

# La classe politique: Parties and Political Instability in Haiti

Taylor Wentges

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Haiti's anti-government parties united in the 1990 presidential and legislative elections in an astonishing coalition to win power under the charismatic leadership of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. By the time of the 1995 elections this alliance had fractured and the pro-Aristide Lavalas parties had formed a new coalition. Soon after, the coalition fractured again amidst dramatic congressional and party infighting, with Aristide forming another party – the Fanmi Lavalas. Other parties have suffered similar fates, with the total number of parties now in the neighbourhood of 50.

As a result of this party instability and legislative gridlock, the 1997 elections were cancelled, both houses of parliament were dissolved, the country has been without a government since 1997 (indeed it has had 10 governments since 1987), violence is again on the increase, foreign aid is drying up, and many believe the May and June 2000 legislative and municipal elections will solve little. Haitian political and economic development is stalled – in large measure due to the nature and reality of its unstable party system. This continuing political uncertainty could have further consequences on the Presidential elections in Haiti currently expected before the end of this year.

This paper seeks to address the problems of the political parties and party leaders themselves as obstacles to development in Haiti, and suggests reform of the party structure as one potential catalyst for sustained economic development.

The following issues are highlighted in the paper:

- the political and economic context;
- the nature of the political party system;
- party instability through the 1990, 1995, 1997 and 2000 elections;
- implications for Haiti and the international community;
- possibilities for reform; and
- recommendations for Canada and the Organization of American States (OAS).

## RÉSUMÉ

Les partis de l'opposition au gouvernement en Haïti se sont unis lors des élections présidentielles et législatives de 1990 pour former une coalition étonnante en vue d'accéder au pouvoir sous la houlette du très charismatique Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Au moment des élections de 1995, cette alliance s'était fracturée quand les partis Lavalas pro-Aristide avaient formé une nouvelle coalition. Peu de temps après, la coalition s'était de nouveau fracturée à

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la faveur de graves luttes intestines au sein du congrès et du parti qui débouchèrent sur la formation par Aristide d'un nouveau parti appelé Fanmi Lavalas. D'autres partis ont connu un sort identique et on dénombre à l'heure actuelle en Haïti environ 50 partis politiques.

Du fait de cette instabilité politique et du blocage législatif, les élections de 1997 ont été annulées, les deux chambres du Parlement dissoutes, le pays est sans gouvernement depuis 1997 (en fait Haïti a connu dix gouvernements depuis 1987), on assiste à un regain de violence, l'aide étrangère est presque tarie et nombreux sont ceux qui pensent que les élections municipales et législatives qui doivent avoir lieu en mai et juin 2000 ne régleront pas grand-chose et risquent même d'aggraver la situation. Le développement économique et politique de Haïti est au point mort – ce qui s'explique dans une large mesure par la nature et par l'instabilité du système des partis politiques haïtiens.

Dans ce document, on se penche sur les problèmes des partis politiques et de leurs dirigeants eux-mêmes en tant qu'obstacles au développement de l'Île, et on avance que la réforme de la structure des partis pourrait être un catalyseur de développement économique soutenu.

Ce document aborde les questions suivantes :

- la nature du système des partis politiques;
- l'instabilité des partis politiques lors des élections de 1990, 1995, 1997 et 2000;
- les implications pour Haïti et pour la communauté internationale;
- les propositions de réforme; et,
- les recommandations à l'intention du Canada et de l'Organisation des États américains (OÉA).

## RESUMEN

Durante las elecciones presidenciales y legislativas de 1990, los partidos de oposición al gobierno en Haití formaron en una sorprendente coalición que logró acceder al poder bajo el liderazgo del carismático Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Sin embargo, para las elecciones de 1995 esta alianza se había desmembrado y los partidos Lavalas simpatizantes de Aristide formaron una nueva coalición. Poco después, y en medio de tremendos conflictos congresionales y luchas partidistas internas, esta nueva coalición también se desintegró, a partir de lo cual Aristide creó un nuevo partido: el partido Fanmi Lavalas. Otros partidos haitianos han tenido igualmente una suerte semejante. En la actualidad existen alrededor de 50 partidos diferentes en el país.

