of Haiti's subordination to foreign powers than its most recent election debacle. Marred by blatant and widespread fraud, manipulation, and disenfranchisement, the November 28 general election was de-

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nounced as an undemocratic “selection” by the country’s popular movements. It was the logical result of foreign, and primarily U.S., imperial policy in Haiti. There were many good reasons to expect that the election would hardly be a legitimate exercise in democracy: To begin with, the country was and is still reeling from the unprecedented humanitarian crisis resulting from the earthquake, which killed an estimated 250,000 people. About 1.5 million Haitians in the West Department, where the epicenter of the earthquake was located, still have no real address, living in some 1,300 makeshift tent and tarpaulin camps.

There did not exist the minimal infrastructure for holding a fair and representative vote—namely, an accurate voters’ list, adequate mechanisms for voter registration, facilities allowing people to cast their vote with relative ease, and the presence of security and observer personnel at polling stations to guard against abuses and irregularities.¹ And the choice of candidates was arbitrarily limited by the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), which banned candidates from the country’s largest and most representative party, exiled Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas, along with 13 smaller parties. Despite provisions in Haiti’s 1987 Constitution stipulating that members of the CEP be elected by local assemblies, they are today unconstitutionally appointed by President René Préval.

But the U.S.-dominated United Nations Security Council disregarded these concerns and pressed ahead. Anxious to reestablish a democratic facade on its illegal occupation of Haiti, the UN evidently viewed an ugly, chaotic election as more desirable than the alternative demanded by Haitian popular organizations: the formation of a provisional government that would convene a new CEP whose members would be drawn from recognized and representative popular and civic groups. This was how the 1990 elections that first brought Aristide to power were organized.

Three quarters of Haiti’s 4.7 million eligible voters shunned the November election, according to the CEP’s own figures. Yet the CEP proclaimed the election satisfactory. “We cannot say it was a 100% success, but the day was successful,” declared the CEP’s general director, Pierre Louis Opont. The Joint Mission of the Organization of American States and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which oversaw the election, followed suit. CARICOM’s Assistant Secretary General Colin Granderson noted many election-day irregularities—including “deliberate acts of violence and intimidation to derail the electoral process both in Port-au-Prince and the provinces”—but went on to say that the Joint Mission “does not believe that these irregularities, serious as they were, necessarily invalidated the process.” U.S. State De-

partment spokesman P.J. Crowley called the election “a significant step for Haiti.”

The election debacle can be directly linked to the 1991 and 2004 coups. Both disrupted not only Haiti’s executive and legislative institutions, but also the country’s less visible local government, such as the Assemblies of Communal Sections (ASECs), created by the 1987 Haitian Constitution. The ASECs, through an electoral pyramid percolating up from the country’s 568 communal sections, elect 10 Departmental Assemblies, each of which proposes three names for Haiti’s nine-member Permanent Electoral Council (PEC). From that pool of 30, the executive, judicial, and legislative branches are each supposed to pick three candidates. Since 1988, however, that PEC has never been convened according to these constitutional provisions because of foreign-instigated political interruptions. In the context of political upheaval, the president has always unilaterally selected a Provisional Electoral Council from among an arbitrarily defined group of Haitian social “sectors,” such as Protestants, Catholics, Episcopalians, Vodou practitioners, the handicapped, women, unions, or political parties.

The Fanmi Lavalas party, excluded by the current CEP, was founded in late 1996 by Aristide and his colleagues in preparation for the 2000 election. In May and November elections that year, the new party captured the Parliament and reelected Aristide as president. The new government promised to “invest in people” and make good on social justice projects. But after Lavalas swept the Parliament in May, a powerful triumvirate composed of the United States, Canada, and the European Union imposed a crushing embargo on foreign aid and loans to Haiti. The three powers—who called themselves “Friends of Haiti”—nurtured both vocal and violent oppositions, ranging from paramilitary “contras” assaulting people and government facilities from protected bases in the Dominican Republic to concocted and sometimes phantom groups dressed up as representatives of “civil society.”

It all led to the coup of February 29, 2004, carried out by foreign soldiers. A U.S. Navy Seal team, directed by the U.S. deputy ambassador Luis Moreno, whisked Aristide and his wife from their home in Tabarre into exile in Africa, while U.S., Canadian, and French troops occupied strategic locations around the country. Most of the country’s governing institutions were dismantled—the legislature, the senate, and municipal governments. Even many schools were disrupted or disbanded. Thousands of leading political figures were killed, imprisoned, or driven into hiding or exile. The occupied country was nominally ruled for two years by U.S.-installed de facto prime minister Gérard Latortue and President Alexandre Boniface. Aid was unblocked but increasingly redirected to NGOs and charities, deliberately

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fostering service-provider networks and bypassing the Haitian government.

