

# Elections in Haiti, Dominican Republic reflect rising opposition to IMF policies

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Nationwide elections held in the two countries which share the Caribbean island of Hispaniola produced landslide victories for parties which claimed, however demagogically, to oppose policies of austerity and privatization dictated by the International Monetary Fund and other Western-controlled lending agencies. Balloting was held in the Dominican Republic May 16 and in Haiti on May 21.

The Dominican election saw the victory of the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), whose presidential candidate, Hipólito Mejía, won 49.9 percent of the vote, compared to 26.7 percent for six-time former president Joaquin Balaguer. Blind and 93 years of age, Balaguer remains the leader of the Social Christian Reformist Party. Danilo Medina of the ruling Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) finished third with 23.4 percent of the vote.

Despite their left-sounding names, both the PRD and the PLD are bourgeois parties which campaign with social-democratic rhetoric in order to win votes in a country where over 60 percent of the population lives in dire poverty. The PLD abandoned its populist pretensions under the regime of outgoing President Leonel Fernandez, who faithfully implemented IMF policies of opening the country to foreign trade and investment and privatizing state-owned industries.

The result was the fastest growth rate in Latin America last year, 8.3 percent, fueled by a huge influx of foreign investment, which benefited only the small minority of Dominicans in the upper crust of society. According to one press account: "The rich have grown richer, while corruption remains endemic and prostitution, drug trafficking and illegal boat journeys to the United States are on the rise." Especially unpopular was the outgoing government's decision to privatize the state-run sugar and electrical power industries. The Dominican Republic has been plagued by power blackouts, with many families enduring outages of 12 hours a day, while electricity bills have soared.

Fernandez was barred from seeking reelection, and his chosen successor, Medina, reaped the harvest of popular discontent. The PLD fell to third place, while the PRD, which held the presidency for two terms from 1978 to 1986, came within a hair of an absolute majority of the vote. Both Balaguer and Medina conceded after the first round of voting, eliminating the necessity for a runoff.

Mejía campaigned on a platform of increased social spending, aid to small farmers and a "reassessment" of the current government's privatization policies. He couched all of these pledges in the language of Dominican nationalism.

The incoming president is certain to discard this verbal radicalism. An agronomist and businessman who was a cabinet official in the 1970s, he can be expected to quickly bow to the IMF and the US corporate interests which dominate the Dominican economy.

The legislative election held four days later in Haiti took place under conditions of rising social and political tension. The Lavalas Family party of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide won an overwhelming victory, with a turnout estimated at 50 to 60 percent, more than 10 times the proportion of those who participated in the last legislative elections in 1997.

According to preliminary figures released May 29 by the Electoral Council, Lavalas won 16 of the 19 seats which were up for vote in the Senate; one was taken by an independent, and two had not yet been determined. In the lower House, Lavalas won 20 of 83 seats outright and was leading in another 30, with a runoff scheduled for June 25 for all districts where no candidate won an outright majority.

The victory in the legislative election sets the stage for Aristide to return to power in presidential elections scheduled for later this year. The former priest won the presidency in 1990 but was overthrown soon after in a military coup. The US government restored him to the presidency in 1994 following American military occupation of the island, but the Clinton administration insisted that Aristide leave office at the end of 1995 as scheduled, despite the loss of three years of his term to the military dictatorship.

Aristide actually profited politically from being forced to leave office, since the austerity measures demanded by the Clinton administration and the IMF, including privatization of state enterprises and cuts in subsidies, were largely implemented by his successor Rene Preval. Aristide increasingly distanced himself from these policies, denouncing the sell-off of government-owned factories and utilities as a windfall for the tiny elite of wealthy Haitians, who snapped up shares in the newly privatized firms.

Preval was elected in 1995 with Aristide's support, but the Lavalas majority in the legislature soon splintered into rival factions, with the more overtly right-wing grouping, headed by Gerard Pierre-Charles, finally breaking with Aristide entirely and reconstituting itself as the Organization of People in Struggle (OPL), while the former priest reorganized his loyalists under the name Lavalas Family.

