

Bootstrap Politics: Elections and Haiti's New Public Officials

Robert Maguire

Between June and September 1995, municipal and parliamentary elections held in Haiti swept out incumbents and brought to public office a new generation of political leaders. Typical of the electoral sweep is the 83-member national Chamber of Deputies, where only three incumbents were re-elected.

With few exceptions, Haiti's newly-elected public officials are unknowns to the world outside their communities. But within these communities, they are noted civic activists and community leaders. Many have gained local prominence serving in the ranks of non-governmental organizations. Thus, while most may be new to elected public office, they are not new to positions of responsibility and leadership. This essay examines the results of Haiti's 1995 municipal and legislative elections as a consequence of ongoing efforts to reverse historically exploitative

relationships between the Haitian state and its citizenry. As such, it traces the evolution of many of these new political leaders, their mandate for change and their promise as guiding forces for a democratic future in Haiti. It also suggests that trends evident in the elections provide hope for the emergence of political institutions throughout Haiti that are accountable to the citizenry and truly represent their political, economic, and social aspirations.

Unheralded Instincts

As a tropical storm lashed the country one Sunday morning in November 1994, several dozen members of a local peasant movement convened a long-delayed meeting with the representative of an international organization near the town of Milot. The movement had initially planned the meeting for late 1991. But violence, repression, and intimidation following the military coup of September 1991 had forced its delay until

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international forces intervened to oust the dictatorship led by Raoul Cedras. As the number grew of those quite ordinary-looking Haitian men and women who had braved the hour, the rain, and the mud to participate in the meeting, the venue changed from a home to a nearby cinderblock building that also served as a church and a school.

Quickly, the discussion turned to politics. The visitor asked those in attendance if they would participate in the following elections, then planned for January 1995. The response was a unanimous yes. Would they return to office their Deputy, who ran as a member of the same political party that sponsored Jean-Bertrand Aristide's presidential candidacy in 1990? the visitor asked. No, was the instantaneous reply. After we elected him, one man added, we never saw him again. He went to Port-au-Prince and never did anything for us. Who would they vote for, then? asked their guest. It is too soon to know, one person replied, because there are no serious candidates yet.

A year later, one of the organizers of that meeting is the newly-elected Mayor of Milot. Other participants in the meeting and members of the peasant movement have been elected to the mayoral council of Milot and to the three Community Section Administrative Councils (KASEKS) that are responsible for local government in this commune of approximately 70,000 inhabitants. Fresh into office, the new Mayor has already initiated a regional mayors' assembly to coordinate policy and programs and to facilitate citizen feedback. The incumbent deputy was not re-elected. His seat has been filled by a Lavalas affiliate.

As we will see, the rise to public office of Milot's new leaders had been seeded even before the founding of the area's community organizations a decade earlier, and was replicated throughout the country.

Confronting Powerlessness and Inferiority

Since Haiti's independence in 1804, a masterfully insidious state-sanctioned system of predation has led its victims to believe they are powerless, inferior, and worse, somehow completely to blame for their own condition. Lawrence Harrison, among others, has characterized the behavior of predation's victims as signaling cultural inferiority or fatalism.

Haiti's poor and powerless, however, cannot be solely blamed for their condition. Rather, their persistent poverty must be viewed as a result of the historical relations between the nation and the state. Trouillot has argued this effectively in his book, "Haiti: State Against Nation" (1990):

The peasantry never directly confronted the system's ultimate beneficiaries – the top state officeholders and, above all, the merchant bourgeoisie. Hence, even though the peasants might have wondered about the causes of their poverty, they knew few individuals on whom to place the blame. Indeed, they were more likely to accuse a fellow villager of worsening their lives than an exporter or an official they have never met. (p. 86)

By the 1980s, Haiti's rural producers and entrepreneurs had become more adept at identifying external causes of their poverty. At the root of this skill was their exposure, first, to analyses that helped them understand the structure of the political economy, and then, to programs encouraging them to do something to address the problems through both self-help programs and mobilization. Much of this achievement came about through the work of groups affiliated with, or sponsored by, the Catholic church. Many of today's new public officials participated either in these programs or the community organizations the programs engendered.

