

Haiti: Damning the Flood

Peter Hallward's masterful account of recent Haitian history

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This is Part II of Peter Hallward's masterful account of recent Haitian history and what may lie ahead for its beleaguered people. Please refer to Part I that's posted on Global Research.

2001 – 2004: The Winner Loses?

In spite of its strength and resilience, FL had its faults and suffered the consequences. Its relative informality made it vulnerable to “opportunistic” infiltration by members of the “conventional political class” as well as former Macoutes, soldiers and criminal gang leaders. Some FL politicians also used their positions for personal gain and implicated the government in damaging scandals.

Further, the very strength of its support meant the opposition had to undermine the organization from within. Ways included money and weapons to neighborhood gangs to change sides and turning the state's own security forces (the USGPN Presidential Guard) against the President. Aristide's last Prime Minister, Yvon Neptune, believed by year end 2003, few national security force members could be trusted because they'd been corrupted by “members of civil society.” In addition, some Aristide supporters became disillusioned by his fruitless negotiating strategy and for not being more decisive in the crucial pre-coup weeks.

The CD took full advantage, were able to buy off some of the FL hierarchy, and “paint a lurid picture of a government mired in drugs, embezzlement” and human rights abuses. Post-coup, there was even talk of a “Noriega-style indictment of Aristide (to) rid the US of their turbulent priest once and for all.” When the idea faded for lack of proof and Aristide's willingness to cooperate with DEA while still President, old corruption and embezzlement charges resurfaced. Although bizarre and outlandish against a self-effacing priest, Aristide's opponents tried to tarnish him with charges of appropriating state funds for private gain, living in palatial luxury at his private home, and stealing tens of millions of dollars to do it.

More damaging were charges of Haiti's “worsening human rights situation.” In the 2001 – 2004 period, reports from human rights groups like NCHR (Haiti's highest profile one), CARLI, and CEDH read like a CD script to provide ammunition for promoting regime change. Post-coup, however, these same groups seemed not to notice mass state-sponsored killings that accompanied and followed Aristide's ouster.

Along with others, Human Rights Watch (HRW) was notably egregious, given its reputation that's decidedly undeserved. In its 2001 report, it described 2000 as a year of “mounting political violence” and blamed it on Aristide supporters. It repeated the accusation in 2002, and in 2003 said that “worsening human rights conditions, mounting political turmoil, and a

declining economy marked” (Aristide’s government). “Human rights conditions remained poor (with) police violence, arbitrary arrests, and wrongful detention, among other problems” – clearly condemning Aristide for what the opposition caused. In contrast, in 2004, HRW didn’t even mention Haiti in its annual report, but two weeks before the February coup it issued a press release blaming the government for the worst of the violence preceding it. Shamelessly, HRW blamed the victim and let the villain off scot-free.

Amnesty International (AI) was much the same. In the violent post-coup period, (directed at FL), AI and HRW muted their criticism and framed it in the continuing “cycle of violence and impunity that has plagued the Caribbean republic for so many years.” What more could the putschists ask for? They couldn’t buy better assessments.

Compared to tens of thousands killed under the Duvaliers, the generals and post-coup Latortue government, Aristide abhorred violence, wouldn’t tolerate political killings, and on their own, the PNH at most caused a handful of them in his second term. Yet HRW and AI equated the period to the worst state-sponsored violence in modern Haitian history, then ignored the whole human rights question in 2006 when it raged out of control.

A particularly damaging and equally untrue Aristide accusation was that he relied on violent gangs, called “chimères,” to maintain power, intimidate opponents, and control the country. The press bought it, and even the London Independent (two weeks before the 2004 coup) reported “Aristide’s Thugs Crush Hopes of People’s Revolution with Beatings and Intimidation.” This and similar accounts painted Aristide as reinventing himself as a Macoute, yet it was outlandishly false.

In a country plagued by violence, unreported was why, and by and against whom. Haitians are desperately poor. Even those with jobs hardly earn enough to survive. The only way the country’s factory owners can maintain the system is through intimidation, and they rely on the military and PNH as their enforcers.

In contrast, Aristide abhors violence and not a single opposition leader was killed or disappeared during his tenure, either time. Whenever pro-government forces turned violent, it was largely in self-defense, a practice Aristide condoned. At the same time, during Aristide’s second term, substantial PNH elements turned against him and were beyond his control. There’s no proof whatever, that FL, at any time, initiated, supported, or directed any form of violence. The media reported otherwise.

