

# **The Fall of Aristide and Haiti's Current Predicament**

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To understand Haiti's authoritarian and turbulent politics—only 7 of its 44 presidents have served out their terms, and there have been only 2 peaceful transitions of power since the beginning of the republic—it is critical to analyze the material and historical circumstances of the colonial period. French colonialism generated an authoritarian tradition rooted in the legacy of the plantation economy. Based on slavery, this economy created a real dilemma for Haiti's founding leaders, a dilemma that was never resolved satisfactorily.

There has always been a very clear link between economic structure and political system in Haiti. For instance, immediately after gaining independence in 1804, the country's founders confronted a cruel choice. They needed to restart a devastated economy and yet the material foundation on which emancipation could flourish was itself inimical to individual freedom. Indeed, material recovery depended on agricultural exports—primarily sugar—based on plantation production, which in turn required coercive forms of labor. Haiti's founding fathers, Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion, were all bent on revitalizing this mode of production, but this posed a crucial dilemma: how to reconcile the safeguard of emancipation and the former slaves' aspirations to become an independent peasantry with the drastic labor discipline that the plantation economy required. If they preserved emancipation by supporting the former slaves' aspirations to become independent peasants, they would ultimately condemn the country to material underdevelopment. If they promoted an immediate economic recovery, Haiti's rulers would be compelled to

impose a military-like discipline on the newly freed masses and they would thus emasculate emancipation itself. Thus, in spite of ending slavery, the Haitian revolution and its subsequent defense reinforced militaristic patterns of behavior and a hierarchical social structure.

In fact, top officers not only gave orders and expected obedience but they reaped the spoils of power. They greatly benefited from the state's grossly unequal redistribution of land with which they sought to establish themselves as a new class of planters. It is true, however, that the attempt to restore the plantation system was not completely self-serving; it responded also to a question of survival, of generating the resources for a strong military with which to defend Haiti's independence. Haitian rulers had good reasons to fear the aggression of the great powers of the time. As defenders of white supremacy, these powers abhorred the first successful black revolution against slavery and feared the revolution's consequences for their respective empires.

Thus, the contradictions of the plantation system, the hostility of western imperial forces, and the class aspirations of Haitian leaders created a historical fissure between a militaristic state of the few and the wider society of the many. In this sense, at the very beginning of independence, a real class society crystallized. In addition to the issue of class, there was also the question of color. Mulattos have historically enjoyed more status, privileges, and wealth than the black majority and this reality has generated political tensions and conflicts between the two groups. The practice of exploiting color for political ends has

always played a major role in Haitian history and continues to reflect the persistence of racial divisions and inequalities inherited from the colonial period.

Haiti's authoritarian tradition is therefore rooted in the legacies of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance as well as in the vicissitudes of the early period of independence. This tradition, however, is only part of the story. For the revolution itself and the struggles of the newly freed slaves to escape from the harsh discipline of the plantation economy are clear symbols of the Haitian quest for liberty. Indeed, former slaves did not put up with the attempted restoration of this economy. They dreamt of an agrarian egalitarianism and simply wanted to own some land and subsist independently on it. Thus, emancipation generated the eventual abandonment of the estate economy and the rise of a smallholding peasantry. Haitian rulers were incapable of imposing the rigid discipline required by the plantation system; former slaves could not be easily compelled into a new servitude, they always had the opportunity to exit the plantation cage and become *marrons*--individuals suspicious of the state and fleeing its authoritarianism. Freedom in this sense implied freedom from any central authority, representative or otherwise. Thus, the plantation system collapsed gradually and Haiti became a Republic of peasant proprietors bent mostly on subsistence production.

Paradoxically, the rise of this peasantry hindered the limited chances there might have been for the productive development of the economy. The steady decline of agriculture was not, however, a simple matter of a peasant economy of

subsistence and of a growing subdivision of land, it was principally the consequence of the utter deficiencies of state assistance and the lack of significant incentives for peasant production. To that extent, peasants have always been the quintessential *moun andeyo*—those who are taxed but marginalized and without representation. Not surprisingly, the peasantry's condition has symbolized both the country's material stagnation and acute patterns of class exploitation.