The church-linked initiatives were encouraged by regional bishops' meetings in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, and in Puebla, México, in 1979, which mandated the church's active involvement in addressing the social and economic needs of the poor. In Haiti, church leaders – particularly the growing numbers of native-born clergy and religious lay leaders of modest backgrounds – developed the premise that social, economic, and political change could come from the bottom up. They also came to believe that community-based agents of change, or *animatè*, could catalyze local grassroots development groups as structures for community mobilization and action.

By 1991 the merit of this hypothesis had been borne out. Hundreds of *animatè* had developed such a track record of successful community mobilization that Haiti gained a reputation as one of only a handful of nations, worldwide, where "evidence of grassroots groups' increasing political importance is available." (from Durning, Foreign Policy, 1989). By 1991, conservative estimates put the number of Haitians belonging to or affiliated with these grassroots groups at two million, out of a total population of seven million.

The path toward this achievement was fraught with obstacles. The critical factor was psychological: instilling in themselves and in those with whom they associated a sense that "they are somebody." In a society in which the state conditioned the poor from

1995 Election Results in the Haitian Parliament

Chamber of Deputies

<i>Political Affiliation</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Total</i>
Lavalas / OPL	5	4	2	1	9	2	1	-	4	28
Lavalas / PLB	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
Lavalas / MOP	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Lavalas / KOREGA	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	3
Lavalas	2	4	2	4	1	7	3	4	3	30
Independent	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	5
Other	-	-	1	3	2	-	1	1	-	8
Open Seats	1	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	4
Total:	13	10	7	11	12	10	6	6	8	83

Senate *

<i>Political Affiliation</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Total</i>
Lavalas / OPL	-	2	1	1	2	1	-	2	1	10
Lavalas / PLB	-	-	1	-	-	1	2	-	-	4
Lavalas / MOP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lavalas / KOREGA	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Lavalas	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
Independent	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Open Seats	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total:	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	18

* In 1990, nine members of the Haitian Senate were elected to six-year terms from 1991-1997. Their political affiliations (at the time of the election) were: FNCD (5); MIDH/PANPRA/MDN-28 Alliance (3); Independent (1). The current political affiliations of these senators, if changed, are not known at this time.

Key to Geographic Departments:

1. West	4. Grand Anse	7. Northeast
2. South	5. Artibonite	8. Northwest
3. Southeast	6. North	9. Central

birth to think of themselves as non-entities, this shift in outlook proved elusive, at first.

Those who composed the overwhelming majority of the country's population, the peasants, had become the *moun andeyò* – the people on the outside – since the early nineteenth century. The elites of the cities and town reinforced this exclusion by ensuring that peasants were locked out of any meaningful participation in political process.

Prior to their involvement in consciousness-raising programs, most *moun andeyò*, in their contact beyond their intimate world, literally kept their heads bowed, feigning docility, hiding their thoughts and altering their comportment to avoid conflict with those who held power. In this context, getting people to sit together, to share problems and common experiences, to persuade them that they could, through their own concerted actions, effect change in their lives, was an almost overwhelming task.

Another impediment was the extremely hostile official environment. It was essential that those who sought to keep the population powerless keep that population ignorant, off-balance and disorganized. Peasant groups that organized to understand and improve their social and economic status were viewed as impertinent, at best. It was no surprise, then, that those in power undermined and sabotaged civic associations, their leaders, and their activities through extortion, intimidation, physical abuse and imprisonment.

In response, Haiti's incipient reformers fell back on *mawonaj*, a strategy from the country's past and evocative of runaway slaves that boils down to "resistance through elusiveness." When threatened, leaders and groups blended into the woodwork until it was safe to re-emerge. This practice would serve them well, not just during their early days of organization, but in the future. Using *mawonaj*, Haiti's evolving grassroots movement survived Duvalier and the rapacious military regimes led by Henri Namphy, Prosper Avril and, finally, Raoul Cedras and his cohorts.

