

From Papa Doc to Aristide...

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John McKee relates the tortured history of Haiti under imperialist domination

On 19 September US troops landed in Port-au-Prince, beginning the second US occupation of Haiti this century. In 1915 Woodrow Wilson's aim was to put 'men in charge of affairs whom we can trust'. In 1994 President Clinton's aim is exactly the same.

The roots of the Haitian crisis lie in the popular revolt which toppled the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier ('Baby Doc') in 1986, ushering in a period of political turmoil. Since then the USA has been trying to assure a smooth transition to stable capitalist democracy, and to avoid direct military intervention. They have been constantly thwarted.

When Baby Doc fled into exile in France in 1986, the Duvalier dynasty had been in power for 28 years. François Duvalier ('Papa Doc') was popularly elected as president in 1957. Within a year he set about establishing a dictatorship. The president's 'cagouards' later to achieve notoriety as the murderous Tontons Macoutes were his instrument of terror. After mopping up political opponents, they were unleashed in a purge of the army.

By 1963 the trade unions had been dissolved and their leaders forced into exile. Between 1959 and 1963 a series of attacks on the Catholic Church, including the expulsion of several bishops and the Archbishop, had effectively broken its Breton-dominated hierarchy. Duvalier manipulated and encouraged the popular religion of Voodoo as a counterweight to Catholicism.

Papa Doc's base of support was in the urban black middle class and among the peasant landowners with medium size holdings. His campaigns against his enemies drew on the black nationalist ideology of 'noireism', mobilising his supporters against the colonialism of the French dominated Catholic Church and against the privileged position of the mulatto elite in the church, education system and army.

Black Haitians were promoted. Yet at the same time Duvalier was careful not to alienate the largely 'mulatto' capitalist and estate owning class, which retained its dominance over trade. By the mid-1960s Papa Doc had perfected the dictatorship which remains in place to this day. Power lies with the military machine which also controls the police, with the Tontons Macoutes, which became partly integrated with the military, and with Section Chiefs appointed by the army. The Section Chiefs are often small landowners, and themselves employ private militias ('attaches') to extort taxes and levies from the peasants and terrorise the democratic movement in the rural areas.

By the 1980s this regime was becoming an embarrassment to a US government intent on encouraging 'democratic' neo-liberal regimes throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Duvalierism represented quite the opposite. Whole sections of its ruling class had every interest in maintaining the status quo. They wanted to prevent the transformation of Haiti into a manufacturing assembly area for US capital, a development that threatened to annihilate the domestic trading bourgeoisie.

The popular explosion of 1985-86 drove Baby Doc from the country. It developed as an alliance between the 'popular movement', the peasant organisations, 'Ti Legliz' (the 'small church' movement), students, trade unionists and the 'democratic' bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie. The latter, represented by the National Front for Change and Democracy (FNCD), constantly sought a compromise with the old regime and a 'peaceful transition'. The result was that after 1986 the popular movement was demobilised. The old dictatorship re-asserted much of its control through the use of terror. The 1987 Constitution was a compromise which banished the Tontons Macoutes, promised free elections and reform but left power in the hands of the military.

In 1990 the Haitian masses took part in their 'rst free elections since 1957. They voted overwhelmingly for a coalition led by Fr Jean-Bertrand Aristide which won 67% of the popular vote. Against Aristide were ranged two major parties representing different fractions of the Haitian ruling class. Roger Lafontant, former head of the Tontons Macoutes, represented the Duvalierist regime. He drew support from the military and the land-owning oligarchy which kept the sharecropping peasantry in semi-feudal servitude. The other significant presidential candidate was former World Bank official Marc Bazin, the favoured candidate of the US State department which bankrolled his campaign through various front organisations. He drew his local support, such as it was, from the so-called 'technocrats', the section of the bourgeoisie and managerial layers most closely connected with the US-controlled assembly industries and agribusinesses.

