

Haiti – 1987 – Presidential and National Assembly Elections

Hello, my name is Jeff Fischer and my story is about the Haitian general elections that were conducted in 1987. Going back from 1985 to 1991, I served as a member of the Kansas City Board of Elections Commission. In this capacity, along with three other Commissioners, I participated in the policy making and administration of all the public elections conducted within the city limits.

During the same period, events were occurring a long way from Kansas City in Port-au-Prince. The 29 year dictatorship of the Duvalier family, first led by François “Papa Doc” and then his son Jean-Claude, “Baby Doc,” was being ended. At the time, little did I know that there would be a connection between these events. The catalytic events in Haiti started in 1986 when anti-government protests began and Baby Doc opened fire on protesters. In all, at least 50 people were killed. This produced a backlash with the international community and the Haitian military stepped in and removed him from power. He departed Haiti for France with relatives on February 7th, 1986. A provisional government was established, the National Council of Government, led by Lieutenant General Henry Namphy and two other military and two civilian members.

In October of that year, the first Democratic election in 30 years occurred for a 41 member Constituent Assembly. However, the election experienced low turnout and had many administrative issues. The transitional timeline for the interim government in Haiti was to hold a referendum for the adoption of a constitution on March 29th, 1987. However, given the issues with the Constituent Assembly elections, international supporters of the transition wanted to take some actions to inform the referendum organisers about the basic tenets of election administration. Now, these were the early years of the interest of the United States government in the promotion of democracy abroad. The National Endowment for Democracy had been established in 1983 along with two of the core partners of the National Endowment for Democracy: the National Democratic Institute, NDI, and the International Republican Institute, IRI.

As a result of the overthrow in Haiti and the need to establish a new government, the US Department of State sought to set up a study tour for those individuals who were responsible to organize these elections so that they could visit an election office on Election Day and see how elections were organised. As it turned out, Kansas City was conducting a municipal election in February of that year and a request was made by the State Department. A delegation from Haiti came to Kansas City to observe the election. Now for us at the Kansas City Election Board, this was obviously all brand new. We really didn't know what their expectations were for the visit, nor did we really have a programme to put together for instruction of this kind. So we took an operational approach to their visit. That is, we gave them a tour of the headquarters operations so

that they could view the workflow and see how the office was organised. They visited polling stations to view the configuration and responsibilities of poll workers. They were present at the tabulation of ballots. Now in this case, it was a central count of punch card ballots, but nevertheless they could see the controls and transparency required in ballot tabulation.

I was impressed with this experience and established contact with the US Embassy in Haiti.. Mr Brunson McKinley was ambassador at the time and there was another organization involved, a consulting firm which organised the study, Eddie Mahe Jr. and Associates. Eddie was a political consultant, but also had a USAID United States Agency for International Development contract regarding supporting elections abroad. As a result of my communications, I was invited to conduct an assessment of election preparations in Haiti for the elections to be conducted on November 29th, 1987. This first assessment trip led to two further trips and a trip to Haiti on Election Day. My first trip was from September 13 to 18. During this assessment, I constructed a scenario of the structure of the administration of elections as envisioned by the Provisional Election Commission. The organization of a voter registration campaign was discussed. The ballot structure was also discussed whether separate ballots would be used for each candidate that could be picked up individually, or whether these would be compiled in a kind of coupon style book; and the recruitment and training of election workers was discussed as well as civic education and ballot security on a second trip conducted from October 21st to the 26th.

Voter registration had started on October 19th. The Electoral Commission engaged Citibank to provide data entry services for voter registration. During this trip, I learned that the NGO which was providing election worker training had withdrawn, creating uncertainties as far as election worker training was concerned. Additionally, there was an insufficient number of candidates in some contests, with 11 districts having no candidates at all, and Article 291 of the Haitian Constitution prohibited former Duvalier regime associates from running for office for 10 years. However, some insisted to do so and intended to do so in an “unofficial mode.” However, what that meant was never fully clear.

My third trip took place between November 8th and 11th. Prior to the completion of the computer entry of the list, it was estimated that from 1.5 to 2.0 million Haitians had registered. Our Citibank's data entry capacity would not be able to process all of the registrations for Election Day before Election Day. So some polling stations would be served by handwritten lists. There were also bottlenecks in the shipment of registration documents to the Data Processing Centre, placing further stress on the election calendar. Election security was discussed, but none was being provided by the provisional government. So this led to the Electoral Commission organizing what were called “gardes de vigilance,” unarmed security at polling stations. And other groups

considered to participate in election peacebuilding included other civil society organizations, the Boy Scouts and Catholic nuns.

My final trip for the November 29th election took place between November 27th and December 1st. I observed the voting material organization process at the Electoral Commission on November 28th, involving election workers who were both young and old, male and female. Catholic nuns did assist with the process. Now I visited several local election commissions with an individual named Charles Tardieu, a consultant, an election observer, and someone who had worked on election worker training. The Tardieu family and I stayed in a seaside home the night of November 28th in a rural area about 10 miles from the city of Grande Goave. That evening we were joined by 8 young men who said they were poll workers and wanted to talk about the election. One of them was a polling place Vice President who said that he would be getting up at 2:00 or 3:00 AM just to walk 10 miles to the polling station where he would be working. When I asked what motivated them to participate in the elections, their response was that it wasn't so much by institutional engagement, encouragement from church or school, but rather self motivation and peer encouragement.

And actually, on Election Day, I became an election support worker, and Charles and I delivered voting materials to six polling stations in Grande Goave. Observing at several polling stations, the voting was basically moving forward with some projected problems such as a shortage of ballot secrecy envelopes. Two of the polls were out of doors. Charles and I were on our way to another polling station, ferrying 3 workers and some materials when the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, Dr. Ernst Mirville, came on the radio around 10 and said the voting was being suspended because of violence at polling stations in Port-au-Prince. There was a massacre of at least 34 people, most of them at the Argentine School in Port-au-Prince, a polling station. While the Duvalier's have been deposed, they're enforcers, the TonTon Macoutes, had not and opposed the democratic transition.

While the headlines in public takeaway from the election became the deaths and violence, In my assessments and an Election Day report, I wanted to provide a record of the constructive and positive attributes which the organisers of the election had demonstrated. While I cited that there was violence and the election was shut down and regretted the tragedies, I also wanted to bring forward in these assessments the full story to be told, including the planning, preparation and real enthusiasm which characterised the process before the violence was before the violence erupted. I thought these were important precedents to bring out for Haitians to consider in future elections. But along with the precedents were established for Haitian elections, there were also precedents established before the international community's engagement in

electoral assistance. After the voting was shut down, at the El Rancho Hotel in Port-au-Prince, international observer groups had assembled all being called in from the field. Including NDI, the National Democratic Institute, and an organization that I had not heard of before, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, IFES. As it turned out, Eddie Mahe had established this new nonprofit, which was intended as a vehicle to conduct electoral assistance work as envisioned in a 1986 study, which he produced. While NDI and IRI had an obvious political party focus, IFES was intended to be non-partisan in its work with electoral management bodies. But USAID invoked a provision that it had at the time against a single contractor doing what it termed, “design and build,” that is, if an organization designed a project such as IFES, it was not eligible to build or operate it. So as the story goes, Eddie turned over the organization to a fellow political consultant, F. Clifton White, who built the organization and made it viable. And in fact, IFES would establish its first field office in 1990, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.