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Have Haitians Finally Found the Formula for Moving Forward?

A December 21 accord, brokered by key Haitian actors, offers an inclusive and transparent architecture to address the country's longstanding ills.

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The headlines from Haiti have been so bad for so long that few get the world's attention anymore. It seems like nearly every day there are stories of [dozens being killed in the country's capital](#) or of the U.S. Coast Guard [stopping hundreds of Haitian migrants](#) from reaching U.S. shores. Then there are the more ominous headlines that say [war](#) or even a [Rwanda-style massacre](#) are approaching amid the country's "[nightmarish conditions](#)." With Haiti's situation seemingly more intractable than ever, some observers have wondered if the world is simply [tired of trying to help](#). But at the end of last year, an underreported agreement was forged by Haitians — injecting a glimmer of hope that the country could go down a new path.

 People walk by an abandoned police station in the Drouillard neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Nov. 7, 2022. (Adriana Zehbrauskas/The New York Times)

People walk by an abandoned police station in the Drouillard neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Nov. 7, 2022. (Adriana Zehbrauskas/The New York Times)

On December 21, a coalition of business, civil society and political actors quietly signed an accord with Haiti's prime minister, Ariel Henry, that outlined a possible transitional arrangement that could lead the country to elections. The accord has received little attention and even less international support, which is unfortunate, because it could be the best chance the beleaguered country has to reset its political, security and economic institutions in the coming year.

From Fragility to Failure

Many refer to Haiti as [a failed state](#). I have fallen into that trap myself — in a weak moment accepting a journalist's characterization of the country as failed, given how much control gangs have throughout the country and the lack of democratic institutions. But having served in a true failed state — Somalia after the collapse of its government in 1992 — I do not believe in retrospect this is accurate.

Haiti is at the extreme low end of functionality. It has an underperforming, unelected government that does not control all the country's territory and cannot provide even the most basic services. Its prime minister, around whom swirls accusations of [malfeasance](#), has little support. But it does have a government, security forces, diplomatic representation and a functional airport and seaports. In addition, it has a very vibrant civil society and active intellectual, business and political life, although the current wave of migration is quickly hollowing that out. In short, there is much to work with in Haiti that failed states simply do not have.

But given the government's weakness, and the proximity of violent gangs to the national palace and their ability to shut down fuel and transit at will, it would be foolish to assume this state of fragility can continue indefinitely. All the trend lines are moving in the wrong direction. What there is to work with now may not be present in six months.

The Promise of December 21

It would be wise then to seize the moment offered by the “National Consensus for an Inclusive Transition and Transparent Elections,” also known as the December 21 Accord. Developed by a coalition of business, civil society and political actors, the accord aims to create the architecture for an effective, transparent and representative transitional government that would lead the country to elections by the end of 2023.

The objective of the accord is to “[promote national dialogue](#) in the search for a consensus on milestones ... for the major projects of the transition period, particularly in security, the [c]onstitution and elections, economic reforms, justice and the rule of law, and social and food security.” The accord acknowledged similar past efforts to reach a transitional governing framework — including the [Montana Accord](#) and September 11 political agreement — but noted that these efforts have not worked, even as the desperation of the populace has increased.

The accord calls for a High Council of Transition (HCT) with three prominent individuals: former first lady and presidential candidate Mirande Manigat from the political sector; Chamber of Commerce President Laurent St. Cyr from the business sector; and the president of the Protestant Federation, Calixte Fleuridor, representing civil society. Prime Minister Henry approved this trio and installed them on February 7.

The HCT will develop roundtables to channel Haitians' opinions and mobilize expertise, fostering a kind of moral suasion and gravitas. This is a complex, but essential, undertaking to draw together the views of Haitian society and include them

for the first time in a political process. The first roundtable will be on security, identifying the requirements for restoring essential safety in the country. For any political process to succeed, it will need to be closely aligned with progress on security. The goal of these roundtables is to forge consensus among the main political, social and economic actors of the country on key issues and work with the prime minister and cabinet to define a roadmap for the transition period.