Aristide had won a reputation as an opponent of the Duvalier regime, surviving numerous assassination attempts. A member of the Salesian Order, Aristide had gravitated towards 'liberation theology' and was active in the 'Ti Legliz' movement which established 'base communities' and organised amongst the poor. It became an organising focus against the Duvalierist dictatorship and played an important role in the toppling of 'Baby Doc'.

Aristide was a populist. He appealed to the urban poor, the workers and the small peasants. He was initially under their direct pressure. That is why the 've families and their imperialist masters hate and fear him. But Aristide identifies most of all with the small private property owners, rejecting working class politics and communism. Therefore he would not and could not sever his links with the deceitful 'liberal' elements of the Haitian capitalist class.

At 'rst he acted as a tribune of the masses. But his very prominence put him beyond the masses' control and even their pressure, especially once he was armed with presidential powers. He built up an adulatory following that enabled him to play a Bonapartist role. Despite his radical reputation, Aristide was courted by the National Front for Change and Democracy (FNCD) which drew its support from the traditional sectors of the Haitian bourgeoisie, the merchants and traders who controlled imports of foreign manufactured goods and exports of agricultural products such as coffee. The trading bourgeoisie felt threatened by Bazin's neo-liberal programme which sought to establish Haiti as a major base for US assembly plants, threatening to undermine the source of their wealth in the importing businesses.

Aristide became the candidate of the FNCD but drew behind him the Ti Legliz movement, various peasant, student and other popular organisations. This movement became known as the 'Lavalas', meaning the 'ood', a biblical reference to the mass wave of support that would sweep him to power in the elections. This was in essence a popular front 'a bloc of the exploited classes with a section of their exploiters.

Between the election victory and Aristide's inauguration Lafontant attempted a coup, seizing the national palace and declaring himself provisional president. The coup brought the masses onto the streets. Barricades were thrown up throughout Port-au-Prince and the coup collapsed. Over a hundred supporters of the old regime and many members of the Tontons Macoutes were lynched. The Pere Lebrun 'a 'aming

tyre placed around the neck of its victim?made its appearance as a popular weapon of revolutionary justice.

Strengthened by this demonstration of popular support, Aristide was inaugurated in February 1991 and proceeded to carry out his programme of reforms. These were moderate bourgeois democratic reforms but threatened to dismantle the oligarchy's instruments of power during a period of radical mass ferment. The police were to be separated from the army, purged and placed under the Ministry of Justice. The army high command was purged of its Duvalierist generals?six of the seven general staff were retired. The army was to be drastically reduced in size. The judiciary was to be purged; four Supreme Court judges were immediately replaced. The 555 Section Chiefs were removed from army control and placed under the jurisdiction of the Justice Ministry.

On the economic front Aristide rejected immediate privatisation of state controlled enterprises like the telephone company and instead proposed state support through new investment. A land reform programme was proposed to revitalise Haitian agriculture. A reform of the government bureaucracy was planned to reduce corruption and inefficiency. Proposals were made to increase Haiti's pitifully low minimum wage.

These reforms were moderate enough to receive the stamp of approval of the International Monetary Fund, which restored credit to the new government. During his election campaign Aristide cautioned his supporters that the Lavalas movement intended to carry out ?a political revolution, not a social revolution?.

In fact he merely proved that in Haiti the one is impossible without the other. His purge of the old regime provoked howls of rage from all sections of the bourgeoisie which had been thoroughly alarmed by the intervention of the masses against the coup. The popular front alliance of the Lavalas was already beginning to come apart as Aristide had to rely more and more on the popular movement to defend his presidency. He now made references to ?false Lavalassien? who had to be fought.

By the end of September, with rumours of coups and assassination attempts sweeping Port-au-Prince, Aristide addressed his supporters in the popular movement from the steps of the National Palace, calling on the poor and unemployed to ?turn their eyes on those with the means?. In a possible reference to the Pere Lebrun he told them, ?Your tool in hand, your instrument in hand, your constitution in hand. Don?t hesitate to give him what he deserves.?