Removing the Muzzle

It was only when Jean-Claude Duvalier left Haiti and the muzzle came off (*babouket-la tonbe*) that those now surfacing as Haiti's new political leaders first became visible beyond their organizations. With the predatory state demonstrating some weakness in maintaining the control, established grassroots groups quickly abandoned *mawonaj* and surged forward, raising their voices and extending programs designed to confront and resolve fundamental problems that

kept them poor, isolated, and locked out of the political process. Membership in existing groups flourished, and hundreds of new community associations formed throughout the country, adding their voices to the post-Duvalier call for fundamental social, economic, and political reform.

Haiti's organized grassroots surged forward on two fronts: programs aimed at improving social and economic status, and efforts to improve political standing. A good example of the first were the small farmer association initiatives in grain storage and marketing (*estokaj*), which attempted to improve producer and community food security and increase revenue through greater small farmer control beyond the farm gate. In the immediate post-Duvalier years, the second was characterized by widespread participation in education and training initiatives such as the Catholic church's short-lived national literacy program *Misyon Alfa*, and by grassroots mobilization to vote in the, Constitutional Referendum of 1987.

Leading the surge were new-generation community-based civic leaders, including the *animatè*, whose experience, community stature and analytical sophistication continued to grow. These individuals performed key roles in helping community groups harness resources for local development projects. They served as intermediaries between grassroots groups and both city-based non-governmental organizations and international donors in the presentation and negotiation of proposals for projects funding. *Animatè* also led literacy programs and organized sessions to study the Constitution. Some activists moved beyond their community to become involved with regional and national non-governmental organizations and projects.

In the immediate aftermath of Duvalier's fall, Haiti's grassroots leaders endeavored to effect political change as outsiders. With their ingrained distrust of the state, in a time when the future of democratic process was far from certain, they spurned political posts and avoided direct involvement in what passed for political parties in post-Duvalier Haiti.

Although the muzzle had fallen in 1986, in succeeding years the struggle persisted between those seeking substantive reform and those who accepted only cosmetic change or pressed for a return to previous conditions. Neo-Duvalierist forces targeted activists, particularly leaders of the community-based organizations. During successive post-Duvalier periods of military rule, grassroots leaders – and organization members – faced intimidation and violence that was often much harsher than experienced before, before they had become visible.

As Haitian and international human rights monitors have documented, such crackdowns grew especially harsh following the September 1991 coup. Military and paramilitary violence was directed as much against the leaders of community-based organizations as it was against reformist elected officials. As a result, civic activists and groups were forced underground, their voices apparently silenced. It appeared that the recidivists leading and supporting the coup had succeeded in refitting the muzzle, causing groups to disintegrate, driving their leaders into hiding, and more broadly, reinstating predation at will.

Events since late 1994, such as those in Milot, show that Haiti's grassroots organizations and its new generation of civic leaders survived the years of military rule. Although their ranks were certainly thinned in those difficult years, activists and civic associations thought to be destroyed resurfaced as international forces began to secure lawful environment. And as they re-emerged, they told how they had survived the darkest hours of the coup.

Their stories bespeak vast determination and resourcefulness. They reveal that community organizations continued to meet without their leaders, who had fled, re-enacting strategies of *mawonaj* to keep themselves active. The stories tell of community leaders going into hiding in Port-au-Prince, organizing ad hoc leadership associations among themselves to maintain morale and continue their analyses and education. Finally, the stories demonstrate that many have learned that, in order to ensure that the reforms they seek are enacted and sustained, they must engage the political system, directly.