Esta inestabilidad de los partidos junto a la parálisis legislativa que se produjo trajo consigo la suspensión de las elecciones de 1997, la disolución de ambas cámaras del parlamento, que el país esté sin gobierno desde 1997 (o más bien que haya tenido 10 gobiernos desde 1997), que la violencia esté en auge otra vez, que escasee la ayuda externa, y que muchos piensen que las elecciones legislativas y municipales de mayo y junio de 2000 producirán escasas mejoras sino empeoran aún más la situación. El desarrollo político y económico de Haití se ha estancado debido en gran medida a la inestabilidad de su sistema partidista.

Este trabajo intenta reflejar como los problemas de los partidos políticos y sus propios líderes obstaculizan el desarrollo de Haití. Además, se ofrecen recomendaciones de reforma a la estructura de los partidos como posible catalisis para alcanzar un desarrollo económico sostenido.

El presente trabajo destaca los siguientes aspectos:

- las particularidades del sistema de partidos políticos en Haití;
- la inestabilidad de los partidos durante las elecciones de 1990, 1995, 1997, y 2000;
- consecuencias para Haití y la comunidad internacional;
- propuestas de reformas, y
- recomendaciones para Canadá y la Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA).

## THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Haiti does not currently experience any direct threats from a military regime; there are no major ethnic or religious cleavages; and it has benefited in the recent past from a considerable amount of international assistance. One cannot help but wonder, therefore, why there has not been at least some minimal improvement in the quality of elections and the level of legislative consensus since the ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, or at least since the return of President Aristide from exile in 1994.

To be sure, the country has had little experience with democracy, has suffered under the yoke of countless military rulers, and been an economic and political pawn of great powers for decades if not centuries. Widespread reforms launched in 1995 to build democratic institutions have collapsed: the judicial system is dysfunctional, and the Haitian National Police remains vulnerable to accusations of human rights abuses, political interference and drug-related corruption.

The economy of the hemisphere's poorest country is tottering. With the closure of the Haitian Parliament since January 1999 and the repeated postponement of legislative elections, Haiti's government has been practically paralysed. New budgets have not been passed. Promised foreign assistance for non-humanitarian purposes has been largely suspended. Total aid and loans to Haiti, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), have dropped from \$534 million US in 1995 to \$356 million US in 1999, while the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) together have a further \$570 million US on hold – a sum equivalent to 18% of the country's GDP (*Economist Magazine*, December 4, 1999). Formal unemployment is estimated at 50-70%. Survival often depends upon remittances from abroad – reported to be worth up to \$ 1 billion US in 1998. While remittances are a key resource, they are also a reminder that Haiti has been weakened for years by the exodus of its best and brightest.

Relatively new threats have also emerged. Haiti has suffered from devastating soil erosion and climate change, creating an additional obstacle for rural

peasant farmers. Particularly alarming is the boost to the economy from illegal drugs. With its quiet coves lying just a few hours north of the Colombian coast, Haiti has become a popular transshipment point for cocaine.

## NATURE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM

The current instability should be attributed in part to the character and activity of the political party system and leadership. Haiti's political parties tend to be small, poorly organized and funded, and highly personalized. Alliances, both electoral and parliamentary, are usually tactical and transitory, and political programs are often deliberately left vague to permit the leadership to quickly join others with better prospects for power. In parliament, voting patterns do not necessarily correspond to party affiliation, and legislators can belong to several alliances.

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As a result, registered parties normally number in the 40-60 range, and the party and alliance names on the ballot vary dramatically from election to election. It is little wonder then that this "classe politique", often viewed as an elite club with few connections to the populous and civil society, evokes such apathy and cynicism from the average Haitian. It is also not surprising that parliamentary majorities and stable government have been so elusive.

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The instability becomes readily understandable if one takes a look at the country's recent electoral and political history. In particular, it is instructive to examine the high volume of emerging and disappearing parties, and the political manoeuvring surrounding four key issues – foreign intervention, economic restructuring, support for Aristide, and democratic reform.

## 1990 ELECTIONS

Following four years of post-Duvalier military rule, the 1990 joint presidential-legislative elections provided a fresh start for Haiti. Two main coalitions faced off.

