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Violence, repression endanger prospects for fair elections in Haiti

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A little more than a year ago, Haiti's democratically elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide fled the country in the face of a month-long armed revolt and pressure from the French and U.S. governments to leave. Immediately following the coup, an interim government, headed by the U.S.-backed Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, was installed and Haitians were promised elections in the fall of this year.

But is that promise a hollow one? Fourteen months after a regime change in Haiti, political instability and violence plague this tiny Caribbean country. Reports of human rights violations abound. Members of Aristide's political party, Lavalas, have been imprisoned or gone into hiding while soldiers from the Haitian army, disbanded under Aristide in 1995, have resurfaced to grab a piece of the political pie. Haitian journalists who have written exposés critical of the interim government have come under attack. Although the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, initiated last summer to assist the country during this transitional period, has stepped up its efforts to restore security in the country, some critics say the international organization has not done enough and was initially hampered by the weakness of the interim government it is mandated to support.

The turmoil in Haiti today raises questions about how the upcoming elections can occur.

"I think elections will take place but I don't think they will be free and fair because there are so many sectors that want to control them," said Haitian journalist Joseph Guyler Delva.

Bullets, not speeches

Despite the presence of 7,400 U.N. peacekeeping troops, security remains the country's most pressing problem. In many areas, bullets rather than campaign speeches are the means for influencing political

allegiance. Over the past seven months, scores of Haitians have been killed by armed gangs, machine gun-toting police or former soldiers.

The reemergence of members of the Haitian army, many of whom were blamed for killings, maimings and rapes during the coup regime of 1991-94 is one of the most volatile variables in the political scene here. The interim government initially embraced the ex-soldiers, who were among the instigators of last year's coup, as "freedom fighters" but has since distanced itself from them and says the newly elected government must decide whether or not to reinstate a Haitian military. According to Reuters, ex-soldiers currently control several parts of the country and there are reports that some have been integrated into the Haitian police force. In late March, two U.N. peacekeepers and at least two ex-soldiers were killed during gunfights in the towns of Petit Goave and Hinche.

But former soldiers are not the only armed faction operating in Haiti today. "Every group has armed actors involved with it at this point," said Anne Sosin, a paralegal with the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti. "It is not only that the arms are there but that they are being employed. A lot of people have taken to using violence as a tactic," she said.

The problem is particularly acute in the poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, which were a strong base of support for Aristide and Lavalas. Some observers say the heavily populated slums provide a crucial constituency and no one can win Haiti's national elections without controlling them.

Until very recently, Cité Soleil, the capital's coastal slum inhabited by 600,000 people, remained a no-go zone because of gang violence. Hospitals closed. Even the police refused to enter the area. The situation has improved somewhat since U.N. peacekeepers began patrolling the slum's main thoroughfares and in early April launched a crackdown in an attempt to disarm the warring gangs.

Cité Soleil's gang feuding is more than a conventional turf war and has roots in the country's current political crisis. Pro-Aristide militants are at odds with a group named after one of the slum's neighborhoods, the Boston gang, which is reportedly receiving funds and arms from Andy Apaid, a Haitian industrialist and politico. Apaid is one of the leaders of Group 184, a pro-business organization opposed to Aristide that was established by the U.S.-based Democracy for Haiti Project.

Human rights monitors report that police raids on the poor neighborhoods of Bel Air, Fort National and Lower Delmas have resulted in illegal arrests, disappearances, summary punishments and, in some instances, street massacres. Last November, Amnesty International called on the transitional government to set up an independent commission of inquiry into "summary executions attributed to members of the Haitian National Police." Human rights monitors point out that these abuses by the police, often conducted with impunity, help fuel the violence.

"I don't think we can have an election in this situation," said Vladimir Laguerre, a former sports commentator for Haitian television. "If I am a candidate, can I go to Bel Air? People were too afraid to attend carnival this year. People are too afraid."

"It is a de facto disenfranchisement," Haitian journalist Delva said of the turmoil in Port-au-Prince's slums. "At the same time the government is condemning the violence in those slums they want to have a pretext in which these people won't be able to go out and vote."

Laguette would like Aristide to return but he said many Haitians don't believe that will happen because the current U.S. president and his father won't tolerate it: "Aristide doesn't have a chance with Bush. The first coup against him happened with Bush the father. The second coup happened with Baby Bush." Laguerre said Haitians prayed for a Kerry win in 2004, believing the Democratic candidate would ensure Aristide's return. "Now they have to fight, fight, fight," he said, later adding that the current violence reflects people's frustration with the interim government's inability to provide basic needs.

"People have no food, no money, no electricity. These are what are basic for a human being to live. At least when Aristide was here they had food," Laguerre said.

Imprisoned or underground

Since the coup, many members of Lavalas and officials from Aristide's government have been imprisoned or gone underground, leaving some to wonder how legitimate elections can occur when the opposition has been so severely crippled.

