



Democracy in ashes. Ballot papers are burnt, destroyed or discarded. Party representatives and bogus monitors play a central role in the fix.

But who is laughing?

On 12 January 2015, the mandates of a second third of the Haitian Senate and of the whole of the lower house expired, leaving Haiti without a legislature. This was due to the failure of President Michel Martelly to hold any legislative or local elections since he took power in March 2011. Since then, Martelly has been governing by decree.

According to the Haitian Constitution, the body that organises and oversees all elections is the Conseil Electoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council). The Constitution, in fact, provides for a Permanent Electoral Council but the formal conditions for its creation have not once been met in

The first task of the new CEP was to deal with the scandal surrounding other electoral bodies: if the CEP has overall control of the electoral process, at the level of the geographical Departments and the Communes, the process is organised and monitored by ten BEDs (Departmental Electoral Offices) and 140 BECs (Communal Electoral Offices) respectively.

On 2 March, the electoral timetable was published: on 9 August, the first round of elections for the 20 Senate seats, and elections for all 118 seats of the Chamber of Deputies; on 25 October, the second round of Senate elections and the first round of presidential elections; finally, on 27 December the second round of the presidential elections.

The campaign was declared open by the CEP exactly one month be-

The most comprehensive report on this 'fiasco' was compiled by a group of Haitian CSOs, namely RNDDH (National Network for the Defence of Human Rights), CNO (National Council for Election Observation) and CONHANE (Haitian Council of Non-State Actors). They were able to deploy some 1500 observers to just under 50% of the 1508 polling stations established across the country.

To describe the 9 August poll as 'flawed' would be a gross under-

The people have spoken – the bastards!

It is mid-December 1990 at the École Argentine in Port-au-Prince and the votes are being counted by candlelight. About nine out of ten of the giant ballot papers unfolded and held up for scrutiny express a preference for Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the FNCD (National Front for Change and Democracy) ticket on which he is running. After about forty minutes, one man, wearing a badge identifying him as one of President George Bush Sr's personal observers, has seen enough: turning from the counting-table and pushing through the crowd, he snorts, to no-one in particular, "The people have spoken – the bastards!"

In Haiti's very first free and meaningful elections, the people had embraced democracy with enthusiasm: more than 80% had turned out – defying the intimidation and violence meted out by the army and the PNH (Haitian National Police) – and 67% of those "bastards" had delivered Aristide a landslide victory.

Their joy was to be short-lived nonetheless: barely eight months into his five-year mandate, Aristide was ousted by a military coup d'état. To no-one's surprise, the coup was financed by Haitian business elites and, even less surprisingly, those who orchestrated it had long been on the payroll of the CIA.

There followed three years of terror: upwards of 5,000, mostly poor, Haitians were murdered, tortured, raped, or 'disappeared' by specially formed death-squads. Tens of thousands more were forced to flee, many meeting their deaths in the waters between Haiti and Miami.

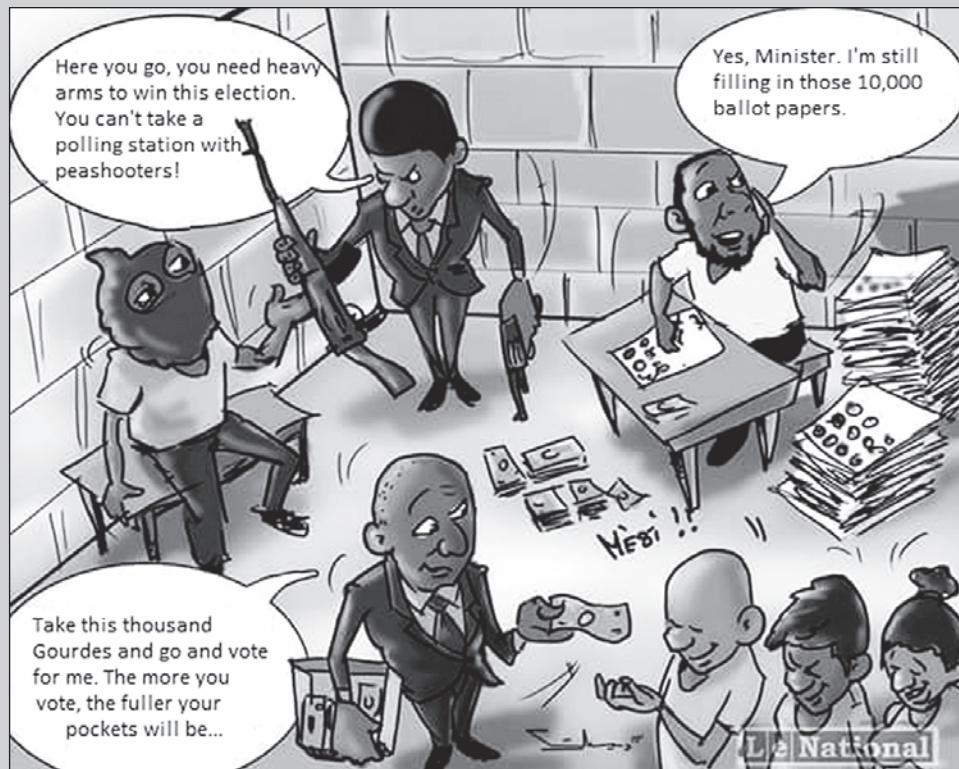
But the violence was anything but random: the aim was to eliminate – by targeted assassination – the leaders or would-be leaders of the

