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Haiti

Fall of the house of Aristide

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More than two thousand hundred dollar bills, rendered unreadable by mildew! The Aristide supporters who took part in the looting of his residence were surprised to find this sum in a strongbox concealed in a subterranean hideaway. They then understood that for their dear president, 200,000 dollars represented no great amount. To understand the current situation, we have to imitate the behaviour of these Aristide supporters, ignore our first impressions, and dig a little deeper into Haitian politics.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359311.jpg>]

For many well-intentioned people, explaining Aristide's departure is simple. He was the victim of a coup which took place in three phases:

1. the Haitian bourgeoisie destabilized the “democratically elected” Aristide government because, in spite of its weaknesses, it had introduced reforms;
2. former military elements linked to the CIA took control of a part of Haiti in a bloodbath;
3. a unit of the US army came to kidnap Aristide and force him to sign a letter of resignation. Aristide would, on this account, be a kind of new Allende. Except that Allende did not stockpile dollars in his residence!

The thesis that we have just presented, which is broadly speaking that of pro-Aristide propaganda, rests on several untruths. In fact, Aristide had not carried out the slightest progressive reform during his second term and there is no Aristide/bourgeoisie conflict for a very simple reason; Aristide is himself one of the biggest bourgeois in Haiti. We have seen the convergence of four processes: a conflict internal to the dominant classes, a very broad mobilization of intellectuals and a significant fraction of the dominated classes against a reactionary and despotic regime, a revolt against Aristide on the part of the armed bands that he had previously used and the intervention of former military elements in conditions which remain unclear. The best proof that we have not witnessed a simple “coup” is that, despite the past crimes of some among them, the paramilitaries who advanced from the North of Haiti were welcomed as liberators by many people. In some places, the police stations and the symbols of the regime were attacked before the arrival of the paramilitaries. As one commentator wrote, even Beelzebub accompanied by a horde of dragons would have been welcomed as a hero.

The role played by the United States in this complex crisis is far from being as simple as is generally believed. Already under Clinton, Aristide was no friend of the Republicans. However, he had the advantage of ensuring social calm, applying the neoliberal reforms that were demanded and recycling US propaganda. Rare are the heads of state that, like him, congratulated the “success” of the Johannesburg summit on durable development! While exercising economic and political pressure on Aristide, Washington supported him until the eve of his departure as the rope supports a hanged man. However, Bush refused to send the soldiers that Aristide demanded to protect his regime. It was only when Aristide's armed gangs (the “chimères”) began to pillage Port-au-Prince and to practice extortion on US citizens that Colin Powell abandoned Aristide, following in the footsteps of the then French foreign secretary, Dominique de Villepin. In proceeding in this way for four years, the US has allowed an experience initially emerging from the left to pursue its degeneration to the end and thus discredit itself.

The thesis of the kidnapping of Aristide, which would not be absurd a priori, is not very credible even if it has enjoyed a great echo. Aristide himself did not breathe a word about such a kidnapping when he spoke on the radio upon his arrival in the Central African Republic. And up until now, he has not succeeded in formulating a coherent narrative. The leaders of his party have not taken up his thesis and Aristide's letter of “resignation” was read with a straight face by his prime minister and trusted aide, Yvon Neptune.

Aristide's system

The local and parliamentary elections in May 2000 were the occasion of a quite incredible fraud; the goal was not to win the elections but to win all the posts. The international observers did not see much of this, because the essence of the fraud took place after the vote. Stuffing the ballot boxes, changing statements, intimidation of protesters, anything went so long as the desired result was achieved. The militants of Lavalas (the organization of Aristide supporters) had received bountiful supplies of weapons for the occasion. And when there were not enough of them, the police helped out. The president of the Provisional Electoral Council refused to sign its statement and judged it more prudent to exile himself when Aristide telephoned him to say that it was "a matter of life and death". The Organization of American States (OAS) nonetheless remained deaf to the complaints of the opposition and concentrated on a secondary problem concerning some senators. The result was a long political crisis. The OAS sent missions to try and reconcile the regime and the opposition. But its main reproaches were addressed to the opposition, which was accused of being too intransigent. The burning of the opposition's offices in December 2001 encouraged it in the belief that new elections would be impossible, since the armed bands in the pay of the regime could act freely.