With rare exceptions, Haiti's numerous constitutions, beginning with the one promulgated in 1801 under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture have all ratified the providential authoritarianism of a single all-powerful individual. Toussaint's 1801 Charter set the tone for future generations by declaring him Governor General of the island "for life." While life mandates have not been a universal feature of all Haitian constitutions, they shaped political customs and expectations and legitimated the dictatorship of personal rule. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Haitian rulers have claimed to embody the people and indeed God's will. Haitian rulers have thus tended to run the country like imperial and monarchical presidents. They have in their majority sought to suppress challenges to their supremacy and stifle the autonomous development of popular forms of power. They have shown little sympathy for democratic practice.

Far from being an innate aptitude, this authoritarian political tradition is rooted in the material conditions of the country. It reflects *la politique du ventre*, the "politics of the belly." This politics is a logical consequence of the material

scarcity and unproductive economy that have marked the history of Haiti. Given that poverty and destitution have always been the norm, and that private avenues to wealth have always been rare, politics became an entrepreneurial vocation, virtually the sole means of material and social advancement for those not born into wealth and privilege. Controlling the state turned into a zero-sum game, a violent fight to monopolize the spoils of political power.

Thus, scarcity has meant that those holding political power have used any means available to maintain their position of privilege and authority. Relinquishing office peacefully has always been an extremely costly, difficult, and rare occurrence. Not surprisingly, compromise is extraordinarily uncommon and the army as the institution with a monopoly of violence has played a decisive role in resolving and instigating political conflicts.

With the coming to power of Francois Duvalier's dictatorship in 1957, the army was challenged and undermined by the creation of a paramilitary organization—the *macoutes*. Built to repress dissent and check the army, the *macoutes* became the vehicle of a despotic order. And yet, Duvalier had some legitimacy based on a populist and demagogic ideology of *negritude*—a form of black power. Black power in this instance was a cover that masked the ascendancy of a black elite that lorded it over the poor majority. In fact, Francois Duvalier's regime failed to generate any improvement in Haiti's economic or political life. Moreover, the regime's tyrannical nature caused a massive exodus of Haitians to other shores.

When Duvalier died in 1971, his son Jean-Claude assumed the Presidency for life. He promised an economic revolution and a political liberalization. In the mid 1970s he launched a relatively "open," technocratic project—what he called *Jean-Claudisme*. He stopped the worst excesses of the *macoutes*, tolerated some dissent, and rehabilitated the army as an institution. In these conditions, the country experienced a short period of economic development and hesitant liberalization. By the early 1980s, however, *Jean-Claudisme* exhausted itself; liberalization was abruptly terminated and repression became the rule again. Moreover, economic growth came to a halt due to massive corruption and state predation.

Yet, the liberalization of the late 1970s had contributed to the emergence of an increasingly assertive civil society. Many non-governmental organizations challenged the abuses of Duvalierism and began calling for social justice and human rights. Prominent among these organizations was the radical wing of the Catholic Church, known as *Ti Legliz* (little church) which articulated a devastating public critique of *macoutisme* based on the prophetic vision of the Theology of Liberation. For *Ti Legliz* and the vast majority of Haitians, real change demanded a massive social, political, and economic transformation, a revolution that would overturn almost three decades of Duvalierist domination. It is under these conditions of dissent and growing mass protests that Jean-Claude Duvalier was forced to flee the country on February 1986.

It appeared that with the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship the country would start a new history freed from its long legacy of despotism. A wave of national optimism and euphoria buried temporarily the conflicts between antagonistic actors, institutions, and social classes. These conflicts, however, quickly exploded in a series of confrontations between the army, which had inherited power from the dictator, and an assertive popular movement bent on both “*déchouké*”—uprooting—Duvalierists and installing a democratic regime. Ultimately, the military resorted to repression, violently aborting the elections of 1987 and organizing farcical ones in 1988 only to seize power again in a coup a few months later.

