

With Friends Like These...

CARICOM and Haiti

Kevin Edmonds and Roger Annis

In a troubling abandonment of its moral high ground on matters of Haiti, the organization representing the governments of the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, has bought into the flawed national election to take place in Haiti on November 28. CARICOM will join with the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union as official observers.

The decision effectively sanctions an electoral process that has excluded 14 political parties from participating, including Haiti's largest, Fanmi Lavalas of exiled, former President Jean Bertrand Aristide. In addition, the current electoral conditions will not have the required facilities and voter registration in place to guarantee a fair and inclusive vote.

The council provided very poor reasoning for the exclusion of the 14 parties. Fanmi Lavalas was earlier banned from the two-round, partial senate election in April/June 2009. At that time, the reason cited was a technical one—the party was accused of failing to fill in its registration paperwork correctly, a charge its leaders hotly deny. Then in another incident in November 2009, Fanmi Lavalas was excluded for failing to submit an original party authorization for the April 2009 elections. The party's attorneys provided documentation refuting the banning pretext and arguing it was an arbitrary and last minute invention. Nonetheless, the decision was carried over into the upcoming November 28th elections.

The decision by CARICOM to participate in this deeply flawed election constitutes a significant reversal of the position it took in February 2004 when Haiti's elected president and government were overthrown by a paramilitary revolt with key backing from the U.S., Canada, France and the UN Security Council. At that time, CARICOM condemned the overthrow. It refused to recognize the appointed regime put in place by the foreign powers. It was the only inter-governmental organization to suspend Haiti's membership.

CARICOM said the overthrow in Haiti violated its fundamental adherence to democratic principles, including the right to self-determination of peoples and countries. On March 27, one month after the coup, CARICOM asserted that, "the restoration of democratic rule in the troubled nation is essential to its involvement in the regional community," and that, "no action should be taken to legitimise the rebel forces."

Haiti was only accepted back into CARICOM in 2006, following the election of President Rene Preval in February of that year.

The silence of CARICOM in regards to the recent scandals surrounding Haiti's current Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) which relate to its unconstitutional exclusions and its controversial makeup –is deeply troubling, and a step in the wrong direction for democracy and stability in the region. According to Brian Concannon of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), the constitutionality of the CEP, "is not an easy question. The 1987 constitution does allow for a provisional council. The problem is that the body has never moved beyond its provisional status. That's the fault not only of Preval today but also of the governments which preceded him."

Critics say the executive branch of Haiti's government has wielded great influence in the selection of the CEP, rather than the maximum

of fairness and autonomy from political influence that should prevail. Preval himself is quietly favoring one of the candidates to be his successor--no less than his son in law, Jude Celestin.

The exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas and other candidates has led to a widespread lack of credibility for the election as well as calls for a boycott from the Haitian populace, including leaders of Fanmi Lavalas.

When asked about this exclusion, CARICOM Assistant Secretary Colin Granderson held firm, reiterating the official position of CARICOM that, "The Haitian electorate is benefiting, more parties are engaging, and the boycotting front is crumbling."

What CARICOM does not take into account is the effect that an election considered widely illegitimate would have on the social and political fabric of Haiti – a nation already ravaged by the earthquake, cholera and tropical storms. As 45 members of the U.S. Congress put it in an open letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last month, "Haiti's next government will be called upon to make difficult decisions in the reconstruction process that will have a lasting impact on Haitian society, such as land reform and allocation of reconstruction projects among urban and rural areas. Conferring these decisions on a government perceived as illegitimate is a recipe for disaster."

In April of this year, former Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson stated, "A strong CARICOM needs a strong Haiti." However, the recent action of CARICOM is undermining the possibilities for Haiti to rebuild itself back as a stronger and more democratic state.

For any election to be successful, it must be fully inclusive and transparent. Haitian attorney and human rights lawyer Mario Joseph

recently told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in a wide-ranging interview that the necessary pre-conditions for this do not exist. According to Joseph, the country's first priority is to have a strong program of national reconstruction in place, in which the people have confidence and are fully participant. Then it needs an accurate voter list, easily obtainable voter registration, and polling stations with easy access for the population.

Joseph says the international community should help build effective government institutions, not press for the election of a new president in conditions where Haiti's judicial and legislative branches are weak or barely functional. "If you don't have the judiciary branch to apply the law, if you don't have the legislative branch to control the government, why are we talking about elections?" he says.

How can CARICOM and the people of the Caribbean remain silent about the absence of democratic guarantees in this election? Haiti's history is intimately intertwined with the history of the rest of the Caribbean. To abandon Haiti now is to abandon the ideals of justice and democracy that CARICOM is supposed to stand for.

CARICOM has taken the moral high road on matters of Haiti alone before, which makes this recent aligning of the organization with the traditional antagonists of the island all the more disappointing. Supporting the unfair and exclusionary elections in Haiti will only benefit the same members of the international community who have largely been responsible for deepening and profiting off of Haiti's tragedy. Haiti needs CARICOM now more than ever in order to ensure these illegitimate elections do not undermine the demands for self determination voiced by the Haitian people in the rebuilding of their nation. Unfortunately, CARICOM is intent on underwriting the upcoming elections which will no doubt lock the Haitian people into a deeper state of desperation – adding political fuel to the already devastating humanitarian disaster.

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