In addition, FL could gain nothing from violence. The country had an estimated 210,000 firearms with the vast majority of them in ruling class hands. Yet even if Aristide controlled them, his position was firm, and it stemmed from his liberation theology position. He insisted on peaceful reconciliation with his enemies. Had he wished, millions of Haitians would have instantly supported a popular uprising and sent his opponents packing.

However, ignoring realpolitik pressed Aristide in a corner, made him negotiate from weakness, and in the process, disenchant members of his original following. CD took full advantage.

Concessions like punishing structural adjustments took their toll. They alienated opportunistic FL supporters, and two of the country’s high-profile peasant organizations (Tet Kòle Ti Peyizan and KOZE-PEP) called them “anti-populaire” and condemned how they harmed Haiti’s farmers. Yet most in the FL camp stayed loyal in spite of claims to the

contrary. They were with Aristide at the beginning, stayed to the end, and still support FL today. So do the vast majority of Haitians. Aristide could mobilize them like no one else, that made him a threat, still does, and is the reason elitists insist he stay out of the country and region, hoping that out of sight is out of mind. Not then and not now.

2003 – 2004: Preparing for War

Hallward calls the February 2004 coup “consistent with the long-standing pattern and priorities of imperial foreign policy....a scandal....never inevitable....not irreversible....and (importantly) a failure.” How so on the last point? Because the perpetrators “failed to accomplish their main objective” – eliminating Lavalas as an “organized political force.” The February 2006 presidential election showed its resilience and began “a new phase in the Lavalas project” with miles to go nonetheless to achieve it. More on that below.

The second Aristide coup differed from the first. The imperial alliance needed support on the left as well as the right. It meant co-opting “progressive” NGOs along with stage-managed student protests. In addition, some militant (street gangs) and organizations sympathetic to FL had to be won over. Finally, in the end, it took US Marines to do what what Haitian proxies couldn’t on their own.

Consider the importance of NGOs in a country like Haiti where estimates are that there are more of them per capita (from 10,000 to 20,000 total number in 1998) than anywhere else in the world. Their role is essential because of what they provide – about 80% of public services for food, water, health care, education, sanitation, and more. Equally crucial is their source of funding with at least 70% of it from USAID – a key imperial project agent. Its efforts are to pacify the country, create a secure investment climate, and assure most benefits flow to US interests.

Using NGOs as a tool makes it more appropriate to call them “other-governmental,” not “non-governmental.” They, in fact, put a respectable face on imperial harshness and to that degree are counterproductive. They mostly serve the powerful, not the people, and in the end (most often) have little to show for their efforts.

Some of them, in fact, played an open political role at the time of the 2004 coup in spite of disguising their partisanship behind a seemingly neutral or principled facade. Groups like Action Aid (against worldwide poverty), Christian Aid (for the same purpose), and Catholic Relief Services (“to assist impoverished and disadvantaged people overseas”) are three notable examples. There are many others, and they make wonderful propaganda.

A notable Haitian-based one is Batay Ouvriye (BO) – a “small, quasi-clandestine network of labor activists.” It claims to be on the left, but does more for the right. As the February 2004 approached, BO aligned with anti-FL forces to denounce the “outright criminal” Aristide government as the “main agent of corruption.” It called FL anti-labor and anti-poor, was bought off to do it, and belatedly admitted getting \$100,000 from USAID. Hallward says they did more to tarnish Lavalas than any other group.

Students did their damage as well. One “progressive” pro-coup group called them the turning point in the anti-FL campaign. They began protesting in the fall of 2003 about “lack of services and lack of university autonomy” and faced off against Haitian police. The scheme is very familiar.

In an effort to destabilize Lavalas, the IRI and G-184 found willing student recruits – with considerable time and money doing it and new groups created for the purpose. Leaders were chosen and bought off with money and visas to America and France in exchange for organizing protests. They were also trained in what to do. It was perfect. In exchange for a modest investment, the putschists bought an ideal cover – “idealistic young democrats” to denounce Aristide and FL and make great copy in the mainstream press.

Yet imagine the irony – they attacked a movement and President who did more for Haitian education than any other head of state in the country’s history. They found a pretext to do it when the university’s rector was removed in July 2002 even though his term had expired. Protests against it were staged, but were small and ineffective.

