

Imperialists act to oust President Aristide

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At the end of February, with most of Haiti in rebel hands and the capital under siege, the French and US governments called on the popularly elected President, Jean-Beatrand Aristide, to step down.

This was no popular revolution. The rebels of the National Liberation and Reconstruction Front (NLRF) was a group of no more than 300 heavily armed combatants, led by former officers of the disbanded armed forces of Haiti. Their success was a result of a growing economic and political crisis within the country.

In 1990 President Aristide became the first popularly elected president since the 1950s, when Haiti fell into the iron grip of the Duvalierist dictatorship of father Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and son 'Baby Doc' .

Aristide was a priest who took up the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed in Haiti. Following the overthrow of Baby Doc, Aristide won the 1990 presidential elections with 67% of the vote. The favoured candidate of the US and World Bank trailed far behind. In less than a year, however, he was overthrown by a military coup and fled the country. About 1,000 people died in the ensuing terror campaign by the military. A UN economic embargo, growing repression and mass waves of refugees heading for Florida led the US to intervene militarily in 1994 and put Aristide back into power.

But the US ensured that Aristide was under strict control, faithfully fulfilling the demands of the IMF and World Bank, honouring the enormous debts built up by the dictatorship and promising to step down when his term ran out in February 1996, after just over two years in office.

In May 2000 Aristide's Lavalas Family Party won a large majority in the parliament but the elections were disputed and the opposition cried fraud, backed by the US and the EU because of the 'irregularities'. The imperialists' real concern was their need to constrain Aristide. He had enormous support among the poor, and his Lavalas party was made up of a series of semi-mass organisations. There was always the fear that under pressure from his supporters he would adopt policies threatening imperialist interests in Haiti.

But Aristide did not challenge imperialism, or mobilise the masses. Instead, he tried to win back the favour of the international donors and the IMF. A harsh austerity programme was introduced in 2003, ending fuel subsidies and cutting expenditure on education and public administration. Growing opposition amongst students saw them joining the opposition in protests on the streets. Opposition radio stations financed by exiles from abroad started calling for armed actions against the 'tyrant' Aristide. Lavalas supporters, often in organised street gangs, attacked the student demonstrators, denouncing them as supporters of the counter-revolution; several students were killed in these clashes, others went into hiding.

In this growing crisis, the remnants of the old dictatorship launched their military attacks in the north of the country on February 5th. Aristide had disbanded the old armed forces in 1995 and set up a new police force. But this force is no match for the well financed and trained NLRF who have targeted it, attacking police HQs and murdering all those they lay hands on. Pro-Aristide supporters have fled or have been subject to beatings and killings. Only in the capital did Aristide supporters feel strong enough to take over

the streets, arming themselves and building blockades.

Aristide called for outside help but the imperialists had no intention of bailing him out unless they had him firmly under control. Instead, with the French in the lead, a 'peace plan' was put forward, backed by the US, Canada and the Organisation of American States. Aristide could stay on, providing an independent Prime Minister acceptable to the opposition was appointed.

The opposition refused this compromise. As the rebels took town after town, they clearly thought Aristide's days were numbered and they could insist on his removal. As armed Lavalas militias took to the streets of the capital, the imperialists quickly decided that they too should get rid of this dangerous man. The French offered to lead an international armed 'peacekeeping force' and called on Aristide to step down 'to avoid an uncontrollable spiral of violence'. The US sent ships laden with marines towards the capital, saying they were ready to intervene in days.

Haiti, just like Iraq, shows once again the imperialists' hypocritical attitude to democracy. Elections are acceptable as long as the right candidate is elected. 'Unsafe' elected candidates - a Chavez or an Aristide - must be removed at the first favourable opportunity.

Only when the masses of Haiti take power into their own hands, and exercise it through their own direct democracy - through workers' and peasants' councils - will they be able to finally settle accounts with imperialist oppression and their own exploiters.

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