

Washington reluctantly concedes Préval is Haiti's president-elect

Richard Dufour, Keith Jones
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The attempt of Haiti's traditional elite and elements in and around the Bush administration to prevent René Préval, the clear winner of the country's February 7 presidential election, from being proclaimed president-elect has failed.

Under conditions of profound political crisis—a popular upheaval against the attempt to rob Préval of his election victory, the exposure of massive electoral fraud, and the worried intervention of representatives of the US, other powers, and the UN and its Haiti-stabilization force—Haiti's election council voted early last Thursday morning, 8 to 1, to declare Préval elected.

"We had to do something," said council member Patrick Féquiere. "We could have just told Préval he got 48.76 percent, but when he contests the results all of this mess is going to come out—the blank votes, the missing votes."

The council's vote was preceded by several days of frantic consultations and negotiations involving Préval, Haiti's US-installed interim government, Washington and diplomats from France, Canada, the Organization of American States and the UN.

That the Bush administration was not easily reconciled to a Préval victory is underscored by an op-ed piece that appeared in last Thursday's *Miami Herald* by Robert Noriega. As US assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere from 2003 to 2005, Noriega was one of the principal architects of the 2004 coup that deposed Haiti's last elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Noriega, who was quite willing to use a rebellion by fascist-minded former Haitian army officers and leaders of the vigilante group FRAP to chase Aristide from power, argued in his *Herald* piece that "violent mobs" of Préval supporters appeared intent on denying Haiti legitimate government "by trying to convince those tallying the ballots that 49 percent is 'good enough'."

Diplomats from France and Canada, countries that worked hand-in-glove with the US in the campaign against Aristide, are said to have continued to insist, long after UN, Brazilian and Chilean diplomats had conceded that the official vote count was riven with irregularities, that Préval be forced to contest a second run-off presidential election.

Two factors explain the shift in the attitude of the imperialist powers.

First, fears of the mounting popular anger against the attempt to falsify the election result—an attempt which masses of poor Haitians rightly recognized to be a continuation of the 2004 coup. On Monday, Feb. 13, Port-au-Prince was paralyzed by mass protests, as Préval supporters, mainly shantytown dwellers and other working people, took to the streets. While this protest and smaller demonstrations on subsequent days were almost entirely peaceful, there was palpable concern among leaders of the interim government and the UN stabilization force of a popular eruption should it be officially announced that Préval would be forced to contest a second ballot, thus opening the door to further manipulations and provocations by Haiti's elite and their allies in Washington.

The second factor was the brazen character of the fraud. Initial results made public two days after the vote gave Préval, the one-time ally of deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, 61 percent of the ballots cast. The following day the figure had shrunk to 50.2 percent. Vote-counting then ground to a halt with the electoral council providing no explanation for days. Poll stations in outlying areas of the country where Préval was said to enjoy a wide lead were ransacked and thousands of ballots marked down as "missing". Under conditions where most people had walked or waited in line for hours to vote, the number of blank ballots was said to have reached the improbably high number of 85,000 or 4 per cent of all votes cast. Another 147,000 votes were discounted because they were deemed illegible. And one day after the UN had said that there was no evidence of large-scale electoral fraud, tens of thousand of valid votes were found in a Port-au-Prince garbage dump.

So flagrant and incontrovertible was the fraud—and so obvious was it that it had been perpetrated with the connivance of Haiti's interim government and the election council—that the "flawed" Haitian elections were dangerously exposing the claims of the Western powers that they had intervened in Haiti as guarantors of democracy, and by extension their claims to be acting as a force for liberty in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

There is also every reason to believe that the Bush administration and its international allies extracted various pledges of "good conduct" from Préval before giving their final approval to the election council declaring him elected. According to an unnamed Western diplomat cited in the New

York Times, Préval responded to demands that he guarantee that Aristide, who now lives in exile in South Africa, be barred from returning to Haiti with the reply, “The last time Mr. Aristide returned to Haiti, he came with 50,000 troops [a reference to the US military operation that returned Aristide to power in 1994]. I don’t think he’ll have access to that kind of force anymore.”