Not so a year later in December 2003 when a student rally supporting the G-184 turned ugly. Brawls between pro and anti-government protesters broke out, up to two dozen students were injured, the event was blown out of proportion but it worked, and some anti-Lavalas elements called the event the defining moment of FL’s demise. They dubbed it “black Friday,” but what actually happened wasn’t clear cut. Aristide and Prime Minister Neptune condemned the violence, some witnesses blamed it on students, not police, and the actual amount of it was low and never spun out of control. Nonetheless, the damage was done, and the opposition and dominant media took full advantage.

Even so, by late January 2004, it was clear that more than demonstrations were needed to topple the government. Further, pro-government rallies dwarfed anti-government ones. In early February, it was time for stronger measures with a fury that had been building in Gonaives in the northwest and across the DR border.

2004: The Second Coup

From summer 2001, paramilitary attacks assaulted the Aristide government, but were minor hit-and-run affairs. By fall 2003, however, things changed. They became more regular and intense and spread from the Central Plateau to Petit Goave (in the south) and Cap-Haitian (in the north). So far, however, insurgents lacked a reliable neighborhood base. Up to mid-2003, they had none in Port-au-Prince (in the south) but managed success in Gonaives (in the northwest). Then they scored a success in the capital as well.

In mid-July, one Cite Soleil-based gang leader and his lieutenant were bought off with money (in the tens of thousands) and promises of visas. They were well-armed, supported by anti-FL police elements, and posed a direct challenge to pro-Aristide groups, but still not enough to unseat the government.

In Gonaives, however, on February 5, 2004, an “alliance of criminals, death-squadders and former soldiers” (called the Cannibal Army) launched the final operation (in the words of one rebel leader) to “liberate Haiti from the dictator Aristide:”

- they overwhelmed the Gonaives police force in a three hour gun battle;
- burned the station and released about 100 inmates;
- torched homes of the mayor and other FL officials;
- took a new name – the Revolutionary Artibonite Resistance Front;

- on February 7, they undertook their most important engagement – ambushing an inept police counterattack, killing seven officers;
- they now had total control of the city, took Hinche (in central Haiti) on February 16 and Cap-Haitien (in the northeast) on February 22.

The CD and dominant media trumpeted Haiti's impending liberation and created myths about why it approached – the Aristide dictatorship, criminal gangs portrayed as liberators, the CD never inciting violence, and Haiti's elites determined to achieve a “political” and “democratic” solution. Of course, these claims were lies with victims called oppressors and dark forces portrayed as liberating ones. All the while, however, the insurgency didn't proceed smoothly.

Despite their resources and backing, aside from Gonaives, Hinche and some Central Plateau villages, rebels were challenged by a resilient and well-organized resistance. Almost every time, an alliance of police and pro-FL activists sent the aggressors packing. On February 9, Lavalassians regained control almost everywhere. On February 10, rebels retreated to their Gonaives stronghold. Across the Central Plateau, Haitians recognized them as the return of the hated army.

Then later in February, well-armed insurgents “steamroller(ed) their way quite easily across most of northern Haiti.” The government, in turn, concentrated on defending Port-au-Prince, and Aristide still hoped for a negotiated solution. It was wishful thinking.

As events unfolded, Aristide's retreat and refusal to issue a national call to arms sealed his fate. Rebels cut off the road from the capital to Cap-Haitien, halted food convoys to the north, fuel ran out in the city, electricity failed, hospitals closed, and conditions became desperate. Things were heading for a showdown, and by late February only Lavalas partisans could be trusted to protect the government. At the same time, pressure was building for Aristide to resign, but he persisted in seeking a negotiated solution.

In mid-January, he agreed to CARICOM's proposal to accept an opposition prime minister, hold new elections, take further measures to disarm his supporters, and reform the police. The opposition ignored him, and the effort fell flat. It was followed by a February 21 Roger Noriega proposal in his role as the ruthlessly duplicitous regional Assistant Secretary of State. It gave everything to the opposition and called for Aristide's unconditional surrender. Even so, to quell violence, Aristide accepted it, yet even that conciliatory gesture was rejected.

The whole process was a charade, and Noriega revealed it by canceling final negotiations and ending any chance for settlement short of an Aristide resignation. The French were quite happy to go along and for good reason.

It stemmed from a 2003 Aristide call for France to repay the massive sum it extorted in 1825 compounded by a modest amount of annual interest. But at 5% up to 2003, it amounted to \$21 billion dollars and clearly rankled the Chirac government. By September 2003, members of its embassy had a full-time anti-Aristide job, and except for the US, no other country so enthusiastically wanted him out.