Lessons learned

Ultimately, the bottom-up political mobilization of the 1980s played a key role in getting representative voice elected to the office of the President in December 1990. However, most eyes then were on the ultimate prize of Haitian politics: the Presidency. Though parliamentary and municipal posts were also at stake, voter enthusiasm for them was low. In run-off elections held five weeks after Aristide's victory, voter turnout fell to less than half of that for the presidential election. The keen attention on the presidential race and the relative disregard paid to other races had consequences that, immediately obvious after the elections, reverberated during the coup, and even influenced the elections of 1995.

In preparing for the 1990 elections, few of Haiti's new-generation community-based leaders served as

political party activists, and few ran as candidates. While most threw their support behind the late-blooming presidential candidacy of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, they tended otherwise to remain outsiders, removed from political parties, including the party that embraced Aristide. (Even had the supporters themselves considered running, Aristide's late entry into the race rendered improbable their own even later candidacies.) With their almost exclusive focus on the presidency, grassroots leaders and voters betrayed their nascent understanding of parliamentary government as reorganized under the Constitution of 1987. They misread the vital importance of the parliamentary and municipal races.

Since the nineteenth century, Haiti's candidates for elective office had come from the urban-based elites who organized limited-constituency political parties. Frequently, the candidates for rural districts sent by the urban-based parties happened to own land in the districts, but lived in the city. Given restrictive gender and property-ownership covenants, registered voters were also an elite and restricted group. Indeed, in the 1880s, Port-au-Prince had fewer than 1,000 qualified voters. Seats in Haiti's Senate could be won with as few as 100 votes. Universal suffrage came in the second half of the twentieth century, but did not determine electoral results.

By the 1990 election, universal suffrage of those eighteen and older, guaranteed in the 1987 Constitution, had broadened the electorate considerably. However, despite some attempts to appeal to a wider constituency, political parties remained exclusive, urban-based entities intent on brokering elections. Their candidates were, at worst, absentees sent from the city; or, at best, locally based *citadin* (urban elites) determined to exclude the lowly peasant from political participation. Regardless of origin, these candidates represented the interests of Haiti's tiny *classe politique*, which had conducted state business for generations, alienating themselves from the voters and the nation's new political activists. The failure of established political parties to engage the peasantry in the post-Duvalier period made them all the more suspect among activists and rank-and-file.

Given the political establishment track record, it is no surprise that voter enthusiasm in 1990 for most political insiders – parties and candidates who mirrored their nineteenth century counterparts – was low. This sentiment, combined with Aristide's late entry in the race and the resulting disproportionate focus by most voters on the presidency, led to a major irony: traditional candidates of traditional parties won

the majority share of parliamentary and municipal seats in the 1990 elections.

Inexperienced but comprising a reassuring majority of the population, Aristide's supporters had felt little need to worry who held Parliament. They hardly suspected the difficulties facing a President opposing an old-guard legislature that had every intention of conducting politics as usual, opposed to anything more than cosmetic change. Strained relations between the Executive and Legislative branches predictably worsened into acrimony and open conflict. The deadlock not only blocked Aristide's reform efforts, it fed the anti-Aristide sentiment building among the military and its supporters, considerably lengthening Aristide's post-coup exile.

For Aristide's supporters and all grassroots activists, this chain of events brought home an important lesson: each office is a prize of some importance, be it the Presidency, a Parliament seat, mayoralty, or village councillorship. The results of the June to September elections indicate that this lesson has been taken to heart.

Election Results and Political Affiliation

Haiti's 1995 municipal and legislative elections involved all offices except the Presidency and one-third of Senate seats. The precise number of contested positions was 2,192: eighteen in the Senate; eighty-three in the Chamber of Deputies; 399 on Haiti's 133 three-member municipal mayoral councils; 1,692 on the country's 564 three-member rural KASEKS.

Throughout Haiti, Lavalas affiliates swept elections, including those for the national Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. In the Chamber of Deputies, Lavalas affiliates won sixty-six of seventy-nine races decided; in the Senate, they won seventeen of eighteen open positions.

