

HAITI

IPS

Haitian election planning far behind schedule as violence reigns

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PORT-AU-PRINCE (IPS/GIN)-“We are not on schedule,” a member of Haiti’s interim government told IPS, referring to the delay in the preparations for the October and November elections, a key step towards the gargantuan task of rebuilding Haiti’s institutions.

The national director of fisheries in Haiti, Robert Badieu, said he did not believe the timeframe set by the provisional electoral council for the Oct. 9 municipal elections and the Nov. 13 legislative and presidential elections would be met.

To elect the new government-comprising the 129 members of the legislature and some 7,000 local and regional posts in the nine departments (provinces) into which Haiti is divided-around four million voters, nearly half of the population, must be registered within the next few months, using what government authorities tout as the country’s “first fraud-proof” election system. But the efforts are way behind schedule.

However, the sense of discouragement among local political leaders stands in contrast to the mild optimism expressed by several military chiefs of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), with regard to progress made in getting the violence under control.

The main problem is not organized armed political groups, but the hundreds of gangs that are mainly active in three Port-au-Prince neighborhoods, and, to a lesser extent, in Gonaives, to the north, where the Argentine battalion is stationed, they explained. Around 400 people have been killed in clashes between gangs and the Haitian police since September.

Philippe Mathieu, minister of agriculture, natural resources and rural development, told IPS that the gang violence is similar to the urban violence seen in many of Latin America's big cities, like Rio de Janeiro, Brazil or Bogota, Colombia. The omnipresent security guards armed with shotguns and rifles and the shots heard in the middle of the day near the government headquarters by a group of Uruguayan journalists recently visiting Haiti clearly indicated that peace is a long way off. There were no signs of the local police.

The sounds of gunfire came from the poor Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Bel Air where the Brazilian battalion is posted. Bel Air, Cite Soleil and Carrefour, which is guarded by the Sri Lanka battalion, make up a sprawling slum district on the hillside lining the west coast of the capital. The three neighborhoods surround the main port in this Caribbean island nation, the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

The current efforts to restore order are taking place in a country where 50 percent of the population is illiterate and 180 armed gangs operate, including former members of the army dissolved by former president Aristide in the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, 87 political parties are grouped in two fragile coalitions, the Democratic Convergence and the Democratic Platform. The Lavalas Family, the strongest party, is not taking part in the elections.

The doubts about the elections arise from the slow pace of the voter registration process, and especially the difficulties in getting the high levels of violence under control. To these problems was added the recent U.S. decision to order the departure of the families of U.S. diplomats in Haiti and non-essential embassy staff, because of the violence.

Sources with the UN civilian staff expressed surprise over Washington's decision, saying the security situation had not changed over the past few weeks, and that the violence was under better control than at the beginning of the year.

No other embassy in Haiti followed suit, the sources told IPS.

But the biggest doubt over the viability of the elections arises from the absence of the state, which becomes painfully obvious with a short tour of the narrow streets of Port-au-Prince, home to half of Haiti's 8.5 million people, 80 percent of whom are poor. The police are barely getting organized, with MINUSTAH's help, and there is an auxiliary

force, dubbed the "men in black" for their black uniforms, who are armed with weapons that they have been able to confiscate, from simple shotguns to sophisticated weapons of war. Municipal buildings are, like most of the city, barely standing, amidst the mountains of garbage piling up on busy streets.

In this no-man's land, authority is exercised by the armed private guards keeping watch outside supermarkets and hotels, high walls concealing the opulent homes of the wealthy few, and sports utility vehicles, which are necessary for climbing steep hillsides, to reach the inaccessible mansions of the local elites. And, of course, the white vehicles and blue helmets of the heavily armed, mainly Latin American MINUSTAH forces.

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