popular movement and thus cure the people of their new-found thirst for democracy.

In 1993, Bill Clinton succeeded Bush Sr as US president but it was only when the body-count of drowned Haitians washing up on Miami beaches started to impact on his approval ratings that Clinton decided to call time on the carnage in Haiti. The laughably baptised 'Operation Restore Democracy' swung into action with Aristide

returned to Haiti in October 1994, accompanied by 20,000 US Marines and about the same number of UN forces – the intended message being that he was now Washington's man.

Raoul Cédras and the other perpetrators of the coup were allowed to leave for Panama or the Dominican Republic, taking with them an estimated \$300m of plunder and leaving the state penniless.



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statement. The 'irregularities' noted in the RNDDH report amount to a veritable A-Z of election fixing:

- Polling stations set up in premises that were much too small to accommodate the expected number of voters, or in places that were manifestly inappropriate – such as nightclubs, cock-pits, or even private residences (including residences belonging to candidates or party officials).
- Voting booths (isoloirs) that appeared to have been designed specifically to prevent people from casting their ballot in secret.
- Indelible ink (designed to prevent multiple voting) that did not start working until several hours later.
- Polling stations awash with individuals claiming to be political party monitors (mandataires) or independent monitors (observateurs) but who openly campaigned for candidates, intimidated voters by threats of violence, or initiated mass brawls in order to force the suspension of voting.
- Incompetent or blatantly partisan

polling station officials who allowed multiple voting by failing to require that voters sign against their name on the election register (liste d'émargement).

- Frequent mismatches between the electoral roll and the election register, meaning that many voters who turned up to vote were unable to do so.
- Blatant ballot stuffing or, conversely, the removal and destruction of ballot papers.
- Etc., etc...

Even the European Union observer mission – which traditionally favours the 'three brass monkeys' approach to election monitoring – was moved to bemoan the frequent recourse to 'methodical violence' by the candidates themselves. This might appear shocking when viewed from the perspective of 'normal' electoral politics but is less surprising once one realises that many of the 232 candidates for the Senate and 1621 aspirants to the lower chamber were in fact notorious thugs or gangsters (see below).

POHDH (another large Haitian

human rights platform) managed to field 800 observers, and its own highly critical report closely echoed that of RNDDH. As did its headline recommendations: cancel the vote from polling stations where electors had been prevented from voting, or where there had been orchestrated violence, intimidation or ballot stuffing; eliminate and prosecute candidates who had taken part in violence; dismiss and prosecute incompetent, partisan or corrupt election officials; investigate the role of the CEP in preparing the fiasco. Finally, in advance of the October elections, launch an urgent civic education programme to make voters aware of their rights and responsibilities.

All observers, national and international, deplored the historically low turn-out (officially 18% but almost certainly lower in reality) which some put down, in part, to fears of violence on the day, or to obstacles deliberately created by the authorities, but which is probably also the effect of years of disillusionment (see inset story).

Here we go again

And so on 26th of October the curtain went up on the second round of the electoral farce. It appeared, initially, that the CEP had at last got its act together: materials were distributed to voting centres on time; the electoral roll had been published well in advance of polling day; some electoral officials guilty of fraud or simple incompetence on 9 August had been replaced; the police, who had clearly been ordered not to intervene on 9 August, were now taking a visibly more active role. All of this allowed the international community to applaud the 'professionalism' and 'integrity' of the CEP. Even national observers such as RNDDH and POHDH released relatively positive press releases the day after the poll.

But only two weeks after the ballot, the full extent of the confidence trick that had been played on the Haitian electorate had become plain for all to see. The extensive report on 26 October ballot released by SOFA, CNO, CON-HANE and RNDDH was titled 'A

The Clinton administration illustrated its commitment to this 'democracy' by decreeing that Aristide would be 'allowed' to serve as President only until the end of 1995 (which is when his five-year term would have ended anyway – had he not been in exile for three of them!).