"Jesus, Toussaint-Louverture, Aristide - the credo of the Haitian people", read the banners hung up above the streets of Port-au-Prince until recently. Aristide has over several years built a system which inexorably borrowed the traits of Duvalierism; fraudulent elections, generalized corruption, vassalization of the justice system and the official forces of repression (the army in the case of Duvalier, the police for Aristide), generalized impunity, the establishment of armed parallel bands, repression of the press and of trade unions and other organized movements, attacks against the autonomy of the universities, a struggle against recalcitrant sectors of the bourgeoisie, an ideology based on a claimed defence of the "black race", manipulation of Voodoo, a double language in relation to imperialism and a cult of the personality. François Duvalier presented himself as a "leader of the third world" persecuted by the USA. Those leaders who, like Hugo Chavez, imprudently took up Aristide's defence risk confirming him in this role. One cannot however place an equals sign between Aristide and Duvalier. Unlike François Duvalier (who had threatened the US with a turn to Moscow), Aristide reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1996, and remains, it seems, an admirer of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro.

From Castro, Aristide would have taken the notion of the single party, harsh repression of opponents and direct dialogue with the masses. On the other hand, the former priest has abandoned any project of social reform since returning to the presidency in February 2001. Even the semblance of agrarian reform that his predecessor, René Préval, had to some extent attempted, was abandoned. The peasant organization KOZEPEP, set up with Préval's assistance, played a significant role in the electoral fraud of the year 2000, but it nonetheless had to close shop because of the pressure it was under. Its leader Charles Suffrard went into exile in the US. The Ministry of Social Affairs systematically took the part of the employers against the workers. When some trades unionists linked to the Batay Ouvriye movement were killed near Cap Haïtien the regime turned against the victims. Some of them, including some of the wounded, were taken by helicopter to Port-au-Prince. They only got out of prison several months later, after a solidarity campaign.

In April 2002, following negotiations, parliament voted for a law almost doubling the minimum wage, which had not changed for years and had become totally obsolete. It was primarily a propaganda action and a means of putting pressure on the employers. Meanwhile, the prime minister accused them of having light skins and not being real Haitians. After the law was passed, the wages of state employees were not increased, when they were paid at all, while the law was effectively ignored in the private sector. It was, moreover a trade unionist who informed the minister of social affairs that the law had been voted through!

Priority to business

Under Aristide's rule, a remodeling of Haitian capital took place, just as had been the case under Duvalier. Contrary to legend, significant sectors of the Haitian bourgeoisie are linked to Aristide, such as the Mews group, which has been friendly with all the regimes of recent decades, or Haiti's biggest bank, Unibank, created ten years ago. Some bankrupt enterprises have been bought up by front men to Aristide's profit, while businessmen have been subjected to extortion or abducted. One foreign entrepreneur has said that during an interview with Aristide, the latter asked him for a commission of 20%. However, if the revelations of former policemen are to be believed, the essence of the Aristide fortune could have another origin, the cocaine traffic. It has been revealed that, increasingly, police departmental heads were chosen in accordance with their abilities to manage the cocaine trade. Jean Baudoin Kétant was, it seems, the key man in this trade in Haiti. He has been linked to three Colombian cartels at once, and the DEA (the US anti-drugs agency) says it has been trying to arrest him since the 1980s. He was for a time close to Aristide, but the latter finally delivered him to US justice last year, for reasons that it would be very interesting to know. During his trial, held in Florida in February 2004, he claimed that Aristide controlled 85% of the cocaine trade passing through Haiti. He had himself channeled tens of millions of dollars as commission. A Haitian entrepreneur, Olivier Nadal, has claimed that the Unibank group was used by Aristide for laundering money.

Since his exile in Washington (1992-1994), Aristide has been very closely linked to the US Democratic party. And not only for ideological reasons! Under Aristide, Haiti, "the poorest country in the western hemisphere", as they like to say in the US, was fourth on the list of states spending the most money on lobbying activities in the US. As a counterpart to this, Taiwan has significantly subsidized the Lavalas administration. Already, in 1991, Aristide used part of a speech to the general assembly of the United Nations to propose that Taiwan regain its seat at the UN. A declaration which seemed incongruous at the time, and which passed largely unnoticed because he was overthrown by a military coup some days later.

