

Haiti presidential elections to be held at gunpoint

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16 October 2010

The November 28 presidential elections in Haiti will be a travesty of democracy. Not only is the nation still reeling from the effects of the January 12 earthquake and diplomatic pressures from the United States, but the government is moving to disenfranchise large numbers of voters.

A major concern of the Haitian government is to avoid a political explosion over its handling of the January 12 earthquake, in which over 200,000 people ultimately died while the arrival of US military forces blocked the arrival of medical supplies.

On September 28, the government imposed a deadline for voter registration, declaring that people registering after that date would have to wait for the next presidential elections before they can vote. As a result, large numbers of people will be denied the right to vote.

According to the government's Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), some 4.5 million Haitians are on the lists of registered voters. However, *Le Monde* reported in September that deceased and émigré voters had not been purged from the registration lists since 2005. In addition, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people are still in makeshift camps erected after the earthquake.

Le Nouvelliste reported on September 28 that the government had ended voter registrations, though long lines of people were still waiting to sign up. The National Identification Office (ONI), with 141 locations throughout Haiti, issues the national identification cards (CIN) required for voting. The ONI had expected at least 400,000 applications by September 28, but only 290,000 people completed the process before the deadline.

The paper described lines outside ONI offices:

"[R]ight up until this Tuesday, numerous citizens still, at the last minute, wanted to request their CIN. Long waiting lines were seen in front of the central ONI office in Babiole. The scene was not very different in Petionville, where a crowd of people was massed in front of another office...some having made several trips without success."

Even those who were able to register before September 28 were not certain of receiving a card. Marie Yolène Gilles, program assistant at the National Network for Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH), told the paper that one of the ONI offices, in "the commune of Marigot, is located in a corridor of the commissariat which has been inundated several times by rain...in recent weeks," and that "the authorities didn't have voter registration lists at their disposal."

She also described the distribution of cards in the commune of Jacmel, where the ONI bureau is capable of preparing 50 to 60 cards per day, but was delivering only 15 to 20.

The operations of the Provisional Electoral Council are being bankrolled largely by foreign governments, with \$7 million coming from Europe, \$1.5 million promised by Japan, \$5 million from the United States, and \$5.3 million from OAS/Caricom.

Officially, the elections are being organized under Haiti's 1987 Constitution, adopted after the fall of the Duvalier regime, and subsequent electoral laws. That constitution promised citizens the right to life, health, and respect for each individual, in conformance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, conditions in Haiti make a mockery of these promises.

Ten months after the earthquake, hundreds of thousands of Haitians still face a horrific existence, according to an October 6 report by the organization Refugees International. Even those in makeshift camps

are threatened with eviction; RI reports that already 15,000 people have been evicted from various camps. Evictees are often housed in new camps where no humanitarian aid is available.

At one camp, the landowner burned thirteen tents during an eviction, and a child died in the fires. RI also found an increase in sexual and domestic violence because of the pressure of living in such conditions. It also “received reports of women and girls forced to exchange sex for food, especially since the general food distributions stopped in April.”

Civilians have no effective recourse, however, as complaints must be addressed to the main foreign military force in Haiti, the UN peacekeeping force MINUSTAH. According to the RI report, “the current humanitarian coordinator (HC)—the person who should be increasing the effectiveness of the humanitarian response and aid delivery—also plays the role of resident coordinator and deputy special representative of the secretary general of MINUSTAH.”

Reports make clear that international investors are using their control of the elections to push for a pliant government that will give them free rein to exploit Haiti’s impoverished, earthquake-stricken masses.

On October 8, *Le Nouvelliste* reported on a Quebec-Haiti business forum at which Canadian ambassador Gilles Rivard was present: “Mr. Rivard has striven, in the last few days, to convince presidential candidates visiting the embassy in succession” to put in place a judicial system that protects investors.

Rivard made clear that investors would not invest the funds needed to rebuild Haiti until they felt sure the government could reliably provide a pro-business climate for them to make profits. He said, “There is solidarity in regard to Haiti. I think that Canada and Quebec have demonstrated it eloquently. The problem is that it is not with sympathy and solidarity that one makes investments, but with a secure and trustworthy investment climate.”

At the same forum, Josseline Colimon Féthière, Haitian minister of commerce and industry, touted her government’s actions, including a total or partial tax break for up to 15 years and the right to transfer interest and dividend payments abroad without penalty.

In June 2010, US Senator Richard Lugar issued a report entitled “Haiti: No Leadership—No Elections.” The report, addressed to the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee, in reality contained a set of instructions for outgoing Haitian President René Préval, whom Lugar hoped would maintain the “legitimacy” of the current regime.

Lugar bluntly compared Haiti to US-occupied countries in the Middle East: “[T]he lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that the greatest constraint to rebuilding devastated countries, war-torn or otherwise, is the absence of strong and transparent leadership.”

Following the maxim that he who pays the piper calls the tune, Lugar threatened that while “the United States and the international community have demonstrated their desire to support the people of Haiti...this commitment should not be taken for granted.”

In exchange for its funding, Lugar intimated, the international community reserved the right to dictate how the CEP would run the elections. His report instructed Préval “to undertake the appropriate restructuring of CEP’s membership, in consultation with international partners.”

The US government is particularly sensitive to the role of the Fanmi Lavalas party. A 2004 US-backed coup ousted elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was of that party. Lugar’s report added that the “international donor community” should “seek an agreement with the CEP and all political parties, including the factions of Fanmi Lavalas, to ensure that the parties meet the CEP’s legal requirements.”



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