



Four Questions that Could Determine Haiti's Future

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recent developments underscore the immense challenges in achieving a democratic transition.
- The short-term danger is that the state will completely collapse due to a severe security crisis.
- International supporters need a sustained, comprehensive strategy to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Thursday, November 21, 2024 / READ TIME: 11 minutes

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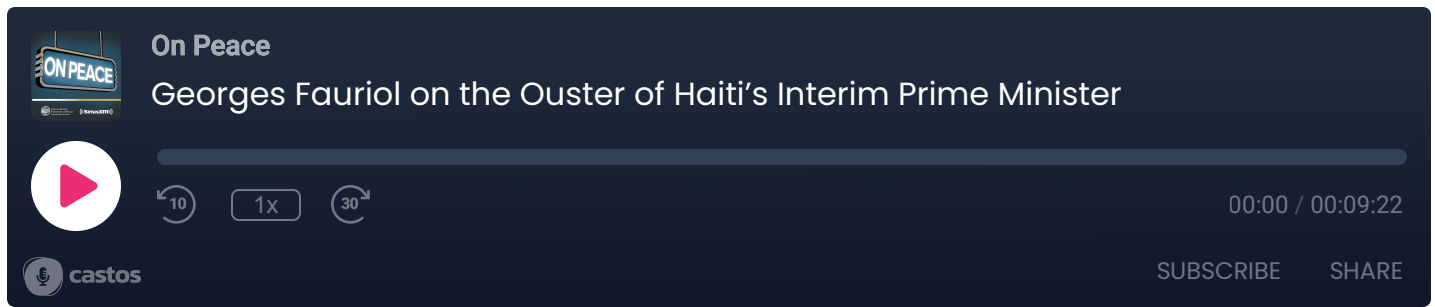
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Much has happened in Haiti over the past two weeks — none of it is reassuring. The Transitional Presidential Council (TPC) fired Prime Minister Garry Conille on November 10, after only six months in office. Moments before an interim prime minister was sworn in the next day, a U.S. commercial airliner was struck by gunfire, forcing a pause in flights to Haiti's international airport. These developments underscore the reality facing Haiti's interim government and the immense challenges it faces in achieving a transition by February 2026, as outlined in an April 3, 2024 agreement. Given this dysfunction, Haitians and their international partners are rightly concerned that the country's evolving political and security crisis will only further deepen.

For the United States, these recent events should lead to a reassessment of its options in support of addressing Haiti's security, political and humanitarian challenges. The process should start with finding answers to four key questions.

1. Can the components of the interim government get on the same page?

Conille's dismissal highlights the overall distrust that has characterized the relations between the prime minister and elements of the TPC. It also shows that some TPC members appear insulated from the painful societal realities facing the country. With [corruption charges](#) targeting three members of the TPC festering since last summer, tensions rose with Conille. His dismissal was preceded by the TPC's demand that he oust Foreign Minister Dominique Dupuy and several other cabinet members, which he refused. Successive meetings between Conille and the TPC, some brokered by Caribbean Community and the Organization for American States, were inconclusive. For many observers, this episode only strengthens the cynicism toward the country's governing class.



Moving forward, the current rotating TPC President, Leslie Voltaire, will ultimately be judged by his ability to foster transparent governance and accountability, confirming that the TPC does not and cannot govern alone. This means clarity in decision-making authority between the TPC and the newly appointed prime minister, Alix Didier Fils-Aimé. In the absence of an elected national parliament, there has been much talk, but little progress, on devising a representative national advisory council. This should focus urgent attention on the need to activate a commitment from the April 3 agreement, the Government Action Oversight Body, whose mandate includes oversight over the cabinet's performance but has remained in procedural and political limbo.

Another imperative is to stand up an inclusive national dialogue process, with the TPC seen as representing a male-dominated clique of self-interested political actors. Much of this is at the mercy of a deteriorating security environment, let alone a humanitarian crisis. In their initial public statements following the recent crisis, both Voltaire and Fils-Aimé underscored the need to address several priorities related to security, economic recovery and elections. A concrete first step would be to formalize the transitional government's Security Council, a critical coordinating body, envisioned as follow-through to the April 3 agreement, that has yet to be functional.

“The short-term danger is that what is left of the Haitian state will collapse before the

international community settles on an effective security approach.”

