

Haitians are demanding democracy, but foreign interests prefer the status quo

Written by The Conversation USA

After months of faltering, Haiti's quest to find a successor to musician-turned-president [Michel Martelly](#) has ground to a halt, leaving an already desperately poor country struggling to find a way past a seemingly intractable stalemate.

After a first round of polling widely condemned for "[irregularities](#)", a second round run-off was scheduled to take place on January 24. The event had already been postponed from December 27 due to the fall-out from the first round, but then opposition candidate Jude Célestin refused to participate at all in an election he said was rigged in favour of Martelly's handpicked successor, [Jovenel Moïse](#).

Moïse is a highly controversial candidate. Nicknamed "Nèg Bannann" (Banana Man), he is a banana exporter with no political experience. He is [alleged](#) to have ordered the removal of up to 800 small farmers from the Trou-du-Nord zone in north-east Haiti and then used the land to build a private banana plantation with support from foreign investment.

After public protests against Martelly's perceived interference in the candidate selection process, the Provisional Electoral Council postponed the election just hours before ballots were due to open. Faced with only one official candidate, anti-government protesters are now calling for the current president's immediate departure.

But while Haitians themselves are demanding real democracy, foreign interests – led by the UN, the EU and the Organisation of American States – have played down voting irregularities and focused instead on the "[violence](#)" of the protests, calling not for better elections but for "[stability](#)".

Such foreign interests are a leading cause of Haiti's current political situation. They also explain why its anti-election protests are unlikely to gain meaningful international support.

Open for business

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Since the devastating [earthquake of January 2010](#), political elites, international businesses and NGOs have cemented an economic structure aligned to the priorities of overseas capital. Much of Haiti's economy is built on low-wage factory labour that provides goods for foreign markets, primarily the US. Gap, Levi's, Walmart, Old Navy and Fruit of the Loom are some of the major brands that benefit. The average daily wage of Haitian garment workers is [31 cents an hour](#).

Overseas investment in the island has been almost completely diverted from agriculture. [According to Oxfam](#), various IMF policies have been a boon to foreign capital; a forced cut to rice tariffs, for instance, meant US rice companies could export tons of cheap rice to Haiti, leaving this formerly self-sufficient nation dependent on foreign food handouts. In the island's formerly major rice-growing areas, malnutrition has become a serious issue.

In 2011, a presidential election took place with the support of foreign capital, despite the earthquake-ruined nation lacking the infrastructure to hold a full and fair vote. International observers played down claims of electoral fraud that apparently prevented Célestin, the protest candidate, from reaching the run-off.

The US and UN have been accused of helping to rig this election on Martelly's behalf. [WikiLeaks revelations](#) and subsequently released emails sent by then-US secretary of state, [Hillary Clinton](#), back up claims of foreign interference, showing the degree to which the US State Department [took an interest in the outcome of the 2010 election](#). Martelly ultimately won that contest with the backing of just 16.7% of registered voters, and ever since, business leaders have formed the core of his support base.

The perversity of this meddling is matched by the presence of the notorious Duvalier dictatorship's former henchmen in Martelly's inner circle. Martelly even campaigned on a promise to restore Haiti's brutal military. He reiterated this promise [as late as July 2015](#).

Stacked odds

So the outside world's latest calls for political "stability" ring hollow. And much of the

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international media is repeating the narrative without question, focusing on the perceived threat of anarchy rather than Haitians' right to democracy.

This is shameful. Alleged government interference in press freedoms and persecution of political opponents and human rights defenders leave Haitians with few meaningful alternatives to civil unrest. Organised protest is hampered further by a national literacy rate [as low as 60%](#), a lack of daily newspapers in Creole – the language of Haiti's poor – and limited internet access.

Much of the violence during anti-government protests reflects Haiti's unhappy relationship with UN peacekeepers, who have been a constant presence on the island since a [coup](#) in 2004 to oust populist president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Notoriously, they were the cause of the [devastating cholera epidemic](#) that followed the 2010 earthquake. Many Haitians view them as nothing less than an occupying force.

A provisional government now seems the most likely outcome of Haiti's political stalemate. But it remains to be seen whether Martelly will step down at the end of his five-year term on February 7 as required by the Haitian constitution. Like many of his presidential predecessors, he could seek to extend his mandate.

How long he could then hope to hold on to power will depend not on the preferences of the Haitian people, but on what risk his continued governance is deemed to pose to the nation's economic and political stability – and therefore, to international interests.

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