

# HAITI - Presidential candidates also campaign overseas (Amy Bracken, IPS)

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*Blasting from giant speakers in Brooklyn's Crystal Manor ballroom one recent evening was a new song in Haitian Creole: "Vote! Vote Bazin for change!"*

NEW YORK, Nov 7 ([IPS](#)) - But most of those gathered at this political rally will not vote for Marc Bazin or any of the other candidates running for president of Haiti this winter. U.S. citizens face a ban on dual nationality in Haiti's Constitution, and those U.S. residents unable or unwilling to return to Haiti to vote in person have no absentee ballot option.

Still, Bazin and other Haitian candidates are campaigning hard outside Haiti because they see Haitians living abroad as enormously influential. More than 80 percent of college-educated Haitians live overseas, and the vast majority of Haiti's annual income comes from Haitians abroad sending money back to friends and family.

With 35 candidates registered to run under a provisional government that took charge after the ouster of Jean-Bertrand Aristide almost two years ago, this will be the most hotly contested presidential election in Haitian history, and Haitians abroad are getting more attention than ever.

In Boston, three candidates recently participated in the first Haitian presidential debate overseas — and one of the first ever in Haitian history. Since early October, at least eight candidates have already done the rounds in Boston, New York and Miami, where most of the U.S.'s half million Haiti-born residents live. Others have campaigned as far away as France.

The candidates are looking for both money and, indirectly, votes. Leslie Voltaire, Bazin's campaign manager and formerly Aristide's Minister of Haitians Living Abroad, said Haiti's entire middle class lives overseas, and he called Bazin's first U.S. tour "a way to tell [Haitians abroad] that they count, that we count on them, and to push them to get on the phone and tell their relatives to vote for Bazin."

It is also clear to Haitian politicians what will win over Haitians outside Haiti. A major issue arising at campaign rallies, fundraisers and debates in the U.S. is, ironically, the right to vote and dual citizenship.

Those attending the events are U.S. residents and citizens, but they speak Creole, stay in close touch with loved ones back home, and think obsessively about the state of their nation. Many, who fled Haiti's violence and grueling poverty, wait for the day they can safely return to their homeland.

In an effort to show his credentials as a representative of Haitians abroad, Bazin told the 90 or so New York audience members that he had lived in Washington for 18 years, working for the World Bank. "And so I'll say to you, Haitians abroad, Diaspora, with Bazin as president, you will have the right to vote," he said. "With Bazin as president, you will have dual nationality..." The audience silenced him with wild applause.

Meanwhile, back in Haiti, all registered candidates have been forced to prove their Haitian nationality before the Provisional Electoral Council by presenting their own birth certificates and those of their parents.

One presidential candidate not on tour in the U.S. is Texas multi-millionaire businessman Dumarsais Simeus, who was born into a peasant family in Haiti's Artibonite Valley but has spent 45 years outside

Haiti.

A debate is raging over whether or not he has the right to run for president, with the electoral council claiming he does not, the Supreme Court claiming he does, the interim government challenging the ruling of the Supreme Court, and the population taking a variety of positions on the issue.

But candidates touring the U.S. have been clear on the issue: Simeus should be able to run. Bazin invoked Haiti's 1987 Constitution in asserting that all Haitians in exile have the right to return home — even brutal dictators like Jean-Claude Duvalier, who currently lives in France — but where it infringes on the rights of Haitians overseas, Bazin questioned whether the document should be honoured.

Calling it "painful" to see a man who means well being prevented from shooting for Haiti's top job, Bazin said, "The Constitution is clear, but should we stick to the Constitution or should we look toward some sort of political compromise?"

In its 201 years, Haiti's relationship with the developed world has been highly ambivalent, with great national pride belied by the humiliation of Haitians clamouring to get on boats to leave the country at all costs, and with a nation boasting the distinction of being the first free black republic on Earth while forced into total economic dependence on others.

Fittingly, enforcement of the ban on dual citizenship has been anything but consistent. Haiti's current interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue was a resident of Boca Raton, Florida, when selected for the post, and he has said he plans to return there when his replacement is sworn in.

His predecessor, Yvon Neptune, had studied architecture in the U.S. and was popularly accused of being "American" — a charge he denied.

Further complicating the situation, the electoral council birth certificate requirement for presidential candidates neither proves nor disproves that they have become citizens of other countries. Meanwhile, non-Haitians, including a Canadian and an African, have reported being able to register to vote in Haiti this year simply by proving residency.

According to the Constitution, one loses Haitian citizenship not only if he or she is naturalised in another country, but if they live outside the country for three years without "proper authorisation". To top it off, "Once Haitian nationality is lost, it cannot be recovered."

This harsh exclusion of foreign nationals has been challenged at home as well as abroad. Aristide, whose wife, Mildred Trouillot, is U.S.-born, supported a Constitutional amendment to allow dual citizenship. The amendment received support in Parliament, but the legislative body was dissolved before action could be taken to implement it.

Voltaire said the dual citizenship ban is supported only by an upper crust in Haiti jealous of those living abroad. "The problem is that we have an elite of five percent of the people controlling 50 percent or more of the resources, and who would not accept a lot of competition," he said.

Today, Haitian politicians show little fear of this elite, which has lost considerable electoral power in the last two decades. More than ever politicians acknowledge the dependence of Haitians in Haiti on Haitians abroad — that is, between Haiti's nine geographic departments and Haiti's Diaspora, known as the 10th department.

Jean Claude Desgranges, Aristide's former cabinet chief and a supporter of Bazin, who splits his time between Haiti and Florida, declared in Creole to the Brooklyn crowd, "I'm of the 10th department, just like you. I'm a true Haitian, just like you... You are all living as Haitians and you are all going to die as Haitians."

Haitians at home and abroad are anxiously awaiting an announcement from the electoral council on the

date of presidential and legislative elections, now only loosely scheduled for mid-December.

Already pushed back from November, the vote for president could be delayed again due to the debate over Simeus' right to run.

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