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Kenneth Kidd

PÉTIONVILLE, HAITI—At the front of a second-floor classroom in the high school overlooking Place St. Pierre, Monfleyer Jean Fenel is waving a large, clear plastic bag.

The final tally of votes from a single poll is to be placed into just such a bag, he says.

Before him sit nearly two dozen Haitians, most of them young, all hired as election workers for Sunday's presidential run-off.

Three workers will be assigned to run each poll and Fenel, a supervisor from the country's electoral council, has been reminding them that, while they can instruct voters on the physical logistics of filling out a ballot, under no circumstances are they to tell people for whom to vote.

Which passes slightly strange, if only because Fenel is wearing a white T-shirt with the following message emblazoned in blue: *Bon Retour Prezidan Titide*.

Former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide may not be running in this election, but his return to Haiti last Friday after seven years in exile casts yet another complicating shadow over it.

No one formally attached to Aristide's leftist Lavalas party was allowed to run in these elections, whose deeply flawed initial round came in November.

Because of that, some groups have been calling for a boycott of Sunday's run-off between two centre-right candidates, lawyer Mirlande Manigat and singer Michel "Sweet Micky" Martelly. Aristide himself said as much on his arrival, claiming the exclusion of Lavalas equalled the exclusion of a majority of Haitians.

Even without the return of Aristide, Haiti's ability to carry out moderately fair elections — and the ensuing level of voter turnout — was already seriously suspect.

Under international pressure, the electoral commission has made numerous changes since November's balloting, which was marred by vast disorganization, widespread fraud and huge, mid-day street demonstrations claiming the election had been rigged.

The electoral council has since fired roughly 500 poll workers and their supervisors from the most problematic polling stations, and has beefed up training.

The list of the country's 4.7 million voters has also been scrubbed up to remove discrepancies between the electoral council's information and that of the national identification office, which issues voters' cards.

More importantly, perhaps, staffing at a 24-hour call centre has been bolstered and, in addition to the council's website, a text-messaging system was created to help voters locate their polling stations.

In November, the names of people killed in the earthquake still appeared on voters' lists, and close to a million people were living in tents, often far from the communities where they used to vote.

And since more than 40 per cent of the regular polling stations in areas affected by the earthquake were destroyed, there was mass confusion among those attempting to find the new locations.

Even Haiti's prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, reportedly had trouble finding out where to cast his ballot after being assigned to the wrong polling station.



Haitian provisional election officials went through the procedures for Sunday's election with staff at a polling station in Port-au-Prince Saturday morning. Mirlande Manigat and Michel Martelly are the final two candidates in Haiti's national election.

Lucas Oleniuk/Toronto Star

This time, however, the electoral council has fielded roughly one million requests for poll locations, much of that through a system that alerts cell-phone subscribers that they can use text messages to get information on where to vote.

"It's simple and it seems to work well," says Benoît Charette, a member of the Quebec National Assembly and part of the Francophonie's observation team. "Almost everyone here has a cell phone.

"The information is easier to get this time. This will help."

Still, there are worries, especially around the potential for violence.

"The main fear is that Martelly or Manigat will get their supporters to protest as they did the last time," says Charette. "If they do that, for the international community, that will mean they want to sabotage the election."

His group, as well as the UN mission and various ambassadors, have given the candidates "direct warnings on this specific point," Charette says. "We want them to say clearly to their supporters: don't go out on the street.

"We hope that each camp will respect their commitment on this, to have a calm election day."

Is this likely? "We have reasons to be optimistic."

Then again, as Charette ruefully recalls, he'd also been optimistic shortly after the polling stations had opened in November.