Launched in 1990, the *Front National pour le Changement et la Démocratie* (FNCD) was a

left-of-centre alliance of parties with a distrust of foreign intervention, and a plan for major democratic and anti-market economic reform. Yet due to its more establishment outlook, it chose to remain at arms length to the populist Lavalas movement of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. However, when, with the aid of a delay of the election date, Aristide decided at the last minute to run for president under the FNCD banner, the coalition had little choice but to become essentially a vehicle for Aristide's more radical restructuring and people power. The second coalition was the centre-right *Alliance Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (ANDP) which sought a more market-oriented, pro-foreign, evolutionary path to democracy.

The 1990 elections gave Aristide a strong 67% majority victory, and although the FNCD was denied a majority in both legislative houses, his wide support among the poor and popular organizations suggested that at last a period of political stability was at hand. It was not to be.

Prior to his inauguration Aristide announced that he belonged to no party, resulting in early legislative alienation from his coalition partners and the *classe politique*. He was overthrown in a coup nine months later and fled the country.

## 1995 ELECTIONS

Three years of military rule ended only with the armed intervention of the United States in September 1994 and the return of Aristide to power in October. Shortly thereafter, he and his supporters launched a new party – the *Organisation Politique Lavalas* (OPL) – as a means to turn the Lavalas movement into a political party. Back in power with the help of American troops, Lavalas now took a more pro-US and pro-market economic approach.

The Lavalas movement was now the party of the centre, with small anti-Aristide, anti-US, anti-market parties on its left, and small anti-Aristide, anti-US, pro-market parties on the right. The former ANDP coalition had since split up, in large measure because its leader, Marc Bazin, had participated as Prime Minister in the military regime. No anti-OPL coalition was ever mounted due to continuing mutual distrust among the parties and their desire to maintain their own autonomy and chances for

power. It was a strange situation with the fractured left and right often sounding very similar in their opposition to Lavalas.

Scheduled by the Haitian Constitution for December 1994, legislative and municipal elections were delayed twice with the first round held in June 1995 and the run-off held in July. Amid widespread administrative troubles and opposition party complaints, partial elections were held in August in those districts with the worst problems, followed by a second round in September.

The OPL achieved overwhelming majorities in both houses and among the municipalities, and with the election of Aristide supporter René Preval to the presidency in December 1995, (constitutionally Aristide was barred from two successive presidential terms), it looked as though a stable period of legislative and executive government could at last begin.

## 1997 ELECTIONS

The honeymoon was to be very short-lived. In-fighting quickly developed within the Lavalas-OPL camp over the proposed privatization and pro-market reform legislation of President Preval. When Aristide decided to publicly condemn the legislation, the old pattern re-surfaced once again. Parliament became gridlocked as a fierce power struggle erupted between pro- and

anti- Aristide OPL legislators. The former president and his supporters, anticipating a return to power in 2000, and mindful that they had to distance Aristide from the continuing economic crisis, reverted to their traditional anti-foreign, anti-market platform.

In 1997, Aristide then registered his third electoral vehicle in seven years, the Fanmi Lavalas (FL) party, with OPL reciprocating with a name change to *Organisation du Peuple en Lutte*. The subsequent Senate elections themselves proved chaotic as the anti-Aristide/Preval opposition charged government collusion in the electoral process and largely boycotted the second round. As a result, the prime minister resigned, and the second round of the elections were finally suspended by the Chamber of Deputies with only two senators having been elected in the first round – both from the Fanmi Lavalas.

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Matters only became worse, however, with the expiration of the parliamentary term in November 1998 with no resolution to the political stalemate, and the decision by President Preval to dissolve both houses in January 1999 and rule by decree. Electoral and legislative politics had once again been hijacked by power politics and gone into paralysis.

In short, since 1987, Haiti has had 10 governments, an essentially non-functioning legislature, no establishment of a Permanent Electoral Council, and no government at all since 1997. While matters seemed to be improving with the 1990 election and then with return of Aristide in 1994, politically the country has remained on a downward trajectory.

## THE 2000 ELECTORAL SEASON

Now in the midst of a protracted summer election season, the situation has worsened with electoral mismanagement and accusations of executive electoral interference and violence delaying legislative and municipal voting three times to May 21, 2000, with the run-off vote scheduled for June 25th. Moreover, with US and UN security forces no longer present, and the newly-created *Police Nationale Haitienne* (PNH) demoralized, lacking in basic equipment and facing accusations of corruption and pro-FL sympathies, the conditions are less than ideal for the elections. This had lead to further concerns about the acceptance of the election results both by the losing parties and by the population at large.