In addition to channeling Haitian voices and expertise to the government, the HCT will be responsible for ensuring electoral credibility and integrity by participating in the selection of members for the country's election management body, known as the Provisional Electoral Council; developing recommendations for the electoral process; and choosing a committee of experts to devise constitutional revisions related to elections.

Along with the HCT, the accord makes provisions for an entity that would fulfill many of the normal tasks of the Haitian legislature, known as the Government Action Control Body (OCAG). The OCAG would have a role in overseeing governments budgets, management and transparency.

Detractors and Spoilers

Some civil society leaders told me in a recent trip they have been put off by an accord that appears to center around dialogue, considered a luxury the country cannot afford. But the strength of the accord's design is that dialogue is channeled through the HCT to have an immediate impact on governance and delivery of services as the HCT advises the prime minister and cabinet. It accepts the reality of the current de facto government but immediately broadens decision-making and transparency, creating a conduit for many more Haitian voices. It has both immediacy in better decision-making and more effective governance, with an open door to broader inclusion. As provisional governments go, it is a strong and viable framework.

But why do Henry and his cabinet need to listen to the HCT? After all, it will not sit in the palace and has no formal decision-making role in government. Those who signed on to the accord suggested it will depend in part on the support December 21 receives from Haiti's key allies, who without tipping the political balance, could nonetheless be supportive, even insistent on following processes spelled out in the accord. In part, it will also depend on the functioning of the roundtables and the quality of their recommendations.

Since the signing of the accord, a number of additional groups have offered their endorsement, and some work has been done on planning for the roundtables. But to succeed, the accord needs active diplomatic and financial support, starting with a secretariat that could manage the day-to-day tasks of the HCT and the OCAG. More importantly, a secretariat could work on the larger challenge of running the very complex roundtables and building the infrastructure for the inclusion of civil society in the accord. There are a number of models for how this could be done, such as [Tunisia's National Quartet Dialogue](#) in 2011 and Colombia's recent Regional Dialogues. Some have extensive participation, others channel through a small grouping. And recent models include the skillful use of social media and technology to receive and collate views, which could overcome the many security challenges in Haiti that will make gathering difficult. A secretariat would also oversee engagement with experts and deployment of their expertise, both in the evolution of the accord's design, and in the many technical issues the roundtables will confront.

The December 21 accord, as any proposal in Haiti, has its vociferous detractors. Some believe it has sidelined the earlier Montana Accord; others see it as doing little more than propping up an unpopular prime minister. As usual, there are accusations of interference by outsiders. But even if one accepts these criticisms, it is difficult to see a better path forward. What the December 21 accord brings is the most inclusive architecture for transition to date. It would be far better at this point to modify and build out this architecture than start over, losing another year in the process.

There could be an additional one or even two members added to the HCT, an inclusive debate on how to conduct the roundtables, and wide-ranging (but hopefully rapid) consultations on appointments to the OCAG and the electoral council. The accord is set up with a certain flexibility. But it cannot be effective if it is simply weakened at every turn by those who believe it doesn't allow them sufficient prominence.

International Support is Invaluable

While the accord was designed and is being managed exclusively by Haitians, it will need strong support from the international community to be viable. Many international actors are cowed by accusations that previous involvement in Haiti has been wasted at best, or counter-productive at worst, and they should leave the country alone to find its way. While the international community has often acted clumsily in Haiti, this argument is unsettling, given the many periods when close international partnerships have yielded [notable progress in all social indicators in Haiti](#), and the country's rapid decline following the last pullback of the international community in 2017. For the December 21 accord to succeed, international actors will need to provide funding and expertise for the roundtable process.

December 21 is not a panacea for Haiti's many challenges, but it is also not simply another proposal among many that have come and gone. In setting up an inclusive, flexible, transparent architecture for transition, it offers the best formula to date. Starting over at this point would be incredibly costly. It is an opportunity not to be missed.

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