One might have thought that after three years of military dictatorship, the people would have been eager to exercise their democratic rights. Not so. In the legislative elections of summer 1995, just over 30% turned out to vote; in the Presidential elections at the end of that year, that figure dropped to 27%.

It could have been that there was no competition: deputies standing for the OPL (Organisation Politique Lavalas), most of whom in fact no longer supported Aristide's original progressive agenda (did even Aristide still support it?), took 67 out of 83 seats in the legislature and 17 out of 27 Senate seats; René Préval – Aristide's anointed successor as president – won 88% of the popular vote.

Alternatively, perhaps the 70% who shunned the ballot box suspected the truth: namely that the decisions affecting them were not to be made in parliament or the presidential palace, but in Washington.

Indeed, when Aristide was returned to office, it was on condition that he implement a swathe of neo-liberal 'adjustments' to the economy – from the slashing of the public sector, to the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the reduction or virtual elimination of import tariffs: Haiti was to be 'open for business' – or else! So much for the 'sovereignty of the people'!

Democracy in Haiti to this day has been es-

entially subordinated to the implementation, come what may, of the neoliberal agenda – the so-called *Plan Meriken* (American Plan).

By the due-date of the next elections (2000), what passed for a democratic opposition had come to face an uncomfortable truth: they had no popular support and they would never come to power through the ballot box as long as Aristide and his *Fanmi Lavalas* organisation were able to field candidates: since 1990 not a single non-*Fanmi Lavalas* candidate had garnered more than 11% of the vote in any election.

Accordingly, when Aristide was re-elected with 91.7% of the votes in December 2000, the opposition became explicitly anti-democratic: grouped under the banner of the Democratic Convergence, they proceeded to sabotage what remained of Haitian democracy.

Unable to tear up, burn or throw away the ballots cast by the people in 2000 (tactics that would become standard practice in 2010/11 and again in 2015), they formed a 'parallel government' and did everything they could to prevent Aristide's administration from implementing any of its policies (although it is not clear, in truth, exactly what those 'policies' might have been).

In this they were aided and abetted by far right-wing elements of Bush Jr's foreign policy establishment who succeeded in imposing an illegal aid-embargo on Haiti and went so far as to fund and train a well-armed insurgent force masquerading as 'freedom fighters'.

This time round, Aristide managed to serve a little over three years of his five-year term. In February 2004, he was kidnapped by US, French and Canadian special forces and packed off to Africa where he would remain seven years in exile. This 'democratic intervention' was lobbied for and applauded not only, as one would expect, by the Haitian bourgeois political class and neo-Duvalierists, but also by

numerous supposedly 'progressive' Haitian CSOs and virtually all of that country's self-styled 'intellectuals'. At that time, even the Haiti Support Group remained remarkably sanguine about this slap in the face for participatory democracy.

As it goes, 2004 was a nodal point in the post-Duvalier 'transition to democracy'. Why? Well, it revealed just how vacuous that notion was. The debate that came to focus on the person of Aristide – Saint or sinner? Champion or opponent of Neoliberalism? Charismatic leader or thuggish megalomaniac? – was profoundly irrelevant. The point was this: twice in less than 15 years (1991 and 2004) the Haitian people were under the impression that they had exercised their popular sovereignty through the ballot box, and twice they learned that their choices were dust in the wind unless sanctioned by the local bourgeoisie and their foreign backers.

The rest is, as they say, history. As all but the most myopic could have predicted, the departure of Aristide was swiftly followed by invasion and occupation. Two more years of slaughter (2004-2006) – of the same slum-dwelling victims as under the junta of 1991-1994, perpetrated by the same thugs, but this time with the high-tech assistance of MINUSTAH; three more 'elections' – under military occupation, in the wake of the 2010 earthquake and in the midst of a lethal cholera epidemic – each one tightening the stranglehold of IMF/World Bank technocrats on what is left of the Haitian economy.

It is no wonder then that this time round well over 80% of Haitians decided to boycott the current 'selections': still mired in poverty, still dying in a cholera epidemic introduced by the foreign occupiers, teetering precariously on the brink of the next orchestrated 'food crisis', they see 'democracy' for what it really is: a sad, pathetic farce.

Vast Operation of Organised Electoral Fraud'.

The basic mechanism of the fix consisted in making sure that 'real' voters were effectively outnumbered by huge numbers of bogus electors. Whether the fraud was 'made in Haiti' or as many have alleged, designed in Washington, matters little: what is beyond doubt is that the CEP itself was at the centre of operations. Who would have thought that a CEP under the presidency of Pierre Louis Opont – a self-confessed election fraudster – would have stooped to such depths?

