

Haiti's humanitarian crisis: Rooted in history of military coups and occupations

Friday 20 May 2011, by [ANNIS Roger](#), [IVES Kim](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2011).

The international mainstream media presented the November 2010 election in Haiti as a predictably chaotic event in a country notorious for political violence, corruption, and dictatorship. But something new crept into some analysis of the event, a sense that the big powers present in Haiti had a big hand in the election-day fiasco.

Contents

- [An election outcome foretold](#)
- [From Duvalier Dynasty to \(...\)](#)
- [Ten lost years](#)
- [Why Haiti?](#)
- [A shared future with the \(...\)](#)

The world was rightly aghast at the chaos it read about or watched on television. But the implication by some that Haitians were to blame, and that Haitian elections unavoidably lead to such chaos, is false. In reality, the November exclusion election and its second-round denouement on March 20, 2011, is simply another chapter in foreign, primarily U.S., imperial policy in Haiti over the past two decades that has sought to disenfranchise the Haitian masses and roll back the national sovereignty of Latin America's first independent republic.

Grasping this reality not only allows decryption of election myths but also explains why so much of the international relief and reconstruction effort since the January 12, 2010, earthquake has been a failure, and what can be done to reverse that.

An election outcome foretold

Concerned voices in Haiti and abroad warned against the timing and terms of the November 28 and March 20 votes. The country, they said, was still reeling from an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that should receive all available attention and resources.

They condemned the arbitrary and patently unjustified decision of the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) to ban candidates from former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas, clearly the country's largest and most representative party, along with 13 smaller parties. The CEP remains an appointed body (by outgoing President René Préval) instead of the permanent council elected by local assemblies that is stipulated by Haiti's 1987 Constitution.

Critics also said that the minimal infrastructure for holding a fair and representative vote did not exist, at least during the crucial first round, namely, an accurate voters' list, adequate mechanisms

for voter registration, voting-day facilities allowing people to cast their vote with relative ease, and the presence of security and observer personnel at polling stations to guard against abuses and irregularities. [1] Indeed, some 1.5 million Haitians in the West Department where the earthquake struck still have no real address, living in about 1,300 makeshift tent and tarpaulin camps.

The post-earthquake crisis was compelling reason enough to postpone a vote. But when the cholera epidemic erupted in mid-October, the push for elections became absurd. A Haitian patriot residing in France wrote to one of this article's authors:

They could have found another way to govern the country than to stage an election over the earthquake ruins and dead bodies still warm from cholera infection or from lack of medical attention caused by the electoral chaos. My anger remains so strong against those who advocated elections to govern...what? I barely recognize my country as being such.

But the UN Security Council and the powers that dominate it disregarded doubts and protests from Haitians and pressed ahead, anxious to renew a democratic facade on their illegal occupation of Haiti. From their standpoint, a chaotic vote might look bad before the world, but the alternative, proposed by Haitian popular organizations, was worse: the formation of a provisional government that would convene a new CEP whose members would be drawn from recognized and representative popular and civic groups. This was how the 1990 elections that first brought Aristide to power were organized.

And so Haiti stumbles along with a deeply flawed electoral exercise whose only certainty is that the presidential winner will be a rightist politician friendly to Haiti's elite and foreign capital, if not inspired by Duvalierism.

Author Peter Hallward has written a post-earthquake afterword to a new printing of his seminal 2007 history of modern Haiti, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*. Penned in September 2010, before it was clear that elections would take place, his words still capture the essence of Haiti's dilemma:

The period that began with the military coup of September 1991 is best described as one of the most prolonged and intense periods of counterrevolution anywhere in the world. For the last twenty years, the most powerful political and economic interests in and around Haiti have waged a systematic campaign designed to stifle the popular movement and deprive it of its principal weapons, resources and leaders. The January earthquake triggered reactions that carried and that are still carrying such measures to entirely new levels. [2]

From Duvalier Dynasty to military coups and intervention

To anticipate what lies ahead in Haiti, it is important to understand the origins of the popular movement for democracy and social justice that has shaped the last 25 years. The movement's resilience is a legacy of the astonishing and successful war for slave liberation and independence of 1791-1804, an event that continues to reverberate in Haitians' consciousness and world history.

