

New date set for Haitian vote as crisis mounts

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For the fourth time in the last five months, the date has been reset for elections to replace Haiti's interim government installed in a US-backed coup in February 2004. The new date—February 7—has been announced after Washington, the United Nations and the Organization of American States placed significant pressure upon the regime. The US is desperate to cloak the government it has installed in Haiti with some form of institutional legitimacy.

As of January 7, the last date set for the vote, 1.9 million out of 3.4 million voters still had not received their required ID cards. The election is supposed to select a president as well as 110 legislators. The February 7 vote could be followed by a second round on March 19. Patrick Fequiere, a member of Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council, stated, "It is clear that this new date is in response to increasing international pressure."

Haiti's constitution requires an interim government to hold elections in 90 days. It has now been a full two years since Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the country's last democratically elected president, was ousted and forced into exile in South Africa.

The reason given for the latest delay is a rash of "kidnappings" attributed to "armed gangs" of Aristide supporters. The UN special envoy to Haiti, Juan Gabriel Valdes, said, "We are not going to allow [kidnappers] any attempt to derail the electoral process."

The UN occupation troops have locked down Port-au-Prince, establishing checkpoints at the major intersections as armored personnel carriers patrol the streets. Cité Soleil, an impoverished shantytown of 500,000 that largely supports Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party, has been made into a virtual prison according to Jean-Joseph Joel, the secretary-general of the local Lavalas branch.

Heeding the demands of Haiti's business leaders and the coup government, Valdes suggested that another UN military raid on the neighborhood could be imminent. Many Cité Soleil residents fear a repeat of the massacre on July 6, 2005 that killed 50 people. The massacre resulted from a UN military operation to assassinate Emmanuel "Dread" Wilme, a popular community leader labeled as a "bandit" by UN forces (a monument has since been erected in Wilme's honor by Cité Soleil residents).

Demonstrations erupted in Cité Soleil on Thursday, January 12 against the UN occupation and its collusion with the coup

government that has jailed political opponents. One person was confirmed killed and 17 were injured in clashes with UN troops as of Wednesday last week. One of the wounded was a 12-year-old girl. "Every day, we are counting dead bodies," said Joel.

A 30-year-old woman named Edline Pierre-Louis, who lost her unborn baby when she was shot by UN troops on July 6, protested the UN's denial of the massacre. "The blue helmets [UN troops] are lying," she told the Haitian Information Project. "They killed so many people, and I praise God that I am alive to call them liars."

As witnessed by independent Canadian reporters Leslie Bagg and Aaron Lakoff, "multiple killings of civilians have been committed by UN forces." In Cité Soleil they interviewed a resident named Dieunord Edme, who spoke of his wife, Annette Moleron, being shot and killed by UN troops on January 7 in an incident that also claimed the lives of four other women in a marketplace. The reporters witnessed a bloated corpse by a roadside that residents couldn't retrieve because the UN military in Haiti (MINUSTAH) would fire on anyone that approached it. The reporters claim the corpse was left out in order to intimidate the neighborhood.

On Monday, January 9, Reginald Boulos, the president of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Andy Apaid, the Haitian-American who owns Haiti's oldest and largest sweatshop empire—both members of the Canadian and US-backed Group 184—called for a "strike" allegedly to protest the wave of kidnappings. Group 184, which played a prominent role in destabilizing Aristide's government, has been funded by the International Republican Institute, a constituent part of the National Endowment for Democracy, the US agency established to carry out political operations formerly orchestrated by the CIA.

The *New York Times* reported, "The Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called a strike to pressure UN peacekeepers to move against gangs—allegedly loyal to ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—who have carried out many of the kidnappings." The "gangs" are the code word for Haiti's poor, who largely support Aristide, and would most likely vote for René Préval, who served as Haiti's president from 1996 to 2001. It is apparent that most of Port-au-Prince regarded the strike, in the words of one angry street vendor who closed his stall due to lack of business, as "a rich persons' strike."

Announcements aired over Radio Metropole threatened that

anyone leaving “their house takes their life into their own hands.”

While many former Lavalas members have been murdered, jailed or exiled by the coup government, Préval has been allowed to run unimpeded and leads in the polls, despite the support given by some sections of the Lavalas party to Marc Bazin. Bazin was a former minister of finance under the Duvalier dictatorship, and has also served as an official for the World Bank. Running for president in the 1990 elections, Bazin received only 14 percent of the vote, losing decisively to Aristide, who had gained popularity by denouncing the Duvalier regime.