The Security Council is essential for the oversight and vetting required for a coherent and responsive management of the varying security arrangements international actors are providing. As Haiti shifts its appeal to the international community toward a more conventional U.N. peacekeeping operation (PKO), this is all the more critical. The nebulous nature of arrangements between the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) and Haiti's government was one of several issues that undermined the MSS.

2. What's next for international security support?

The MSS is arguably a missed opportunity, and the question now is whether it can be salvaged. The reality is painful: the Kenyan deployment is nowhere near the number promised and the overall security situation has worsened, with neither the [Port-au-Prince International Airport](#) nor several major port facilities secure from gangs. These gangs' increased lethality and expanded national presence suggests a move toward cartel-like operational ambition. Calculated levels of violence demonstrate that no neighborhood or community is safe, and their actions are increasingly timed for political effect. The fact that these gangs operate with impunity also should draw attention to Haitian political and economic actors that benefit from these developments and the international trafficking networks that energize them.

As the MSS has not dismantled gang violence, it is time to explore other options, which could include:

- **Transitioning to a conventional U.N. PKO mission.** The major virtues of a PKO are that it is by definition a larger-scale effort; incorporates upfront operational, administrative and political capabilities that the MSS lacks; and implies a budgetary support that is more institutional in character and does not leave a Haiti security mission at the mercy of political vagaries in the U.S. or elsewhere. There is already U.S. diplomatic effort behind this.
- **Merging the MSS with a PKO through a robust U.S.-led international coalition.** This could help address a conceptual policy gap. Washington has not adequately explained Kenya's leadership role in addressing Haiti security problems. But this would require a significant reversal of the Biden administration's posture toward Haiti, framed as a "Haiti-led solution" and fearful of commitments that might lead to U.S. boots on the ground. With the latter as a backdrop, the incoming U.S. administration faces some tough choices.

In this regard, one can envision two other security scenarios anchored by the reality that the MSS and upgrading Haitian National Police (HNP) capabilities are insufficient.

- **A U.S. approach as part of a regional policy principle.** Such an approach would take the fight directly to Haiti's gangs and related lucrative regional trafficking networks. This would include specialized private contractors and could overlap with other foreign trainers working with the HNP. The political messaging would be important in underscoring U.S. policy clarity in both its Haiti and regional context, and in effect give notice to Haiti's political leaders that Washington expects positive outcomes from their end as well. The downside may be that the sheer scale of gang violence and its geographical expansion make this option difficult to bring to scale.
- **The "Bukele option."** Another alternative may be shaped by political developments in Haiti and influenced by experiences elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America. Nayib Bukele, the president of El Salvador, has taken a [hard-nosed approach](#) against gangs and violent elements in his country. This approach could likely have adherents in Haiti, the region and in Washington. It would require a creative mix of up-front U.S. security and political assistance for the creation of a key ingredient to Bukele's relative achievements: a modern army. Haiti's army, disbanded in the 1990s but re-established over the past decade, remains a very small force, and both within Haiti and among international partners raises profound concerns.

There are many downsides to this path, including that what has politically and operationally worked in El Salvador may in fact be a failing strategy in Haiti. There is nonetheless a legitimate policy review needed in context of parallel international efforts to rebuild HNP capabilities and in the process identify distinct missions better addressed by a professional, modern and well-equipped military. This is also likely to forestall a more provocative scenario that might unexpectedly emerge: an offer, facilitated by Haitian intermediaries, from a non-Western power to insert paramilitary forces.

3. Whither international support?

Conille's dismissal may not be a surprise to many Haiti analysts, but that it is coinciding with an upcoming change in the U.S. administration — and possible U.S. policy — is material. The TPC's ousting of the prime minister may be interpreted by some as engineered to benefit Haiti's Lavalas party-related political constituency, which could bring up historical baggage from the 1990s and early 2000s in the minds of some in Washington.

All of this underscores the policy challenges inherent in transitioning to a conventional PKO or a robust U.S.-led security commitment. The PKO option is the most likely to achieve success, the gradual rebuilding of the HNP, and overall support for an orderly political transition. It short-circuits the diplomatically cumbersome aspects of the MSS operation and would boost multilateral deployment numbers and budgets to a meaningful level. Nonetheless, for U.S. policymakers such a move would need to overcome several diplomatic, political and Haitian public perception challenges. When initially explored earlier this fall at the U.N., a PKO faced Russian and Chinese opposition. Ultimately, the MSS was [renewed](#) for another year.

