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For US in Haiti: Black Lives Don't Matter

By Mark Weisbrot
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Journalists are taught in school to avoid euphemisms. When someone dies, they write that she “died” instead of “passed away.” But one euphemism that has become a fixture in U.S. news reporting is “the international community.” This is generally a substitute for the U.S. government, with or without some input from some of its allies.

Perhaps this is nowhere more true than in Haiti, where Washington has long exercised a veto over the country's most important decisions. But last week the "international community" suffered a rare defeat when Haitians rejected Washington's plans for a deeply flawed presidential runoff election to take place on Sunday, January 24.

How did this happen? Basically, Haitians managed to put Washington in the situation of having to maintain that a runoff election with only one candidate, businessman Jovenel Moïse, would be legitimate, or postpone the election. As late as last Thursday, just three days before the election, U.S. officials were insisting that they would go forward even if the second candidate, engineer Jude Célestin, refused to participate. But he stuck to his boycott, and they backed down.

Célestin was also the candidate that finished second in the first round of Haiti's 2010 presidential elections. But the "international community" had a different choice, and brought in an "expert" mission under the auspices of the Organization of American States to examine the results. Without a recount or even a statistical test of a ballot sample, it reversed the first-round results, eliminating Célestin and putting musician and businessman Michel Martelly into the runoff. Martelly went on to win the election and become president. Approaching the end of his five-year term, he is supporting Moïse as his replacement.

In last week's events, it was not just the work of one person that forced Washington to back down. There were serious street demonstrations, condemnations from human rights organizations, religious leaders, business groups and the refusal of seven other presidential candidates from the first round to accept another episode of illegitimate elections. They had plenty of arguments and evidence on their side. In the first round of the presidential election, held on October 25, local observers found massive irregularities and evidence of fraud. More than 900,000 observer credentials were distributed to political party representatives — effectively allowing them to vote multiple times. International reporters witnessed these passes being sold on the black market. In an election where only about 1.6 million people (26 percent of the electorate) voted, the legitimacy of the vote became doubtful.

It was even tougher to accept the election results after a commission appointed by Martelly found that only 8 percent of tally sheets that they examined were free from irregularities. The opposition did not all have the same demands but they wanted a new electoral council to lead the process and some reforms to make sure that the second round would be credible. Many observers have also demanded a serious examination of the first-round ballots to see if there was any basis for accepting the results.

No date for new elections has yet been set, and it remains to be seen what will happen when Martelly's term expires on February 7.

The current fight for legitimate elections in Haiti is another episode of a long struggle for democracy that goes back to the U.S.-backed dictatorships of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957-1986) and the overthrow of the country's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 1991 and again in 2004 (with decisive support from Washington). And even further back, it is rooted in Haiti's many conflicts with "the international community" since the

country's founding in 1804 from a slave rebellion, including its occupation by U.S. Marines from 1915 to 1934.

Today's electoral turmoil shows how much continuity there is with this awful history. In a sense, the country remains occupied today by United Nations troops who were brought in not to help with reconstruction after the 2010 earthquake — as many people mistakenly believe — but six years earlier, to “keep order” after the constitutional government was overthrown, its officials jailed or forced into exile, and thousands of supporters killed.

It would be remiss not to mention the institutional racism that allows for such continuity. This is most painfully obvious in the response of “the international community” to a problem that they themselves created just five years ago: the cholera epidemic that has killed nearly 10,000 Haitians and infected hundreds of thousands more. Cholera had not been present in Haiti until some UN troops — not “aid workers” as some people alleged— dumped their human feces into the country's water supply in 2010. Yet they refuse to come up with the money that would be necessary to provide clean water and resolve the problem, even though they have spent much more than this on maintaining their military presence in the country.

It is hard to see such twisted priorities as other than a statement that “Black lives don't matter.” As with the elections, and USAID reconstruction funds of which only 1.6 percent went to Haitian organizations and companies, it seems that even in dealing with a deadly disease caused by these foreign governments' own gross negligence, power and control over the country are the first priorities.