

What's At Stake in Haiti's December 3, 2006 Elections: the ASEC System

On December 3, Haitian voters will vote for candidates for mayor, and for representatives in a system called the ASEC system. In all, over 29,000 candidates are running for 1,420 positions. The mayoral elections are relatively straightforward: voters vote for a “*cartel*” or slate of three candidates that will collectively manage the affairs of the municipality.

The ASEC system is more complicated. It is a large pyramid structure, designed to radically decentralize democracy, by insuring that people who get into office on the votes of their immediate neighbors have a say at the top levels of political power. The base of the pyramid is the ASECS themselves, chose by neighborhood. The top is the national Inter-Departmental Assembly, made up of ASEC members chosen successively to represent their neighborhood, their municipality and their department.

Haiti is divided into 10 Departments, each Department is divided into municipalities, or communes, and each municipality is split into communal sections.

ASECS (*Assemblés des Sections Communales*) are the foundation of the system, which is shaped like a pyramid. Each section elects a Sectional Assembly, or ASEC. The ASECS play an advisory role to the CASECS, which are the actual administrators of local government. The ASECS also look over the CASECS shoulders, to make sure they are spending the money well.

Each ASEC sends one representative to the Municipal Assembly. The Municipal Assembly plays a similar watchdog/advisor role at the municipal level- the mayor is supposed to report to it on the use of municipal resources, and cannot sell state lands in the commune without the Assembly's approval. The Municipal Assembly is also responsible for drawing up the list of nominees for judges in the peace courts in the Department

Each Municipal Assembly sends a representative to the Departmental Assembly. The Departmental Assembly actually chooses the members of the Departmental Council, which administers the Department. The Departmental Assembly plays a similar watchdog/advisor role at the Departmental level, and the Departmental Council reports to it. The Departmental Assembly is also responsible for drawing up the list of nominees for judges in the trial courts and appeals courts in the Department. Each Departmental Assembly nominates three people to serve on the national Permanent Electoral Council (CEP), then the Supreme Court, the executive and the legislature each pick three names from that list for the CEP. So no ASEC system, no Permanent Electoral Council. No Permanent Council, you can always contest the election results, because it was run by an unconstitutional Provisional Council.

Each Departmental Assembly sends a representative to the Interdepartmental Assembly. The Interdepartmental Assembly helps the executive branch, and is involved in policy planning. The Assembly is entitled to attend and vote at Ministerial Council meetings that deal with issues within its domain.

So to enter the system, one needs to be involved in politics at the very local level, where it is hard for centralized money to penetrate. And candidates cannot enter the system with the expectation that they will make it to the Departmental Assembly, where the power starts to stack up- the chance of any single ASEC member reaching the Departmental Assembly is less than 1:25. And at the other end, the ASEC system is the bottleneck through which the CEP and judicial nominees must pass.

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