

Washington steps up pressure on Haitian government

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Washington is growing impatient over the Haitian government's reluctance to bow down to US and international criticism of alleged electoral fraud in recent parliamentary elections.

Last month, US Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Luis Lauredo accused Haitian leaders of ignoring "the serious concerns raised by the international community regarding the May 21 elections." He condemned "the flawed methodology for determining Senate winners" and warned that "in the absence of meaningful change, the United States will not support the presidential and legislative elections planned for November 26." Lauredo concluded with a threat to cut off vitally-needed US aid.

The Haitian government of Rene Preval has since been pressured into accepting another OAS mission to Haiti after US State Secretary Madelaine Albright had, what press reports termed, a "vigorous exchange" with the Haitian president during the UN Millennium Summit.

In late September, the OAS's Adjunct Secretary-General, the US diplomat Luigi Enaudi, spent a week in Haiti trying to mediate between the government, which is controlled by the *Famille Lavalas* party of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the *Convergence démocratique*, a 15-member opposition alliance, which includes supporters of the former military and Duvalier dictatorships as well as erstwhile allies of Aristide. In the middle of his mission, Enaudi was joined by Donald Steinberg, the US State Department official responsible for Haiti, and his Canadian counterpart David Lee. In what appeared to be a coordinated action, the North American diplomats threatened to cut off \$400 million in annual assistance, while European Union officials were telling a visiting Haitian government delegation that the EU will suspend its \$100 million a year aid program to Haiti if the election dispute is not soon resolved.

At the conclusion of his mission, Enaudi refused to call it a failure, but conceded he had not gotten representatives of the government and opposition to meet face-to-face and didn't know whether he would be returning to Haiti.

The Preval government is insisting that the results of the May 21 elections are "non-negotiable," while the opposition is demanding that the electoral commission and all those elected on May 21 immediately be suspended from their official functions and new elections organized.

Should the US, Canada and the European Union make good on their threat of an aids cut-off, Haiti, the poorest country in the

Western Hemisphere, will be devastated.

But one would search in vain for any serious explanation from the North American and European powers as to the reasons for the current crisis. The incongruities and contradictions in the accounts given by the diplomats of the great powers and recycled by the international press are well illustrated in a report filed by an OAS delegation that visited Haiti in August. According to that report, "Since 1997, Haiti has been through a prolonged political crisis which has left the country without a constitutionally established government for three years and without a Parliament for 18 months.

"The national and international community hoped that the legislative and municipal elections, finally held on May 21, 2000, would bring a solution to the political crisis with the establishment of a new Parliament. It was encouraging to see that 90 percent of the Haitian electors had registered, and that 60 percent of those electors have voted in the first round of the elections.

"... the consensual opinion [of foreign observers] was that overall the May 21 elections have been free and transparent." But the electoral council awarded 19 of 27 Senate seats to Aristide's Lavallas Party, based on it having won the majority of the votes polled by the four biggest vote-getters in the first round—not of the total votes, as prescribed by Haiti's election law. Ignoring protests from the opposition and foreign governments, the Haitian government then pressed ahead with a second round of elections July 9 "in an attempt to have the results of the Senate elections validated."

"The [OAS] Commission has observed that following these irregularities in the legislative elections, political polarization and a climate of intimidation have intensified in Haiti and have dealt a blow to the consolidation of the fragile democracy in the country."

Left out of this account is any consideration of the objective roots of the violent power struggle which has been raging within the Haitian elite. The OAS report acknowledged that the "absolute poverty in which most of the population is living ... the high rates of illiteracy, the reduced life expectancy, the high rates of infant mortality, and malnutrition are ... creating a situation of social urgency." But it failed to examine either the source of this devastating social crisis or its connection to the political power struggle.