Préval is not running on the Lavalas ticket but rather as an independent. His previous administration enacted a pro-business agenda, including the privatization of state-owned enterprises as well as the downsizing of the civil service. He brought Haiti’s economic policy into line with the demands of the IMF and World Bank for trade and tariff liberalization. Préval also largely dropped his promised agrarian reform. In spite of his conservative policies, the right-wing sections of the Haitian elite that installed the current interim government oppose his return to power. Préval has vowed to allow Aristide’s return to Haiti and would likely replace current officials with veterans of his own administration.

This Haitian regime’s latest “kidnapping” excuse for postponing the election—echoed by the UN occupiers and the media—amounts to a smear against, and an imminent threat to the poor in Haiti’s urban slums. Contrary to the propaganda that the kidnappings are the work of Lavalas supporters to destabilize the elections, the *New York Times* reported that the “kidnappings have targeted people from all walks of life.” Michael Lucius, chief of the Haitian Judiciary Police, stated that the kidnappings are a “purely criminal activity” and have no political connection. He believes that the kidnapers are merely looking for cash ransoms.

In addition, the Haiti Information Project affirms that corrupt Haitian police are implicated in the kidnappings. Judge Jean Pérs Paul ordered the release of eight police officers implicated in kidnappings. Also among those arrested and released was Stanley Handal, who was accused of running a kidnapping ring. Handal is a member of one of Haiti’s wealthy families that supported the coup against Aristide.

Haiti’s business elite seized upon the kidnappings to postpone the elections because of its concern that Préval would place first out of the 35 candidates running for president. At the same time, the pretext serves as a means of prodding the UN occupation forces into moving against the enemies of the coup government. Jean-Joseph Joel explains that the UN is under intense pressure from the business elite to use force in order to improve the odds of their favored presidential candidate, Charles Henri Baker—another sweatshop owner and also a Group 184 founder.

There is suspicion that the recent suicide of General Urano

Teixeira da Matta Bacellar, the Brazilian head of MINUSTAH, may have resulted from his being pressured by the Haitian business elite and UN officials to crack down on Cité Soleil. Bacellar had reportedly opposed the plan. The Brazilian government of President Luiz Inacio “Lula” da Silva has led a Latin American-dominated “peacekeeping” force that replaced the US Marines who invaded the island nation following the coup that toppled Aristide. In an ominous development, the late General Bacellar has been replaced by Chilean General Eduardo Aldunate Herman, who has been accused of human right abuses from the Pinochet-era.

Two of Haiti’s best-financed presidential candidates—FRAPH death squad leader Guy Philippe and the suspected murderer of an Aristide critic, Dany Toussaint (who served as senator and also as the chief of police under Aristide before turning against him)—have long been connected to cocaine trafficking, according to US Drug Enforcement Administration officials. Youri Latortue, a senate candidate who is a nephew to Haiti’s interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, has close links to drug smuggling gangs. Since the arrival of the UN “peacekeepers” the flow of cocaine “is essentially unimpeded,” according to the US State Department.

While drug traffickers and former death squad leaders like Philippe and Jodel Chamblain go untouched after playing leading roles in the 2004 coup, UN troops have concentrated their fire on the poor in Haiti’s shantytowns, who have resisted this government of gangsters and sweatshop owners.

Underlying the intractable political crisis in Haiti are the desperate economic conditions for the vast majority of the people, the result of imperialism’s relentless oppression of the country. In July 2003, Haiti was sending more than 90 percent of all its foreign reserves to Washington to pay off over a billion dollars in debt, the bulk of which was accumulated from loans under the brutal US-backed Duvalier dictatorship. (When “Baby Doc” Duvalier was finally overthrown in 1986, the US flew him into exile to the French Rivera along with millions stolen from the Haitian treasury.)

Thus, most Haitians live on one meal and less than a dollar a day. Many have risked death attempting to flee, as evidenced by the deaths of 24 migrants who suffocated last week in a truck while being smuggled into the Dominican Republic. The deaths sparked angry demonstrations on the border, in which workers and youth burned tires, chanted slogans and threw rocks at UN troops deployed in armored cars. Last Thursday, two people were killed and several wounded in these clashes.



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