

Haitian president ends term amid widening protests

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On February 7, Haitian president Michel Martelly formally stepped down from the post, in keeping with the constitutional requirement that he not occupy it beyond the end of his term. Two failed attempts at elections to replace Martelly have led instead to the creation of an interim government with a provisional president to be chosen by next week.

After intervention by diplomats from the Organization of American States (OAS), on Friday night Martelly reached an agreement with Senate president Jocelerme Privert and Chamber of Deputies president Cholzer Chancy about the structure of the interim government.

Under Friday night's agreement, candidates for the position of interim president have five days to register, and members of parliament will then elect one, whose term will expire on May 14 of this year. Evans Paul will remain prime minister until a "consensus" replacement is chosen by the ruling elites. The interim government will organize a presidential election scheduled for April 24, and the winning candidate will be sworn in on May 14. Nominally, Haiti is governed under a constitution adopted in 1987 after the fall of the Duvalier regime; however, that constitution makes no provision for an interim government when elections are not held.

The first round of voting for Martelly's successor occurred on October 25. A run-off election between top vote-getter Jovenel Moïse—the candidate of Martelly's PHTK (Parti Haitien Tet Kalé) political formation—and second-place candidate Jude Célestin of LAPEH (la Ligue Alternative pour le Progrès et l'Emancipation Haïtienne) has been postponed twice because of street protests and Célestin's refusal to participate. It was scheduled first for December 27 and then for January 24; the second postponement left no possibility of

organizing another election before the end of Martelly's term.

The facade of democracy that has been propped up by United Nations soldiers since the US-orchestrated coup against Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004 is collapsing. Fraud in the October 25 elections was so widespread that Jude Célestin refused to participate in the run-off and instead sought support from protesters and opposition parties calling themselves the Group of 8. PHTK candidate Moïse has been left to campaign, with no opponent, for elections that have not taken place.

Although Parliament has begun meeting again after a year of not having enough elected members, there are still 6 empty Senate seats out of 30 and 27 vacant deputies' seats out of a total of 119.

Five of the nine members of the Provisional Electoral Council (Conseil Electorale Provisoire, CEP), including its president, Pierre-Louis Opont, have resigned because of the failed elections. Among the CEP's responsibilities is approving election results.

Le Nouvelliste reported that, during its "special mission" to intervene in the crisis, the OAS held 25 meetings with Haitian figures who included Martelly, Evans Paul, Jocelerme Privert, Cholzer Chancy, leaders of the Group of 8 opposition parties, union leaders, high-level business leaders, and other presidential candidates. Sir Ronald Sanders, president of the Permanent Council of the OAS, exuded false humility when he declared that "my delegation is satisfied that...our presence had a favorable effect on the search for a consensus formula by diverse groups."

Behind these machinations, however, Haiti's ruling class and its imperialist sponsors are panicking. On January 20, NBC reported that "a few thousand people joined the demonstration in downtown Port-au-Prince

on Tuesday marching through narrow streets and occasionally chanting: ‘The revolution has started, get your gun ready.’ ”

A January 21 article in the *Guardian* stated succinctly that “a sense of dread and foreboding has settled on Haiti’s political elite.”

According to *Haiti Libre*, US special coordinator for Haiti Kenneth Merten said after the January 24 postponement that “what would be bad is to see the population in the streets with disturbances and intimidation, which is unacceptable in our eyes. We are following the situation very attentively.”

Street protests have been ongoing since the first round of elections on October 25, with thousands participating in Port-au-Prince on a regular basis. The Group of 8 opposition parties have sought to co-opt these protests for their own ends. The Platform Pitit Dessalines, for example, was heavily involved in the January protests that contributed to the second postponement of elections. Pitit Dessalines’s candidate, Moïse Jean-Charles, finished third in the October 25 voting.

Reuters found Volcy Assad, a Jean-Charles aide, at a January 23 protest where he told the news agency, “We want a transitional government to set up an investigation commission that will determine the sincerity of the elections.”

On Friday, however, former soldiers from the Forces Armées d’Haïti (Fad’H) drove through Port-au-Prince and other cities armed and dressed in fatigues, with the tacit support of newly installed defense minister Lener Renaud. *Le Nouvelliste* reported that the participants—on motorcycles and in pickup trucks—were silent as they drove from Carrefour to Delmas to Pétion-Ville to downtown Port-au-Prince, except for one who declared that “we are in the streets to reestablish order.”

When the soldiers reached the Champ de Mars and confronted protesters, the latter pulled 78-year-old Raphaël Néro Ciceron from one of the vehicles and stoned him to death in his military uniform.

Renaud claimed afterward that despite the uniform he was wearing, Ciceron did not appear in the register of the Office for Management of Demobilized Servicemen. This detail did not stop Renaud from fully supporting the actions of the former soldiers or threatening more such interventions. He told *Le*

Nouvelliste that “former servicemen are citizens in their own right” and “they have the right to protest no matter when and no matter how.”

“It’s like a natural spirit,” Renaud went on, “they have the right to make their voices heard.”

Anti-government protests have not been limited to the capital. According to *Haiti Libre*, a protest expected to draw 2,000 Haitian emigrés in French Guiana was scheduled for last Wednesday to oppose the establishment of an interim government in Haiti.

AlterPresse reported protests in the city of Hinche, in Haiti’s Central Plateau, starting at the end of last week. While these included members of opposition parties and public administration officials, their demands went further than just electoral reforms. They called for the arrest of Martelly and members of his administration for impoverishing the country.

Issues other than the elections are also motivating Haitian workers and peasants. On January 19, a Royal Caribbean cruise ship carrying nearly 3,800 tourists was unable to dock at the company’s private resort in Labadee because of protests carried out by local residents in small boats. In the following days, two more Royal Caribbean ships did not dock because the company feared more protests.

The protesters, banging pans and shouting, were upset about the lack of jobs and economic benefits from the Labadee resort. Known for its long zip line over the water, the property is surrounded by armed guards and a 12-foot-high fence. A witness reported a sign saying “USA Away!” in one of the protest boats. Royal Caribbean said in a statement that “although the protest was peaceful in nature...there would be a significant impact on our guests’ ability to enjoy Labadee.”



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