

“Made in the USA” election crisis in Haiti

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The front-runner in Haiti’s election charged Tuesday that the vote count—now entering its second week—was plagued by “gross errors and probably gigantic fraud.” The totals being reported by the country’s electoral council “do not correspond with reality,” he said.

Former Haitian president Rene Preval made the accusations in the wake of mass protests Monday that saw two Haitians gunned down by United Nations “stabilization” troops and the capital of Port-au-Prince paralyzed by demonstrations and burning barricades.

The political crisis ignited by the prolonged delay in announcing the results of the February 7 election has brought the impoverished Caribbean country to the brink of civil war. There are strong indications that this is precisely the intention of the US-backed figures from within Haiti’s right-wing political class who control the ballot tabulation.

The Haitian people are entirely justified in believing that the election is being rigged by Washington to impose US policy on the island nation. In February 2004, the US orchestrated a bloody coup by ex-soldiers, criminals and death squad leaders to oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was kidnapped by American operatives and forced into exile. Washington then sent in the US Marines, who have since been replaced by some 9,500 blue-helmeted UN troops. The one party that enjoyed mass support, Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas, has been outlawed since the coup, with its prominent members imprisoned, exiled or forced into hiding.

Having used violence and military force to overthrow an elected government that it opposed, the Bush administration has no compunction about employing fraud and provocation to shape the kind of regime it wants in Port-au-Prince. After all, similar methods for stealing an election were used to install George W. Bush in the White House in the first place.

Seven days after millions of Haitians went to the

polls, the ballot count has inexplicably ground to a halt. There is no dispute that Preval was the overwhelming victor in the election, winning at least four times as many votes as his nearest rival. The issue is the attempt by those opposed to Preval to deny him an outright majority and thereby force the election into a second round next month.

While initially vote totals had Preval sweeping the election with over 61 percent of the vote, as the count has dragged on his percentage has precipitously fallen to just below the 49 percent mark—a shift that is widely attributed to the throwing out of tens of thousands of ballots from the impoverished shantytown neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, which voted massively for the ex-president. In addition, some 72,000 blank ballots were reportedly added to the total, thereby diluting Preval’s lead.

Pierre Richard Duchemin, the Catholic Church’s representative on the electoral council, and Patrick Requiere, another council member, both charged Sunday that the results of the election were being manipulated to deny Preval a clear-cut victory.

While the US State Department has signaled that it is willing to work with Preval, who during his 1996-2001 presidency faithfully implemented a draconian structural adjustment program dictated by the International Monetary Fund, his election by a landslide was by no means a welcome development in Washington.

The vote, which saw a powerful turnout by Haiti’s oppressed masses, represented a stinging repudiation of US policy and, above all, the 2004 coup that toppled Aristide, whose populist rhetoric made him anathema, both to the Bush administration and the Haitian oligarchy.

Among Haiti’s privileged classes, Preval’s former ties to Aristide made him suspect, at best. Their favored candidate, sweatshop owner Charles Henri Baker, who

garnered barely 5 percent of the vote, has vowed to challenge the election and to prevent Preval from taking office.

US officials have pressed Preval to give them a guarantee that he will not allow Aristide to return from exile in South Africa and that he will bring his political opponents into the government. Forcing a second round would provide Washington and its right-wing Haitian allies with political leverage either to compel Preval to accept their dictates or, failing that, to unleash a campaign of violent destabilization similar to that utilized to oust Aristide two years ago.

There are in all probability differences within the Bush administration over what course to pursue in Haiti. In an article published January 29, the *New York Times* cited past “ideological wars and partisan rivalries” in Washington over how to deal with the Aristide government. Extreme right-wing elements with ties to the anti-Castro Cuban exile groups, like Otto Reich, who was appointed the State Department’s top official for Latin America, supported Aristide’s overthrow, just as they had sought to overthrow Venezuela’s elected president, Hugo Chavez, two years earlier. Other State Department professionals had warned that such a coup would only throw Haiti into chaos.

The *Times* report detailed the operations of the International Republican Institute (IRI), a Republican Party-linked body that is a constituent part of the National Endowment for Democracy, the agency created by Congress in the 1980s to carry on the kind of US political operations that were previously conducted by the CIA.

The IRI, working with elements like Baker and fellow sweatshop owner Andy Apaid, organized in the Group 184, poured in money and advisors to destabilize the Aristide government and pave the way to the violent coup of 2004. No doubt, these extreme right-wing Republican ideologues are just as opposed to Preval taking power as their Haitian allies.

While the Bush administration has claimed to be pursuing a global crusade for democracy and, together with the US media, portrayed elections held under US military occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq as major achievements, it has drawn no such attention to the chaotic process in Haiti.

The Haitian developments expose all too clearly what

the US ruling elite means by democracy. The gross manipulation of the election is only the latest episode in a long history of oppression dating back to the US invasion of Haiti in 1915, the 20-year occupation that followed, and Washington’s subsequent support for the Duvalier dynasty, which ruled the country through naked terror for three decades.

The “democracy” that Washington is exporting begins and ends with the establishment of regimes that allow the unhindered domination of US-based multinationals over all facets of the economic and political life of their countries.

To the extent that the people seek to express their democratic aspirations by voting against US interests, Washington is prepared to use more violent or coercive methods to achieve its aims. Significantly, even as the vote-rigging drama was unfolding in Port-au-Prince, the *New York Times* reported Tuesday that the Bush administration and Israel were drafting plans to destabilize and topple the newly elected Palestinian government controlled by Hamas by starving the Palestinian people into submission.

In Haiti, a century of US domination has yielded a social catastrophe, with two thirds of the population of 8 million somehow surviving on less than a dollar a day, 80 percent unemployment, and a life expectancy of barely 51 years. It has also produced extreme social inequality, with a tiny ruling elite that is prepared to utilize the bloodiest forms of terror to defend its privileges.

The fight for genuine democracy in Haiti, as elsewhere in the world, must inevitably take the path of confrontation with US imperialism and its local allies. The bitter lesson of the Aristide presidencies is that such a struggle cannot be waged on a nationalist basis, but rather requires a unified struggle of the workers and oppressed masses of Haiti, the Caribbean and the United States itself against global capitalism.



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