Given both President Aristide's tremendous popularity in Haiti and the post-coup election context, the Lavalas sweep should have come as no surprise. The far-from-perfect electoral process bringing Haiti's new public officials to office has been justifiably criticized. "Free, fair and flawed," is the summary judgment of one observer. But had the electoral process been without flaws, the results would no doubt have been the same.

Most Haitians welcomed the overwhelming Lavalas victory as another significant step in the country's move away from an authoritarian past. But for some, particularly the detractors of the Aristide government, the Lavalas sweep represented – or was

represented as – the creation of a dangerous one-party state.

Analysis based on historical precedent and contemporary fieldwork, including interviews with civic association activists, newly-elected public officials, and grassroots voters, suggests this fear is overstated. More accurate is the representation of Haiti today as largely a one-purpose state, that purpose being to move from a debilitating past. Affiliation with Lavalas as a vehicle of change, in the view of many grassroots leaders, is a means of achieving progress along those lines.

It is beyond dispute that the vast majority of Haiti's newly elected political leaders affiliate with Lavalas as a political movement. Throughout Haiti's history, however, affiliation with a political movement has not necessarily meant membership in a political party. Findings based on recent fieldwork suggest the same may be true today. Many of the new public officials distinguish between affiliation with Lavalas and membership in Lavalas. Several deputies and Mayor elected under the Lavalas banner, for example, quite clearly state in interviews that they do not consider themselves members of a Lavalas political party. Rather, as candidate seeking fundamental social, economic and political reform, they had run for office under the Lavalas umbrella in order to achieve those ends. In their view, citizens voted for them, not for their political affiliation, but for their track record in their communities. The new officials stress that their primary responsibility lie with their constituencies, rather than with the political party of Lavalas.

Further, Lavalas itself appears to be an aggregate of multiple groups. *Plateforme Politique Lavalas* – PPL – entered the elections as a coalition of three political organization: *Movement d'Organisation du Pays* (MOP), *Organisation Politique Lavalas* (OPL) and *Pati Louvri Baryè* (PLB – The Open Gate Party.) MOP and PLB are based, respectively, in the West and the North/Northeast. The OPL exists nationwide. The PPL emerged from the elections as a coalition of five political groups, adding the regionally-based Lavalas/KOREGA (*kòdinasyon Rejyonal Gran Anse*) and *Pouvwa Rassambleman Organizasyon Popilè* (PROP – the Popular Organizations' Power Movement), founded in April 1995 and apparently best organized in rural strongholds of the Artibonite and the Northwest.

This diversity within Lavalas further suggests that the country is not evolving in the direction of a monolithic one-party state. Rather, such diversity suggests broad-based political parties may yet emerge

from the political amalgam of Lavalas affiliates. The one-party notion is much too simplistic in Haiti's new political context; it ignores the increasing sophisticated political instincts of the country's ordinary citizens.

From Outsiders to Insiders

The shift by many grassroots leaders and activists from eschewing active political participation to direct involvement, first as candidates for municipal and national posts, and now as public officials, is a fundamental change in the nature of political participation in Haiti. Those visible as today's elected public officials have evolved from non-governmental activists, trying to effect change from the outside, to hands-on players working for change from the inside.

This trend has broadened to include appointed positions. Since Aristide's restoration in October, 1994, many political posts have gone to individuals affiliated with – or at least openly sympathetic towards – grassroots movements and their aims. These appointed officials are willing to work closely with both those organizations and the newly-elected national and municipal officials who have risen from their ranks. One way or the other, it now appears that the *moun andeyò* are increasingly engaging, and guiding, Haiti's nascent democratic political process.

