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Haiti Votes: Bigger Challenge Remains Dominican Republic's Threat Of Ethnic "War"

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Haitians voted for a new president. With 54 candidates seeking the post a run-off seems inevitable. Whoever wins will face overwhelming challenges, none greater than the threat from the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola, to expel hundreds of thousands of ethnic Haitians

Haiti was an oppressive French slave colony, liberated in 1804 in a bloody, 13-year revolt inspired by the French Revolution. Slave-holding America was ambivalent toward Haiti's revolution and the two countries developed in very different directions. For instance, Haiti's liberator declared himself emperor and slaughtered many whites. "Liberated" peasants were forbidden from leaving plantations to revive the farming economy.

Haiti never developed into a stable, prosperous democracy. Rather, the country suffered through some 30 coups over the years and was occupied by the U.S. military for nearly two decades a century ago. More recently Haiti went through three decades of rule by father and son dictators, "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier, which ended only in 1986, followed by botched elections, military coups, violent conflict, populist politics, international sanctions, and a threatened U.S. invasion in 1994, followed by reinstatement as president of the violent demagogue Jean-Bertrand Aristide. (One of his former ministers, Maryse Narcisse, is on today's ballot.)

In January 2010 an earthquake devastated Haiti. Estimates of dead ranged widely, to more than 300,000. At least 1.5 million people were displaced. Haiti received almost \$10 billion in foreign aid in the following three years, but little long-term benefit is evident. The government is legendarily incompetent and corrupt. Today President Michael Martelly, a popular musician elected in 2011, rules virtually alone. He and the opposition were unable to agree to the composition of the Provisional Electoral Council, preventing scheduled parliamentary polls from taking place. At the moment Haiti has only 10 elected officials besides the president.

Secretary of State John Kerry dropped into Port-au-Prince earlier this month to urge "free and fair elections that take part without intimidation, without violence." So far Washington has contributed \$30 million toward the legislative and presidential polls.

Alas, the campaign was not smooth. The first round legislative vote in August, contested by 128 *parties*, suffered several violent incidents, closing some polling places and requiring a revote for 25 (of 139) seats. Later that month presidential candidate Michelet Nestor was assaulted while campaigning. At least 15 people were killed earlier this month in Port-au-Prince's infamous slum, Cite Soleil. Some residents blamed gang disputes over distribution of money handed out by candidates, a traditional corrupting practice.

Candidate disqualifications have led to controversy and party boycotts. In early October a member of the Provisional Electoral Council resigned, criticizing election planning. Jessica Hsu of the NGO Haiti Communiterre complained that residents were being treated as "pawns by politicians," as in past elections. At least the presidential vote went surprisingly well.

Haiti's economic problems are equally severe. The country should not be poor. The Caribbean is inviting, capital city is active, people are entrepreneurial, and successful live well. Residents of the Dominican Republic, who share Hispaniola Island, have left behind extreme poverty.

However, Haiti's hardship is evident when one arrives at the country's decrepit airport. The nation's per capita GDP ran \$846 last year, less than one-seventh that in the DR, making the former the poorest nation in the region. Six million out of 10.4 million Haitians live in poverty; more than 2.5 million suffer in extreme poverty. Despite recent GDP growth, Haiti's per capita GDP has fallen an average of .7 percent annually *since 1971*. Per capita electricity use is just two percent of that in neighboring DR. Haiti's human development index is the lowest in the region.

The economy is largely agricultural, with much subsistence farming. Mining and tourism, mostly tied to cruise ships, also are important. Manufacturing never has fully recovered from Clinton-era sanctions imposed to return Aristide to power. Haitians rely heavily of remittances from relatives overseas.

Even an honest and competent president will have a difficult time transforming Haiti. According to the "Economic Freedom of the World report," the openness of Haiti's economy, a key determinant of growth, has remained largely static since 2000. Opined the *Wall Street Journal's* Mary Anastasia O'Grady: "Haiti is a failed state, devoid of institutions, transparency and the rule of law."

The country does particularly poorly in protecting property rights and providing justice, which underlie a market economy. Intrusive labor regulations, trade barriers, restrictions on foreign investment, and impediments to starting a business are additional serious problems. The latest World Bank "Doing Business" survey found that it takes 97 days to legally start a new enterprise in Haiti, more than three times the Latin American average. Explained Douglas Clayton of Leopard Capital: "investors have to navigate lots of obsolete regulations and procedures to invest in Haiti." Three years ago the government opened the Caracol Industrial Park, expected to become the largest such facility in the Caribbean. Yet it sits unfinished, having attracted but a fraction of the intended number of firms and jobs.