Some 29,500 candidates contested the approximately 10,000 local and parliamentary positions on the May 21 ballot. A second round is scheduled for June 25 for the 83 lower chamber and 19 Senate seats at stake. There are over 11,200 polling stations across the country.

Again, Haitian voters face bewildering choices as the electoral slate reflects a new party landscape, and as platforms shift across the political map. On the extreme left are several anti-Aristide, anti-market parties; Fanmi Lavalas has now staked out the left; OPL is in the centre; a new centre-right coalition – the *Espace de Concertation* (EC) – is anti-Aristide, anti-US., and pro-market; and the right brings

together a mix of small neo-Duvalieriste and anti-Aristide parties that are growing in popularity and boldness.

So bitter is the political atmosphere, and so afraid are the non-Fanmi parties that the FL will win a majority, that obstruction has been used by the opposition parties to delay or cancel the elections. Furthermore, Aristide and his supporters have also been accused of delaying the legislative elections until the presidential vote in late 2000 so as to capitalize on the ex-president's popularity when he runs again. All sides have blamed each other for fomenting delay, and all sides had narrow political interests in postponement. The campaign has been marred by violence, with at least 15 people killed since late March 2000. As such, even after the May 21st first round vote, the count will likely be held up, the second round and its results may be delayed,

and as in 1995, the potential for first and second round partial make-up elections could take voting well into the Fall presidential campaign.

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: At the time of going to press, international observers (both official election monitors from the Organization of American States and other international agencies, as well as independent individuals) showed signs of relief and optimism that the May 21 vote had passed relatively well: voter turnout was high (50-60%); the Haitian National

Police maintained calm and relative order; national election monitors and poll watchers worked cooperatively; and to date, there were few accusations of fraud. Some suggested that Haiti had taken the first steps towards democratic and transparent processes with this vote. However, a positive evaluation of the process may prove premature amid reports of post-election arrests of opposition figures. Results were not expected before June 1; make-up and run-off elections remained pending.]

In many ways, however, these elections are not the point. The question is not whether Lavalas could win an electoral majority; the question is whether it can sustain a legislative majority. In Haiti, the two are by no means synonymous. Aristide must improve his consensus-building skills once in power

or yet again another great opportunity for stability and reform will have been lost.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HAITI AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

What does this mean for Haiti? Why is politico-electoral stability so important? First, and most obviously, without sufficient political cohesion elections clearly become very disruptive and violent affairs – even in the absence of systematic coercion and fraud – with the subsequent government unable to pass key reformist and developmental legislation. Economic progress is further threatened since the international community is withholding key developmental aid (and threatening to withhold current funds) in the absence of successful elections.

Legislative and electoral stalemate also prevents the formation of a Permanent Electoral Council. According to the Constitution, a transitional *Provisional* Electoral Council was to oversee the election of the first legislature and municipal councils which together would in be responsible for selecting six of nine members of a Permanent Electoral Council (the Executive chooses the remaining three). Given that legislatures have never sat long enough to do this, the president by default has continued to select members of the provisional body. This adversely affects the legitimacy of electoral authorities, and the legitimacy of future elections.

The 1987 constitutional provision preventing the participation of members of the Duvalier regime in government for ten years has expired. Consequently, pro-Duvalier rallies have boldly become more public, and Jean-Claude Duvalier has himself openly offered his assistance to these supporters. As the Duvalier years continue to recede into the myth of the «good old days», nostalgia and popular desire for a political and economic saviour may dramatically increase the possibility of a return to military rule as an attractive panacea to chaos, poverty and perceived broken promises by Aristide and the *classe politique*. Moreover, as the American public and Congress seem less and less willing to become entangled in intractable foreign conflict, elements of

the US government may quietly view the return to authoritarianism in Haiti as a temporary solution, and the lesser of two evils.

There are also threats to regional stability. The Dominican Republic has itself only recently emerged from years of authoritarian-style leadership, and has enjoyed a period of relatively strong economic growth and social stability. Indeed, the country has just completed a presidential election that showed remarkable improvements over past votes. But continued violence and instability in Haiti limits natural intra-island trade and increases the risk of cross-border drug trafficking and refugee flows. Political instability in one part of the island of Hispaniola reverberates to the other.

