Noref Report

"Politics is dirty" – the view of Haitian youth

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Summary

On 28 November 2010, ten months after an earthquake devastated the capital and surrounding areas, presidential and legislative elections are due to be held. Apart from the logistical and technical challenges posed by the elections, the findings of a study carried out by the authors in July 2010 indicate that the real challenge is the legitimacy of politics per se among the Haitian population, particularly the youth. A series of focus groups were held with young people from differing educational and socioeconomic backgrounds in three cities, as well as surrounding rural areas.

It became clear that most of the participants saw politics as practiced in Haiti as a dirty game and expected politicians to be corrupt and to have achieved power through influence rather than ability. Very few thought it possible to stay "clean" within the present elite-based system. Though many would like to influence Haiti's future through political means, without financial independence it is hard to see how non-elite youth can hope to become an autonomous political opposition. In the absence of an arena in which they can put forward their views, there is a risk that they may turn to violence.

Despite the bleak picture painted by the participants, the fact that they recognise the dysfunctional patterns and structures that maintain the status quo means that they have the ability to become agents of social and political change. Although such change needs to come from within, the international community should recognise the potential of this new group of intellectuals as a positive social force and provide it with economic, social and technical support. The question of how best to provide them with the autonomous space they need to unleash their constructive potential should be one of the driving issues in the years to come.

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Introduction

Presidential and legislative elections are due to take place in Haiti on 28 November 2010, ten months after a massive earthquake destroyed the capital, killing over 220,000 people and displacing nearly a quarter of the population. The purpose of the elections is to replace President René Préval, as well as 11 members of the 30-member Senate and all 99 members of the Chamber of Deputies. The new President will be responsible for leading the Haitian people through the daunting challenge of reconstruction and will be the national counterpart for the international community. Two weeks before the Haitians are supposed to cast their votes, there is no lack of obstacles standing in the way of a successful election: more than one million people are still internally displaced; the provisional electoral committee (CEP) lacks legitimacy; anti-candidate violence is on the increase; millions of eligible voters have not yet registered; and the distribution of identity cards has just started. In addition a cholera outbreak has killed nearly one thousand people and has now reached the capital of Port-au-Prince.

The findings of this study, however, indicate that the real challenge is not the technical organisation of the election but the legitimacy of politics *per se* among the Haitian population. Haitians' understanding of politics differs fundamentally from the way in which we tend to view politics in a western context. Failing to recognise this may mean that the electoral results, and the political processes leading up to them, will be misinterpreted.

The underlying assumptions about what politics means in a Haitian context, and what its purpose is, were the main topics debated in a series of 19 focus group discussions[1] involving around 150 Haitian youth in July 2010. The focus groups were held in three cities, Jacmel, Cap-Haitien and Port-au-Prince, as well as surrounding rural areas. Young people from a range of different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds participated. The majority were university or high school students, and many were also active in different civil society organisations. Participants needed to be eligible to vote in the election (ie, turn 18 before 28 November), and the maximum age was 30. Most of the participants were in their early 20s. This report describes the main conclusions that emerged from the discussions.

Politics seen as dirty

Though from differing socioeconomic and sociopolitical backgrounds, all the participants shared a negative view of "politics". Politics at national level is seen by young people as a zero-sum game, the goal being to control state resources. Politicians are described as *grands mangeurs* (big eaters) preying on public resources for personal gain, trying to "eat" as much as they can while they are in a position of access. In the eyes of young people, politics is a dirty activity associated with corruption and theft, not a means for ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making. "Politicians are seen as criminals." "They are thieves." "They are just filling their pockets." Statements like these were uttered in most of the focus group discussions. It was clear that, regardless of socioeconomic background, the young participants perceived politics as practiced in Haiti as essentially immoral, as demonstrated by the behaviour of past and present political actors. Adopting a conceptual framework in which political practice is viewed as a dirty endeavour, motivated by greed, is useful for understanding the challenge that the upcoming elections, and party politics in Haiti in general, face in terms of their legitimacy.

