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Haiti: Time to Make Some Hard Choices

One hundred days into the administration of Haitian President René Préal and the country has witnessed scant movement on the political or economic fronts.

BY CARLO DADE

Key challenges — some long-standing, others caused by recent stumbles — are looming and time is growing short for the new government to act.



MIXED RESULTS: President Rene Preval has made progress on security, but lags in other areas. (Photo: Joao Castellano/UN)

In one sense the lack of movement in Haiti can be seen as positive—at least the downward trajectory of the past decade has stalled. On the other hand, the lack of movement is creating anxiety because of the elevated expectations among the popular elements in the Haitian society that enthusiastically elected Préal and who took to the streets when attempts were made to rig the voting results and deny him the presidency.

Of course, not everyone had high expectations for the new government. Most of those in the Haitian private sector and international community who supported his candidacy did so somewhat reluctantly and have been waiting to be surprised by the new president. In this case, Préal is looking a lot like Godot.

Four key challenges loom for the Haitian government and will force Préal into action in the very near future.

SECURITY

Surprisingly, in this area some progress has been made as Préal has given the United Nations (UN) forces the green light to go after the gangs that had been behind a recent spike in kidnappings and shootings. However, this was a reactive gesture; the rise in gang activity was viewed as a direct threat to Préal himself and he had no choice but to allow the UN a freer hand. When he acted, he did so forcefully, going on the air to tell the gang leaders to “give up your weapons or die.” In response, the UN has moved Chilean troops from Cap Haitien and Uruguayan troops from Jeremy to Port-au-Prince and in recent weeks has taken back the airport road and sections of neighborhoods held by the gangs.

This success will be temporary unless the government develops the capacity to incarcerate captured gang leaders. In response to the crackdown in Port-au-Prince several gangs have tried to establish a beachhead in other cities. They have been turned in to the UN forces by locals who fear the gangs. But no sooner are gang members arrested, then they are released by the Haitian courts. This is doubly dangerous as it increases the feeling of impunity on the part of the gangs and the sense of impotence of the law-abiding populace. The Haitian judiciary and penal institution are incapable of coping with the situation due to the capacity, human resource and corruption constraints that face all branches of government. It was suggested by some in the international community that foreign judges could be brought in to assist in a reform of the judiciary

and handle the backlog of cases. This was vehemently criticized by the Haitian judiciary, most Haitians and by the Diaspora as a gross infringement on Haitian sovereignty. Given a choice between the loss of sovereignty implied in rampant lawlessness and impunity among gangs versus that implied by accepting further international help, Préval, in line with the popular opinion seems to have chosen the former.

CHINA

Despite the presence of Chinese troops in Haiti as part of the UN forces and the presence of China on the UN Security Council, which has to approve the UN Mission in Haiti every six months, Haiti continues to recognize Taiwan. Given the massive support provided by Taiwan for Préval's election, this situation will not change. In effect, China has sent peace-keeping troops to a country that does not officially recognize its existence. China and Haiti appeared to have worked out a detente on this issue where Haiti would keep its relationship with Taiwan low-key and China would overlook it. This came to an end when Haiti deliberately provoked China at the UN. Haiti is serving a term as part of the committee that sets the UN General Assembly agenda. In this capacity it was given a resolution, prepared by Taiwan clients Nicaragua and Gambia, calling for discussion of "the security of the Korean peninsula and the straits of Taiwan." Haiti not only presented this resolution to the agenda committee where it was unanimously rejected, but the Haitian mission turned around and presented the same resolution again the very next day. China was not amused. Beijing termed the offense "grave" and the "trade office" in Port-au-Prince called upon the government demanding an explanation. The Chinese government has promised that there will be repercussions.

PARLIAMENT

The new parliament has passed no legislation in four months and its main preoccupation appears to be what type of cars members will be given, the size of per diems and other critical matters of state. The aid and technical assistance that Canada is providing to the parliament has been ineffective. The one area where Parliament did move was potentially disastrous. There was strong support in the new body to reconstitute the Haitian army. Given that no donor funding, which accounts for over 65 percent of the government's budget was available, the parliament decided to take money from the President and Prime Minister's Office. Luckily, business and civil society organizations managed to convince the lawmakers that this move would have severe repercussions from the international donors and instead the body voted to approve a modest sum for a study on creating a new security force. However, the business and civil society groups behind this intervention were an ad hoc group and it is questionable if they can continue to play this role with Parliament without donor support.

REFORM OF CONSTITUTION

According to the Haitian constitution, the country will have to have 11 elections in the next 5 years. The elections scheduled for this December will be postponed because so many UN troops are tied up in Port-au-Prince. There will likely be rumbling from the Haitian street over this delay and more rumbling if the future electoral schedule is reduced. However, it is clear that Haiti simply cannot afford 11 elections in 5 years. The next round are local and municipal elections. If newly elected officials mimic the newly-elected Parliament there will be new demands on aid and expectations from a new domestic constituency without offsetting contributions to governance.

Massive aid inflows have distorted the rationale of expectations on the part of the Haitian

populace and parliament. Eleven elections in five years, or reconstituting the army, or perks for parliamentarians all seem like fine ideas if one either has the money to afford them or if one does not have to worry about paying the bills. Neither applies to Haiti. The advice given by Polonius to Laertes in Hamlet is quit appropriate, "costly thy habit as thy purse can bear [...]." Someone in the international community will have to remind the country of this hard reality. Fortunately for Haiti the new head of the UN Mission appears up to this task. We can only hope that as with the crackdown on the gangs, Préval can rise to the challenge and support him.

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