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Photo: Demonstrators yell during the funeral of slain journalist Jean Dominique in Port-au-Prince, Haiti on Saturday, April 8, 2000. Courtesy: AP Photo/Daniel Morel.

Haitian President Sets Date for Elections

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In the wake of rising violence and unrest following the April 3 murder of popular political commentator and radio broadcaster Jean Dominique, and widespread protests of the government's postponement of elections, Haiti's president announced on April 12 that legislative and local elections would be held on May 21. President René Prével set the date after local activists and international observers roundly condemned his repeated rescheduling of elections. The government hopes that the announcement of a firm date will silence its critics and lead to calm, but opposition leaders remain wary.

"The president has not yet officially set the new date," Gerard Pierre-Charles, head of the Struggling People's Organization, one of the main opposition groups, told the Associated Press after Prével's initial announcement. "We must consult with other parties and with our members before we decide whether the new dates would be acceptable."

Carlo Dupiton, a member of the Electoral Council, was more optimistic. "I don't think there will be any new postponement," he said, noting that by May 21 "the atmosphere will be less tense."

Haiti has been in political crisis since President Prével suspended parliament in January 1999 and began ruling by decree, postponing legislative elections four times. Most recently, Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council set April 9 as the election date, with a second round set for May 2, but Prével overruled the decision, citing "logistical problems," as he had for all four postponements. According to Prével, almost half a million eligible voters remained to be registered, and an inefficient, poorly run election would be worse than no election at all. Critics, however, contended that schisms and disagreements within Prével's inner circle had prevented

agreement on a date and framework for elections.

Tatiana Wah, who worked in the administration of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and is now Chairperson of the Haitian-American Alliance, was one of many Haitians who deplored Préval's "lack of statesmanship and consciousness" and the stalling of the electoral process. "Préval's actions of dissolving parliament, going through a term without a parliament, proves to Haitian-Americans the lack of leadership and understanding of the country's many ills," she said. "The country has deteriorated economically, politically, and socially due to this administration's inaction."

The opposition charged that Préval was hoping to push back elections until December 2000, when Aristide, his political ally whom he replaced as president in 1996, will run for the presidency. Opposition leaders alleged that come December, pro-Aristide candidates would be given the thousands of electoral offices left vacant since Préval suspended parliament.

In response to the repeated postponements, Haitian demonstrators called for elections and the resignation of the Electoral Council, and members of the international community denounced the delays. The European Union, the biggest aid donor to Haiti, announced that future aid would only be disbursed if elections were held and a functioning parliament could design and approve a budget. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the turmoil in Haiti "underscores the urgent need to reestablish democratic institutions in Haiti," and encouraged "the government to hold planned elections in order to meet the constitutional deadline [in July] for the seating of parliament."

The reaction from the United States was just as indignant. State Department spokesperson James Rubin said the US was "deeply concerned and troubled" by Dominique's death, and alarmed by the government's postponement of elections. "In our view, the government of Haiti must publish new dates for elections soon, and lend full financial, logistical and security support for the provisional electoral council to ensure these dates are met," Rubin declared. "Failure to constitute promptly a legitimate parliament will risk isolating Haiti from the community of democracies and jeopardize future cooperation and assistance."

Peter Romero, acting US Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, told the House International Relations Committee that Haitian President Préval "has attempted to walk away from the commitments he made to us and more importantly to the Haitian people." Romero said that if a parliament was not re-established, \$400 million in promised aid "will probably disappear" and "our policy would undergo a serious review." Dismissing Préval's claim of "logistical problems," Romero said, "the time has never been more ripe for elections." He noted that 4 million Haitians (more than 90 percent of those eligible) had already registered to vote, photo IDs had been distributed, and that the Provisional Electoral Council was ready to select 40,000 campaign workers. "We could have elections by the end of the month if the political will of the president is there. We haven't seen it yet," Romero said.