By fall 2003, France rejected Aristide's request and called it based on “hallucinatory accounting.” The French Socialist Party agreed, denounced the Aristide “dictatorship” and

called for his resignation. After that, Aristide was too preoccupied with his survival to press the issue, and post-coup in April, his successor Latortue called the claim “illegal, ridiculous and was only made for political reasons. The matter is closed.” More on this (made-in-USA) appointee below.

In the meantime on February 20, Colin Powell said the US wouldn’t “object if Aristide agreed to leave office early.” US Ambassador Carney called Aristide “toast,” and Haiti’s President told CNN on February 26 that an international community token gesture would have stopped the insurgency in its tracks. A single call from Powell would have done it. However, on February 25, the Franco-US alliance blocked the last-ditch CARICOM Security Council proposal to save the government. Then on February 28 (hours before the coup), the White House press secretary blamed Aristide for “the deep polarization and violent unrest....in Haiti.” It was about to come to a head at the hands of US troops.

By late February, Aristide was severely weakened, his position tenuous, and his government only controlled greater Port-au-Prince. On the night of February 28 into the early morning February 29 hours, it ended. The Franco-US alliance falsely claimed he resigned. Aristide vehemently denied it. In fact, insurgents couldn’t unseat him, so US Marines were sent to do it.

Throughout February, Aristide repeatedly insisted he’d serve out his term and had no intention of resigning. In CNN February 26 and 27 interviews, he again reaffirmed his intention to stay and would only step down when his term expired on February 7, 2006. As late as 1AM February 29, he told no close allies he’d leave office – not his chief legal counsel, his press secretary or even his wife.

US claims that it was voluntary are false and consider the circumstances. The scheme:

- was arranged in total secrecy;
- it happened in the middle of the night into the early morning pre-daybreak Sunday hours;
- there were no cameras, reporters or independent witnesses; and
- it’s inconceivable Aristide would choose the Central African Republic (CAR) as his refuge location; it’s a repressive police state closely aligned to France, and on arrival he was held under house arrest and denied access to the media, telephone and all contact outside the country;
- - numerous other inconsistencies also went unanswered and the dominant media didn’t asked.

When he finally got a chance to explain, Aristide told CNN and others he was “taken by force by US military.” They and Haitian security forces surrounded his home and threatened him with massive and immediate violence “to push me out and (against his will) sign a letter stating that “I have been forced to leave to avoid bloodshed.” To his disgrace (post-coup) in mid-April, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan produced a Report on Haiti to endorse the official Franco-American storyline in every respect.

It was false and deceptive. For one thing, Aristide wasn’t threatened by Haitian rebels. They were at least a week away from assaulting Port-au-Prince, and with mass FL support, they knew it might be impossible to succeed if they tried. Rebel commander Philippe, in fact, told

reporters that at best they hoped to blockade the city, then “wait for the right time.” He later admitted that the “rebellion” was largely a made-for-media bluff to scare Aristide into thinking their small force (around 300 in total) was strong and unstoppable.

In contrast, Aristide’s real threat was from US Ambassador Foley and French Ambassador Burkard. They likely knew what Hallward explained – that if Aristide held on for another week or so “his government might well have been able to regain control of the situation. There was no popular revolution (or) crisis of leadership.”

US and French hawks knew time was running out and they had to act. They tried threatening phone calls into the early February 29 hours. They didn’t work. “Aristide wouldn’t budge, and Foley (ran) out of options....Time was desperately short.” It was harder concealing “the obvious links between the political and military wings of the US-backed opposition,” and some sources said “the French in particular were starting to panic, and were now determined to force the issue at all costs.”

Foley apparently agreed and “settle(d) for plan B: direct US abduction.” At the same time, with time running out, no one else could be relied on, so orders went out for US Marines to finish the job and do it fast. With Aristide’s commitment to non-violence, their job was easier. But Hallward believes his choice was strategically sound. Had he chosen to stay and fight, there’d have been a bloodbath, and Aristide would have committed suicide. By leaving and avoiding it, he exposed his conspirators and gave Lavalas a chance to “regroup and prevail in a longer-term struggle.”

Even so, things got ugly. When word got out about his abduction, supporters took to the streets and vented their rage. Gas stations and banks were torched and USAID and CARE property stolen. Downtown shops were also looted. At the same time, opposition forces struck back and in the first few post-coup days killed between 300 and 1000 persons. They and Bel Air, La Saline and Cite Soleil residents (Lavalas loyalists) were the real coup targets, and their suffering had only begun.

