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Haiti Tries Elections, Again

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In February 2004, a group of armed rebels took control of the north and central parts of Haiti and moved toward the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, in an attempt to overthrow President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. After appealing to U.S. and French diplomats, Aristide realized he would not be protected. Before the rebels reached the city limits, he resigned and left the country on a plane provided by the Pentagon. Aristide claims he was kidnapped by the U.S. government and was the victim of a coup d'etat. Washington insists the choice to resign was Aristide's own and that they saved his life. Aristide is now living in exile in South Africa.

Immediately after Aristide left, U.S. Marines secured Port-au-Prince. In the weeks that followed, a U.N. mission (called MINUSTAH) arrived, and an interim Haitian government took power. Parts of Haiti then erupted into horrific violence that has left at least 900 people dead since last September.

MINUSTAH is now trying to secure the country in time for new presidential and legislative elections in November.

PORT-AU-PRINCE-It's a steamy Saturday morning outside a downtown voter registration bureau. There are more than 100 people waiting in line to register, but I'm having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me. I walk up and down the rows of people, asking in French and English while my translator does the same in Haitian Creole. I want to know why people are coming out to register. Almost no one will even look me in the eye.

I've gotten used to this. The day before, at a different registration site, a man threw water at me when I tried to interview his mother. He yelled at her not to answer my questions. She hiked up her orange skirt and-literally-ran away. It would be hard to find a better example of how deeply suspicious and afraid Haitians are-especially supporters of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide-as autumn's elections loom.

My first visit to Haiti was exactly 10 years ago, not too long after the Clinton administration returned Aristide to the presidency, expelling the regime that had ousted him in a military coup three years before. International aid money was flowing in. It was a time of hope and relative security in a country that has never had a surfeit of either.

Today, like Aristide, that security and hope is gone. In its place is a miasma of self-interested power-brokers, violent gangs, and a distrustful, victimized citizenry. No single center of power-not the United Nations, the interim government, nor any political or armed group-has filled the void left by Aristide's departure, and the result has been a year of violence where chaos has reigned and it isn't clear who is responsible for reining it in.

At times over the past 18 months, Port-au-Prince's poorest neighborhoods-places with upwardly mobile names like Bel Air and Cité Soleil-have seemed like killing fields. Thousands have been wounded and

displaced; hundreds have been killed. A wave of kidnappings terrorized Haitians to the point where parts of Port-au-Prince looked like a ghost town, even in broad daylight.

And while many blame Aristide's supporters for the continuing violence-his partisans insist he's still the president, and some have vowed to fight (clearly with his blessing) until he returns-at this point, the blame extends far beyond the former president's gangs. Anti-Aristide gangs, drug-traffickers, members of the defunct Haitian army, and corrupt elements of the Haitian National Police have all played major roles in the conflict. All benefit in some way from the chaos-and all could play a role in ruining the upcoming elections.

One afternoon, I went to a quiet spot in downtown Port-au-Prince and met with a few residents of Bel Air who'd fled the neighborhood because of the violence. Bélo Alise, a 37-year-old father of two, was now unemployed. In June, he'd watched his brother get shot by gang members during a confrontation with the police. So, in the weeks that followed, he and his wife packed up what little they had and began the walk out of Bel Air with their two children. Like any of the Haitian slums, Bel Air is just a series of city blocks that you don't want to get lost in, filled-and I mean filled-with lean-tos, shacks, and garbage. About 300,000 people live there in unimaginable poverty.

On their way out of the neighborhood, gang members stopped Alise's family. After a few tense moments, the gang members said that in order for the couple to leave with their things, they had to pay. They returned home. A few days later they left Bel Air-and most of their belongings-behind. A week later, when Alise returned to get more of their possessions, he found that their shack had been pillaged.

Claudette Milyas was even less lucky. Forty-two years old, with only a few teeth, she told me she'd left three of her four children in Bel Air because she couldn't afford to feed them. In February, her husband was apparently killed by the Haitian National Police during one of their raids into the neighborhood. "My husband wasn't involved in anything," she said. "You don't have to be involved in anything to be a victim. So many people have been shot and killed in Bel Air, and most of them aren't involved in anything."

Bel Air is an Aristide stronghold, and a number of the gangs there have connections to Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas political party. But both Alise and Milyas told me that they weren't sure which side the Bel Air gangs were on. Many were Aristide supporters, but others weren't. These days, the gang leaders seem more like warlords-terrorizing Bel Air for their own profit. Between the gangs and the unpredictable police, Alise and Milyas felt they were under siege from all sides.

In late June and early July, it finally occurred to the U.N. security force and the Haitian National Police that maybe they should do something before Haiti turned into another Somalia. Through a series of heavy-handed missions-including assassinations of pro-Aristide gang leaders and anti-Aristide ex-army officials-they began to regain control of Port-au-Prince. As security improved, the various agencies dealing with voter registration-which was well behind schedule-redoubled their efforts.

Back at the voter registration bureau, among the hordes of Haitians sweating in line, I finally find a woman who will talk to me. She tells me her first name-Anne Marie-and age-46-but won't say where she lives. I ask her why everyone seems so scared. She laughs nervously and starts to explain how there's been "repression in the streets." She repeats the phrase several times. The repression, she says, comes

both from rival gangs and the Haitian police. But now, with the United Nations cracking down, Anne Marie says she feels safer, and she wants to register.

Whether she'll actually vote is another issue. Anne Marie tells me that "all citizens should vote," but she also came to the registration site for another reason. The government has encouraged registration by linking it to a new national ID card—a big deal in a country where 40 percent of the population has no formal identification. As government ad campaigns have emphasized, the ID card will help people get a driver's license, open a bank account, and get birth certificates for their children.

But perhaps the biggest selling point is the fact that the ID will also help Haitians get a passport. Slim as the promise of that paperwork may be, given the prevailing poverty and the difficulty Haitians have gaining entry into other nations, for many, it's still their best hope for leaving the violence and poverty of Haiti behind.

Elections officials are optimistic that about 60 percent of Haiti's voting population of 4 million will register. They're hoping about two-thirds of those who register will actually vote.