

Haiti - Endless poverty and repression?

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In December 1990 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a radical populist priest, was elected president with 67.5% of the vote. September 1991 saw him overthrown by a military coup, whose leaders are still in power seven months later. Is Haiti's failed attempt at parliamentary democracy an exception to the trend in the rest of the region? Laura Watkins and Clare Heath look at the background to the fall of the popular priest.

Haiti is the poorest country in the western world, with 75% of the population living below the World Bank's poverty line. Less than half the population are fully employed. One per cent of the population get 44% of the income. The masses are heading towards starvation.

Since Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier was forced to flee Haiti in 1986 the country has been in political turmoil. The masses got rid of the hated president, but it was the armed forces that stepped in to rule the country. Since then general strikes, barricades, bloody massacres and elections drowned in blood have characterised Haiti's recent history.

The Duvalier dynasty had ruled the country since 1957 and developed a notorious repressive apparatus with a private army of thugs, the Tonton Macoutes. The economy was based on subordination to the USA, with a parasitic bourgeoisie whose money came from trade and, more recently, on the development of assembly plants for the USA.

The majority of the population scrape a living on land ravaged by deforestation and soil erosion which has left less than a third of the country suitable for agricultural use. The vast bulk of agricultural production—sugar and coffee—is for export.

Under François 'Papa Doc', and then Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc', the Duvaliers created a huge system of corrupt officials at every level of the state, collecting exorbitant taxes from the peasants, creaming the money off for themselves, and controlling the judicial and executive functions.

Modernise

After the Duvaliers a section of the bourgeoisie, in alliance with the USA, hoped to modernise the country. They sought to develop a neo-liberal programme for the economy with an import of foreign capital and expansion of the assembly industry.

They are opposed by a Duvalierist section of the bourgeoisie who wish to maintain their privileges with a more protectionist economy and continued domination of the countryside by the massive landowning families and their corrupt state officials.

The period since 1986 has seen a continuous struggle between these different wings of the bourgeoisie, but one conducted in the context of decisive, if sporadic, interventions by the masses and the army. The new constitution, introduced in March 1986 after the flight of Duvalier, had banned Duvalierists from office for ten years, but this in no way indicated the defeat of their apparatus.

The 1987 election was aborted when non-Duvalierist candidates and their supporters were gunned down wherever they were found. Voters queuing up at polling stations were sprayed with automatic rifle fire from passing vehicles. The response of the military to this intervention was to dismiss the electoral commission and oversee a reconvened election themselves in which Duvalierists were allowed to stand.

Election

In 1990 the first free election was held and the masses voted in a left wing Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He had entered the campaign relatively late on, and stood against the favoured candidate of the USA.

Aristide was elected after a campaign in which the USA sought to get their chosen man into power. The USA wanted a 'democratic' regime with the legitimacy of free elections, but they also wanted stability in order to push through neo-liberal reforms and reduce the obstructive power of the corrupt Duvalier officials. Their chosen man was Marc Bazin, a conservative and former World Bank technocrat. He had previously been finance minister under Jean-Claude Duvalier for nine months, but had absolved himself by getting fired over a disagreement about curbing corruption.

The hostility of the masses to candidates like Bazin was massive, shown by their support for Aristide. In Aristide the masses were presented with a candidate who had been a fierce opponent of the military regime, who had spoken out against corruption and against the domination of the country by the USA. He had faced down the wrath of his church, and called for a radical redistribution of wealth, advocating armed mobilisation and mass participation in government to achieve it.

To many of the slum dwellers, in large areas of the capital Port-au-Prince, Aristide appeared to be offering leadership for resistance to the worst excesses of dictatorship. They quickly rallied to his banner and tens of thousands formed self-defence brigades in the cities to protect their areas, to attack symbols of Duvalierism and to take on the Tonton Macoutes. The day of the elections saw massive mobilisations, thereby preventing fraudulent intervention of the Duvalierists or other forces.

The election of Aristide threw the bourgeoisie and the USA into confusion - this was not the kind of puppet they had hoped for. Here was a man advocating direct action by the masses against the rich and corrupt. He spoke openly of a people's revolution.

