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An election without voters

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Less than four months before the start of Haiti's elections, it is getting hard to conceal the signs of an impending fiasco. But Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council (known by its French acronym CEP) and the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti are trying anyway.

Faced with out-of-control violence and the impossibility of registering 4.5 million Haitians by Aug. 13 (60 days before the first election on Oct. 13), the two institutions keep issuing upbeat but unsubstantiated statements about the electoral process.

By the end of May, out of 436 planned registration offices, the Organization of American States admitted that only 14 had opened. (For Haiti's 2000 elections, the CEP opened more than 2,000 registration centers.)

By early June, less than 2 percent of eligible voters had registered, so the CEP and the U.N. escalated their public relations. Every few days,

one or the other would announce the opening of new voter registration centers and the registration of additional Haitian voters with numbers almost impossible to verify in the face of the skyrocketing violence in the country.

Desperate for change

As a tidal wave of kidnappings struck Haiti, leading to the evacuation of the Peace Corps and non-essential personnel from the U.S. Embassy, the U.N. enthusiastically reported that voter registration centers in Haiti had doubled. Several days later the CEP reported that the number of centers had quadrupled again. But by June 21, the registration rate was a still-insignificant 3.5 percent.

One might think that the average Haitian voter — too poor to make a kidnapping target and desperate for change — would be lining up to be fingerprinted and photographed in return for the right to vote. But he or she would need to get out of the neighborhood first. There are no registration centers in the poor neighborhoods and no plans to open any either.

Even getting out of the house can be a dangerous ordeal in the poor neighborhoods of the capitol, Port-au-Prince. Police and paramilitary groups, often backed by U.N. troops, routinely raid these areas, considered bastions of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, purposely killing or arresting suspected dissidents and killing or maiming bystanders as collateral damage. When the political violence subsides, gangs filling the void left by the police's conversion to a political force take over, imposing economic terror.

Meaningful participation in election activities is impossible. Aristide's Lavalas movement, which has won every fair election in Haiti's history by a landslide, refuses to join the elections unless the attacks against it stop. This includes freeing the hundreds of political prisoners in Haitian jails, from grassroots activists to Haiti's last constitutional prime minister, Yvon Neptune. It means ending the routine police practice of managing legal, nonviolent demonstrations by shooting at them.

Unable to control the country

The response of the countries that pushed Aristide out of Haiti to

exile in Africa 16 months ago is to hope for the best. They will support some tinkering — more guns for the Haitian police, a few more U.N. soldiers — but will not face up to the fact that Haiti's interim government is unable to control the country and unwilling to establish the conditions necessary for free and fair elections.

The U.S. government appears willing to accept a deeply flawed election with low turnout, no Lavalas participation and no effective campaigning. That will provide a window of opportunity for the opposition, which has managed to attract millions of U.S.-taxpayer dollars but few Haitian votes over the past decade. It will also allow the Bush Administration to say that its regime change strategy in Haiti bore fruit. The one thing it will not do, is to make life more free, democratic or in any way better for the millions of poor Haitians who have suffered for too long from too many undemocratic governments.

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