2004: Revenge of the Haitian Elite

In the short term, the coup succeeded, but getting rid of Aristide was a diversion. The real aim was “to break once and for all the movement sustained by many dozens of pro-Lavalas ‘organisations populaires.’ ” To prevent another Lavalas president, it would require:

- in the short term, forming a pseudo-government of exclusive elitist members with plenty of foreign money and military power backing them; a campaign of anti-Lavalas organization aggression, especially in their slum area strongholds; and manipulating the electoral process to divide and conquer the opposition.

- in the longer term, integrating Haiti into a stable neoliberal regional order; adopting “untrammelled privatization” and structural adjustments; increased reliance on foreign aid for elitists’ interests, not poor Haitians; further reliance on co-opted NGOs; increased supervision of security forces; and more. These measures would reinforce class barriers and let Haitian industrialists and foreign investors get on with their imperial project.

Efforts in that direction began immediately, as in 1991 overt armed resistance was quickly suppressed, and putschists aimed to target their enemies as harshly as they dared. They dared plenty, and things turned ugly fast. Innocent victims were fair game while high-profile

FL figures or anyone seen as a threat were hunted down and either fled or were jailed. Many went into hiding. Others reached exile.

Throughout the country, rebel thugs got free reign to terrorize and kill, did plenty of both, and did it openly in the streets. Hundreds ended up dead or missing. The state Port-au-Prince morgue was swamped with bodies, far more than it could handle, and on March 7 had to dump or bury 800 corpses – many with their hands tied behind their backs and bags placed over their heads.

Bodies turned up everywhere, in the streets, washed up on beaches, abandoned to pigs as food, and volunteers were still collecting them around Cite Soleil through the end of 2005. Anyone associated with Lavalas was fair game, but that could be anyone because its support was so strong and still is.

US Marines controlled the capital and within days 2000 foreign troops joined them – not to protect the public but to “soften up ‘hostile’ neighborhoods by clearing away their last remaining defenses” to defend against rebel attacks. Killings were commonplace to wipe out resistance, create an atmosphere of fear, and solidify the new ruling government’s authority.

Democracy was nowhere in sight, and its establishment was farcical on its face. This was the process:

- on February 29, Haiti’s Supreme Court chief justice, Boniface Alexandre, was sworn in as interim president ignoring the constitutional requirement for the legislature to ratify his appointment and that he became an illegitimate coup d’etat appointee;
- on March 3, a temporary “Tripartite Council” was nominated – comprised of one unauthorized Lavalas representative, the opposition, and the international community to assure the group was pro-elitist;
- the “Council’s” job, in turn, was to appoint another one – a seven-person Conseil des Sages (Council of the Wise) made up of nearly all anti-Lavalassians;
- this group then chose an acceptable prime minister and imported a Floridian (for the past 20 years) for the job – Gerard Latortue, a neoliberal economist and former UN functionary who could be relied on as a loyal elitist ally. Like no other recent official in the job, Latortue held absolute power for the next two years, his government excluded all FL supporters, and he achieved wondrous results for his backers:
- Haiti’s literacy program was abandoned immediately;
- subsidies for schoolbooks and meals were canceled;
- agrarian reform was reversed allowing former landlords to reclaim their land;
- income tax collections (from the elites) were suspended for three years;
- price controls and import regulations were ended to benefit agribusiness, harm local production, and Haitian businessmen raised food prices up to 400%;
- the new Tabarre university was shut down;

- despite pledged \$1.2 billion in donor aid, none of it went for job creation, production or public works beneficial to poor Haitians; in a country with 70% or more unemployment, one of Latortue's first acts was to fire several thousand public sector employees forcing them into destitution with little means to survive;
- he also ended the careers of thousands of elected officials by closing down the government and replacing it with unelected hand-picked successors;
- trial judges were also dismissed and replaced with more acquiescent ones; and
- overall he served the powerful and abandoned any pretense of social investment for the most desperately impoverished people in the hemisphere.

Besides a suitable government, the other priority was security – reestablishing a “more army-friendly” Haitian National Police (PNH), in lieu of a more expensive Haitian army that wasn't needed. Doing it, however, meant reactivating the old death-squad network that would work just as well but it had to be done discretely.