The army was, however, a profoundly divided institution; internecine struggles soon generated a series of coups and countercoups. Under massive domestic and international pressures, the men in uniform were compelled to exit the national palace and facilitate the electoral return of civilians. Led by the charismatic and prophetic messianism of Father Jean Bertrand-Aristide, the huge majority of poor Haitians became *Lavalas*—the flood—an unstoppable flood. Elected in a landslide, Aristide assumed the presidency on February 7, 1991; embodying the hopes and aspirations of the *moun andeyo*, he became *Lavalas*.

Aristide was bent on turning the world upside down. He exposed the gigantic class divide separating Haitians, preached that “*tout moun se moun*”—all human beings are human beings, and advocated extra-parliamentary methods of popular rule. He soon discovered, however, that Haiti’s dominant class found

this brand of politics to be thoroughly unacceptable. In September 1991, barely seven months after his presidential inauguration, Aristide was overthrown in a bloody coup and forced into exile.

Incapable of imposing its legitimacy at home and abroad, Raoul Cédras' new military dictatorship remained in power for three violent and repressive years. During this time, Aristide managed to sustain his domestic popularity and mobilize international public opinion against the junta. After a series of failed negotiations between the exiled President and the "de facto" regime of Cédras, 20,000 American troops took over Haiti peacefully with the blessing of Aristide as well as the United Nations. Ironically, Aristide, the advocate of liberation theology, the prophet of anti-capitalism, and the nationalist leader, knew that to restore his presidency he had no choice but to depend, and depend utterly, on massive American military assistance. The circumstances leading to Aristide's "second coming" changed him immensely. Constrained by the overwhelming American presence and by the demands of international financial institutions, he began collaborating with former enemies to implement policies that he had hitherto rejected. He abandoned the priesthood to become a Machiavellian "Prince," maneuvering unsuccessfully to recover the wasted time of exile by prolonging his presidency for three more years. In February 1996, bowing to external pressures, Aristide relinquished the reins of government to his former Prime Minister, René Préal. However reluctantly he may have done so, Aristide engineered the country's first peaceful electoral transition of power.

The rituals of democracy were taking root in spite of manifest shortcomings and flaws.

The Préval presidency was marred by internal power struggles within *Lavalas*, culminating in a major split between Aristide and his erstwhile supporters. In addition, it symbolized the politics of “*doublure*”—meaning those holding public office were not those ruling the country. Indeed, secluded in his private residence in Tabarre, Aristide maintained his hegemonic presence; he was the power behind Préval’s throne. The result was permanent crisis and political paralysis. The country suffered from increasing corruption, crime, and poverty. The euphoria of 1991 as well as the dreams rekindled by Aristide’s return in 1994 gradually faded away, giving rise to popular apathy and cynicism. A series of rigged elections kept alive democratic rituals but undermined the victors’ legitimacy. This lack of validation was particularly evident in the controversial 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections, won overwhelmingly by Aristide and his *Fanmi Lavalas* party. Supported by the United States and France, the opposition regrouped in the “*Groupe des 184*” refused to recognize the legality of these ballots and contributed to the second fall of *Lavalas* and his leader.

Many observers on the left have argued that Aristide’s second fall was the result of American imperialism and had little to do with his own policy failures and the country’s domestic class structure. While there is a certain plausibility to

this argument, it is ultimately flawed; it ignores Haitian agency and exaggerates the omnipotence of US hegemony.

There is no doubt that the Bush administration had little sympathy for Aristide. While it reluctantly acknowledged his legitimacy as president of Haiti, it opposed him for ideological reasons and starved his regime of badly needed foreign assistance. Formulated and exercised by two ultra-conservatives, Roger Noriega and Otto Reich, Washington's policy was bent on empowering Aristide's adversaries. The US encouraged and financed the development of the opposition regrouped in *Convergence Démocratique* and the *Groupe des 184*. Moreover, while it may not have directly supported the rise of the armed insurgency, Washington clearly knew that unsavory elements of the disbanded Haitian army were training in the Dominican Republic with the objective of violently overthrowing Aristide. And yet, it did nothing to stop them. In fact, the US simply abandoned Aristide even though he agreed to the terms of a CARICOM engineered compromise—a compromise that the opposition rejected. Instead of compelling the opposition to accept it, which would have emasculated Aristide's powers and generated a government of national unity, the White House ominously "called into question [Aristide's] fitness to continue to govern" and urged "him to examine his position carefully, to accept responsibility, and to act in the best interests of the people of Haiti." In short, once the armed insurgency began and chaos engulfed the country, the Bush administration seized the opportunity to force Aristide's exit.