The uprising that overthrew the 29-year rule of the Duvalier family dynasty in February 1986 opened the prospect for democratic rule. But while the dictator JeanClaude "Baby Doc" Duvalier and his family had to flee, the repressive apparatus of Haiti's wealthy elite remained intact. What followed was a tumultuous, four-year struggle to hold a national vote.

Washington and the Haitian bourgeoisie, working through the Armed Forces of Haiti (FAhH) and

death squads, tried violence and every trick in the book to control that process, including drowning in blood an attempted November 1987 election and staging a pseudo-election two months later that was almost universally boycotted.

The founding of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States in 1983 signaled a new strategy by Washington of installing heads of state in its neocolonies through engineered elections rather than through military coups. This strategy, much to Washington's surprise and dismay, met its first defeat in Haiti in December 1990. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former liberation theology Catholic priest, won the presidential election, Haiti's first democratic election in many decades, with 67 percent of the vote, heading a broad, unstructured, popular movement called the Lavalas (meaning "flood"). His closest rival, the Washington-backed candidate and a former World Bank official named Marc Bazin, won a paltry 14 percent.

But Haiti's elite appealed the vote, in the words of first coup Prime Minister Jean-Jacques Honorat, to "a higher authority" than the Haitian people. On September 30, 1991, the army and police staged a coup, exiling Aristide. The FAdH, with civilian frontmen, established a reign of terror for the next three years.

The coup had a devastating effect on political as well as social and economic life. Soldiers and paramilitary gunmen killed and exiled thousands, including many of Haiti's most talented and battle-tested political leaders. But the popular movement was resilient. Much like the newly freed slaves' response to Napoleon Bonaparte's attempt to reintroduce slavery in 1802, the Haitian masses in the early 1990s showed the world their resolve to stop a return to neo-Duvalierist dictatorship.

Resistance to FAdH rule erupted in mass protests, aerial leaflet drops, and anti-coup pamphlets and radio broadcasts. Giant pro-democracy demonstrations and conferences grew in Haitian diaspora poles like New York, Miami, Montreal, and Paris. Tens of thousands of refugees took to the high seas in wooden sailboats destined for Florida; most were intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard. Haiti was becoming ungovernable, and its puppet governments an embarrassment. To counter brewing revolutionary projects, stem the tide of refugees, and reestablish stability for U.S. investors, the Clinton administration gambled that it could use Aristide to front for the neoliberal reforms it sought to implement in Haiti. Surrounded by 22,000 U.S. troops, Washington flew Aristide back to Haiti on October 15, 1994, the first time anywhere it had reinstated a president previously ousted by a U.S.-backed coup. But Aristide did not follow the Clinton script for privatizing state industries. Worse yet, in 1995 he abolished the Haitian army, depriving Washington and Haiti's elite of their principal lever for controlling Haitian governments since U.S. Marines ended their 20-year occupation in 1934.

In 1995, while Haiti remained occupied by UN troops, the U.S. Embassy insisted on elections to replace Aristide, despite the Haitian people's call for him to recoup the three years he spent in exile. On February 7, 1996, Aristide handed over power to his former Prime Minister, René Préval. But where Aristide resisted the privatization of state enterprises, Préval welcomed it. He also granted Washington the right to penetrate Haitian waters and airspace at will.

Meanwhile, Aristide and his colleagues founded the Fanmi Lavalas party in late 1996 and began preparing for the 2000 election. In May and November elections that year, the new party captured the Parliament and reelected Aristide as president. In turning the presidency over to Aristide in early 2001, Préval was the only Haitian head of state in the last 70 years to serve a full term and hand over power to an elected successor.