In fact Haiti's social catastrophe is directly tied to the economic agenda the US and other imperialist powers have imposed on Haiti. Under an International Monetary Fund-style structural

adjustment program, whose adoption was a condition for US support for the restoration of the democratically-elected Aristide to the Haitian Presidency in 1994, the country's internal market is being opened up to the transnational corporations, profitable state industries have been privatized, social spending further reduced, and thousands of government jobs wiped out.

None of the rival Haitian political groupings is opposed to the economic agenda of international capital. Rather, the power struggle consists largely of the attempt of the various groupings to convince the US and other imperialist powers that they should be entrusted with the task of carrying out this agenda.

Stoking the conflict is the historic weakness and dependency of Haiti's venal bourgeoisie. Lacking an independent economic basis, various cliques fight for state power, so as to gain access to patronage and the prerogative of further plundering state resources through privatization.

A second important factor in the political crisis is that the government's opponents on the extreme right—partisans of the former Duvalier and Cedras dictatorships—have been encouraged by the US Republicans to persevere in their efforts to rid Haiti of the “dangerous radical” Aristide. This encouragement has taken two forms: explicit statements from leading Republicans that the US should never have restored Aristide to the presidency and the Republicans' own vendetta against the Clinton regime.

Further contributing to the political volatility are the appeals made by Aristide and his supporters to popular discontent during last spring's election campaign. Aristide's party adopted a right-wing election platform pledging to continue the IMF-dictated policies pursued by Preval, but in the final weeks of the campaign suddenly switched gears and appealed both to anti-IMF sentiment and popular hostility to the former military and Duvalier dictatorships.

Aristide's opponents don't just resent losing out in the immediate power struggle. They, and their international backers, fear, not without reason, that such populist appeals could so raise the hopes and expectations of Haiti's impoverished masses as to give rise to a social rebellion that threatens the already shaky edifice of capitalist rule in Haiti.

The subsequent attempts of the Preval government to manipulate the electoral process indicate the Lavalas Party's own fears of the rising social tensions. For a government that had cut social spending and thousands of public sector jobs there was a clear danger in continuing to stoke popular opposition to the agenda of the IMF. Preval and Aristide probably also recognized that their own support at the polls was largely negative, a product of popular hatred for the former dictatorships, and might diminish in a second round—historically turnouts in second rounds in Haiti have been extremely low—especially if the opposition carried through on its veiled threats of violence.

In the ensuing months, the Preval regime continued to faithfully apply the dictates of international capital, hoping thereby to ease pressure from Washington for new elections. Last month, at the urging of the World Bank and IMF, the Haitian government stopped subsidizing the price of oil, causing it to jump 44 percent.

For decades Washington supported right-wing dictatorships in Haiti. Even now, while lecturing the Haitian government on

electoral procedure, it refuses to hand over to Haitian authorities thousands of pages of documents concerning the crimes of the Cedras military regime and its allies.

The real aim of Washington's current campaign of threats against the Haitian government is to make the Lavalas regime even more subservient to the dictates of international capital by insisting, in the name of “political reconciliation,” that longstanding US allies on the extreme right are given a share of political power.

The real aims of the US in Haiti were made explicit in speeches top government officials gave to a National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians Conference last June as the conflict over the conduct of the elections began to assume serious proportions.

“Most Latin American and Caribbean nations,” declared Peter Romero, acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, “are firmly on the path of economic reform, stepping into the twenty-first century with privatized economies, liberalized regulatory systems, and improved financial systems”—all euphemisms for the unrestrained penetration of international capital in formerly closed national markets at the cost of jobs and social devastation.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “these positive developments are hindered by the fact that corruption and government inefficiency still thrive at near epidemic levels in some countries in the region, and the political will to put aside partisan differences and pursue sound economic policies is simply not always there.” In the case of Haiti, “progress toward economic reform has been uneven and painfully slow.” Vowed the next speaker, Special Haiti Coordinator Donald Steinberg, “We will continue to press the Haitian Government to restore fiscal discipline and move ahead on the modernization of key state-owned enterprises.”



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