The young participants could not conceive of the possibility that Haitian politicians might commit to real power-sharing. Instead, they described a political game dominated by lack of trust, manipulation and cheating. "When they are in power, they even arrest their opponents! They think that if you are not with them, you are against them." "The opposition is the enemy." "They don't know how to cooperate." In particular, the more educated youth are well aware that politics as played out in Haiti does not comply with democratic principles. Barak Obama's appointment of Hillary Clinton, his main opponent in the presidential race, to the post of secretary of state following his election was mentioned as an example of good democratic practice. "Something

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1   The number of participants was between six and eight in most groups, but some groups were larger because of the high interest in participating. A common interview guide was used in all the focus groups, including questions such as: What is politics and how does it affect daily life? Who are the politicians? Who do they represent? What is their area of responsibility? How important are elections? What would motivate young people to vote? However, participants were free to elaborate on the topics they found important.

like Obama and Hillary Clinton would never happen in Haiti", a member of a youth organisation in Port-au-Prince said. "The politicians don't want to share power with their opponents. But they may give positions to their opponents to keep them quiet."

The young expect their politicians to be corrupt and to be in positions of power because of their connections, not their abilities. Expectations of incompetence add to young people's contempt for politicians. However, despite assuming that most politicians are motivated by greed, they do also recognise that a few are motivated by good intentions. The participants were, nevertheless, divided on whether it is possible to "stay clean" in politics, without becoming tarnished by the "dirty" system. Very few thought that it was possible, and only then as long as the candidate was wealthy and not dependent upon external economic support for campaigning. Most of the participants thought that someone who was unwilling to "play the game" would be isolated by other political actors and obstructed in achieving his or her goals. In the eyes of the electorate, a candidate with good intentions would anyway be associated with other "dirty" politicians and just seen as one of them. "Even if I did start out with a vision, everyone would still believe that I did it out of greed," said a young electoral observer in Jacmel. Several participants claimed that the social stigma of being associated with politics, and hence seen as opportunistic and deceitful, was so strong that their families would not allow them to get involved.

Social navigation[2] and co-optation

Politics in Haiti is primarily a middle-class activity. Without a parent or patron to mentor them in the corridors of power, political office is beyond the reach of most young people. "You don't choose a political party, the political party chooses you." The young man making the statement was the leader of a civil society organisation in Cap-Haitien and had himself been contacted by a political party that wanted to make him their candidate. He had turned down the offer, not wanting to become part of a system that supports those in power. Nonetheless he understood others who gave in to the temptation.

Youth organisations want to act as a counterbalance to a system they view as corrupt and elitist, but in the absence of independent sources of funding they easily fall prey to clientelism. A member of a student organisation in Jacmel described it as follows: "We need to do it [mobilise], but it is not happening at the moment. We are not unified. They try to corrupt us. When we try to emerge, we meet obstacles from the government and the private sector. They try to buy us. They give you a visa [to leave the country], give you a car, offer to help you with campaigning, make you their candidate. Then you are no longer motivated to oppose them". A student organisation in Cap-Haitien shared the same concern: "If young people have good ideas, the leaders buy them or try to intimidate them. When young people become local leaders, they give them scholarships and send them overseas."

Haiti is a country dominated by neo-patrimonial structures and opportunities depend on having access to the right networks.[3] The way for non-elite youth to enter the political game and gain access to resources and positions is to navigate themselves into a position where the political elite finds it valuable to co-opt them. Strategies can include navigating into a position where one is seen as a political opponent causing trouble or as a positive resource within the local community who can attract voters. Due to the highly personal nature of Haitian politics, candidates rely on local representatives who are popular and visible. Gaining social standing within the local community requires concrete social action; participating in civil society is one way of making oneself attractive to political parties or individuals.

Despite being highly critical of politics as it is played out in Haiti, it was clear from the discussions that young, educated Haitians are well aware of the democratic potential for social change. The participants expressed a strong desire to influence their country's future by political means but found it impossible within the current system. One of them joked that there are two types of Haitian youth: those who do not want to go into politics because they are afraid of becoming corrupted, and those who want to do so for exactly the same reasons.

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2   For a discussion of social navigation see: Henrik Vigh, Navigating Terrains of War, New York, Berghahn Books, 2006.

3   For a compelling analysis of contemporary Haitian politics, see Robert Fatton Jr, Haiti's Predatory Republic: The Unending Transition to Democracy, Boulder, Co., Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.

In a context in which few paths to economic and social mobility are available, integrity comes at a high price. Political campaigning and winning supporters is expensive and without financial independence it is hard to see how non-elite youth can hope to become an autonomous political opposition. In order for them to be able to participate in Haitian politics, outside of the patrimonial structures, access to employment and no-strings-attached financing are necessary preconditions. Within the existing political structure, young people are given very little room for manoeuvre.

