

Runoff Election Campaign Begins in Haiti

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The runoff campaign begins Thursday in the Haiti presidential election, with two right-wing candidates, both with links to the former military rulers, competing in the March 20 vote. Either Mirlande Manigat, wife of a former president, or singer Michel Martelly, who supported a series of military dictatorships, will succeed outgoing president René Préal.

On the eve of the campaign launch, former US President Bill Clinton, who exercises vast power in Haiti as UN special envoy and co-chairman of the Interim Haiti Recovery Committee, which controls the flow of earthquake disaster aid, met separately with each candidate. The meetings were held behind closed doors at the posh Hotel Karibe in Port-au-Prince, the capital city.

Clinton said he was confident that the March 20 runoff is “going to happen on time,” despite the chaotic operation of the initial presidential vote last November 28, and the multiple postponements of the runoff. The final round of voting was delayed by a protracted dispute over which candidate finished second behind Manigat, and thus qualified for the runoff against her.

Initially, the candidate of Préal’s Inité party, Jude Célestin, was declared the second-place finisher, despite violent protests by supporters of Martelly, a well-known singer and performer. Manigat received 31.4 percent of the vote, Célestin 22.5 percent and Martelly 21.8 percent, according to preliminary figures.

Under heavy pressure from the United States, and after a report by the Organization of American States upholding Martelly’s claims of widespread vote fraud, the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council) placed Martelly on the ballot for the runoff, disqualifying Célestin.

According to Haitian press reports, however, four of the eight members of the CEP declined to validate the final results, which were published over the sole signature of council president Gaillot Dorsinvil.

Célestin issued a statement calling the decision a “prize for violence,” referring to street riots by Martelly supporters, and declaring, “They stole victory from us.”

But Préal and Célestin backed down after a visit to Port-au-Prince February 1 by US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who demanded they accept the results decreed by the OAS. “We have made it very clear we support the OAS recommendations, and we would like to see those acted on,” Clinton told the Haitian media.

The US flatly rejected a proposed compromise for a three-way runoff including Manigat,

Martelly and Célestin. The only sweetener for Préval was the US agreement to extend his term in office from February 7 until May 14, to give time to hold the runoff, declare the result (the final count is to be reported April 16), hear any appeals of the vote results, and then swear in a successor.

The rigged character of the electoral maneuvers is a demonstration of the isolation of all factions of the Haitian ruling elite from the great mass of the people, who had little enthusiasm for the process and no faith in any of the major candidates.

The most popular party in Haiti, the Fanmi Lavalas of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was barred from the election by the CEP, at the insistence of Préval, a former Aristide ally who broke with him after the US-backed coup that sent him into exile for the second time in 2004.

Several other parties were also barred from the elections, leading to a plunge in vote turnout, with only 22.8 percent of registered voters casting ballots, compared to the 59.3 percent who voted in 2006, when Préval won his second non-consecutive term. In the areas hardest hit by the earthquake of January 12, 2010, only 12.4 percent of voters went to the polls.

The result is that the March 20 runoff will be conducted between presidential candidates who received the votes of 6 percent and 4 percent of the electorate, respectively. Both candidates have ties to the dictatorship of François Duvalier (Papa Doc) and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc), who ruled Haiti in bloodthirsty fashion from 1957 to 1986, and to the military rulers who succeeded the Duvaliers and ruled for most of the period from 1986 through 1994.

Manigat's husband Leslie, initially a supporter of François Duvalier, fell out with the dictator and was imprisoned, before going into exile. He returned in 1986, and won the office of president in elections in January 1988, widely viewed as rigged by the Haitian military. Six months later, Gen. Henri Namphy staged a coup and dismissed Manigat from office. He ran for president again in 2006, one of a group of right-wing candidates who lost badly to Préval. Mirlande Manigat, now 70, is a law professor.

Martelly, 49, developed friendly relations with the Haitian military and police leadership during his career as a kompa musician and nightclub operator in Port-au-Prince. He was a vociferous opponent of the populist Aristide, supporting the military coups that overthrow the elected president in 1991 and again in 2004. He was also linked to the FRAPH, a paramilitary outfit that played the same role for successive military juntas as the notorious tonton macoutes thugs did for the Duvaliers.

Before the two candidates began their official campaign, they spent time meeting with the real masters of Haiti, including Clinton, who holds the purse strings for the country, and Antonio Patriota, the foreign minister of Brazil, which commands the UN peacekeeping force in Haiti, MINUSTAH.

Manigat and Martelly also met with representatives of the Club of Madrid, a coalition of former leaders of the European powers, among them Felipe Gonzalez, former prime minister of Spain, and Lionel Jospin, former prime minister of France. Both also travelled to the neighboring Dominican Republic for talks with Dominican President Lionel Fernandez.

Martelly made provocative comments about the possible return of Aristide to Haiti. "If there is a problem, the justice system will take care of it," he told reporters, referring to the threat of legal charges against Aristide should he set foot on Haitian soil.

The former singer made no such statements about Jean-Claude Duvalier, who suddenly and unexpectedly returned to Haiti last month, after 25 years in exile. It was Duvalier's return that prompted public discussion of a similar action by Aristide, who has been in exile in Africa since a US military jet flew him out of the country seven years ago.

The Obama administration has publicly opposed Aristide's return, with State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley telling a press briefing, "I think we would be concerned that, if former President Aristide returns to Haiti before the election, it would prove to be an unfortunate distraction."

The Préval government has issued Aristide a visa February 8, and Aristide declared his intention to return soon, in a column published last week in the British daily newspaper Guardian.

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