The political appetite for continued U.S. engagement in Haiti will be shaped partly by the worsening security and humanitarian situation, and its ramifications for U.S. immigration and refugee politics. Part of that assessment will include determining

whether a conventional PKO is the best fit for a security situation that is mutating into an open-ended gang environment with criminal networks extending into the rest of the Caribbean Basin.

Tactically, there are useful lessons from previous PKO engagement in Haiti (1994-2017), which counters the perception that it was a failure. But a more immediate downside is that it will take time to deploy and begin on-the-ground operations — with near-full deployment by late Spring 2025. Can Haiti wait that long? An intermediary measure may be an initial boost from a robust, most likely U.S.-led effort, some of it with private contractors, to train and equip the HNP, while also incorporating some remnants of the MSS operation.

4. Is a February 2026 democratic governance transition achievable?

Let's face the facts: the short-term danger is that what is left of the Haitian state will collapse before the international community settles on an effective security approach. Reassuringly, the TPC leadership and the new prime minister have reiterated their commitment to elections in 2025 and a transition to an elected government by early 2026. It has also highlighted that the country's insecurity is the top priority. For Washington and other key capitals, the early 2026 transition is non-negotiable. So, 2025 will have to be the year of miracles.

Ultimately, the TPC's fate and the transitional governance architecture will be shaped by its ability to achieve at least a short-list of goals. Beyond the *sine qua non* of street-level security, this includes: constitutional reform and a referendum; national elections; and policies that energize the economy and address the humanitarian crisis. Two existing U.S. initiatives can make a significant difference: the HOPE/HELP trade preference legislation, and the [Global Fragility Act](#), which has the virtue of focusing on institutional "resiliency" and has a 10-year program lifespan. Haiti's

robust, if weakened, civil society and large, diverse U.S.-based diaspora can energize with follow-on actions.

Haiti needs focused financial resources and expertise for pending initiatives. One example is the steering committee (Comité de Pilotage) for the National Conference, which could frame productive decisions needed to achieve a democratic transition in February 2026. In connection with the process to reform the 1987 constitution, the National Conference recently named a coordinator to lead a study group composed of constitutional experts from Haiti and the diaspora. The coordinator, Jerry Tardieu, is as a former parliamentarian who previously led a constitutional review committee with conclusions that were well-respected.

Other tasks for the National Conference's steering committee are quite specific and include: generating a package of laws enabling the completion of the constitutional reform process, and what has been framed as a restatement of the societal compact between the state and civil society and political parties, meaning, outlining in broad terms a national vision for the remainder of the century. Another example is a civil society-led undertaking, the Groupe d'Assistance à la Transition (GAT), whose mission includes mobilizing key stakeholders and serving as a potential interlocutor to the international community's engagement in transition-related efforts.

Even measurable success on the above issues begs the question about the possibility of holding a credible national electoral process. The latter is a high bar considering that elections cannot happen in the absence of street security, and the recreation of an electoral council and the administrative and financial apparatus to make it all happen. The envisioned timetable of a constitutional reform process in spring 2025 and national elections in the second half of the year is nearly impossible to meet. If delayed, the burden falls on Haiti's transition leadership to provide a convincing and workable alternative.

Holding the constitutional referendum may in fact be the most surmountable — and politically necessary — challenge. This is about revising and updating the constitution, not rewriting the entire text. There are some procedural issues to resolve to give the process legitimacy, but the hard work has mostly been done, including a parliamentary commission report, various efforts undertaken by Haitian constitutional scholars, and more recent technical support being provided by international democracy assistance groups.

The next big challenge lies in the politically cumbersome process of recreating the electoral council (which is already underway) and firming up the funding needed for both the pre-election period and the election themselves. Security is not the only challenge; in Haiti’s most recent elections, [voter turnout](#) at the presidential level was near or below 20%.

In the end, no amount of support will be effective unless Haiti’s new leaders put aside personal ambition and partisan aspirations and cooperate. Hopefully the international community has learned from previous engagement in Haiti. Disjointed, piecemeal efforts lacking close coordination with key Haitian actors will not produce the desired result of a democratic governance transition in early 2026.

PHOTO: Kenyan police officers, part of the Multinational Support Mission, guard Haiti’s main port in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Sept. 25, 2024. (Adriana Zehbrauskas/The New York Times)

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PUBLICATION TYPE: Analysis

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