The CEP had issued, by one estimate, up to 900,000 accreditation passes to 15 election monitoring organisations and *mandataires*. Five of the 15 accredited observer organisations were of recent creation and had no track-record, let alone expertise, in election observation. They were, in other words, blatant fronts. The already exorbitant number of passes was further inflated by reproductions – made possible by the CEP issuing blanks.

On election day, those armed

with these passes were able to coerce, intimidate or buy off voters in the polling stations. More significantly, they were able to vote themselves, often multiple times, in polling stations where their names did not appear on the electoral register. For that to happen, the complicity of polling station officials was also required.

The actions of these *mandataires* had been denounced after the 9 August round, but the CEP's real stroke of genius in October was to ban the wearing of official vests (which would enable easy identification of monitors) in the polling stations. The result of this was to make it virtually impossible to distinguish between legitimate voters and paid political touts.

The implications of the maths are startling. The official turn-out on 26 October was just over 26% (about 1.5 million voters); national observers put the figure at no more than 25%. In other words, it is possible that, across the country, there were almost as many 'virtual voters' as genuine voters.

These figures may go some way to explaining how Martelly's chosen successor for the presidency – Jovenel Moïse – officially emerged with 32% of the vote, while an exit poll of 1800 voters outside 135 polling stations, conducted by a respected Brazilian Institute (IGARAPÉ), gave him only 6.3% of votes cast.

Stewards' Enquiry?

So, for the last two months Haiti has been plunged into yet another 'electoral crisis'. Complaints have been lodged by candidates and parties who consider that they have been robbed of victory; Haitian CSOs have demanded the re-running of selected ballots or even the cancellation of the whole process and the setting of a timetable for new elections. A beleaguered CEP promised it would investigate itself, before being forced to set up an 'independent' commission to do that job.

The rising clamour of protest, and the accumulating evidence of massive fraud (including in the

Tabulation Centre where the ballots from across the country are verified and counted) culminated in the announcement by the CEP on 21 December that the second round of all four elections (mayoral, legislative, senatorial and presidential) had been indefinitely postponed.

And yet, one wonders if all of this is not just smoke and mirrors. Perhaps the only question worth asking is this: if these elections have been a grotesque farce from start to end, who is laughing now? Let us examine some of the glaring paradoxes thrown up by this process.

Getting things into perspective

Where Haitian civil society saw 'a vast operation of organised electoral fraud', the international community, for its part, saw at worst a few 'minor irregularities'. In a recent interview with *Le Nouvelliste*, the US ambassador to Haiti, Mr Peter Mulrean, calmly asserted that his embassy had had observers 'all over the place' ('un peu

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partout') and they had seen no evidence of fraud. We do not know just how many observers the international community deployed, but it is unlikely that they matched the 2,400 fielded by just two Haitian CSOs (RNDDH and POHDH).

It is unlikely, also, that they saw the same things. POHDH reported that its own observers were kept out of some polling stations while EU and other foreign observers were ushered in – presumably to be treated to the carefully stage-managed spectacle of a well-run ballot.

Mulrean further used his interview to cast aspersions on the motives of all those who had cried foul, whilst leaving Martelly's PHTK party whiter than white (or rather pinker than pink). And that despite the fact that PHTK and Bouclier (another pro-Martelly party) had been, by all accounts, the most egregious offenders in both August and October.

Here is another paradox: never have there been so many candidates and political parties and so few voters willing to turn out to elect them. Why would elections be viewed as so vital by the former and so irrelevant by the latter?

There were 232 candidates chasing one of the 20 Senate seats up for grabs, and no fewer than 1,621 candidates seeking one of the 118 seats in the lower house. The odds of success were even longer for the presidential candidates with 54 candidates seeking the 'padded armchair'. Those candidates represented 128 different political parties. The invention of acronyms must be one of the few boom industries in Haiti! This proliferation of parties was facilitated by Martelly lowering the minimum membership requirement of political parties from 500 to 20 back in 2013.

It is not as if standing for election comes cheap: just registering as a candidate for the chamber of deputies cost \$1000 and double that for a Senate candidature. But that is only the beginning: Haitian economist Leslie Péan estimates at \$500,000 the cost of a serious senatorial campaign; unless you can lay your hands on \$6 million do not even contemplate taking a tilt at the presidency. In a country where 80% of the population lives on less than two dollars a day, who can afford to stand for office? The answer, according to Péan, is: drugs dealers or gangsters – or at least those lucky enough to be funded by such criminals.

