ELECTIONS, HAITI-STYLE

by Raymond Alcide Joseph

If all goes according to the latest plan, “free and honest” municipal elections will have been held in Haiti’s capital of Port-au-Prince on August 14, capping a three-phase process that began in the provinces six months ago. Can a quarter-century-old dictatorship hold “free” elections? What are the advantages of staggered balloting in a country the size of Maryland and with a mere five million inhabitants?

Plans for any type of election in a poverty-stricken, politically repressed island nation ruled by a “president-for-life” are subject to skepticism. Yet an analysis of the “elections” may indicate something of the mood of Haiti’s citizens and also reveal the nature of a regime that claims to be a “bulwark against communism” in the Caribbean and Central America.

On April 22, 1982, Jean-Claude (“Baby Doc”) Duvalier was commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Duvalierist rule and wishing his subjects many more years of the same, when he dropped a bombshell. “We will have free, honest, and democratic elections.” At the municipal level, he added quickly. There was no mention, however, of when these elections would be held.

Haiti watchers were intrigued by the idea—the first such municipal exercises since the late François (“Papa Doc”) Duvalier assumed power in a so-called election in 1947. The Port-au-Prince “White House” has named the mayors from that time on.

Nine months after the first hint of elections to come, Baby Doc again addressed the nation. In his “State of the Republic” message on January 2, the thirty-two-year-old chief returned to the theme of “free elections.” One week later the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas O. Enders arrived in Port-au-Prince for discussions with Haitian officials. A communiqué was issued on January 11 after two days of meetings. The U.S., Enders said, “welcomes the positive steps” taken by Haiti toward democratic rule—and among these he noted the upcoming municipal elections. By way of incentive to keep up the momentum, Enders went on, the U.S. expected to increase its annual aid to Haiti from the previously announced sum of $35 million to $45 million.

Two months later the government declared the elections, but with a twist: They would be staggered. “That way [the government] can better control the process,” says Gregoire Eugène, president of the Christian Social party and an exile in New York since November, 1980. “This method permits the authorities to show up in force at expected trouble spots and impose their will by the presence of sheer military might.”

Apparently the method worked well during the first phase of the elections, which took place in early April in three isolated and noncrucial departments: the Northwest, Artibonite, and Plateau Central. But things began to go awry for the government during the second round last May 15.

Various towns, especially in departments in the north and south, chose candidates whom some describe as “antigovernment” but at best can be called “independent.” It was the voting in the northern city of Cap-Haitien, second largest after Port-au-Prince, that gained the widest publicity. Here, the government’s official candidate obtained only 30 per cent of the vote; former Mayor Emmanuel Maisonneuve was dealt a humiliating defeat by Wilson Borgella, an obscure hotel keeper making his first venture into politics.

Cap-Haitien, some 160 miles north of Port-au-Prince, has been in a rebellious mood for some time. In 1979 it sent the only independent “député,” or legislator, to the rubber-stamp Haitian National Assembly; Alexandre Lerouge had captured 90 per cent of the vote, trouncing the strongest opponent the government could find. This past May, as in those “legislative elections” of 1979, the government marshaled its troops in Cap-Haitien in an attempt to intimidate the populace. This time, though, the government went a step further: The minister of defense and the interior, Roger Lafontant, set up temporary headquarters in the city and made his presence there quite visible. On the day before the election Lafontant went so far as to order the arrest of Mr. Lerouge, whose parliamentary office supposedly gives him immunity from arrest, and took him under guard to Port-au-Prince. Lafontant stated that the legislator’s presence in Cap-Haitien would have had a bad effect on the voting; candidate Borgella was quoted as saying that the president “didn’t want Lerouge to get involved in the elections here.”

The rebellious mood of Cap-Haitien was already a matter of record, but the pulse of citizens in other parts of the country had yet to be taken. What happened in Petit-Goave, only fifty miles west of Port-au-Prince, was equally distressing for the government. Its candidate, Mrs. Cameleau

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Loiseau, a former mayor, had been endorsed by Minister Lafontant, but Willy Jean-François, a popular teacher at the local lyceé, did not fear the encounter. When it became obvious to local officials that Jean-François was going to walk away with the election, he was arrested. Students then took to the streets chanting, “No, no, no, you won’t steal this election!” “Yes, yes, yes, free and honest elections!” To appease the angry students, the authorities freed Mr. Jean-François.

Minister Lafontant moved quickly to quash a budding scandal. He annulled the Petit-Goâve election “because of irregularities by government officials.” Two weeks later balloting took place in a calmer atmosphere and the independent candidate overwhelmingly defeated the government stand-in. Mr. Lafontant then went on to hail the elections as “significant progress of Haitian democracy.”