Once established, every credible human rights organization visiting the country in 2004 and 2005 came to the same conclusion – the kind of thugs recruited waged an open “campaign of terror in the Port-au-Prince slums.” They served as Haiti's largest and most brutal gang and had free reign to operate.

One of their most pressing tasks was arresting and imprisoning loyal Lavalassians. By late 2006, Haiti's jails overflowed with them and pro-Lavalas neighborhood residents. The capital's squalid penitentiary held four times its capacity, and only a fraction of them committed a crime. Most of them were grassroots FL supporters or OP members. One was former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, another was Rene Civil, one of Haiti's most respected activists. Still another was Father Gerard Jean-Juste who spent 26 years in exile working with Haitian refugees in Miami, then returned to Haiti after Aristide's 1991 election.

Imprisoning the opposition had its limits, however. It stretched the capacity to do it to the maximum. As prisons overflowed, anti-Lavalas efforts unleashed unprecedented levels of persecution, and a UN paramilitary force supplied heavy weaponry to supplement the more conventional kinds the PNH used.

2004 – 2006: Repression and Resistance

Hallward divides it into three phases:

- an initial all out assault on FL activists followed by about two more months of similar tactics;
- then an April 30, 2004 Security Council-authorized (Blue Helmet) MINUSTAH occupation force to take over from an initial Multinational Interim Force (MIF); it began its first of successive six-month deployments in June with this supposed mandate – to employ “less abrasive” tactics such as “pseudo-legal” arrests and “punitive imprisonment” in lieu of public executions; it's portrayed as “neutral” even though it's thuggish; and after an initial lull in violence, it's been as brutish as street gangs with high-powered weapons for added firepower; its mission is also illegal for being the first time ever Blue Helmet force supporting a coup d'état against a democratically elected President;

— a third 2004 phase began in late summer/early fall under the “retrained, rearmed and reinforced” PHN with plenty of MINUSTAH backup.

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the coup, Haitian resistance remains strong, and brutish force is matched against it. It results in indiscriminate killing in Lavalas strongholds like Cite Soleil and an early example in Bel Air on the 13th (September 30) anniversary of the 1991 coup. Over 10,000 rallied to commemorate it, were shot at by police, up to 10 people were killed and many others wounded. Repressive incursions into neighborhoods followed with Bel Air a frequent target.

The reason is its remarkable resilience, unflinching support for Aristide, and proximity to the edge of the downtown’s commercial center, national palace and police headquarters. Bel Air also learned how to defend itself, and its “comites de vigilance” led resistance against pre-Aristide military dictatorships. This combination of “poverty, solidarity and strength” made it essential to subdue. In the fall of 2004, repeated PHN/MINUSTAH incursions arrested dozens of people and shot many others. On October 11 alone, 130 people were jailed, and repression continued for months. It hasn’t stopped.

No one knows the full toll that keeps mounting. But one study was startling. It was by Wayne State University, School of Social Work researchers Athena Kolbe and Royce Hutson. For the period February 2004 to December 2005, they used coordinate sampling and personal interviews to document the following in the greater Port-au-Prince area:

- an estimated 8000 killings;
- 35,000 sexual assaults;
- about 21% of killings by the PHN;
- another 13% by the demobilized army; and
- still another 13% by paramilitary gangs like the Little Machete Army.

The report documented kidnappings, extrajudicial detentions, physical assaults other than rape, death threats, physical ones, and still others of sexual violence. Investigators concluded that “crime and systematic abuse of human rights were common in Port-au-Prince” involving criminals but also “political actors and UN (Blue Helmet) soldiers.” It also stressed an overwhelming need on the ground for attention to “legal, medical, psychological, and economic consequences of widespread human rights abuses and crime.” The study ended in December 2005, but rampant abuses continue daily in pro-Lavalas areas.

Cite Soleil is a frequent target. It’s a Port-au-Prince slum, an FL stronghold, and with 300,000 residents is the largest neighborhood in the country by far. It may also be the poorest, most congested, and without even a pretense of infrastructure. Yet it shows a determined capacity to defend itself. In the ensuing post-coup months, hundreds were killed trying, the slaughter continues against Lavalas sympathizers, and UN Blue Helmets are the main perpetrators. Even so, and despite months of “open warfare” on Cite Soleil streets, MINUSTAH’s attempt to subdue the community was no more successful than earlier PHN and co-opted street gang efforts. By late summer 2005, a dreaded moment for pro-coup forces approached – electing a new Haitian president.