The chairman of the Committee, Representative Ben Gilman (R-NY) agreed, saying that failing to hold elections this month "will seriously jeopardize the hard-won support for Haiti presently held by the American people and the international community." Representative John Conyers (D-Michigan), however, urged caution in calling for elections in Haiti. "We must make sure we don't trip over some important realities," including a 75 percent illiteracy rate, he said.

With President Préval's agreement to hold elections on May 21, he has now shown the political will to allow the democratic process to move forward, but the road ahead could still be rocky. Although "logistical problems" will apparently not prevent the elections from taking place, the government has limited resources with which to implement a national vote and can expect little help from the international community. Kofi Annan warned recently that a new UN mission designed to help bring democracy and promote development in Haiti might be closed down because the US has not paid its UN dues. In his letter to the president of the General Assembly, the Secretary General reported that the UN operation set up on March 16 to help organize elections and reform the country's judicial system was short of funds. The General Assembly had set a budget of about \$24 million for the mission's first year, of which \$9.2 million was provided by the UN and \$14.7 million was to be provided by contributors, primarily the US and Canada. The Clinton administration apparently wants to transfer to the UN mission some \$7.5 million held in UN trust funds, but it is not clear if it is necessary for the US Congress to approve the transfer, or if it will do so.

Many Haitian-Americans are ambivalent about the US's role. "Regarding US sentiment, I've heard many Haitian-Americans say that this country doesn't really care about Haiti's problems as long as no boats are coming with Haitians," said Wah, the Chairperson of the Haitian-American Alliance. "But it's not that they [Americans] don't care, I don't think the Americans know what to do. It might be that Americans cannot really intervene in Haiti's development. What makes a country develop is people's efforts. And Haitians need to figure out for themselves how to create a democracy."

And even if democratic elections are held, it will be difficult for any government to solve Haiti's economic crisis. Wah, who worked in the area of privatization under Aristide, says private sector development has been neglected by politicians and development agencies. "The private sector is paralyzed and the state is weak. Haiti needs a strong private sector to balance, influence, and counter the state," said Wah. "But it's difficult to be optimistic about Haiti. The explosion occurring now needed to happen, and the worst is yet to come. Haiti is an open sore, a blister with an abscess which is now blowing up."

While some observers still fear the worst, the scheduling of elections should help to ease the tensions that have been building up over the last few months. There have been at least 60 reported violent incidents since October, and in recent weeks, Legitime Athis, the leader of a conservative opposition party, and his wife were killed in riots triggered by supporters of Aristide's Lavalas party, and nine other people were killed during outbreaks of mob violence. And the April 3 murder of Jean Dominique provoked further violence and aggravated the political crisis.

President René Préval declared three days of national mourning following Dominique's death, which culminated in a funeral on April 8 attended by 15,000 mourners. Although many Haitians blamed the president for the highly-charged political atmosphere and mob violence that has wracked the island nation, Préval praised Dominique as a martyr for "devoting his life to protecting the humble and the deprived." Violence erupted after the funeral service, as supporters of former president Aristide set fire to the headquarters of opposition leader Evans Paul's Confederation of Democratic Unity. The motive and identity of Dominique's killers are not yet known.

For decades, Dominique used his position as a radio broadcaster to excoriate Haiti's successive dictatorships and to call for democracy, and

was twice forced into exile because of his political activism. The first time was in November 1980, when he was driven out by strongman François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who arrested and expelled Dominique's journalist wife, Michele Montas, and his entire editorial staff. Dominique returned home following the collapse of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's regime in 1986, but was forced to flee again in 1991, when a military junta ousted then-president Aristide. After Aristide resumed the presidency when Raoul Cedras' military junta was forced from power by US intervention in 1994, Dominique returned to Haiti. The 69-year-old Dominique was gunned down outside the headquarters of Radio Haiti Inter. The Organization of American States condemned the murder of Dominique as an attack on democracy and the freedom of the press, and journalists at the private Radio 2000 Vision station sent an open letter to Haitian Minister of Justice Camille Leblanc, demanding protection and saying that reporters receive "serious anonymous threats daily." Haiti "is living moments of anguish, where violence has become the preferred weapon of the intolerant," the letter stated.

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