WHOSE VICTORY?
Some Haitian experts interpret even Wilson Borgella’s victory in Cap-Haitien as a victory of sorts for the government. They paint a scenario whereby the government secretly supported his candidacy as a way of showing the flowering of democracy, noting that Borgella made sure the government knew it had nothing to fear from him. And it is true that in his victory speech Borgella emphasized that he was “friendly with the government.” That did not get much of a response, but when he went on to say that “The first thing I am going to do is construct a home for the city’s old and poor… I will oppose corruption at all levels of government,” his followers cheered loudly.

Those who dismiss the election say it doesn’t matter who wins; after all, a Haitian mayor has no power. “What can Borgella do if the central government cuts off his funds?” asks Jean Dominique, Haiti’s foremost radio commentator, who now lives in exile in New York. “He can’t impose taxes and keep them. Whether the mayor of a Haitian city is named by the central government or elected by the people, he or she is a puppet of Port-au-Prince, which holds the purse strings.” Mr. Dominique, whose station, Radio Haiti, was smashed by government troops in November, 1980, asserts that the balloting as such “isn’t that important. What counts is the pre-election give-and-take. What the people say may have more effect than the rigging of the ballot box.” He concludes: “Whatever the result, there can’t be real democracy in Haiti without a discussion of the issues and without that democracy reaching the top.”

Gregoire Eugène, the exiled Christian Social party leader, who was also professor of constitutional law in Haiti, agrees that the mayor has no power in the Duvalierist system, although the Constitution provides for three categories of elective posts—president, legislator, and mayor/city councilmen—each independent from the other. In each municipality the mayor and the council have the right to impose taxes so as to carry out their duties, Mr. Eugène explains. “But in reality, the mayor is a third-rank functionary, who gets his pay and budget from the minister of the interior.”

Among those outside the country who have criticized the conduct of the elections are U.S. Representative Walter Fauntroy (Dem., D.C.), who sent observers to the May 15 Cap-Haitien polling. The municipal elections must be seen in a certain context, he said. “Democratic development in Haiti is severely retarded, and no serious opposition is possible at this time, because all such have been either physically eliminated, exiled, expelled, intimidated, or coopted.” The Cap-Haitien voting was “a very elementary point of departure… the first such positive step since the devastating repression of November 28, 1980.”

The government apparently learned a lesson in Cap-Haitien, though not the one democrats might have hoped for. To deter independent candidates, the Port-au-Prince elections are being rigidly controlled. Even before the Cap-Haitien exercises, the government had arrested several aides of Sylvio Claude, president of the Christian Democratic party of Haiti. From his hiding place in the country, Claude had expressed a desire to field candidates for municipal posts in Port-au-Prince, and among those of his partisans who were arrested were some potential candidates.

Representative Fauntroy, who heads the congressional Black Caucus Task Force on Haitian Refugees, issued a statement in which he said that “the arrests called into question the integrity of upcoming elections to be held in Port-au-Prince.” And more: “The arrests sent the Haitian nation a message that no one openly questioning national government policies will be allowed to participate in local elections. The message to the world is that the government of Haiti wishes to do business in the old way.”

Still, in Fauntroy’s view, even such timid moves toward democracy in Haiti should be encouraged: “Whether the municipal elections are indeed a beginning step on a path toward future steps, more meaningful democratization is unclear. But it should be encouraged by all concerned to see whether more meaningful activities can be structured.”

Considering Haiti’s current political structure, however, one can hardly expect any “meaningful activities” toward democratization. The government, having witnessed what can happen in relatively free democratic contests, has already taken steps to control the electoral process in the upcoming Port-au-Prince elections; the polling date itself has been changed twice. It is obviously not democratization with which Haitian officials are concerned but the need to please some “friends” in Washington, who must certify each year that Haiti has been making progress toward democracy and is thereby entitled to receive U.S. aid.

Official Washington seems to have taken the bait. As the latest State Department annual report on political repression noted: “Since the 1971 assumption of office by President Jean Claude Duvalier, Haiti’s human rights situation has gradually improved. Despite setbacks… the long-term trend is toward slow-improvement.” Next year, the municipal elections no doubt will be added to the list of political improvements the country has made. Comparisons might even be made between Haiti and such left-wing regimes in the region as Grenada and Nicaragua, which have failed to hold the elections that were promised.

In counseling the U.S. Government to be wary of so-called “improvements in Duvalierland,” Congressman Fauntroy is eloquent:

All those concerned with genuine democratic development should adopt a more critical attitude toward the electoral process being encouraged by the Reagan Administration and evaluate these processes to see if they contain not only the form of democracy but also the substance, which must include the freedom to organize and communicate free from intimidation.

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