Inaugurated

In January 1991, three weeks after Aristide's election and before he was inaugurated Roger Lafontant, the former Interior Minister under Duvalier, seized the national palace and declared himself provisional president. In less than an hour Aristide supporters flooded onto the streets. Fifty thousand people massed in front of the palace, barricades were erected and in the following days hundreds of Duvalierists were lynched or 'necklaced'. The army were indecisive and the masses were successful - Lafontant's coup lasted a mere ten hours.

This decisive intervention by the masses on the side of Aristide served as a warning to the bourgeoisie, and strengthened the new president in his early declarations. In his inaugural speech he sacked six of the seven top military general staff and promoted officers who he viewed as sympathetic or at least politically neutral. He then talked of the need for a 'marriage between the people and the army'.

One of these new officers, Raoul Cedras, was to lead the successful coup against him later the same year. The failure of Aristide to avert the second coup was based on the timidity of his reforms. He did not carry through a thorough purge of the armed forces and the state bureaucracy. He appointed a conservative businessman, Rene Preval, as his prime minister. He deprioritised the struggle of the poor against social

injustice and concentrated on deals with the USA to secure aid.

Aristide continued to try and balance a slow reformist programme aimed at appeasing the bourgeoisie with a rhetoric which urged mass action against corruption. In September 1991, just before the coup, he made a speech which was taken by many to be an incitement:

?Wherever you feel the heat of unemployment, whenever the heat of the pavements gets to you, whenever you feel revolt inside you, turn your eyes in the direction of those with the money. Ask them why not. What are they waiting for. For the sea to dry up??

He referred to a ?beautiful tool? that they may use against the Duvalierists, a reference many took to be to necklacing.

But this rhetoric failed to rouse enough action to prevent the coup this time. The army was united and the mass response met brutal repression. Although there was general strike action and mobilisations of the defence brigades in the urban areas, these were terrorised by the coup-makers. Forty-four youth were executed in the Carregour neighbourhood and 200 killed in the shanty town of Soleil.

It was these mass movements that were the real target of the coup, because it was the threat from them, shown in the January coup attempt, which had allowed Aristide to rule without reference to the bourgeois parties.

Since the coup the military government, led by Joseph Nérette has faced a trade embargo from the Organisation of American States (OAS). In the immediate aftermath US Secretary of State James Baker said ?This coup must not and will not succeed.? The OAS demanded the return of Aristide before the embargo could be lifted.

But the coup-makers almost certainly had the backing of the USA at some level: they may well have urged the crushing of the mass movement without the removal of Aristide from office. The lack of concern by the USA about democracy in Haiti is revealed by the weakening of their stance in recent weeks, and also by their forcible repatriation of Haitian refugees who had fled to the USA.

Settlement

There is an attempt at a negotiated settlement which would return Aristide but tie him to a more acceptable bourgeois government. Aristide has indicated willingness to go along with this, and even agreed to having René Théodore as prime minister. Théodore is leader of the Haitian Communist Party and was committed to a bourgeois alliance to overthrow Aristide from the start. Even this agreement was not enough to guarantee a date for Aristide's return.

In the meantime the masses are suffering increased repression and terror, combined with growing hunger as the effects of the trade embargo hit them, rather than the bourgeoisie.

Since the downfall of Duvalier the masses have repeatedly taken action in defence of their interests and against the remnants of the repressive regime. But at each stage they have been unable to go beyond the sporadic, angry demonstrations to the building of a solid working class based organisation which could lead to a government of the workers, peasants and the urban poor.

Support

Their mass support for Aristide is illustrative?he had no organised base in terms of a party or unions, but could rely on the backing of all those who were anti-Duvalier and anti-imperialist. Once in power he called for mass mobilisations but granted no power to the masses.

The only way forward for the workers and peasants of Haiti is to begin building unions and community based workers' organisations and make sure that the inevitable mass resistance to military rule gives birth to a network of workers' councils willing and able to mobilise a disciplined armed force to shatter and defeat the army. Only then can the Haitian masses begin to overcome the obscene poverty which the imperialist system has imposed on them for decades.

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