

Haiti: mass protests erupt over vote count

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Nearly a week after Haitians went to the polls in the first election since the 2004 Washington-backed coup and subsequent US invasion, official results have yet to be announced, and the impoverished Caribbean country is spiraling into another intense political crisis.

More than 10,000 people poured into the streets of the capital of Port-au-Prince Sunday demanding that Rene Préal, the overwhelming winner of the election, be named president and denouncing the right-wing politicians controlling the vote counting for attempting to rig the results.

The protest saw large crowds march on the presidential palace from the city's shantytowns as United Nations troops and Haitian police armed with automatic weapons took up positions to repress any potential upheavals. On Monday, as protesters erected barricades in a number of parts of the city, UN troops opened fire on demonstrators, reportedly killing one and wounding at least four.

The February 7 election represented a massive popular repudiation of the US-backed coup staged two years ago and the right-wing interim regime installed by US Marines and United Nations "peacekeepers."

As of Monday, with ballots from 90 percent of the polls reportedly counted, the electoral council gave 48.7 percent of the votes to Préal, a former political ally of Jean Bertrand Aristide, the elected president who was ousted in the bloody coup of February 2004 and then forcibly removed from the country by US forces. Préal was the prime minister in Aristide's first government in 1991, succeeding him as president in 1996, and then turning the presidential palace back to Aristide in 2001.

Running second with just 11.8 percent was Leslie Manigat, who was briefly installed as president by the military following the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1988. Sweatshop-factory-owner Charles Henri Baker, who enjoyed the closest ties with the US Republican Party and the sections of the Haitian elite that engineered the 2004 coup, was said to have placed third with less than 8 percent. Finally, Guy Philippe, the death squad leader who led the coup, won only 1.69 percent.

If Préal fails to win more than 50 percent of the vote, he will be forced into a run-off election on March 19. Popular suspicion that those controlling the vote count are manipulating the results has grown as Préal's initial percentage of the total has shrunk and amid prolonged delays between announcements of new totals. The fall in the frontrunner's percentage was particularly suspicious given that the last votes that remained to be counted were from Port-au-Prince, considered a stronghold for the former president.

Some members of the electoral council have openly charged that the vote is being rigged. "There's a certain level of manipulation," council member Pierre Richard Duchemin told the Associated Press Sunday, adding that "there is an effort to stop people from asking questions." He said he was denied access to the tabulation

proceedings and called for an investigation. Another member charged that Jacques Bernard, director-general of the nine-member council, was announcing changes in the vote totals without any consultation with the council as a whole and with no indication of where the new information is coming from.

Elections were also held for 129 legislative seats, for which run-off elections will commence on the March 19 date.

There was an unexpectedly high turnout despite politically motivated arrests and terror campaigns by right-wing gangs; UN military raids preceded the vote along with fears of a potential massacre on election day itself.

The US-installed interim government had postponed elections four times, missing the constitutionally required deadline of June 1, 2004. The UN military occupation authorities had colluded with the corrupt Haitian police and the coup government in allowing political opponents such as Aristide's Prime Minister Yvon Neptune to remain in jail while ignoring the drug traffickers and former death squad leaders who freely participated in Haiti's election.

In Cité Soleil, the poor Port-au-Prince shantytown of 300,000, which has resisted the coup and the UN occupation, all polling stations were relocated outside the neighborhood despite previous protests by residents, who fear leaving it to vote because of possible retaliation by Haitian police or right-wing gangs. Rene Lundi, a local community leader, explained on election day, "It is clear they want to prevent us from voting, because they know our vote won't go their way."

In the wealthy districts, voting was smoothly run, while grotesque delays and inadequate organization that suggested an attempt of election rigging by the coup forces marked election-day reality for Haiti's majority.

When three polling centers serving Cité Soleil opened late, several thousand people had already lined up to vote. Protests and demonstrations began when voters realized the polls hadn't opened as promised. Angry crowds stampeded through gates, scaled the walls, smashed windows, and overwhelmed the police and UN soldiers to get inside the polls. Two people died in the tumult. Some voters were attacked or threatened by police who told voters to clear the sidewalks and come back later. One voter was fatally shot by a policeman, who was in turn attacked by the crowd and killed in retaliation.

"This is a make-believe election," said Robert Bonnet, 36. "This is organized for the bourgeoisie to vote. This is not an election for the people to vote." Indeed, registration just to obtain the required ID cards to vote had been fraught with long waits as well. In the 2000 election, more than 4 million people were registered to vote, as compared to 3.5 million for the current election.