The new government promised to "invest in people" and make good on social justice projects for the masses. But after Lavalas swept the Parliament in May, a powerful triumvirate—the United States (tellingly, under the Clinton administration), shadowed by Canada and the European

Union—imposed a crushing embargo on foreign aid and loans to Haiti.

The three powers—who named themselves “Friends of Haiti”—nurtured both vocal and violent oppositions, ranging from paramilitary “contras” assaulting people and government facilities from protected bases in the Dominican Republic to concocted and sometimes phantom groups dressed up as representatives of “civil society.”

It all led to a second coup d’etat, on February 29, 2004. But this time, there was no Haitian Army to do the dirty deed. It was carried out by foreign soldiers. A U.S. Navy Seal team, directed by the U.S. deputy ambassador Luis Moreno, whisked Aristide and his wife from their home in Tabarre into exile in Africa, while U.S., Canadian, and French troops occupied strategic locations around the country.

Ten lost years

The 2004 coup was another heavy blow against Haiti’s burgeoning political leadership and capacity. Not only was the president kidnapped, but most of the country’s governing institutions were dismantled—the legislature, the senate, municipal governments, schools, and post-secondary institutions. Once again, thousands of leading political figures were killed, imprisoned, or driven into hiding or exile.

The occupied country was nominally ruled for two years by U.S.-installed de facto Prime Minister Gérard Latortue and President Alexandre Boniface. Aid was unblocked but increasingly directed exclusively to NGOs and charities, completely bypassing the government and deliberately fostering service provider networks parallel to and independent of Haitian government oversight.

The 2004 coup has been more lasting than that of 1991 because powerful new players are assisting the United States in destroying Haitian democracy and sovereignty. These include:

- Imperialist powers, notably Canada and France, who bring money, police, soldiers, and lots of political experience in the business of neo-colonial rule.
- The UN Security Council, which provided authorization for the coup and subsequent occupation, notwithstanding that this is a flagrant violation of the UN Charter’s Article 7. In June 2004, the Council created a military occupation force to take over from the United States, Canada, and France called the UN Mission to Stabilize Haiti (MINUSTAH). Most of its foot soldiers are drawn from other neocolonies in Latin America and Asia. Today, it numbers 13,500 police, military, and administrative personnel.
- Latin America’s larger capitalist countries, including Brazil (which leads MINUSTAH’s military component), Chile, and Argentina. They provide a useful fig leaf for what is essentially a Washington-run operation, as cables recently released by Wikileaks reveal.
- NGOs and foreign-financed Haitian “civil society” organizations that became knowing or unwitting accomplices in the coup, often under the watchword that the uncooperative President Aristide had to leave office “for the good of the country.”

It is ironic that Brazil, the last nation in Latin America to outlaw slavery, is now policing the first nation to do so. Brazilian commanders have led assaults on urban shantytown strongholds of armed, anti-occupation Lavalas partisans with the same savagery they have displayed in raids into Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. At U.S. Embassy urging, Brazil directed two bloody and indiscriminate assaults on “bandit” strongholds in the huge Port-au-Prince district of Cité Soleil in July and December 2005.

Dozens of innocent civilians died, as documented by human rights and other fact finding delegations.

Despite international aid conferences and agreements such as the Interim Cooperation Framework (CCI) of 2004, Haiti's agricultural production continued its precipitous decline under the coup regime. Light manufacturing, profiting from Haiti's less than \$1 a day labor (which economists like Oxford's Paul Collier argue is Haiti's greatest national asset) also declined. "Everything is broken in Haiti," said U.S. attorney Thomas Griffin following a visit to the country in late 2004 that produced the first comprehensive look at human rights since the coup. [3] "Haiti's people churn inside a hurricane of violence," his report said. "Haiti's security and justice institutions fuel the cycle of violence."