In the case of Jovenel Moïse, it helped to be backed by a president willing to spend \$3.5 million of taxpayers' money on the services of one of the shadiest political fixers in Latin America. One service allegedly provided by Antonio Solá was the concoction of bogus opinion polls wildly exaggerating Moïse's popularity.

Narcodemocrats

Amidst all the noise surrounding the August and October elections, did anyone even notice the names of the successful candidates for the Senate? One was Youri Latortue. Known as the 'Godfather of the Artibonite', Latortue is a former death-squad member (1991-1994), coupster (2004) and, allegedly, one of the biggest drugs barons in Haiti. Another was Guy Philippe. Having somehow evaded arrest by the DEA (multiple warrants have been issued against him), Latortue's fellow 'freedom fighter' of 2004 was placed first in the Senate race in his fiefdom of Grand'Anse.

Latortue and Philippe are well-connected in Washington. But, when crack cocaine causes such misery on the streets of American cities, why would elements in the US foreign policy establishment be in bed with such notorious narcos? Part of the answer to that question is provided by events in 2008. That was the year that the Mexican drugs cartels came to the rescue of the global capitalist system: HSBC alone bolstered its foundering liquidity by laundering, through its Mexican subsidiary, some \$8 billion of drugs revenues. It was subsequently fined \$1.9 billion for this 'mistake'.

If the cost of running for office is so steep, what of the potential prizes? These begin with the 'campaign funds' to which accredited parties are entitled. If you are lucky enough to actually get elected, then the rewards are commensurate to the office you hold. At the mayoral level, there are the usual profits that accrue from patronage and clientelism. If you are fortunate enough to have a secret airfield in your commune (there are hundreds of these dotted all over the country), you can also take a cut of the merchandise in-bound from Colombia. You may even use your official armoured SUV to transport it. To this can be added the large degree of de facto legal immunity enjoyed by holders of elected office.

The value of the kick-backs and the assorted prebends increases the farther up the food-chain you are. To the biggest fish, the biggest prize.

Legal Bandits

Since his 'selection' in 2011, Martelly has increased the budget of the National Palace from an annual \$2 million to \$7 million, whilst his personal spending allowance has quadrupled to \$20,000 per day! But this is small beer. Martelly has proved himself the equal of the Duvaliers when it comes to plundering the state coffers. His great innovation was the creation of a series of 'funds' that are not open to public scrutiny and which are administered by him, his family and his cronies.

To date, there are nine of these: In-

dustrial Development Fund; Public Investment Fund; Economic and Social Assistance Fund; Fund for the Management of the Collectivities; Road Maintenance Fund; Social Welfare and the Office for the Monetisation of Aid and Development Programs; the National Fund for Education; the Tourism Development Fund, and – perhaps the most cynical of all – the Inter-Haitian Solidarity Fund. And let us not forget his levy on money transfers and phone calls from the diaspora and the misappropriation of Petrocaribe funds. No wonder that he and his cronies are referred to as 'legal bandits' (after the title of one of Sweet Micky's albums).

The art of the simulacrum

The elections of 2015 resembled nothing more than a second-rate play performed by ham-actors, and played out before an empty theatre: political 'parties' that are nothing more than an acronym atop a piece of grubby paper; 'candidates' turning up to vote armed with assault rifles and their pockets bulging with bribe money; polling stations whose 'equipment' was less convincing than a low-budget stage-set; political touts disguised as election officials... As Haitian economist Gary Olius put it, months before the curtain went up on this farce: "In Haiti, we connive in pulling the wool over each other's eyes in everything that concerns politics, democracy and the fate of the people... The art of the simulacrum... is embedded in our culture."

And what of the stage-manager? The international community requires that elections in Haiti be 'credible', that is that they bear just enough resemblance to the 'real thing' for them not to be laughed off the stage by a hooting crowd pelting them with rotten fruit. Here at the Haiti Support Group we thought that the bar of 'credibility' had been driven as low as it could go in 2011. We were wrong.

The most nauseating aspect of this thoroughly depressing spectacle has been the open contempt of the international community for the Haitian people: "we wouldn't stand for it over here, but it's good enough for them!"

Washington has finally arrived at its goal: the corruption of virtually the whole of the Haitian political class and the discrediting of the democratic process to such a point that the electorate would rather stay at home than legitimise it with their presence at the polling stations. In this tacky, deserted theatre it matters not one jot to Washington which party is handed power: there is only one role left to play – to remain that of a "driving-belt"* for neoliberalism.

*Frédéric Thomas, 'Haïti: une nouvelle farce électorale?' www.cetri.be/IMG/pdf/haiti-farce-electorale.pdf