Important mobilizations

On December 5, 2003, armed supporters of the president, the "chimères", assaulted a student demonstration at the state university. The rector, who tried to negotiate, had his legs broken with an iron bar. Even under François Duvalier such acts were never witnessed in a university. For educational and intellectual circles, it was too much. University and high school students then gave their support to the opposition demonstrations, providing them with the force and determination they had lacked and bringing broad layers of society into their slipstream. In Port-au-Prince there were several huge demonstrations, most subjected to violent aggression from the chimères, while there were also demonstrations in small towns that had seen no mobilizations for a century.

The Democratic Platform of the Opposition, grouping political parties and associations, was heterogeneous and marked by great confusion. It never made itself the spokesperson for the slightest social demand. The prominence in the movement of a number of industrialists allowed the regime to present it as the expression of the hatred of the exploiters against the people.

However, the depth of the anti-Aristide movement meant the opposition had the strength to resist the formidable pressures exercised by the US, France and Canada. Only a few days before the departure of Aristide, these states were still threatening the opposition with the worst if it did not accept a suicidal cohabitation with the tyrant.

Some hours after the resignation of Aristide, the UN Security Council voted for a resolution authorizing the deployment of an international force in Haiti. This decision was taken at the request of Alexandre Boniface, the judge who had taken the place of Aristide in the national palace. However Washington and Paris, reconciled for the occasion, cannot, for the moment at least, act totally as they wish. Thus, in the tripartite committee (of the opposition, Lavalas, and the "international community") set up after Aristide's departure, the opposition was represented not by some kind of puppet but by Paul Denis, a historic figure of the Haitian left. However, the fact that a former general,

albeit qualified as a “democrat”, was named minister of the Interior and subsequently chosen as prime minister says a lot about the confusion which reigns today among most of the political parties opposed to Aristide.

Social movement against the army

In recent years there has been a certain remobilization of the social movement. The feminist organizations involved in the National Coordination For the Rights of Women (CONAP) have played a key role in the denunciation of the violence of the Aristide regime, which they declared to be “outside the law”. Four years ago, despite the attacks of the “chimères”, they were the first to demonstrate to demand justice after the assassination, often attributed to Aristide himself, of the journalist Jean Dominique. Last autumn the first congress of the Regional Coordination of the organizations of the Southeast was held. It involves associations of very diverse origins, particularly at the political level, but it nonetheless adopted by consensus an anti-governmental resolution. The process of opposition to the Lavalas regime was accompanied by an initial reflection on the balance sheet of 200 years of independence and the necessity of breaking radically with the approaches taken since the departure of Duvalier. The preparation of the 3rd Assembly of Peoples of the Caribbean, held last summer in Haiti, was also the occasion for some interesting thinking. The Collective “Solidarité, identité et liberté” has proposed that 2004 should be a year of refoundation of a national project. In February, 35 organizations of the social movement met in a “democratic and popular regroupment”: feminist organizations, peasant groups, global justice associations, networks of political activists, community radio groups and networks intervening among workers. In a declaration written in mid-March, three of these associations state that “American forces have intervened in Haiti to divert and confiscate the victory of the Haitian people against the dictatorship of Aristide”.

Much has been said about the involvement of former military elements in the overthrow of Aristide, and notably of Guy Philippe, their leader, an admirer of Montesquieu and Pinochet, who would very much like to head the army. However, many uncertainties linger, including as to their real strength. It is probable that the US information services were at least aware of their intentions and that they benefited from complicity inside the Dominican army. One of them has said that they received financing from some Haitian entrepreneurs. It is possible that they acted as simple CIA mercenaries. It could also be that the affair is more complex, and that they had their own project, based on control of the cocaine trade. In December 2000, the US embassy denounced a conspiracy by Guy Philippe and he was forced to leave Haiti. In any case, a possible link-up between Philippe's men and a number of former high ranking soldiers who escaped from prison on February 29 could represent a serious threat for the future, as well as a card that Washington may be tempted to play.