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After presidential elections, Haitians weary of easy promises

Chris Herlinger | Apr. 27, 2011

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Anne Suze Denestant (Photos by Chris Herlinger/ CWS)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- I first met Anne Suze Denestant in January. A resident of one of Port-au-Prince?s tent cities, she struck me as quiet, a bit shy but also confident and, when need be, steely.

She has to be. Denestant lost her right arm in the devastating January 2010 earthquake, and while she spoke softly and hesitantly of her experiences adjusting to a physical disability, her voice rose when she expressed clear exasperation and anger that so little had been done for her and other survivors by Haitian authorities in the intervening year since 2010.

Had the government done *anything*? "Not in the slightest," she said. "Everything that we've gotten, we've gotten from the NGOs"

When I saw Denestant again, during Holy Week, she said: "We?re still not where we want to be," and expressed a note of caution about newly elected president and one-time Carnival singer Michel Martelly -- known affectionately by fans, and a bit dismissingly by critics as "Sweet Micky," his stage name.

Martelly, who assumes office in May, won a March 20 runoff following a long and dragged out electoral process that was often overshadowed by the halting response to the quake, as well as by bouts of violence and the return of two of Haiti?s most controversial figures: former presidents Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (son of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier) and Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

As it turns out, both Duvalier and Aristide have kept low profiles since their respective returns to Haiti -- though legal action against Duvalier for ill-gotten wealth might still be in the offing, and there are rumors that Martelly might pursue some action against Aristide for abuses allegedly committed during his various turns as president. (Martelly himself has long been an Aristide critic and has admitted past friendships with political figures on the right, including some accused of human rights abuses.)

However, talk of national reconciliation is also in the air, even among those on the left who grew to dislike Aristide but who also suffered greatly from repression under Duvalier and later a string of military leaders. I can only report what I heard, but among some progressives I talked to who lived through the tumult of the 1980s and 1990s, there doesn?t seem to be much stomach for reviving the battles of the past. There is still too much to do in Haiti.

"I do not like impunity," Polycarpe Joseph, a Jesuit-trained lay Catholic leader who heads the Ecumenical Center for Peace and Justice, a Port-au-Prince educational center, told me last week. "But in this specific moment, we must determine what the priorities are."

Joseph said he understands why international human rights groups, especially those in the United States, want to press legal action against prominent political figures, particularly Duvalier. But, he asked, "Is that the right thing for Haiti right now? We are a very divided society right now, and in the current political context we live under now, people need to move forward."

Moving forward was often the argument used for the recent runoff election, and Herode Guillomettre, a Haitian Protestant leader who heads the Christian Center for Integrated Development, a church-based humanitarian agency, said he did not vote because he felt it was an election mainly for show -- in this case, for the international community. He said the tens of millions of dollars spent on the election could have been better used on continuing earthquake recovery efforts.

Still, Guillomettre thought Martelly?s victory was a much-needed lesson to traditional politicians, who he said "need to be closer to the people, have their feet on the ground and need to know the realities of the country."

For her part, Anne Suze Denestant, at 26, fits the profile of increasingly younger Haitians -- roughly half of Haiti's population of about 10 million is now under the age of 20 -- who were looking for a leader who did not fit the traditional mold. Still, Denestant is taking a decidedly neutral attitude towards the new president.

"It's still a 'wait and see' time for us," she said. "When they're elected, it's like they promise a lot."

There are good reasons to be cautious. In researching a book I am writing on Haiti, I came across a marvelous description of Haitian political realities penned more than 20 years by Mark Danner of *The New Yorker*.

Haitians, Danner wrote in 1989, "speak wryly of *le Fauteiul* -- the Chair. Every Haitian of note seems to want the Chair, but once he has taken his place in it the Chair imprisons him and transforms him. The mumbling country doctor becomes a ferocious monster, the stuttering general becomes a drunken Caligula. For, once in the Chair, the Haitian ruler -- 'provisional' or permanent, king or general -- finds himself with no choice but to fight to keep it."

Danner continued: "It was in this fight, in his determination to endure, that Francois Duvalier revealed his genius, by fashioning a repressive system that persists to this day. 'All these candidates and their pronouncements are a joke,' one of his followers told me proudly not long ago. 'Duvalier still rules this land. He will rule it for fifty years.' "

The most pernicious effects of the first Duvalier regime may have worn off a bit sooner than 50 years (though probably not nearly enough), and the good will toward Martelly is palpable right now. But Haitians have enough experience with politicians -- and know enough of the outside constraints, machinations and pressures (e.g., from the U.S.) that constantly face them -- to be wisely weary of easy promises.

"I don?t know what he can do," Saint Soit Joseph, 53, a Port-au-Prince laborer and mason, said of Martelly when he and I spoke earlier this week in the Cite Soleil area of Port-au-Prince, a site of frequent political activism and political repression. "But we can hope.?

Ironically, some of that hope is based on nostalgia for the very political figure Martelly has professed to dislike -- a nostalgia that seems to be most alive for those living on or close to the streets.

Pierre Saint Fritz Robert, an unemployed car washer who lives in a tent on a hardscrabble corner of downtown Port-au-Prince in the shadow of the destroyed National Cathedral, said that Martelly was the only candidate who had visited him and his neighbors and had promised to do his best to improve their lives.

On Easter Sunday, as the curious walked through and picked through the rubble of the once-grand cathedral, Robert said Martelly reminds him a bit of Aristide, whose professed return from an African exile to promote educational efforts in Haiti has been greeted warmly by many.

"Aristide was always thinking of the poor people," he said. "I?m not sure why he came back and why he came back now, but if he builds some schools and helps those in need, that would be good."

Robert paused and repeated a thought. "He was always thinking of the poor people."

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. His book, *Rubble Nation: Haiti's Pain, Haiti's Promise*, will be published later this year by Seabury Books.]

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