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Haiti

Protests in Haiti repudiate authoritarianism and US intervention Interview

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From 14 February 2021, thousands of Haitians took to the streets every weekend in the capital of Port-au-Prince and elsewhere to protest President Jovenel Moïse's refusal to abdicate power. Moïse, elected with U.S. backing in November 2016, had exploited an alleged loophole in Haiti's constitution that states the duration of the presidential term is five years. Moïse was subsequently attacked and killed in his home on 7 July, in circumstances which have still not been fully clarified. Arvind Dilawar of [Jacobin](#) spoke to Kim Ives, editor of *Haiti Liberté* about the protests, before Moïse's assassination.

What was the spark that ignited the protests?

The latest protests stemmed from Moïse's failure to leave office as president on 7 February 2021, as dictated by Article 134.2 of Haiti's 1987 Constitution. He had made it clear that he intended to remain in power in the months leading up to the date, but his refusal came in a very belligerent manner. The people didn't take to the streets on 7 February, because they hoped that he might resign at some point, but he didn't. Since then, every weekend the demonstrations have increased in size and the tone has become harsher.

There is a slight contradiction in Article 134, which says that the presidential term shall last five years. But 134.2 clarifies that the term will have to begin on 7 February of the election year. So, even though the election was on November 20, 2016, that constitutional article says that the clock starts on 7 February.

Throughout Moïse's presidency there were constant demonstrations, as was the case with his predecessor, Michel Martelly. There were about eighty-four demonstrations per month by the end of 2020; this says a lot, given that COVID was already circulating. So, we could say that it wasn't exactly "the spark", but the straw that broke the camel's back.

Unlike in the past, I do not think it likely that these demonstrations will withdraw from the streets. They have been intensifying since July 2018, when Moïse had to dramatically raise fuel prices in the country because Petrocaribe's oil - and with it the money - was no longer flowing into the country. The IMF, which had to intervene to resolve the conflict, said: "you have to raise oil prices, or you are not going to get a loan". So, he did, and that began the last two and a half years of weekly, if not daily, demonstrations.

What structural problems could be identified to explain the continued mobilization of the Haitian people?

Martelly's government was imposed from above by the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2011, when she travelled to Haiti to - basically - twist the then President René Preval's arm and tell him he had to put Martelly in the runoff. Martelly had come third according to the Electoral Council, so she annulled the Electoral Council and dictated that Martelly was going to be in the runoff.

That marked the beginning of the neo-Duvalierist government in the country after twenty years of alternation between [the Party] Lavalas and the semi-Lavaliste government, between Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his so-called "twin", [René] Preval. It was the United States that introduced this neo-Duvalierist group, which brought with it all the characteristics of Duvalierism: corruption, repression, total insensitivity to the demands of the people, and total openness to U.S., French, and Canadian imperialism to do whatever they wanted with the country. [1]

Indeed, that was its slogan: "Haiti is open for business", which, not coincidentally, was the slogan of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier in the early 1980s, before his overthrow. The people of Haiti have demonstrated since the coming to power of Martelly's party.

This is the backdrop to all the demonstrations, which have been mainly against corruption and repression. But in 2018 they became fiercer and more massive because the flow of funds that Venezuela's Petrocaribe provided to Haiti was closed. At one point, Martelly's prime minister said 94% of the government's special projects were being funded by the Petrocaribe fund. When all that money disappeared, Moïse, who had made all sorts of fantastic promises to people (that in 18 months they would have electricity 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and so on), was left with an even more enraged population.

How serious is corruption in Haiti?

Most of the corruption (and this is what's behind the big protest movement) revolves around money stolen from the Petrocaribe fund. It was the anger generated by this that, shortly after the increase in gasoline in July 2018, became a call from social networks under the slogan "Where is Petrocaribe's money?"

The Venezuelans gave Haiti \$4 billion of cheap oil, about twenty thousand barrels a day. Haiti only had to pay 60% up front, and 40% went to this capital fund, which was supposed to pay for clinics, hospitals, schools, roads and anything that would benefit the Haitian people.

