



[USIPeace Briefing](#)

Haiti's New Government Faces Historic Dilemmas

By [Robert Perito](#)

May 2006

Two years after Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster by armed revolt, Haiti appears ready to turn a page in its turbulent political history. Earlier this month, the Haitian people successfully completed parliamentary elections with minimal violence or fanfare, two months after choosing their new president, René Préval. Once in office, Haiti's new leadership will face grave political challenges in governing a country that has been traumatized by chronic violence and instability.

The nature of these challenges was discussed at a meeting of USIP's [Haiti Working Group](#) on April 25, 2006. Principal speakers included Robert Fatton, Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia; Francois Pierre-Louis, Professor of Political Science at Queens College, CUNY; and Hyppolite Pierre, founder of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences and Politics. Robert Perito, senior program officer for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations, moderated the discussion.

Haiti's Colonial Legacy Weighs on its Future

The political challenges facing Haiti today are rooted in the nation's early history. French colonialism left an authoritarian tradition entrenched in an agricultural economy.

After winning independence in 1804, Haiti's new elite faced a cruel choice: restoring the economy by re-instating the sugar plantation system or protecting emancipation by allowing small, inefficient land holdings. The Haitian people resisted a return to coerced labor, calling instead for economic independence and equitable land distribution. Their defiance compelled the new government to enforce a military-like discipline that over time led to a persistent pattern of authoritarianism.

Despite ending slavery, the Haitian revolution created a tradition of imperious leadership and a hierarchical social structure based on stark class and racial divides. Haiti's serial constitutions enshrined the tradition of a single, all-powerful leader who monopolized power. Tensions within the society, however, resulted in a history of violent change in national leadership. Only two of Haiti's 44 presidents experienced a peaceful transition of authority. Further complicating the situation was the general hostility of other nations, including the United States, to the world's first independent "black" republic. Today, Haiti is still troubled by social divisions and has yet to find a comfortable place in regional organizations and the community of nations.

The New Government's First Challenge is Building a Coalition

As it charts the way forward, the new Haitian government faces a number of political challenges. The most immediate is building a coalition government with a parliament in which no single party enjoys a majority. In the April 21, 2006 elections, President-elect Préval's Lespwa party won 12 out of 30 seats in the Senate



The [first meeting of the Haiti Working Group](#) on February 22 addressed questions of how Haitians can find sustainable solutions to its myriad problems.

and 21 of 97 seats in the lower house. The absence of a clear majority will require a critical negotiating process to select a prime minister and establish a coalition government. This poses serious concerns, as Haiti's contentious political culture lacks a tradition of compromise and coalition building.

The process of forming a coalition government will be further complicated by the fact that Haiti's political parties are weak, small, and disjointed. Many exist for the sole purpose of providing a platform for an individual or a narrow special interest. Historically, Haitian politics has been characterized by a struggle for power and wealth between parties on the extreme left and right with neither side demonstrating a commitment to effecting positive change for Haiti. According to one panelist, parties on the right have suffered from endemic corruption, typically "buying" political support to maintain their hold on power. Parties on the left, meanwhile, have a record of using populist rhetoric to obtain political support, but abandoning the public interest when enticed by wealth and power. Control of the state has amounted to a zero-sum game between these competing forces with little benefit reaching the Haitian people.

Democratic Transformation Requires Openness

To address these challenges, participants in the workshop felt the new Haitian government should focus on re-establishing the authority of the central government by strengthening its democratic institutions. To help balance the overwhelming importance of the executive, President Préval should provide resources, technical assistance and training to the parliament, particularly since the institution will need physical refurbishing and many of its new members will be entering public service for the first time. The new president should also seek to reinforce the role of political parties and to cultivate a culture of compromise by fostering an open debate on the future of the country. This will require a formal political dialogue conducted through the media and in institutional channels without resorting to violence. President Préval will need to frankly address the major issues facing Haiti, including poverty, drug trafficking, corruption, the role of former soldiers, and the problem of urban gangs. In doing all of this, Préval should ensure that his actions as president are as transparent as possible.

Second, the new government should harness Haitian civil society and encourage it to fill the gaps in government capacity. Over the course of the last two decades, almost all civic associations--community, peasant, youth and business organizations--have been adversely affected. Winning back the confidence and vitality of civil society is critical to Haiti's political future. Decentralizing the responsibilities of the central government to localities will also help to shift the burden from the executive branch and locate authority and resources closer to the people.

Third, the Haitian Diaspora represents a 'ready reserve' of needed skills and financial resources that have not been fully tapped. While other diasporas have organized potent lobbying forces in Washington, the mobilization of the Haitian Diaspora has been less successful. Some Workshop participants attributed this to Haitian laws that prohibit Haitian ex-patriots from opening businesses in the country. Others felt that a positive attitude on the part of the new government would encourage Haitians to return and invest in their native country. Several representatives of the business community commented that Haiti's new parliament could usefully focus on streamlining and updating laws governing foreign investment and the creation of new businesses.

International Assistance is Vital

Finally, the international community must give Haiti another chance. Many participants felt that international institutions and donor governments had lost faith in Haiti, consigning it to a group of chronically failing states for which there was little hope. With a new government in place, Haiti has an historic opportunity to begin moving forward, but only if it receives timely and targeted support. Panelists believed that international assistance should be concentrated in strategic sectors of the economy such as agriculture, roads, energy, communications, and housing. The commitment of the international community will be critical to Haiti's success, as the country is in dire need of technical expertise and financial resources.

Of Related Interest

[Haiti Working Group](#)

[Haiti's Future](#)

First Meeting of the Haiti Working Group - February 2006
Audio Available

[Haiti's Future: Photo Gallery](#)

[Haiti's Security](#)

Second Meeting of the Haiti Working Group - March 2006
Audio Available

[Haiti Truth Commissions Digital Collection](#)

This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Robert Perito](#), senior program officer in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

[See our complete list of USIPeace Briefings.](#)

United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)