A February 7, 2006, national election did little to alleviate conditions in the broken country. While René Préval was reelected president, many who voted for him simply considered him a lesser evil. Potential Fanmi Lavalas candidates were effectively banned from participation because they were sitting in jail or in exile. Préval has since proven to be a great disappointment to the Lavalas base that voted him in.

The shattering of Haiti's political and social institutions by coups and political instability have made the country exceptionally vulnerable to a string of natural disasters in the past decade, including hurricanes in 2004 and 2008 that all but destroyed Gonaïves, Haiti's fourth largest city, and, of course, the January 2010 earthquake. The latest disaster has been the inadvertent introduction into Haiti of cholera by MINUSTAH's Nepalese contingent in October 2010. It was inevitable that a large, foreign military occupation force drawn from other poor nations around the globe would bring new diseases to Haiti. Nothing was done by the UN Security Council and other international agencies to warn against that, much less prevent it.

Why Haiti?

"Why Haiti?" is a question often asked when observers confront Haiti's political history. Where are important oil or other natural resources in Haiti that might explain imperialism's relentless drive to control the country? And surely imperialism is not threatened by Aristide's reformist societal project whose goals he once described as merely moving "from absolute misery to a dignified poverty."

But it's not the search for oil reserves, potential tourist enclaves, plentiful cheap labor, or pots of gold that drives imperial policy (although the country does have gold reserves now being exploited in these recessionary times by Canadian mining firms). At least, not these reasons alone. It is above all to counter the threat of a "bad example," as the Haitian people proved to the rest of the hemisphere in 1804, and again in 1990. Imperial powers loathe governments of social justice in Haiti or elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean because they radicalize and raise the expectations of the poorest masses throughout the hemisphere and the world.

Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) writes on this in a recent Guardian article:

"People who do not understand U.S. foreign policy think that control over Haiti does not matter to Washington, because it is so poor and has no strategic minerals or resources. But that is not how Washington operates, as the WikiLeaks cables repeatedly illustrate. For the State Department and its allies, it is all a ruthless chess game, and every pawn matters. Left governments will be removed or prevented from taking power where it is possible to do so." [4]

Haiti's heroic, nineteenth century example was a considerable influence on the rise of the civil rights

and anticolonial movements in the United States and around the world following the Second World War.

And the revolutionary inspiration flows both ways. On a clear evening, the shoreline of Cuba is visible from the northeast tip of Haiti. The United States has long feared the influence of Cuba's socialist revolution on the consciousness and political will of the Haitian people. In postearthquake Haiti, amidst thousands of NGOs with multimillion dollar budgets, Cuba, without fanfare, has become Haiti's largest health care provider. Its network of community clinics has treated close to half of the tens of thousands of people afflicted with cholera. Since 2005, Cuba's Latin American School of Medicine has graduated 70 Haitian doctors per year, a priceless national acquisition.

Bolivarian Venezuela has also earned a special place in the hearts of Haitians. Its aid and assistance to Haiti over the past decade and since the earthquake surpasses anything that the imperial powers have offered, including new power plants in Cap-Haïtien, Gonaïves, and Port-au-Prince. With little advance notice, Hugo Chávez received a hero's welcome by tens of thousands in the streets of Port-au-Prince when he made his one visit to Haiti, in May 2006.

A shared future with the peoples of Latin American and the Caribbean

Haiti's unique history, language, and culture can mislead the casual observer to exaggerate its isolation from its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors. Sadly, its history as a victim of imperial interference and intervention is very much a shared one. The 2009 coup against the elected president of Honduras is only the latest of imperial interventions past and present bearing all the same trademarks as Haiti's 2004 coup. [5]

Since the earthquake, we have seen a continuation of the same failed policies in Haiti, including the militarization of aid response by the governments of the United States, Canada and France in the critical weeks following January 12. [6]

The tragedy laid bare for the world to see the rotten foundation bequeathed to Haitian society by two centuries of plunder and intervention.