Imperial America, however, was neither the sole, nor necessarily the decisive reason for Aristide's fall. The fall would have been very unlikely had it not been for an armed insurgency and Aristide's own policies. The insurgency, paradoxically, was partly rooted in Aristide's very methods of governance. Aristide did little to transform the inherited authoritarian tradition. He armed young unemployed thugs, the *Chimères*, to intimidate the opposition; he sought to govern alone as a messiah; and he resisted for too long making meaningful concessions. While voicing a radical rhetoric, he followed the neo-liberal strictures of structural adjustment. In addition, his regime was incapable of resisting the temptations of corruption in spite of its promise of "peace of mind and peace in the belly." Finally, many Lavalas high cadres contributed to the perverse persistence of the "narco-state" inherited from the military dictatorship.

Not surprisingly, Aristide lost the unconditional popular support he once enjoyed and some of his own *Chimères* turned against him. The assassination of Amiot Metayer, the leader of the Gonaives' *Chimères*, the "*Cannibal Army*," generated violent anti-*Lavalas* protests and marked the beginning of the armed insurrection that ultimately forced Aristide into exile. Convinced that it was Aristide himself who ordered Metayer's murder, the "*Cannibal Army*" led by Metayer's brother Butteur, swore to wage war against the president until he was overthrown. When former soldiers and death squad leaders of the disbanded army joined forces with the "*Cannibals*," Aristide's fate was virtually sealed. The United States and France, and to a lesser degree Canada gave the final push that

led to his fall.

Besieged by the harsh material realities of a devastated economy, his own demons, a reactionary elite, and an increasingly hostile international community, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was incapable of seizing the historic opportunity of creating a mass movement that might have begun to equalize life's chances among Haitians. That the armed insurgents, former members of the disbanded and despised military, found little popular resistance in their march to power, symbolized Aristide's ultimate failure. The triumph of the guns proved, however, once again that the old Creole proverb, "*Konstitisyon se papye, bayonet se fe*"—A constitution is made up of paper, but bayonets are made up of steel—defined Haitian politics.

Moreover, the triumph of the gun reflected the proliferation and parcellization of violence. While *Lavalas* had its *Chimères*, its foes had their own violent means. Disbanded by Aristide in 1994, the army went underground without a clear chain of command only to resurface with the anti-Aristide insurgency. The army, however, had no monopoly over the means of violence. Different political groups formed a number of armed gangs over which they had uncertain control. Former *macoutes* who had joined the Cédras junta's brutal "*attachés*" and the paramilitary organization *Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (FRAPH)*, re-emerged to form the new death squads and the criminal "*Zinglentos*" bands. Narco-trafficants established also their own violent syndicates. Not surprisingly, the complete breakdown of central authority

accompanying the fall of Aristide generated a hellish environment. And yet, *Lavalas'* successors, the United Nations military contingent—the so-called *Minustah*—and the weak interim government of President Alexandre and Prime Minister Latortue, have neither the will nor the capacity to unleash an effective policy of disarmament.

*Minustah* and the interim government have failed to curb criminal activities. In addition, they have used repressive means against Aristide's supporters while tolerating the abuses of right-wing paramilitary groups. Under these conditions, a meaningful national reconciliation is unlikely even if parliamentary and presidential elections are held at the end of the year as promised. It is difficult to see how such elections can settle the unending crisis besieging Haiti. In the first place, given the climate of insecurity and the weak and divided electoral commission, it is hard to believe that an environment favorable for free and fair elections exists. With many areas of the country under the armed control of gangs and former military, patterns of systematic intimidation and fraudulent vote counting are to be expected. Moreover, even if logistical problems were to be resolved and the elections are held, it is not clear that the losers will accept the results. Post-electoral conflicts are thus likely.