Three days later General Raoul Cédras, who Aristide had placed in charge of the army, launched a coup. Aristide was bundled out of the country while the popular movement bore the brunt of the military repression. Five hundred were killed within the ?rst weeks of the coup, and at least 3,000 had been slaughtered by 1994.

While Washington formally condemned the coup they did little to enforce the embargo imposed shortly afterwards by the Organisation of American States. The Republican administration decided that if possible they would like to see a return to ?democracy? without Aristide, who they had decided was a dangerous maniac. For the US Administration his appeal to the masses to take up arms was enough to prove him psychologically unstable! As the Washington Post put it in an editorial:

?Returning President Aristide to Haiti is going to be difficult for reasons to which he himself has greatly contributed . . . The President is a hero to the desperate people who live in the slums of Port-au-Prince . . . He has organised them into an instrument of real terror. . .?

Washington made it clear to Aristide that he could only return to Haiti on their terms:

- ? That he negotiate with the generals or their representatives, and that he appoint a prime minister acceptable to the USA (the post of prime minister under the 1987 constitution is much more powerful than the president),
- ? That an amnesty be granted to the coup leaders, including their right to stay in the country,
- ? And that some form of international force should be stationed on Haiti to keep the masses in their place.

Aristide gradually capitulated to all these demands.

By June 1993 the United Nations passed a resolution calling for a mandatory embargo on oil to Haiti, and was preparing to organise an international 'peacekeeping force' to oversee any agreement reached on Aristide's return. Ten days later the 'Governors' Island Accord' was signed. Aristide would name a new prime minister, the Parliament would start instituting reforms under the supervision of a UN force, there would be a blanket amnesty, and Cédras would retire before Aristide's planned return in October 1993. Aristide accepted that his term of office would expire in early 1995 and that he could not stand again for the presidency. He thereby acceded to his own exclusion from office by Cédras (and Clinton), thus thwarting the hopes and aspirations that the masses had placed in him.

Aristide's new prime minister, pro-US businessman Robert Malval, immediately called on all forces to organise political parties, specifically inviting back the exiled Duvalierists. They quickly responded and formed the Front pour l'Avancement et le Progres Haitien (FRAPH), with the approval of the military, containing many former Tontons Macoutes and attachés.

As the date for enforcement of the agreement drew closer, the new government found itself subject to a reign of terror. In September a close associate of Aristide and member of the business elite, Antoine Izmyery, was dragged out of church by attachés and murdered. On October 11 the USS Harlan County, bringing American and Canadian soldiers, turned back when confronted by an armed FRAPH demonstration on the dockside. Three days later Justice Minister Guy Malary was killed in a hail of bullets as he left his office. The Governors' Island Accord was dead.

The Clinton Administration was left with few alternatives. Almost a year of threats of military intervention had no effect, nor had the leaky embargo. The world's major imperialist power could not back down in its 'own backyard' and therefore began to prepare what it had been desperate to avoid: a military intervention.

By September 1994 20,000 US troops were poised to invade Haiti. A last minute deal struck by negotiators led by Jimmy Carter caused the Cédras regime to capitulate and agree to a US-supervised transfer of power. The deal was virtually identical to the Governors' Island Accord. It marked a retreat from Clinton's demands for Cédras to go into exile and for the immediate return of Aristide to power. Instead Cédras could remain to co-ordinate resistance to Aristide and terror against the Haitian masses.

Cédras and the military put up no resistance to the US troops and the masses welcomed them. Mass mobilisations were immediately attacked by police or attaché gunmen and at first US troops stood by. When they responded in Cap-Haitien, the forces of repression retreated.

The US troops are being drawn step by step into the role of policing the masses. The US embassy and the CIA have long been monitoring Haitian 'subversives', even handing over information to Cédras and his predecessors. The USA is no friend of popular democracy, let alone of the workers and poor peasants. It is their most determined and powerful enemy.