But instead of being used for that purpose, it was stolen, wasted and embezzled on a myriad of fake projects: from invisible stadiums to fake food distribution programs, housing construction and so on. Martelly's government thus disappeared some \$1700 million. It is this corruption, this misappropriation of Petrocaribe funds, that animates the indignation of the Haitian people.

It must be said that Haiti had also received some \$13 billion in reconstruction funds after the earthquake. Ironically, they used in Haiti the same slogan they are using [in Washington] today: "Build back better." But it was wasted and intercepted by various intermediaries and NGOs, and what arrived in Haiti also appears to have been wasted by Martelly's government.

However, what is most present in the consciousness of the protesters are the Petrocaribe funds. It was a very popular solidarity fund, unlike the perception in the case of the earthquake fund (assigned by Bill Clinton), about which Haitians sensed, almost from the beginning, that it was probably not going to do much for them.

How has the Haitian government responded to the protests?

With very strong repression. In November, Moïse reinstated Léon Charles, who was in charge of the Haitian National Police just after the coup d'état against Aristide on 29 February 2004. He was responsible then for a very bloody and ferocious repression against the rebellious masses, mainly in Cite Soleil and Bel Air, the two largest slums in Port-au-Prince.

Moïse brought him back, and he has met all expectations and has even received new powers. Moïse, who has ruled by decree since 13 January 2020, has also created by decree a new repressive force, the National Intelligence Agency, which gives its agents the power not only to spy on citizens, but to arrest and even kill them, because their agents are armed. In addition, they cannot be prosecuted, they have total immunity.

It is a force very similar to the Tonton Macoute of the Duvalier dictatorship. The Tonton Macoute had the same extrajudicial powers. They were the eyes, ears and fists of Duvalier's dictatorship, and allowed him to stay in power for three decades.

This intensification of repressive policies has become evident in recent weeks. Dozens of protesters were killed in the final months of demonstrations. Sometimes they were hit by tear gas grenades in the head, and others were killed by police forces acting as snipers, shooting at protesters.

In addition, another decree turned certain forms of street demonstration and protest into an act of terrorism. This provides the legal framework for severe police repression (although the decrees themselves are completely illegal). Even the US State Department has expressed its dismay at these measures, even if it is only rhetoric.

In the midst of Moïse's mania for issuing decrees, he formed his own hand-picked Electoral Council and rewrote the Constitution. Again, these are all tactics that François Duvalier employed in the early '60s to establish his presidency for life.

What do you think will be the results of the current protests?

I would be surprised if Moïse can stay in power until 7 February 2022, as he intends. But it's a complicated situation. At this moment, the political situation in Haiti could be defined as an unstoppable force colliding with an immovable object.

America seems to be hesitating. Julie Chung, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, tweeted last month that she was alarmed by the government's authoritarian and anti-democratic movements. But they did not go so far as to say that they were withdrawing their support. It seems they are maintaining the same policy that the Trump administration had, which is to urge Moïse to hold elections - which he should have held in 2018 and 2019 - and pass the presidential baton, renew the parliament and mayoralties of all of Haiti (right now, there are only eleven elected officials in the country: Moïse and ten senators).

The Biden administration must be watching the magnitude of these demonstrations. The other factor is that, as the demonstrations grow in size and ferocity, the US Congress is putting increasing pressure on the Biden administration, saying that Moïse must resign and be replaced by an interim government.

Now, will this pressure lead the U.S. to remove Moïse? I doubt it. The last time there was a civil transition, the president elected was Aristide, an anti-imperialist priest in the tradition of liberation theology. The US vetoed his election and staged a coup against him eight months after his inauguration in 1991.

Then there is the very important role played by Haiti in Washington's anti-Venezuelan campaign. For those two reasons, the US may feel that its only option is to withstand the storm and continue to support Moïse.

The other possibility, especially frightening given the hawks and warmongers that populate the Biden administration, is a third foreign military intervention in Haiti. Of course, it would probably be hidden under the guise of "humanitarian" intervention. But that would be adding fuel to the fire because the Haitian people - I can say this without hesitation - are fed up with foreign military occupations.

PS:

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[1] François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier were the dictators who ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1986.