Moreover, even assuming that things go well, that elections are held in a peaceful and relatively free climate and that losers accept their defeat, there is little to suggest that Haiti's systemic problems will be addressed. So far, the presidential candidates and the political parties have offered virtually nothing in

terms of programmatic solutions to the predicaments of acute poverty, class divisions, economic stagnation, and ecological degradation. I am afraid that under these conditions, the electoral process will have little legitimacy and will represent a rather meaningless ritual.

Finally, the proliferation of political parties numbering well over 100 that have no popular backing and are mere expressions of the power of a "big man," has transformed the political system into a circus. Mass parties representing and articulating the interests of large constituencies and having a national reach are virtually non-existent. Instead of organized and structured mass parties, there is "one manism" rooted in clientelistic and personalistic criteria. In fact, it may well be more appropriate to describe the vast majority of Haitian parties as "groupuscules." A "groupuscule" is, in the words of Kern Delince, an "*ad hoc* social grouping, which specializes in the accomplishment of a specific and temporary objective."<sup>1</sup> It has no meaningful long-term program and is a mere vehicle to acquire power.

These bleak realities have prompted some to advocate an international protectorate that would take temporary control of Haiti for at least 10 years to set the country on the path of economic reconstruction and political reconciliation. While this idea is not completely farfetched given Haiti's thorough dependence on outside forces, it is unlikely to materialize; and if it did, there is no reason to

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<sup>1</sup> Cited as quoted in Alex Dupuy, "1986-1990: The Struggle for a Democratic Alternative," unpublished manuscript, 1995, pp. 14.

believe that it would succeed in improving the lot of the destitute majority. The American occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934 may have created a semblance of an infrastructure and a form of centralized government, but it contributed neither to long-term self-sustaining economic development nor to lasting democratic forms of accountability. In fact, there is little to suggest that foreign dominance can end vicious historical cycles and unleash virtuous ones. The second American occupation that restored Aristide to power in the mid 1990s should disabuse those promoting a trusteeship for Haiti. Moreover, such a trusteeship would quickly unleash a wave of nationalistic opposition to what Haitians would perceive as a new imperial occupation. But it is not just a matter of nationalism, it is also the fact that the so-called "international community" has neither the will, nor the interest in effecting the transformations required for establishing an equitable and democratic Haiti. The powers that be have no appetite for long-term ventures in state-building; the costs are simply too high, especially for a country like Haiti which has no strategic value and no significant natural resources. This is not to absolve the local Haitian ruling class from its utter failure, but to indicate that it is not alone in its resistance to social change and equity.

Thus, given the constellation of internal and external forces it is likely that power will return to the most reactionary elements of Haitian society, that the army will be reestablished, and that the ugly realities of the past will reappear dressed in new garb. The current situation invites therefore pessimism, but

Haitians have always struggled against all odds. As black slaves, in the age of unfettered white supremacy, they fought for their freedom and defeated the all-powerful French Empire and established an independent nation. Currently, fragile networks of community organizations invent means of survival for the poor that defy the ugly realities of squalor and violence. It is these networks that offer an alternative to the existing predicament. They are the embryonic forms of responsive, accountable power. Whether they can go beyond their local reach remains questionable, but they show that the possibility of hope is never completely foreclosed. Thus, it is possible to hope that having been on the brink of a civil war and facing a descent into hell, some key segments of the Haitian political class will finally realize that they should accept the logic of democracy. They may finally come to respect the verdict of the ballot box and understand that they can no longer tolerate the appalling inequalities between the destitute majority and the affluent minority. Perhaps then new elections will carry to power the more progressive sectors of civil society and perhaps there will be a chance to push forward a modicum of social reforms. The history of the country warns us, however, that material constraints and entrenched class interests weigh heavily against this happy denouement.