

As US isolates Aristide

Haiti's wealthy pin hopes on Bush

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The US Supreme Court ruling that delivered the White House to George W. Bush and the Republican Party was greeted with wild elation in at least one corner of the globe. In Port-au-Prince, residents of the wealthy hillside neighborhoods overlooking the impoverished Haitian capital took to the streets shouting their enthusiasm when the decision was announced.

The high court's action came just weeks after Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the former populist priest and Haitian president, swept back into power with no serious opposition. In legislative elections held six months earlier, Aristide's Family Lavalas party won all but one of 29 seats in the Haitian Senate and 80 percent of the seats in the lower house.

While Haiti's right-wing opposition alleged fraud in the first contest and boycotted the November 26 presidential vote, both elections merely demonstrated that the political alliance of former supporters of the Duvalier dictatorship, ex-military putschists and erstwhile political allies of Aristide enjoy no support outside of the country's small privileged elite. According to the official results, Aristide, who will take office February 7, captured 92 percent of the vote.

The parliamentary election last May was recognized as generally fair by international observers. No one presented credible evidence that voting irregularities changed the outcome—as was the case in the US presidential contest. Yet, after the scale of the Family Lavalas landslide became clear, the right-wing opposition raised the cry of “fraud,” a charge that was quickly echoed by the Clinton administration, not to mention the US Republican Party.

Because of the failure of the Haitian government, headed by Aristide ally President Rene Preval, to re-run various contested Senate races, the US, the Organization of American States and the European Community boycotted the presidential election, failing to send observers.

More significantly, the US and Europe froze virtually all forms of economic aid to the destitute Caribbean country, supposedly in retaliation for the alleged electoral improprieties.

In a letter to Aristide written last month, President Bill Clinton upbraided the Haitian president-elect. “The president cited the need for tangible steps in Haiti to build an inclusive society around the goals of justice and the rules of law,” said a US embassy spokesman in Port-au-Prince. Paraphrasing Clinton, he added, “The United States together with the international community has made it known to the Haitian authorities that their failure to address well-documented election irregularities puts into question

their commitment to democracy.”

Media reports of the US president's denunciations have not bothered to note the hypocrisy of this sermon from a government whose judiciary has just decided the US presidential election by prohibiting authorities in Florida from addressing “well-documented election irregularities.”

The feigned US concern with Haitian “democracy” is in any case a rather recent phenomenon, given that the US served as the principal sponsor for the dictatorship headed by Francois “Papa Doc” and then Jean Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. The corrupt dynasty ruled the country for 30 years with no contested elections using the unbridled terror of its dreaded secret police, the tonton macoutes, to enforce its will.

A Roman Catholic priest who emerged as a critic of the Duvalier dictatorship, espousing liberation theology and at one point calling himself a “socialist,” Aristide won Haiti's first democratic election in 1990. Seven months later, he was overthrown by Haiti's military and driven into exile. Only in 1994 was he briefly restored to power through a US military occupation of the country.

Washington's real aim today, just as it was when it occupied the country, is to forge some kind of power-sharing agreement between Aristide and the old Duvalierist political elite in order to preserve stability and suppress the class struggle. The US and the International Monetary Fund are insisting that the incoming Aristide government carry through stringent structural adjustment programs aimed at dismantling what little remains of a public sector and maximizing the profitability of Haiti's free trade zones. This means assuring an uninterrupted supply of cheap labor and a guarantee of no strikes enforced by “professionalized” security forces.

US special envoy Anthony Lake, meanwhile, was dispatched to the Haitian capital to spell out Washington's demands.

While parroting the Clinton administration's supposed concerns about “democracy,” United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan was somewhat more blunt in spelling out the real fears of the US and European government officials and bankers. In a report to the General Assembly last month urging the shutdown of a UN civilian advisory mission in Haiti, Annan predicted political convulsions in the Caribbean nation.

“Haiti's political and electoral crisis has deepened, polarizing its political class and civil society, jeopardizing its international relations, sapping an already declining economy and adding to the hardship of the impoverished majority,” Annan wrote in the report.

“In the absence of any solution to the crisis, popular discontent seems likely to mount in response to rising prices and increased poverty, and may lead to further turmoil.”