"It's a selection, not an election"

There was an overwhelming consensus among the participants that it would not be possible to hold a fair election in November. An expression heard on countless occasions was, "It's a selection, not an election." "There's no point in voting," one of the university students in Port-au-Prince added. "It will be business as usual." At the time of the group discussions, the list of candidates was yet to be announced but controversy surrounding the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) was undermining the legitimacy of the screening process. The CEP was perceived to be loyal to the elite in power, and no candidate who might threaten their interests was expected to be allowed to run.

"They will stay in power forever. It's a group of friends who choose among themselves. They don't open up to people they don't know. If there are disputes within the group, they just choose someone else within the clan. It is all taking place inside the clan", was how a member of a youth organisation in Port-au-Prince summed up the situation.

President Préval's refusal to respond to the accusations directed against the CEP was interpreted by the young people as confirming that the Council is used as a means of excluding candidates that represent opposing views. Candidates close to power were expected to access government resources for their personal campaigns, and thus gain an important competitive edge. In a news brief dated 1 October 2010, the Haitian human rights group *Reseau National de Défense des Droits Humains* (RNDDH – National human rights defense network) confirmed that

deputies and senators standing for re-election under the current government's *Inité* platform are using state funding in their campaigns. [4]

The discussions held with the young people support the notion that Haitian political life is deeply embedded in neo-patrimonial structures in which political power is personal rather than institutional. Typical of a neo-patrimonial state, political influence is based on loyalty and dependency and, as such, is exchangeable for money or a position. For the voters, a ballot card can be a bargaining chip that enables them to trade political support for personal benefits. According to the young participants, Haitian voters, in particular the least educated ones in rural areas, vote on the basis of tangible benefits, not vague electoral promises. In some cases it is purely and simply in exchange for money, food or gifts. The participants argued that the selling of votes primarily stemmed from poor education and ignorance of the political system. They see large-scale civic education prior to the election as essential if the incidence of vote selling is to be reduced.

Playing to the international gallery

In a context in which politics is deemed illegitimate and the electoral process is ridden with irregularities, young voters see the election as merely an empty ritual, which they are being asked to legitimise. They are strongly encouraged to do their "civic duty" but the candidates they are asked to choose between do not present them with programmes on which they can be held accountable; young people do not feel that the politicians represent their interests. There was a widely-held view among the participants that the international community is pushing for the election mainly in order to provide donors with a "democratically elected" counterpart, rather than to allow the Haitian population to elect a leader with the qualifications that are necessary to lead them through the reconstruction. "The international community doesn't care about the abilities of the candidates. They just care about legitimacy," one of the focus group participants said.

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4   "Presentation of preliminary observations by RNDDH and the CNO on the electoral process", National Human Rights Defense Network (RNDDH), 1 October 2010, http://www.rnddh.org/article.php3?id_article=453&var_recherche=Presentation+of+Preliminary+Observations, accessed 16 November 2010.

Several groups of university students also feared that the international community would interfere in the electoral process to ensure the success of their preferred candidate. The most vocal opponents to the international presence are particularly dissatisfied with Minustah, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti. They see the UN mission as a vehicle for international manipulation and a tool in the political game. Through Minustah, they argued, the international community and the political elite can quell all demonstrations and block public opposition. "Minustah has a mandate to keep the peace," a young participant stated. "If there are demonstrations, they repress them. Minustah sees peace as a means of repression. Every obstacle is seen as a breach of the peace." At the same time they did recognise that demonstrations would turn violent if the UN did not police them. "There is always violence at demonstrations. If there is no violence, they [the government] do not listen. If you go to the extreme, it is easier. If you demonstrate peacefully, they don't listen."

The above statements raise two causes for concern that need to be taken seriously:

• the perception that the international community is suppressing public expression while at the same time blocking democratic participation and, the idea that

• young people need to turn to violence in order to be heard.

Intergenerational distrust

Despite the serious challenges facing the Haitian education sector, today's youth are nevertheless better educated than their parent's generation. While the majority of Haitians in their 20s have at least some secondary schooling, this is the case for only one in every five Haitians in their 40s.[5] They are more technically advanced (many are brought up with internet access and mobile phones) and better informed about the outside world. In addition, they have more organisational experience as a result of their involvement in civil society, which burgeoned following the downfall of the Duvalier regime in

1986. University is still only available to a small minority of Haitian young people, although state universities and private sponsorships help to ensure access to a few from outside the traditional elite. This new intellectual elite has visions for the country and represents an alternative to the existing political culture. They know about political practices in other countries and want a change towards a more representative, transparent and collectively-oriented political system in which they themselves also have influence.

