

Haiti: Stop the Attacks on Former President Jean Bertrand Aristide and the Lavalas Movement

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On Aug. 21, Haitian police wearing black masks and carrying heavy arms appeared in front of the home of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide as a Haitian judge issued calls to arrest him. Hundreds of people courageously surrounded the house to protect him.

One week before, President Aristide was summoned to court on false corruption charges. This is the fourth time since his return to Haiti in 2011 that he has been the target of a politically motivated legal case. (Previous charges were dropped before he could even challenge them in court.) The judge in this case, Lamarre Bélizaire, has been suspended for ten years from practicing the law by the Port-au-Prince Bar Association for using the court to persecute opponents of the present regime. His suspension is due to begin once he steps down as judge.

President Aristide, a former priest, was Haiti's first democratically elected president. He is loved and trusted by the majority of Haitians. While in office he built schools and hospitals, encouraged agriculture, and doubled the minimum wage. He was removed and forced into exile with his family in 2004 by a U.S.-backed military coup. Thousands of members of his Lavalas movement were killed, raped or falsely imprisoned in the aftermath of the coup.

In 2011, after seven years of grassroots organizing in Haiti backed up by an international campaign, President Aristide and his family returned home. Tens of thousands of people welcomed him. He promised to work for education and the inclusion of all Haitians in the democratic process. He has done just that - reopening the Aristide Foundation's university, UNIFA, where today over 900 students from all sectors of society, including those who cannot afford higher education, are training to become doctors, nurses and lawyers.

Legislative elections due to take place in Haiti in October are triggering a new chilling wave of repression aimed at President Aristide and his supporters. Lavalas has overwhelmingly won every election in which it has participated, but since the 2004 coup the party has been barred from elections. As a result, fewer than 20% of Haitians turned out for the flawed election that brought the current President Michel Martelly to power in 2011. The Martelly government has not held an election since, and legislative elections are now three years overdue. Determined to consolidate dictatorial power, the Martelly government has systematically attempted to defame Lavalas, throwing out one set of accusations after another against President Aristide and other respected Lavalas leaders such as former Senator Myrlande Liberis-Pavert.

While President Aristide is being threatened with arrest, former dictator Jean-Claude "Baby

Doc” Duvalier – who is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Haitians during his rule – is living freely in Haiti, and has been openly embraced by Martelly.

Since the devastating earthquake and the cholera epidemic, doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals training at UNIFA are needed more than ever. President Aristide must be able to carry on with his vital work as an educator.

The last time President Aristide was summoned, thousands of people surrounded the courthouse, chanting: “If they call our brother, they call all of us.” We echo their voices. Enough is enough. It is time for food, housing, health care and education. It is time for free, fair, and inclusive elections in Haiti, not dictatorship, so the urgent needs of the population can be addressed. The arrest warrant and other false charges aimed at President Aristide and his supporters should be dropped once and for all.

Signers:

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