Contributing to the election day chaos was the fact that the number of polling stations had been reduced from 12,000 to 804. Despite having millions more dollars to spend on this election than in 2000

(and after four postponements), officials claimed that security and fraud concerns were responsible for the reduction. For countless people, especially those living in the countryside, casting a ballot meant walking for hours to get to the polls. UN advisors remarked in a patronizing tone that Haiti's rural poor are "used to it."

That Haiti's majority would vote for Préval was widely foreseen, which is the prime reason the Haitian elite sought to postpone the elections and to pressure UN forces to move against their political enemies. Préval is seen as a protégé of Aristide, and hated by large sections of the upper classes. He had stated that he would not stop Aristide from returning to Haiti and would also release political prisoners. For Haiti's majority, a vote for Préval was seen as a vote for Aristide. Crowds chanted, "Aristide and Préval are twins." One voter, Barnabe Marvil, said, "We're voting for Préval," because "He'll bring Aristide back."

Washington, the Organization of American States and the United Nations Stabilization Mission, increasingly concerned about the widely perceived illegitimacy of the coup government as well as the civil unrest that is destabilizing Haiti, insisted that the elections go forward. Last month, after the fourth postponement of the election date, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held a tele-conference with her counterparts from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and France, which all supply troops for the 9,000-strong UN military occupation of Haiti. Together, they exerted "strong political pressure" on the coup government to set a firm date, which it agreed to immediately, though clearly unwillingly.

The reason Washington decided to discipline the very forces it previously funded to topple Aristide was summed up by the *Associated Press*: "The elections were deemed vital to avoiding a political and economic meltdown in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. In the aftermath of Aristide's ouster, gangs went on a kidnapping spree, and many factories closed because of security problems and a shortage of foreign investment."

Préval ran as an independent on his own Lespwa party ticket. While promising that improving living standards for the two thirds of the population living in extreme poverty would be his top priority and benefiting from his past association with Aristide, Préval waged a parallel media campaign aimed at reassuring the upper classes that he would defend their interests. He sought to distance himself from Aristide, even suggesting that his former ally may have to face a trial for corruption and abuses committed during his presidency. "If I'm his 'twin,' we do not have the same mother," Préval said.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, he admitted that "much of his campaign had been financed by the elite, and that he would appoint a prime minister from the political party that wins control of the parliament, which is highly unlikely to be his own."

Political observers noted that Préval's candidacy was encouraged by the US and the governments of the UN Stabilization Mission as a means of quelling unrest and restoring order. When he was in power, Préval implemented a draconian structural adjustment program crafted by the International Monetary Fund, resulting in wholesale privatizations and mass layoffs in the public sector and sharp cuts in food and transportation subsidies that had benefited the poor. These attacks on living standards only accelerated after Aristide succeeded him.

Despite Préval's pro-business position, sections of the Haitian elite obviously prefer not to compromise with any section of the political movement that they just overthrew in the violent coup of February 2004. Just as Aristide's "left" nationalist demagoguery was reviled by

both Washington and Haiti's upper class circles, so Préval's rhetoric about aiding the poor—even when couched in warnings that it will not be possible to make great changes in a short period—is viewed as a threat.

Charles Henri Baker's campaign has begun preparing charges to challenge the election results as a fraud. "For the good of the country I cannot let this guy get into power," Baker told the press, declaring Préval "the worst thing that could happen to Haiti if he gets in power." Baker was a co-founder of an organization of Haiti's business elite known as Group 184. It was created to destabilize Aristide's government with US funding via the International Republican Institute, a part of the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency that performs political operations previously carried out covertly by the CIA.

It is clear that even if Washington is prepared to work through Préval to control the situation in Haiti, the US and its allies intervened directly in the period before the elections to promote candidates more directly identified with US policy. The International Republican Institute, for example, sent funds to a splinter faction of Aristide's Lavalas party to support Marc Bazin, a former World Bank official and former finance minister under the Duvalier dictatorship, whom the US backed in the 1990 elections won by Aristide. The US Agency for International Development also provided \$3 million to a UN civil program in Haiti that dispersed monies to groups that had backed the coup. The UN program, called the United Nations Office for Project Services, was to "even the playing field" among candidates, or in other words, shore up the favorite candidates of the coup government.

The UN's envoy to Haiti, Juan Valdés, warned that "the elites feel [they] are facing their last opportunity." If the election does not stabilize Haiti, he added, "the Security Council will hand over the command of the country to a single foreign power." The mandate of the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSTAH, expires on February 15.

In a country so impoverished that most people live on less than a dollar a day, where half the country does not have access to drinking water, the healthcare system is wrecked, schooling is too expensive for many (half the population is illiterate) and masses are relegated to destitute shantytowns, there is little room for Préval or anyone else to mediate between the demands of a narrow wealthy elite, and the mass of Haiti's poor. Not even a semblance of democratic government can be established on the basis of such stark inequality and social polarization.



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