For many community leaders and activists, the shift to engage directly what most had previously abhorred did not come easily. Field research in the immediate aftermath of the United Nations' intervention and the restoration of the Aristide government indicated that many community-based activists remained preoccupied with issues of personal and institutional security. To resuscitate community-based organizations and their economic projects, to restore devastated community environment – in the minds of the new leaders, these were the top priorities. In November 1994, one grassroots leader, now a newly-elected Deputy in the Haitian Parliament, stated "We have to strengthen our economic position to be ready to withstand a return to *mawonaj* if that is necessary"

It was only when *animatè* and other civic activists returned to their homes and positions of leadership and became persuaded that issues of personal security could, for the moment, be set aside, that many confronted their alternatives. Grassroots groups, with one eye on political reality, encouraged their leaders to seek elective office. The best way to guard against a return of the abusers of the past (*makout*), they saw, was to secure political office for their peers.

Experienced community leaders and activists throughout Haiti came forth by June 1995 as candidates for village administrative councils, municipal mayoral teams, and the Parliament. In some constituencies, they formed tickets (*cartels*) with other grassroots activists. Most affiliated with the Lavalas Political Platform; some ran as independents, although registration fees for independent candidates cost as much as ten times that of candidates running under political party banners.

As candidates from and of the *moun andeyò*, Haiti's political newcomers viewed their rural roots as a distinct advantage in the country's changing socio-political configuration. Today, a significant majority of registered voters are also *moun andeyò*. As the election results attest, the voices of these previously disenfranchised voters were heard loudest.

As the new, non-traditional candidates of Haitian politics campaigned among their neighbors, they emphasized the importance of local control over resources, government-to-citizen accountability, and the need for Port-au-Prince to respond to, and invest in, the needs of the countryside. Candidates for national office emphasized the importance of remaining in touch with their constituency, through frequent return visits, by opening offices in their districts, by developing local mechanisms for citizen dialogue. The attitude embodied in these ideas presents a spectacular break from their political predecessors.

The challenge facing this new generation of political leaders is to sustain the break from the predatory politics of the past and to make good on their promises for state accountability, political devotion and economic decentralization. As they begin to work, their neighbors back home – those who voted them into office – will be watching them, one suspects, very closely.

Rough Around the Edges but Reading from the Same Book

U.S. policy makers might well reflect on certain parallels between contemporary Haiti and the post-Revolution United States.

In 1789, the first post-Constitution United States Congress was comprised of many political neophytes. While some were the familiar faces of maturing revolutionary leaders seeking national unity and a strong federal government, others were the faces of more radically attuned, younger individuals, sent to Congress from communities seeking a strongly centralized government and a clean sweep of any vestiges of authoritarianism. Although the institutions

itself and many of its members were rough around the edges, the representatives shared a common goal: to create a system of governance that would put the rest rule by largely absentee, autocratic elites in favor of government “of the people, for the people, by the people.”

This Congress was not made up of political parties. Indeed, it took a decade for parties to emerge. This Congress did not accord Royalists a special place in the opposition. This Congress was made up of an amalgam of Americans, all reading from the same book, even if they read from different pages.

In many respects, Haiti’s current parliament resembles the first United States Congress. Its members are largely new to formal office. Most are very young. They seek to put an end to rule by an autocratic, largely absentee elite. Through universal suffrage they have been elected to enact government accountable to its citizens. Beyond doubt, they are rough around the edges.

Likewise, this Haitian Congress is not composed of political parties. Rather, it is an amalgam of individuals with similar political philosophies, reading from the same book, seeking reforms revolutionary to their society. In the day-to-day challenges of leadership and politics, they will likely find that from that book, different minds will stress different passages.

These political neophytes face challenges that would intimidate lesser men and women. They are under extraordinary pressure to hone their new skills while grappling with all the complicated issues related to rebuilding a new country, practically from scratch. A major challenge will be their ability to be effective representatives of their constituents’ interests even if those interests go against the country’s political mainstream. They will make mistakes; the road will be bumpy.

As they endeavor to pull themselves and their country up by their bootstraps, they will sometimes require assistance. They will need space, and patience. They will be challenged by their constituents. They must maintain a firm grasp on the book from which they read, lest it be stripped from their hands.

It is the considerable challenge of those standing outside this reality to try to place it in its historical context, as Haiti’s newly-elected public officials carry on the work of rebuilding the nation.

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