Haiti’s venal bourgeois elite and their allies in the US Republican Party abhor Préval only slightly less than his onetime mentor Aristide, and for the same reason: because they have become the focus of the hopes of Haiti’s impoverished masses for real social change, for an end to conditions in which a small wealthy elite wallows in luxury while the majority of Haitians struggle to live on less than \$2 per day.

Yet when he was Haiti’s president (from 1996 to 2001), Préval, even more cravenly than Aristide, bent before the demands of the IMF, privatizing state companies, laying off thousands of public employees and ending state subsidies on transportation and food. And during the just concluded election, he reiterated his support for the primacy of the market and defence of private property.

According to a report in Monday’s *New York Times*, at his victory party in a posh Port-au-Prince neighborhood last Friday night, Préval embraced two leaders of Aristide’s party, *Fanmi Lavalas*, “Then he called two men whose designer clothes and light complexions marked them as sons of the upper classes” and hugged them. “ ‘You see everyone ... I am going to reconcile Haiti’ .”

While Préval has said he will only make an official victory speech on Wednesday, it appears that as part of the deal under which he has been allowed to assume the mantle of president-elect the issue of who orchestrated the massive electoral fraud is to be dropped. Similarly, there will be no investigation into the events of January-February 2004, when the traditional elite, egged on by Washington, connived with ex-army and FRAP thugs to unseat the country’s elected president.

For their part, the political representatives of Haiti’s traditional elite have responded to the official announcement that Préval won the presidency by suggesting that his victory was illegitimate and, therefore, that he has no rightful claim on the office. “We are not duped by this Machiavellian comedy of imposing a winner,” said Leslie Manigat, who finished second in the presidential race with about 12 percent of the vote. He called Préval’s victory “a coup d’état through ballots.” Ominously, right-wing businessman, Bush administration favorite, and failed presidential candidate Charles Henri Baker said the election results “presages a somber future for democracy in Haiti.”

The US, France and Canada, while acknowledging that Préval is the president-elect, are giving some support to the claims that Préval was named president as the result of a “political decision”, not truly elected by a majority of Haitian voters.

This is preposterous. Préval and his supporters were the

victims of a massive electoral fraud. If the election commission had to bend its rules—choosing to redistribute the inexplicably large number of unmarked ballots to the 33 candidates in proportion to their percentage of the rest of the vote and thereby raising Préval’s vote percentage above 50 percent—it was because it was trying to “correct” for the numerous improprieties it had, at the very least, failed to prevent, including the theft of tens of thousands of valid votes.

Especially noteworthy in the attempt to use the fraud perpetrated against Préval and the masses who voted for him to ratchet up the pressure on the incoming president was a statement from the acting US ambassador to Haiti. Tim Carney told Associated Press that Préval’s legitimacy could be called into question if he “doesn’t perform,” i.e., if he doesn’t do Washington’s bidding. “If he does perform,” added Carney, “nobody will remember” how he came to power.

Apart from calling for Préval to reassert central government control over the shanty towns of Port-au-Prince, the main demand being made by figures in and around the Bush administration is that the new president should “share power” with the traditional elite and begin this process by naming a right-wing politician or prominent businessman as his prime minister.

In a February 17 editorial, the *New York Times* ignored the role that Haiti’s US-installed interim government played in the attempt to deny Préval the mandate he had been given by the Haitian people and the evident support this attempt enjoyed in Washington, while voicing approval for the proclamation of Préval as president-elect as “the best available exit from a bad and worsening situation.” Then, the voice of America’s liberal establishment echoed the Bush administration’s call for Préval to reach out to his opponents—to those who for decades have, with the support and approval of Democratic and Republican administrations, safeguarded their privileges through bloody violence and by denying the Haitian people the most elementary democratic rights.



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