Many NGO policies are focused on young people, but they are usually geared towards reaching the most vulnerable and improving their conditions. In order to bring about structural social changes, their policies should also target the "most able" youth. Failing to include them entails the following risks:

1. much needed human capital will be un derused when they take jobs for which they are overqualified

2. insufficient tax will be collected if they work in the informal sector

3. human capital and skills will be lost to migration and/or

4. political instability and possibly violence will erupt as a result of their reaction to political/social/economic marginalisation.

In a country so lacking in human resources, why is it necessary to give consideration to including those who are most able? According to the young respondents, there is a major generational gulf between young people and their elders. The main challenge they face is a lack of appreciation for their skills and abilities. Nepotism remains a persistent feature of Haitian society and having a formal education is not sufficient without the right connections. In addition to being excluded from influential networks, well-educated young people are deliberately marginalised by the older generation. They believe that older people in positions of power are intimidated by their academic background and fear being exposed as incompetent or forced out of office. Instead, the latter cling to their positions and exclude young people from both employment opportunities and political influence. "They [the

5   Henriette Lunde, ed, "Haiti Youth Survey 2009. Volume I: Tabulation Report". Fafo report 2009:53, http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/20143/index.html, accessed 4 November 2010.

elders] fear us. We have other ideas. They do what they can to keep us under water, to prevent us from emerging," argued a participant from the state university in Port-au-Prince.

Young people have very little faith in their elders. They have been repeatedly promised influence and positions, only to end up being cheated and used. "Older people take advantage of young people, for instance by asking them to write proposals. Then, when they get the money, the younger ones are excluded and the leaders take the money and buy new cars," explained a member of a youth organisation in Bon Repos, just outside Port-au-Prince. Other participants told similar stories. Young people's structural dependency on their elders also makes them very vulnerable to sexual pressures and abuse. Sexual exploitation was recognised by all participants as a major concern for young women and men alike.

Young people as agents of social change

The participants in the focus groups paint a bleak picture of the political landscape in Haiti. Their view of politics as being a dirty game played for individual gain is discouraging when seen from a democratic perspective. However, the fact that they are able to recognise the dysfunctional patterns and structures by which the status quo is maintained means that there is the potential for change. "We discern the enormous social shortcomings in the society. There are also shortcomings in behaviour and attitudes that are not good. It's the legacy of our system, but I believe that we can act differently because we can discern it," a student at the state university in Port-au-Prince said.

Haitian society is riven with class divisions. An elite minority has access to resources and defends its privileges, while the majority is excluded. University students from a non-elite background, for instance at the state university, have the potential to bridge this divide and are a group that have a great chance of becoming agents of social change. While no longer identifying with their old social position, they have nevertheless yet to consolidate their new position. They find themselves in a liminal position, standing on the threshold – at a point where they are neither part of the elite nor one of the masses, but with networks extending in both directions.

A female student at the state university from a peasant background, when asked if she identified as a member of the elite, said the following: "Yes, absolutely. We have access, we are part of the elite. We are at university. […] But after university we can drop back down to the masses if we don't get a job."

These young people represent a potential for social and political change that could go in either a positive or negative direction. Given the lack of opportunities to find employment and economic security outside the patrimonial structures that pervade Haitian politics, they could oppose the system they are criticizing and go on to correct it. However, if they are not given space in which to take autonomous political action, their best option for attaining social mobility is to be co-opted into the existing structure and to participate in the reproduction of what they recognise to be a "dirty" system. Failing to economically integrate students once they have graduated may also fuel the possibility of social conflict. If, on completing their studies, young people were to find themselves marginalised once again, they could easily make use of their abilities to organise demonstrations and foment social upheaval.

The way forward

The international community should recognise this group of new intellectuals and their potential as a positive social force. Although social change needs to come from within, the international community can help it on its way by providing economic, social and technical support for young activists. In order to realise their potential, young people need to be financially independent of patrimonial structures. Income-generating opportunities that also have a positive social impact should be encouraged, for example through social entrepreneurship. The question of how best to provide this group of young people with the autonomous space they need to unleash their constructive potential should be one of the driving issues in the years to come.