The “turmoil” that Annan fears is a popular revolt against the intolerable conditions of life facing the vast majority of Haiti's population—the workers, peasants and poor. Two out of every three Haitians are unemployed, while the country's per capita income stands at just \$250. According to a report released recently by the UN World Food Program, 4.7 million of Haiti's 7.7 million people are suffering from “acute malnutrition.” Conditions for the masses continue to deteriorate, with the value of the national currency, the gourde, falling from 15 to the dollar in 1996 to 24 to the dollar today.

These conditions are the outcome of US domination and exploitation for most of the twentieth century, since the Marines first occupied the country in 1914, establishing a local military that formed the backbone of the murderous dictatorships that followed. Given the desperate conditions of the masses and the vast gulf between rich and poor, the pleas for “democracy” and “reconciliation” are farcical. What Washington really demands is a regime that will unconditionally defend US interests in the country against any threat of revolt from below.

Just as in the period in which he sought US support during his exile in the 1990s, Aristide has attempted to accommodate himself to pressure from Washington. Responding to Clinton's denunciations, he has vowed to include members of the right-wing opposition in his government and to subordinate his economic policies more directly to the dictates of the international financial institutions. He also wrote Clinton that he will create “a credible new provisional council ... in consultation with opposition figures,” and to hold new elections in Senate races where the opposition claimed irregularities. Finally, the incoming Haitian president agreed to allow US Coast Guard vessels to patrol Haitian waters.

There is every indication that the second Aristide government will attempt to toe Washington's line even more obediently than the first. While biding his time behind the walls of a mansion during the Preval presidency, the ex-priest has cemented his ties with various corrupt elements within the Haitian elite, while his connections with the masses of poor have grown ever more distant. Dwindling popular enthusiasm for Aristide was reflected in the low turnout in the recent election. While the government claimed 60 percent went to the polls, observers from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) put it at less than 20 percent.

Aristide's promises will do nothing to appease either the Haitian opposition or the Republican politicians who are about to take the helm in Washington. Both have denounced him as a “Marxist” and view his supporters as a “mob” bent on mayhem.

Sen. Jesse Helms, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee described Aristide's election as a “sham,” joining with Rep. Porter J. Goss (R.-Fla.), who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, in a statement affirming that “narco-traffickers, criminals and other anti-democratic elements who surround Jean-Bertrand Aristide should feel the full weight of US law enforcement.”

The statement demanded the cutting off of “all direct support for

the Haitian government, as provided under current US law,” and a “comprehensive bottom-up review of US policy toward Haiti.”

The Republican leadership sharply opposed the 1994 intervention to restore Aristide to the Haitian presidency. Under the Reagan administration, Washington maintained its support for “Baby Doc” Duvalier until 1986 when a US Air Force jet was dispatched to Port-au-Prince to whisk the besieged dictator to a luxurious exile on the French Riviera. George Bush (senior) attempted to cobble together a new regime based on the Duvalierist military.

In Haiti, the opposition has no incentive to embrace the pleas by Clinton and Aristide for reconciliation. Given the desperate economic situation in the country, control of state power (and the associated ability to collect protection money from narcotics traffickers) has become one of the few sources of enrichment for the so-called political class and therefore the object of violent internecine struggle. The right-wing Haitian politicians have pinned their hopes on a swing toward a rabidly anti-Aristide policy by the incoming US administration.

Last week, opposition leaders of the so-called Democratic Convergence held a meeting of 800 supporters in Port-au-Prince to announce plans to set up a “national unity government.”

“We want to get a consensus to propose an alternative and provisional government to Mr. Aristide because we don't recognize his legitimacy,” said Gerard Pierre-Charles, a leader of the coalition. He added that the group is waiting to hear what George W. Bush will say about Aristide's presidency after the Republican is inaugurated in Washington.

Thus the Haitian right wing, incapable of registering any significant support at the polls, awaits the inauguration in Washington, anticipating that Bush, who will take office despite losing the US election, will declare Aristide's victory “illegitimate.” Never has the content of US demands for “democracy” abroad been more clearly exposed.

The logical outcome of the combined policy of the Haitian opposition and the Republicans in Washington is either a military coup or another US invasion aimed at installing a new dictatorship.



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