

Clouds gather over Wyclef Jean's Haiti bid

Hip-hop superstar Wyclef Jean flew out of his native Haiti on Friday as clouds gathered over his outsider presidential bid announced barely 24 hours earlier.

"I am leaving because of family obligations, but I will return in several weeks to enter the electoral campaign," the New York-based singer, speaking in Creole, told reporters at Port-au-Prince airport.

"I will not abandon this movement, because the young and the university students are with me. I thank them, as well as the people who were with me yesterday," said Jean, who flew into the country Thursday in a private jet. The Grammy-winning former Fugees frontman has little experience in politics but casts his insurgent bid in the November 28 election as a chance to save a country brought to its knees by poverty, mismanagement and last January's devastating earthquake.

"The United States has (President Barack) Obama, here you're going to have Wyclef," the Haitian-born performer said Thursday after arriving with his wife and daughter.

But even before competing in a race that already features 14 candidates, Jean was hitting obstacles.

While about 500 young people gave him an enthusiastic welcome on Thursday many influential figures in the Caribbean nation, which is infamous for turbulent politics, are less awe-struck.

Questions are being asked about a pop star's suitability for pulling Haiti back from disaster or even whether he is eligible to run.

The constitution requires candidates live at least five years in Haiti and the elections board will decide August 17 whether Jean, whose family emigrated to New York when he was a child, qualifies.

Meanwhile, the would-be savior of Haiti faces continuing questions over whether his Yele Haiti Foundation siphoned off charity money that could have gone to the hundreds of thousands of people left destitute by the earthquake.

Earlier this year, Jean broke down in tears after denying that the foundation had misused funds, as suggested by a 2006 tax return showing that more than a third of its revenues went to cover miscellaneous expenses.

He faces even more serious allegations back in the United States, according to The Smoking Gun website, which reports that Jean owes US tax authorities more than 2.1 million dollars.

While all those questions may yet be cleared up, Jean still has to persuade skeptics that he has the skills and not just charisma to lead.

Outspoken Hollywood actor Sean Penn, who runs a tent city in Haiti for people made homeless by the earthquake, greeted Jean's campaign launch with a stinging rebuke.

"He has been virtually silent. For those of us in Haiti he has been a non-presence," said Penn in an interview with CNN on Wednesday.

"So, I want to see someone who is really, really willing to sacrifice for their country and not just someone who I personally saw with a vulgar entourage of vehicles that demonstrated a wealth in Haiti that -- in context -- I felt (was) a very obscene demonstration."

Even Jean's former Fugees bandmate, Pras, gave the cold shoulder, according to the New York Daily News. Pras was quoted saying he had endorsed another candidate, Michel Martell, "because he is the most competent candidate for the job."