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Fond des Blancs, Haiti

The Struggle for Decentralization in Rural Haiti



When the international media chose to bypass reporting on Haiti's municipal elections this past Sunday, it may have suited those responsible for organizing the election perfectly well.

After two years of mismanaged election funds, logistical failures, and technical problems that characterized much of the process to replace the extra-constitutionally selected Interim Government of Haiti (IGH), the

Provisional Electoral Council, the U.N.'s peacekeeping and stabilization mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH, the European Union, the governments of the United States and Canada, and the IGH itself may have felt more relief than satisfaction when the polls finally closed Sunday evening.

In this third and final stage of voting, Haitians voted 1,420 candidates into offices at the level of local government. In each of Haiti's ten departments, voters cast ballots for *cartels* of three commune magistrates that will govern each municipality for the next four years along with *cartels* of three commune section administrators, known as CASECS, and their parliamentary counterparts, the Communal Section Assembly members, known as ASECS. In theory, the CASECS play an administrative roll in each communal section while the ASECS undertake the dual responsibility of counseling the CASECS and acting as their budget watchdogs during the same four years.

But in rural Fond des Blancs, an area ninety kilometers southwest of Port-au-Prince that occupies the four western-most sections of the commune of Aquin, the voters did not move on so quickly. In fact, a significant representation of the 45,000 predominately illiterate peasants that call Fond des Blancs home stood surrounding the makeshift voting center long after many of them had voted, as if watching the event unfold meant just as much to them as casting a ballot.

Among those present outside the small courthouse was Briel Levielle, a longtime leader of his community and the current director of Fond des Blancs' largest peasant cooperative. To Briel, watching his community participate in electing their neighbors to local government posts, the day was a quiet commemorative to Fond des Blancs' two-

decade struggle to move from its dictatorial past to a fully functional component of a decentralized Haitian state.

Sunday's municipal elections were another delayed attempt to respect Haiti's 1987 constitution that affords communities like Fond des Blancs the right to have representation in the national decision making process. While the constitution now supports government-recognized and financed administration positions at the commune section level, the real hope of this year's election is that Preval's government can finally bring to fruition Haiti's ASEC system, an advisory structure that, in theory, should form a pyramid of parliamentary counterparts to every level of executive power from the local CASECS in each commune section to President Preval himself.



Essentially, each commune section sends one ASEC to the commune's Municipal Assembly. Each Municipal Assembly then sends one ASEC to the commune's Department Assembly, each of which sends one representative to the Interdepartmental Assembly. Along the way, the ASECS are empowered to nominate judges for peace courts at the municipal level and nominate members of Haiti's Permanent Election Council (CEP). Should the system function as proposed, these responsibilities would be of particular importance to communities like Fond des Blancs, which have suffered a repeated history of neglect by Haiti's government.

Briel Levielle remembers when Fond des Blancs was considered a "Komin Riral," or a rural commune, run by the repressive "Kod Riral," the rural code of Francois Duvalier, which placed Section Chiefs at the head of each commune section. At this time in Fond des Blancs, Tonton Macoutes, the feared paramilitary thugs of the Duvalier dictatorship, filled the role of Section Chiefs, using terror tactics to keep the community quiet, fearful, and powerless.

Only with courageous participation in community mobilization projects, such as "Ti Legliz," Haiti's liberation theology movement, were these rural communities able to begin instigating changes in their local power structures. In Fond des Blancs, Briel became involved with a branch of "Ti Legliz" called "Fraternitè Le Engaje," or The Fraternity of Engaged Laypersons. The group used religious-based arguments for taking progressive action against the rural code of Francois Duvalier that eventually led to the creation of a provisional form of CASEC after the departure of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. The three community members nominated to "KAZEK Pwoviswa" – provisional section councils – immediately began working to reform the local administrative position

so that Fond des Blancs' local government, in Briel's words, "would not beat people down, but instead, help them to develop each commune section."

After two more years of mobilization that included the bloodied, failed elections of 1987, critical changes made to Haiti's constitution the same year would allow Briel and two other community members to beat out a *cartel* of Tonton Macoutes that had stayed on in the commune to become the community's first official CASECS in January of 1988.

However, despite the constitutional support for the office of CASEK, the governments of Aristide and Preval working successively to pay back the international community for debts accrued primarily under the Duvalier family dictatorship, could not



finance the positions. For twelve years, Briel tended to the administrative responsibilities of Fond des Blancs as CASEK entirely voluntarily, while the ASEC system, though on the 1995 presidential ballot, would never function at all.

The financial problems persisted when Briel stepped down in the 2000 presidential election. Though the office of CASEK did appear on the presidential ballot, a continued lack of funding for the position would force all elected CASECS in Fond des Blancs to quit their posts or continue on a volunteer basis in 2003, preceding the ousting of President Aristide by ex-military officers in 2004.

In last Sunday's election, the parties responsible for organizing the municipal elections again dishonored the hard-won progress by Haitians to decentralize Haiti's government by failing to provide adequate funding for both the election and the candidates' campaigns leading up to it. On the day of the election, the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), the Interim Government of Haiti, and MINUSTAH used for the third time this year a scattering voting centers that differed little from what the government had use when Fond des Blancs was still considered a rural commune under the rural code of Francois Duvalier. Specifically, the organizers spread a total of five voting centers across ten square miles of mountainous terrain to serve Fond des Blancs' roughly 21,000 eligible voters, the majority of whom can only travel by animal or foot. This, despite the CEP's boasting to the media that it had opened 32 new voting centers across the country to assure the election's "success."

Then, having already spent all municipal election funds on the year's previous two elections, no candidates in Fond des Blancs receive any financial aid for their campaigns as promised, even after the candidates had paid the fees to register their candidacies. The community also received no explanation of the complex CASEK and

ASEC system beyond what members of the community more familiar with the system could offer.

People like Frékel Georges, a candidate for CASEC in the central-most section of Fond des Blancs, said he was left to speak at several churches and social organization meetings to both introduce his platform to voters as well as explain the role of the office for which he was running. In keeping with his own desire to participate in the decentralization of Haiti's government, his *cartel* wants create committees in each neighborhood of his commune section that would meet with the CASECS to both advise the CASECS and distribute administrative duties across the section.

As surely as the organizers have already moved past Sunday's election, Frékel and his fellow newly-elected CASECS and ASECS are now left to wonder about the future of their offices. Although the U.S. State Department has praised Haiti's 2007 fiscal budget as "demonstrating sound fiscal policy," is the United States ready to support Haiti in its efforts to finance a decentralized Haitian government? Will the U.S. Congress and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) move quickly enough to relieve Haiti of its onerous debt, a burden that has repeatedly contributed to hampering Haiti's full realization of the ASEC system? Will the International Monetary Fund, which has finally approved Haiti for its Heavily-Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative, similarly allow President Preval to begin spending funds from Haiti's modest fiscal budget on the local posts in a timely manner, even in rural areas of the country? If not, how long will Haitians living in communities like Fond des Blancs have to wait until their poverty no longer overrules their constitution?

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