The process was scheduled for October 2005, then November, and after four delays, took place on February 7, 2006 – at a time Jean-Bertrand Aristide was still the country's democratically elected President but in exile in South Africa with no ability to run or claim his office.

Fanmi Lavalas was to be excluded or at best “integrated” into the process like a more conventional political party, but its leaders had other plans. They would only participate with Father Jean-Juste as their candidate, a much beloved man like Aristide and a staunch supporter of Haiti's legitimate President. To prevent his running, however, masked police came to his bi-weekly children's soup kitchen. They beat and arrested him, then held him for weeks at the national penitentiary under appalling conditions. He was released in November, arrested again, and then allowed to go to Miami in January 2006 for urgently needed medical treatment.

At the same time, many Lavalassian OPs urged Rene Preval to run, offered full support if he would, got him to accept at the last minute, and caught the whole political establishment by surprise as a result. It let FL abstain from participating while encouraging its members to support a man representing Lavalas continuity with his Lespwa alliance. It worked like a charm, shocked the opposition, and in a free, fair and open election made Preval unbeatable. Yet a group of nine CD leaders were determined to try – at least if they could force a second round to pool their votes around one Preval opponent and do what they do best – arrange things so their man won regardless of how people voted and try any stunt to do it.

They controlled voter registrations and tried to limit them. Whereas the previous Preval administration provided over 10,000 locations, Latortue set up less than 500 in carefully chosen sites to disadvantage pro-Lavalas neighborhoods. In addition, compared to about 12,000 polling stations in 2000, only 800 were allowed in 2006, again with the same tactic employed. Pro-Lavalas strongholds like Cite Soleil and poor rural areas had none.

Nonetheless, turnout was huge – on a par with 1990 and 2000 at around 65%, with many thousands coming miles to vote and enduring long lines to do it. By February 9, with one-fourth of the votes counted, Preval was comfortably ahead at around 62% against his main opponent with 11%. Yet, when results were announced on February 11, they were predictable.

With the Latortue government in charge, they rigged the election, controlled the process, picked the winner and still lost. Thousands of valid Preval ballots went missing or were dumped, and there was little effort to conceal it. Others were mysteriously blank and still more were judged invalid. The near-final tally – Preval's huge majority evaporated to 49.6%, then was lowered on February 13 to 48.7%, making a second round necessary if the result held.

The response on Port-au-Prince streets and around the country was outrage, and it changed things. On February 15, the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) decided to divide the “blank” ballots proportionally among the candidates. It was enough to nudge Preval above the 50% mark and provide him a first round victory. In point of fact, independent observers judged he got between 62% and 70% of the votes, and considering that he tallied 88% in 1996, those figures were likely too low.

Looking back since 1990, the “single most obvious feature of Haitian politics” was

undeniable: populist candidates (Aristide or Preval) won each time – overwhelmingly with Aristide getting 92% in 2000 and he'd likely match it if he chose and were allowed again to run.

The 2006 victory was profoundly important, but as would be seen, equally compromised. It emphatically rejected the 2004 coup, yet got Preval to govern tactfully and timidly. More on that below.

By summer 2006, international donors pledged \$750 million in aid. Initially, Preval announced plans for significant amounts of social investments. He also got commitments from Venezuela and Cuba (in spring 2007) in health care, electricity, other infrastructure and low-cost oil. Around the same time, he announced initiatives in education, literacy, road-building and tourism.

All the while, he had little room to maneuver. He was constrained by not having a legislative majority. He had it in Haiti's Senate but not in the lower Chamber of Deputies that was controlled by a pro-coup – pro-army majority. Even worse was the constant pressure he faced from dominant elitists and the long shadow of Washington always in the wings.

It made Preval extremely cautious, and it showed in his prime ministerial appointment – elitist Jacques Edouard Alexis to lead an eclectic cabinet having five CD members. The result – almost nothing of consequence was accomplished in his first year of office and, even so, the opposition wanted Alexis replaced by a still more “acceptable” alternative.

Preval was indeed hamstrung and it showed in his actions. He's done little for social change, and by spring 2007 was prepared to announce a new round of privatizations, including selling off Haiti's telecommunications company. One year into his second term, a Haiti Progres editor “conclude(d) that so far the government has done nothing at all.” Preval was either “diplomatic” or “indecisive” on Lavalas election demands of “justice for (coup) victims, release of political prisoners, return of exiles, (and ending) militarized assault(s) on the popular neighborhoods.”