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Lastly, continued instability leads to large-scale refugee exoduses to the Bahamas and to Florida, leading to drownings and serious disruptions for Haiti’s maritime neighbours. The stakes are indeed very high in the search for greater unity within the country’s party structure and processes.

## POSSIBILITIES FOR REFORM

International and Haitian communities should place less emphasis on elections, and more on reform of the political party system. This must be done not by attempting to change the parties directly, but by improving the system in which they operate.

*Constitutional Reform:* The 1987 Constitution gave special weight to de-centralized government and separation of powers. The president appoints a prime minister from among the legislators, and with the approval of the president, the prime minister in turn selects cabinet ministers who must not be members of parliament. Given the Haitian party context, this unelected cabinet tends to create an adversarial relationship with the legislature, since obstruction is one of the few ways parliamentarians have an influence on government policy. As a result, there is little incentive for sustained cooperation between the executive and legislature.

A better solution would be to have the prime minister choose ministers from among parliamentary members – half from the Senate and half from the Chamber of Deputies – who could retain their seats. This would create career incentives for legislative cooperation, especially among the ruling party, while still allowing parliament the right to ratify the choice of prime minister and have non-confidence votes. The president would also continue to be directly elected.

*Concurrent Presidential, Legislative and Municipal Elections:* The present situation of staggered elections creates a situation of too many complicated elections and too many opportunities for violence and something to go wrong. It also tends to confuse the electorate and to be very costly. Holding joint elections would encourage a higher turnout, facilitate greater cooperation between presidential and legislative candidates of the same party, and subsequently increase the chances for post-electoral consensus.

*International Financing of Parties:*

In general, Haiti's political parties are very poorly financed and have great difficulties mounting costly national campaigns, conducting research for platforms, and building a grassroots base. International assistance to registered political parties through, for example, a special fund of the Organization of American States (OAS), allocated based on the results of the most recent election, would serve to encourage party development, as well as inter- and intra-party cooperation. Support could be on a sliding scale, increasing if a party merged with another, decreasing if it fractured. This would also promote party longevity since a party would receive no funding if it had not yet participated in an election.

*Release of International Development Assistance Funds:* Holding back millions of dollars in international aid until stable government returns to Haiti only exacerbates the problem by further weakening the economy and creating a climate conducive to the return of undemocratic forces.

*Pressure on Aristide to Negotiate:* Jean-Bertrand Aristide still enjoys significant support among the poorer classes of Haiti, but has a great deal of trouble converting this into stable political power.

Through high-level OAS and bilateral pressure, he must be encouraged to build a stable coalition both within and outside his own party. A popular president who cannot pass legislation is of little benefit to Haiti.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA AND THE OAS

Canada and the member-states of the OAS have much at stake in Haiti. The Government of Canada has provided significant direct and indirect assistance to Haiti in the form of development aid, electoral support, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding in the areas of police and judicial reform. Additionally, international drug issues and the ties to Haiti of the large Haitian community in Quebec place a stable and prosperous Haiti very much in Canadian interests. OAS involvement has come in the form of Foreign Minister-level condemnation of the former military regime, mediation efforts for the return of President Aristide, human rights monitoring, electoral observation, and support for governance.

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Suggestions for the OAS with respect to Haiti could include mediation efforts at the level of Secretary General to encourage party leaders to build coalitions, the use of OAS expertise in political party development, and the establishment of a special fund to address incentives for party development and coalition-building. Canada could contribute to this special fund, provide constitutional and political party expertise to assist reforms to the party system, and utilize the Haitian community in Canada as a unique resource for provision of assistance and encouragement of reform.

In June 2000, Canada and OAS objectives for Haiti will see a special convergence as Canada hosts the 30th OAS General Assembly in Windsor, Ontario. It is an excellent opportunity for Haiti issues to be simultaneously brought to the attention of senior-level Canadian and OAS member-states officials, and for decisions and follow-up to have greater impact.

The Haitian *Classe Politique* and the international community must recognize the vital need to reform the way party politics is conducted in Haiti. This will go a long way towards encouraging electoral and political stability, putting the country on the road to sustainable recovery.

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