The political side of the post-earthquake intervention has also advanced. The November election was nothing less than an orchestrated play to ensure that a pliant president, legislature, and senate would be duly installed. In December, the Organization of American States (OAS) effectively supplanted the CEP as the "final arbiter" of the November 28 election. It arbitrarily excluded Jude Célestin from the second-round presidential vote and placed Michel Martelly on the ballot in his place. The move was not even submitted to a vote among the members of the CEP. Only four of the CEP's eight members approved the move, instead of five, the majority constitutionally required.

The November vote was shunned by three quarters of Haiti's 4.7 million eligible voters, according to the CEP's own figures. In no way does it represent a measure of the Haitian people's will. "With so many irregularities, errors, and fraudulent vote totals, it is impossible to say what the results of this election really are," declared the CEP's Mark Weisbrot on December 30. "If the Organization of American States certifies this election, this would be a political decision, having nothing to do with election monitoring."

Regardless of the outcome of the March 20 electoral exercise, the revolutionary anger of the Haitian masses will lead to months of uprising and unrest. And the successful return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the country will strengthen the popular movement. The three principal targets of popular rage are:

1) The UN occupation and the cholera it has introduced into Haiti;

2) The slow or non-existent response to continued postquake homelessness by NGOs and the former president Bill Clinton-led Interim Haitian Recovery Commission, whose board is dominated by foreign

bankers and government officials, along with Haitian bourgeois representatives; and

3) The Haitian people's complete and flagrant disenfranchisement in the November 28 vote.

Ultimately, protest could send the UN occupation packing. It costs some \$612 million annually, and the UN has just asked for an additional \$850 million on top of that.

Protest will also further destabilize Washington's "Ministry of Colonial Affairs," as Cuba calls the Organization of American States. In late December 2010, the organization's representative to Haiti, the Brazilian Ricardo Seitenfus, was summarily fired after delivering a searing indictment of Haiti's foreign occupation.

"We want to turn Haiti into a capitalist country, an export platform for the U.S. market, it's absurd," he said. "When the level of unemployment is 80 percent, it is unbearable to deploy a stabilization mission. There is nothing to stabilize and everything to build."

"We must build roads, erect dams, participate in the organization of the State, the judicial system. The UN says it has no mandate for that. Its mandate in Haiti is to keep the peace of the graveyard." [7]

Haiti's resistance is creating a wedge in the U.S. dominated OAS alliance and is encouraging Latin America towards the alternatives of the ALBA social/economic alliance of progressive governments and UNASUR, an organization that encompasses most of the continent's Spanish-speaking governments. In this way, Haiti continues playing its pioneering role in history. Haiti's future lies squarely with its brother and sister peoples of the Americas and their shared aspirations for social justice, national and racial equality, and peace with Mother Earth.

Roger Annis and Kim Ives

P.S.

* This article was first published in *ISR (International Socialist Review)*, Issue 77, May-June 2011.

Footnotes

[1] See the [statement of 45 members of the U.S. Congress](#); and an interview on CBC News with Haiti's leading human rights lawyer [Mario Joseph](#).

[2] An expanded version of the September 2010 afterword to *Damming the Flood* can be read [here](#).

[3] Griffin's report was published by the School of Law at the University of Miami and can be read

[at](#).

[4] Mark Weisbrot, "WikiLeaks' lesson on Haiti," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2010.

[5] See "Comparing the Coups in Haiti and Honduras," by Kim Ives, *Haiti Analysis*, August 15, 2009.

[6] See as examples: "Haitian empowerment must be the prime goal," an open letter published in the *Guardian*, January 22, 2010; and Roger Annis, "Exaggerated Claims: Assessing the Canadian Military's Haiti Earthquake Response," *Haiti Liberté*, October 6, 2010.

[7] Roger Annis, "OAS Diplomat Delivers Searing Indictment of Haiti Occupation Regime," *Canada Haiti Action Network*, December 28, 2010.