Point of fact – Preval cut a deal with the devil. To win a first round victory (even though he won overwhelmingly), he agreed to painful concessions. Many prominent FL leaders, including Yvon Neptune, judged his indecisiveness damaging and “indefensible.” Some Lavalassians called his Lespwa coalition “nothing” and would only be supported if it moved “in the right direction.”

In fall 2006, it did the opposite when Preval and Alexis yielded to US and elitist pressure for more direct action against activist neighborhoods. To counter pro-Aristide/Lavalas rallies in Cite Soleil, they authorized a full-scale December Blue Helmet assault that “missed its targets but left around twenty innocents dead.” More incursions followed with many more deaths. So far, Preval was colluding with the enemy instead of representing the people who elected him. Moreover, three years post-coup, some movement veterans believe conditions are “more discouraging than ever before.”

Hallward notes that by March 2007, “there was little popular enthusiasm for a government whose hands were so firmly and so obviously tied by international constraints.” Yet its existence is impressive proof that efforts to crush Lavalas haven't succeeded, and (even though near-impotent), “Preval's own fidelity to Lavalas remains strong. Whoever succeeds him (assuming a comparable election) will in all likelihood share a similar fidelity.” Lavalas,

even in disarray, “remains the most powerful political force in the country.” It endures in spite of immense repression, is less dependent on one charismatic leader, is “less contaminated by opportunists (and has) fewer illusions about what must be done next.”

Conclusion

At the time of his reelection, Aristide and FL were so popular, they threatened the old order with real progressive change. They had to be contained, and they were by a coalition of “first world diplomats, IFI economists, USAID consultants, IRI, (NED and) CIA (functionaries), media specialists, ex-military personnel, (security forces), NGO(’s),” and more who declared victory on February 29, 2004. They ousted the people’s government and “discredited the most progressive (one) in Haiti’s history.” And they used a familiar formula to do it:

- starving the government of aid;
- applying enormous economic pressure and obliging it to adopt unpopular policies like cutting public services and jobs;
- tainting the government’s democratic legitimacy by equating it with former dictatorships;
- controlling security forces and co-opting opportunistic elements of the popular movement;
- forcing the government to be defensive against paramilitary attacks and calling it intolerant of dissent;
- presenting government opposition as diverse and inclusive and calling oppressors victims and victims oppressors;
- getting dominant media support to vilify the government as intractable, authoritarian, and led by a despot;
- overall, turning truth on its head and getting the world community to sign on to it and then stay mute in the face of intense repression; and
- pressuring Aristide and Lavalas to make damaging compromises and mistakes.

In contrast, it’s quite reasonable to blame Aristide for being too “tolerant,” too “conciliatory,” too “complacent,” and too “lenient” with opponents and opportunists who took full advantage. His supporters might argue he failed to act with enough “vigor” and “determination” as they “were entitled to expect.” FL also became “too inclusive, too moderate, too indecisive, (and) too undisciplined” after gaining an overwhelming mandate. Aristide more often was willing to negotiate with his enemies than mobilize his supporters to challenge them. He steadfastly rejected violence and resolutely wanted peace and conciliation.

Yet in spite of what happened, Hallward is hopeful. He believes Aristide’s era “opened the door to a new political future.” Lavalas was an experiment against the established order, and Aristide led it with a minimum of resources, no outside support, and intense opposition. The 2006 election and the three preceding it (in 1990, 1995 and 2000) show that Haitians “consistently and overwhelmingly” voted for “much the same principles and much the same people.” In the long run, toppling Lavalas a second time may work no better than the first.

If presidential elections are held in 2010, Hallward believes Lavalas may likely win a fifth time and solidify its legitimacy further. It's no small factor that eight years under George Bush has encouraged progressive elements throughout the region, and it may pay off ahead for Haitians.

Lavalas has also begun to address its own limitations, to be less dependent on Aristide's charisma, to purge its manipulative opportunists and to build greater strength and resilience from a more solid base. Hallward refers to elements within Lavalas "emerg(ing) from the crucible of repression stronger than before," and it's encouraging to believe they'll build on it. Haiti first won independence through force of arms, it took a decade to do it, and Haitians did it on their own. Prevailing again won't be with weapons, it will take much longer, and it will require a remobilized Lavalas along with a renewed "emancipatory politics within the imperial nations themselves." After 500 years, Haiti's struggle continues and hope sustains it.

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