Corruption is pervasive and limits development. The well-connected dominate many critical markets. While democracy nominally reigns, noted O'Grady: "The political class still uses its

power for personal aggrandizement, as the infamous dictators Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude did for almost 30 years.”

While Haiti at best ran in place, other countries moved forward. In 2000 Haiti ranked 58 of 123 countries, right in the middle, of the economic freedom index. In 2012, Haiti ranked 92 of 152, barely above the bottom third. (The only good news is that Haiti was edging upward.) By punishing entrepreneurship and investment, the government is allowing its people to fall further behind.

Candidates know the economy must be energized, but aren't sure how to do so. Some even talked of promoting import substitution—building domestic industries to preclude the need for imports. But that's an old leftwing panacea which was discredited decades ago as its Latin American practitioners fell further behind economically. Arbitrary attempts to foster domestic industry inevitably are manipulated by influential domestic interests.

A better approach would be to create a competitive, low regulation environment to encourage efficient enterprises, irrespective of whether they import or export. This export-led model worked brilliantly for the East Asian “tigers.” Remove economic barriers, which discourage business creation, domestic entrepreneurship, and foreign investment, and produce better goods for less. But this strategy requires delivering honest and efficient administration, convincing a newly elected legislature to reform economic controls, creating a safe and stable investment climate, and persuading foreign enterprises to conduct business in Haiti. Achieving these objectives would be difficult in the best of circumstances.

Unfortunately, the circumstances likely will not be good. For the past year the Dominican Republic has been threatening to expel nearly 300,000 ethnic Haitians who have lived in the DR, many for their entire lives. The consequences for as poor and divided a nation as Haiti could be catastrophic.

Relations between the two countries have been troubled since their beginnings. In 1822 Haiti gained control of the colony of Santo Domingo, which shared Hispaniola Island and had declared its independence from Spain. However, in 1844 Santo Domingo won its independence from Haiti and became the Dominican Republic, occupying almost two-thirds of the island.

In 1934 DR dictator Rafael Trujillo, of partial Haitian heritage, stoked nationalism by targeting Haitians. In pursuing a policy we now call ethnic cleansing his forces killed as many as 25,000 Haitians in the Parsley Massacre. Ethnic Haitians later were routinely deported, “tracking cycles of economic and political difficulties,” wrote Michele Wucker of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Indeed, she witnessed mass deportations in 1991, including of ethnic Haitians with official citizenship documents, triggered by the Haitian government's criticism of the DR's treatment of migrant labor. More recently ethnic Haitians have found themselves criticized as part of a Haitian “invasion” and targeted by violent attacks. Yet over the years Haitians continued to move to the DR in search of better economic opportunities, especially in DR's sugar industry.

The 1929 DR constitution, in effect until 2010, granted “birth right” citizenship, meaning anyone born in the DR, other than of a diplomat or someone “in transit,” interpreted as a short-term

tourist, was a citizen. However, after a surge of desperate economic migrants following the earthquake, the DR revised its constitution to restrict citizenship to children of “residents.” In 2013 the country’s top court reinterpreted the 1929 constitution, treating undocumented migrants who came for work as being “in transit,” leaving hundreds of thousands of ethnic Haitians stateless, stripped of the only nationality which they ever possessed. Already a vulnerable and oft-mistreated community, Haitians were left “in a precarious state, unable to reclaim their most basic rights, and denied nationality documents necessary for basic transactions, including registering children at birth, enrolling in school and university, participating in the formal economy, and traveling within the country without risk of deportation,” reported Human Rights Watch.

The government responded by pushing what became the Naturalization Law, to allow those affected to legalize their residency or citizenship. However, warned HRW: “the law has been riddled with design and implementation flaws that have thwarted the re-nationalization process, and which continue to prevent individuals from exercising their right to a nationality.” Indeed, the law reflects the wariness of many in the DR to welcome Haitians. Warned Wucker, “the scheme is riddled with problems rooted in a decades-long struggle over the legal status of Haitians born in the Dominican Republic.”