During Preval's five-year term, the government has been

effectively deadlocked, with Preval balancing between Aristide and his opponents, unable to command majority support in the legislature. After failing to win confirmation of several nominees for prime minister, Preval finally dissolved the legislature in January 1999, pending new elections. This vote has been postponed several times, while a struggle ensued between supporters and opponents of Aristide, each seeking to gain control over the electoral procedures.

US agencies, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a notorious conduit for CIA operations internationally, in which the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy participates, have intervened repeatedly in an effort to steer Haitian politics in the direction desired by Washington. The NED funds both the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the overseas arm of the US Democratic Party, and the International Republican Institute (IRI), the parallel offshoot of the Republicans.

The National Democratic Institute gave financial backing to Gerard Pierre-Charles' OPL and egged on the split in Lavalas. Not to be outdone, the IRI organized a faction of stooges in Haiti at a conference in early 1998 of 26 right-wing groups. These groups, with negligible popular support, included several headed by former officials of the Duvalier dictatorship or the military regime of Gen. Henri Namphy, including former President Leslie Manigat, who had been installed by the military, and Marc Bazin, former finance minister for Jean-Claude Duvalier and the presidential candidate defeated by Aristide in 1990. It also included the party founded by Roger Lafontant, the late chieftain of the Tonton Macoute death squad.

In the run-up to the May 21 vote, both wings of the NED threw their support to a new coalition formed on the basis of opposition to Aristide, called the Espace de Concertation (Coalition for Concord), which included both openly right-wing elements and some former Aristide supporters like Evans Paul, mayor of Port-au-Prince at the time of the 1991 coup.

Paul was one of a group of Haitian exiles who brought suit against former military dictator Prosper Avril in a US federal court in 1994 and won a \$41 million judgment against him for ordering their torture. In advance of the elections and under the aegis of the US government, Paul and Avril, the torture victim and the torturer, established a political coalition.

Over the past year and a half, the Clinton administration has made several attempts to forestall a Lavalas victory in the elections. Anthony Lake, former national security adviser, visited the country last year and met with the Espace de Concertation coalition leaders.

The National Endowment for Democracy paid for the election and tried to dictate procedures that would favor the opposition. One such measure was a requirement that all voters produce photo IDs, which was calculated to produce a much lower turnout, since many poor Haitians, after decades of brutal dictatorship, were understandably reluctant to register and get photo identification from the police.

However, when Preval postponed the election the Clinton administration and international lending agencies cut off aid to the impoverished nation. The White House set a June 21 deadline for Haiti to seat a new legislature in order to obtain the release of \$500

million in loans and grants.

In the pre-election period, at least 15 people were killed in political violence, including both supporters and opponents of Aristide. After the May 21 vote, violent clashes erupted in Port-au-Prince between the rival factions, and an opposition candidate for mayor of the city, Jean-Michel Holefen, was hit in the head by a rock and killed. Police fired tear gas to break up a melee in downtown Port-au-Prince.

Although outside observers from the Organization of American States described the voting as generally fair, and there was no violence reported at the polls, the main groups opposed to Lavalas denounced the vote as rigged and declared they would not participate in the runoff. Several dozen candidates and supporters of these groups were arrested the week after the election on a variety of charges, including inciting violence against government officials or Lavalas supporters.

Aristide's right-wing opponents in Haiti are openly banking on further intervention by the US government against Lavalas. They were rewarded with a statement from the US embassy in Port-au-Prince on May 27 condemning the arrests and alleged intimidation of opposition leaders.

Despite the widespread illusions in Lavalas and Aristide, there is an enormous social gulf between the poverty-stricken masses of Haiti and the pro-capitalist politicians vying for power in Port-au-Prince. On the eve of the election, Lavalas held its final election rally in the Cite Soleil neighborhood of the capital city, a huge slum which is a traditional party stronghold. Only 400 people attended out of the more than 200,000 residents.

The tensions between Washington and Port-au-Prince reflect fears in the White House and State Department that Aristide, despite his service as an American stooge during the period of US military occupation, is an unreliable political instrument. Their greatest concern is that with Lavalas in control of the legislature and Aristide returned to the presidency, a popular movement could erupt which the former priest would be unable to control.



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