

Haiti Braces for Return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide

Island issues new passport for former president forced out in 2004 and living in exile in South Africa

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[Haiti](#) has issued a diplomatic passport to former president [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#), in effect ending his seven-year exile in South Africa.

His lawyer, Ira Kurzban, said he had collected Aristide's new passport in Port-au-Prince. "He's going to try to return as soon as he can," Kurzban said.

Aristide has asked the government to provide him with the security constitutionally promised to a former president.

Asked last month whether he was ready to return, Aristide said he would come back "today, tomorrow, at any time".

Speculation that he would try to get back to Haiti increased after the return of former dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who now faces charges of embezzlement and crimes against humanity.

Aristide was twice removed in coup d'états involving Haitian elites, the US, France and Canada, and is accused by his detractors of human rights violations. But he is still one of the most popular political figures in the country. His political party, Fanmi Lavalas, was excluded from the 28 November election on a technicality.

Voter turnout was unusually low in the election, which was marred by widespread fraud. Haiti recently scheduled a delayed runoff for 20 March to pick a successor to President René Préval.

Préval has said he would extend his mandate past its 7 February constitutional end until a new president takes office, scheduled for 16 April.

But Aristide's return could be the political equivalent of a second earthquake in the runoff. It is likely to cause a surge of popular support, with tens of thousands in the street throughout the country.

"You will see, when people know he is returning for sure, they will go out and sweep the streets clean for him," says Jeremy Dupin, 26, a journalist from Cité Soleil, one of the capital's poorest areas.

But some fear that his return will be destabilising to the relief effort. The same forces who supported the coup that forced him out in 2004 will see his return as a huge threat.

“I don’t think it would be appropriate in the current electoral crisis,” said Rosny Desroches, director of a civil society initiative. “He should wait until there is more serenity, wait until there is a government in place.”

The international community who bankrolled the election is also concerned. A US state department spokesman said Washington did “not doubt President Aristide’s desire to help the people of Haiti. But today Haiti needs to focus on its future, not its past.”

Under Haiti’s constitution Aristide has every right to return, although he would not be allowed to run for a third term. But his enduring popularity means his appearance could undermine an unresolved and deeply-flawed electoral process.

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