In late February, Haiti's two most high-profile political prisoners, former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and former Minister of the Interior Jocelerme Privert, detained without charge for more than eight months, launched a hunger strike to protest their imprisonment. In an interview with Bill Quigley, a law professor at Loyola University in New Orleans, Neptune said his life had been threatened three times during his incarceration. At the intervention of U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., who visited Neptune and Privert in Haiti's National Penitentiary in early March, the two former officials were taken to hospitals.

On April 18, the interim government officially charged Privert with orchestrating the killing of Aristide opponents in the town of St. Marc in February 2004. Neptune remains under U.N. supervision. "The fact that it took over a year to charge Privert makes you doubt the evidence," said Brian Concannon, director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti. "I haven't seen the files yet."

The situation of Haiti's political prisoner is "absolutely deplorable," Waters told "Between the Lines," a weekly radio newsmagazine. Commenting on the incarceration and in some cases the killings of members of the opposition party, Waters said, "I think there is an attempt to literally get rid of Lavalas leaders so that when they hold this fake election they're planning, they won't have anybody to run representing the Lavalas party."

A fierce critic of U.S. policy in Haiti, Waters said that Latortue was "basically our puppet" and therefore Washington had to accept responsibility for the plight of Haitian political prisoners and intervene on their behalf.

Between 700 to 800 Lavalas members throughout Haiti have gone into hiding since the coup, according to Renel Blanc, a department coordinator for Lavalas in the city of Hinche. Some have gone into the forests near their homes, others to the Dominican Republic, and still others, like himself, have tried to become invisible on the streets of Port-au-Prince, he said. Blanc, a 43-year-old potter and

father of two, fled his home city of Hinche after armed rebels in February 2004 burned down the local Lavalas office and ransacked his pottery shop.

Prior to Aristide's presidency, Blanc had not engaged in Haitian politics. But he trusted Aristide, a former Catholic priest, because "he is a leader inside the Catholic church" and "he is there to defend the poor." For Blanc, the upcoming elections will be invalid unless Aristide, now in exile in South Africa, can return and organize his base of support.

"We have no other leader," he said, adding that he hopes the U.S. government "will give Aristide a push back." The former president was elected in 2000 by a wide majority with approximately 60 percent voter turnout. His term expires in August 2006 and the Haitian Constitution prohibits a successive run for the presidency.

Two sources told NCR that Lavalas would not enter candidates in the upcoming elections, citing the current instability and political repression as reasons for their withdrawal. But Damien Cardona, a spokesperson for the U.N. Stabilization Mission, said he had heard no such reports. Lavalas has several factions, and Cardona said it was possible that a leader from one group might have advocated withdrawal but "there have been no formal statements" by the party. The U.N. mission is "never going to allow elections that are not free and democratic," he said, stressing that a party's rejection of violence was the only prerequisite to their participation.

As for Haiti's security issues, "there are countries that are going through much more difficult situations and they have had democratic elections," Cardona said. He pointed out that the U.N. mission is sponsoring a national dialogue process. Over the past six weeks "leaders from all political parties, including people who are close to Aristide" have participated, he said.

Throughout Haiti's post-coup year of turmoil, the U.S. State Department has insisted the interim government of Lartortue represents the "best hope" for the country. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a state department spokes-person said Haiti's current political crisis had to be considered in context.

"Let's keep in mind that Haiti has a 200 year history of corruption in government. That legacy became particularly acute under Aristide when Haiti became a narco-state," he said. "The country is emerging from a very rough period. There is a U.N. force that is engaged in bringing stability and the U.N. is trying to train the Haitian police." He added that the U.S. government "supports a political process that is open to all parties."

But Haitian journalist Delva offers a different assessment of today's crisis. While acknowledging that there were rights violations under Aristide, he said the situation is much worse now. Most worrisome to him are the lack of dissenting voices.

Under Aristide, illegal arrests or killings by the police would have been considered "such a big scandal," he said. "Civil institutions were much more vigorous then. But now, [the police] arrest somebody and a few days later his body is found dead in the morgue. This is a person who is supposed to be in police custody. Nobody says anything."

During January and February, at least half a dozen journalists were threatened, beaten or shot at, and one was killed, for reporting stories or hosting talk shows critical of the interim government. According to Delva, the recipient of at least two threats, the repression of the media indicates the severity of Haiti's instability.

Haitians know Aristide "did not leave voluntarily," he said. "The U.S. and the French pushed him out. Now there is a sense that things have changed. ... Everybody wants to show that things are working because if you show they are not working you can't cooperate. If they say there are serious human rights problems, that puts into question the whole system, the whole effort."

Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, said the upcoming elections present the Bush administration with "a conundrum."

"While it says it wants free and fair elections, it will do anything to prevent Lavalas from winning," he said. Byrnes pointed out that although the U.S. State Department issued a "fairly feisty" critique of Haiti in its annual human rights report, the revelation of abuses has had "no traction, no leverage" on U.S. policy, which he described as governed by a deep antipathy for anything affiliated with Aristide.

"In spite of all that democratic palaver by the Bush administration, it is interested in democracy only if it serves its political goal, and in Haiti that means exorcising Aristide and Aristidism," he said.

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