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Saving Hispaniola

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WASHINGTON -- With the declaration of Rene Preval as the elected president of Haiti, a narrow window of opportunity is open, yet again, for consolidating democracy there.

The citizens of the beleaguered country cast their ballots for president in this seemingly never-ending saga of election after election that began with the departure of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1987.

As with previous elections, the latest round was marked by allegations of vote fraud and mass street demonstrations, the refusal of the opposition to accept the declared results and a concerted intervention by the international community to bring the process to a close without further chaos and violence.

More significantly, the latest round demonstrates that democracy in Haiti is not just about elections alone. In the absence of political parties skilled in the art of compromise, each new election is likely to serve as a reminder of the Caribbean country's long-standing divisions rather than the emergence of democracy.

At best, elections in Haiti provide a transitional moment. Not since 1994, when President Jean-Bertrand Aristide returned to Port-au-Prince protected by a U.S.-led U.N. multinational force, has such a historic moment arrived to turn the tide of Haiti's desperate situation. And yet this window might close unless the international community moves beyond the ballot box to reconstruction.

The tremendous obstacles still faced by the nation-building enterprise in Iraq illustrate the

critical importance of a coherent strategy and planning. They are necessary for assisting a national leadership in re-establishing security and the rule of law and for developing skills and institutions that lead to dialogue and compromise. Haiti now offers an opportunity for applying this fundamental lesson.

Haiti could seize this moment to take authentic steps toward democratic governance and a degree of economic stability.

The first step is to acknowledge that the key challenges lie ahead, that elections do not constitute closure. Otherwise, five years from now, another international peace operation is likely to be guarding ballot boxes in one more contentious election.

Haiti also will need the help of its neighbor, the Dominican Republic, a democratic state that shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti and has borne the brunt of its disorder as Haitians flee over the border in search of security, employment and social services. Saving Haiti in this post-electoral period will require not only changes within Haiti but also the diplomatic and financial support of the international community to save Hispaniola.

Post-electoral transitions have always been the Achilles' heel of international efforts to promote democracy in Haiti. Elections have been the preferred exit strategy when resources for development are slim and political will may be lacking.

While the current U.N. mandate in Haiti includes support for national dialogue among all political parties, this process will not materialize without concerted international will. Mr. Preval's new government will need to develop a common strategy for economic and political reform. In the absence of such a process, Haiti might very well end up with a U.N. transitional administration.

After this electoral cycle, Haiti still will be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It will remain the major transshipment point through which passes an estimated 15 percent of the cocaine entering the United States. It has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS outside of sub-Saharan Africa. And with 97 percent of the country deforested, Haiti also will remain unproductive. These conditions will continue the flight of Haitians to the Dominican Republic.

Haiti's best hope is a strong and democratic Dominican Republic. But the Dominican Republic, and its leader, President Leonel Fernandez, cannot do it alone.

Even though Mr. Fernandez traveled to Haiti in December to reach out to all political parties and candidates, his effort was curtailed by riots in Port-au-Prince. If Mr. Fernandez is to succeed, he will need the support of the U.S., the Organization of American States, the United Nations and regional leaders to ensure that his country is not brought down by the economic, political and social chaos that is spilling over the border.

Even with its impressive economic growth - at 7 percent last year, third-largest in Latin America and the Caribbean - the Dominican Republic could be compromised by sharing an island with a failed state.

Saving Hispaniola should be a top priority of the United States, given President Bush's determination that failed states threaten U.S. national security. Allowing Haiti to fester would not only jeopardize its neighbors but also drain U.S. tax coffers to pay for yet another international peace operation. Americans are growing tired of paying for transitions that have no end in sight.

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