The 2004 coup's effect has been more lasting than that of 1991 because powerful new players are now assisting the United States in destroying Haitian democracy and sovereignty. These include Canada and France, who bring money, police, soldiers, and lots of political experience in the business of neocolonial rule; the UN Security Council, which authorized the coup and deployed a military occupation force called the UN Mission to Stabilize Haiti (MINUSTAH); and NGOs and foreign-financed Haitian "civil society" organizations that became knowing or unwitting accomplices in the coup, often under the watchword that Aristide should leave office "for the good of the country."

After the 2010 earthquake, this foreign supervision of Haiti became even greater and more formal with the creation of the Interim Haitian Recovery Commission (IHRC), an unelected, 26-member body founded at a UN conference in March 2010 that decides how to spend the billions of dollars pledged for the country's reconstruction. Half of the IHRC's representatives come from either foreign banks or foreign governments. Its executive director, longtime USAID officer Gabriel Verret, reports to the commission's two co-chairs, Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive and Bill Clinton. Twelve of the 13 Haitian IHRC members complained at the commission's meeting December 14 in Santo Domingo that they were "completely disconnected from the activities of the IHRC" and that their only role was "to endorse the decisions made by the Executive Director and Executive Committee."²

THE OAS HAS EFFECTIVELY SUPPLANTED THE CEP AS the final arbiter of the November 28 election, which was to lead to a runoff election scheduled for January 16. An OAS team reviewed all the polling data and procedures, and recommended that wild-card pro-coup former musician Michel Martelly, rather than official Unity Party candidate Jude Célestin, go to a second round against former first lady and senator Mirlande Manigat, as the CEP's preliminary results called for. As of this writing, Préval has yet to respond to the OAS "recommendation," but the CEP has postponed the runoff until at least late February. The Parliament before expiring in the fall extended Préval's mandate from February 7 until May 14 (five years after his tardy inauguration), but it is unclear how the electoral stalemate may end. Whatever the outcome, either Manigat, Martelly, or Célestin could easily serve as U.S. puppets and possibly even be one or the other's president-nominated prime minister. The Unity Party will likely continue to dominate the Parliament, and the prime minister, who has the most executive power, will come from its ranks.

WHY SHOULD SUBVERTING HAITIAN DEMOCRACY BE SO important to the United States and its allies? Where is the oil or other "strategic resource" in Haiti that might explain imperialism's relentless drive to control the country? And surely imperialism is not threatened by Aristide's reformist political and social project, whose modest goal he once described as moving the population "from absolute misery to a dignified poverty." But it's not the search for oil reserves, potential tourist enclaves, plentiful cheap labor, or pots of gold that drives imperial policy (although the country does have gold reserves being exploited in these recessionary times by Canadian mining companies). Or at least, Haiti is not targeted for these reasons alone. Haiti represents above all the threat of a bad example, as the Haitian people gave to the rest of the hemisphere in the Revolution of 1804 and in 1990. Imperial powers loathe governments of social justice in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America because they produced a powerful "demonstration effect," radicalizing other movements and raising expectations throughout the hemisphere and the world.

And so Haiti stumbles along with a deeply flawed electoral exercise whose only certainty is that the presidential winner will be a rightist politician friendly to Haiti's elite and to foreign capital, if not inspired by Duvalierism. (The former dictator himself, Jean-Claude Duvalier, unexpectedly arrived January 16 for the first time since 1986. He may soon be indicted for corruption and torture.) Whoever becomes president will assume a weak popular mandate and likely be met with uprising and unrest. The Haitian people's disenfranchisement in the November 28 vote will continue to inspire popular rage, along with many other serious grievances, including the NGOs' and the IHRC's slow or non-existent response to the ongoing mass homelessness caused by the earthquake.

The UN occupation—the most visible political legacy of the anti-democratic coups in Haiti—was a lightning rod for popular discontent even before the earthquake. And now it appears that dissent within the occupation force itself has spread to its senior leadership. In December, Haiti's UN Special Representative, the Brazilian diplomat Ricardo Seitanfus, bluntly described the occupation as unproductive, repressive, and anti-democratic in an interview with the Swiss daily *Le Temps*.³ Although it was barely noted in the U.S. media, Seitanfus was removed from his position within a week of the interview's publication.⁴ "When the level of unemployment [in Haiti] is 80%, it is intolerable to deploy a stabilization mission," Seitanfus was quoted as saying. "There is nothing to stabilize and everything to build." He called for the UN to build roads and dams, and to help organize the state and the judicial system, but lamented that the UN says it has no mandate for that. "Its mandate in Haiti," he said, "is to keep the peace of the graveyard." ■

NOTES

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