In practice, noted the Open Society’s Justice Initiative, “the new law’s recognition of citizenship is based not on the fact of birth itself on Dominican territory, but rather on whether a birth was officially registered at the time.” Many were not, which results in an enormous problem in documentation, which is poor on both sides of the border. As a result, many ethnic Haitians in the DR are unable to prove that their parents were in the country legally. HRW reported on the difficulties facing DR citizens of Haitian ethnicity in negotiating the “regularization” process and handling the problems arising from the lack of proper documentation.

Moreover, HRW criticized the DR government for violating human rights even as people attempted to comply with the new law: “military and immigration authorities have harassed, detained, and expelled individuals seeking to enter the civil registries through the registration process as well.” Indeed, in at least one case public officials entered the “registration office to try and deport people as they were handing in their applications.”

Private violence supplements government efforts. Reported Arian Terrill, a DR aid worker, many of those who “voluntarily” depart for Haiti “are actually leaving under harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence by the security forces and Dominican street gangs acting as plainclothes proxies.” These erratic expulsion efforts soon could become systematic. In June the deadline for registering to reacquire citizenship expired and the DR government began preparing for large-scale deportations. Although the authorities later extended the deadline, by September the government had denied almost 80,000 of 289,000 regularization applications.

Officially, only the undocumented are supposed to be targeted. However, police have engaged in indiscriminate round-ups of ethnic Haitians, even those born in the DR. While detainees usually are released when their nationality papers are produced, in June HRW’s Celso Perez observed that the authorities “had become increasingly bold” in deporting suspected Haitians. Explained HRW, “deportations protocols are practically nonexistent and people are targeted on the basis of appearance, with little or no verification of their identity and nationality.” Thousands of ethnic

Haitians have left or been forced to leave the DR. Hundreds of thousands more could be forced into Haiti, where most have never lived.

The DR knows it has an image problem and hired a PR company in the U.S. Of course, as an independent nation the DR is entitled to set naturalization policies. Sadly, Washington is in little position to criticize given America's immigration travails. However, retroactively changing the rules at great cost to those concerned—ethnic Haitians, Haiti, and potentially neighboring countries—raises important moral and practical issues.

The deportations have become a political issue in Haiti. A number of presidential candidates, including Jean Bony Alexandre, Jean Bertin, Michelet Nestor, and Eric Jean Baptiste, have noted the potential adverse impact of mass repatriation. However, as in talking about the economy, no one in government or the campaign has an answer.

In fact, there is little that Haiti can do. The government could better assist ethnic Haitians seeking documentary support to regularize their status in the DR. In fact, the new president should emphasize improving the documentation process for all Haitians.

Haiti is preparing to ban select DR imports, but that will hurt its own citizens as much if not more than people in the Dominican Republic. Haiti has no military option, which would not be justified anyway. Yet the Haitian government cannot afford to support tens or hundreds of thousands of new entrants in an economy which doesn't work and offers few opportunities.

Unsurprisingly, Haitians are appealing for assistance from their neighbors, the Organization of American States, and particularly the U.S. Nestor, for instance, predicted that if the DR forces many more ethnic Haitians into Haiti they will head for Florida: "they will not stay here but will become a big crisis for the U.S." He may be right.

The number of Haitian boat people seeking refuge in America surged in the late 1970s under the "Baby Doc" dictatorship, and continued through the Cuban Mariel boatlift into the following decade. The number rose again in the early 1990s. However, few were granted asylum; tens of thousands were repatriated to Haiti.

Washington surely wants to avoid a repeat performance. Wucker proposed that the U.S. suspend military assistance to the DR "until the country shows respect for international human rights norms. The aid can be used more effectively to support civilian agencies and organizations." In fact, there's no obvious reason to underwrite the DR anyway. But given nationalistic sensitivities, sustained, quiet diplomacy might be more effective than public pressure in persuading the DR to adopt an approach which meets humanitarian necessities while moderating domestic political pressures. America, which already is home to some 850,000 ethnic Haitians, also could accept more refugees with nowhere to go.

Haiti is one of the Caribbean's most sustained tragedies. The Haitian people deserve better political leadership, to be sure. Economic reform should top the new president's agenda. Whoever they elect also will have to work with the DR to address the threat of mass expulsions. Haiti and the Dominican Republic should cooperate for the benefit of all.

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