

Under international pressure, Haitian president Aristide embraces his right-wing opponents

Jacques Richard
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Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, host of the Summit of the Americas which brought together 34 heads of state of the continent last month in Quebec City, used the occasion to increase international pressure on Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

“Democracy in certain countries is fragile,” began the Canadian leader in addressing the matter in his concluding speech—an assessment which would be far too generous if applied to the coming to power of his US counterpart through the disenfranchisement of thousands of Florida voters.

But the Canadian prime minister, who is assiduously courting his powerful neighbor to the south, would never dare question the flimsy democratic credentials of the new Bush administration. “We are particularly concerned by the case of Haiti,” he hastened to add. The assembled leaders of the continent, Chrétien announced, had agreed to put the small and impoverished Caribbean nation “under surveillance.”

A high-level delegation of the Organization of American States (OAS), officially mandated by the summit, has already been in the Haitian capital earlier this month in order to “speed up the dialogue” between the government and opposition forces.

The type of “dialogue” envisioned by Ottawa and Washington was made clear by Chrétien in his speech when he pressured Aristide to “take rapid action on all of the commitments made in December.” He was referring to a letter to the Clinton administration in which the ex-radical priest, after winning reelection five years after the end of his first term, committed his government to a series of measures he had previously rejected. These included:

- * holding new elections for 10 contested senate seats presently held by Aristide supporters;
- * incorporating members of the opposition into his new government;
- * accepting a semi-permanent mission of the OAS to oversee domestic political negotiations;
- * implementing an IMF-style “structural adjustment” program, including the privatization of profitable state enterprises;
- * endorsing the forced repatriation of Haitian refugees by the US Coast Guard;
- * signing on to Washington's “anti-drug” crusade, under which it is dramatically increasing its direct military presence in Latin America.

“We consider this an appropriate road map,” the new US State of Secretary Colin Powell said in Quebec. “But we don't set aside the possibility that we might have other conditions.”

The one fact that Chrétien, Powell and company have always concealed in all their warnings to Aristide is the nature of their political allies on the ground. The Haitian opposition known as the “Democratic Convergence” is a mishmash of former Aristide allies disappointed for not having had their taste of power, former backers of the hated Duvalier family dictatorship, and supporters of the military officers who overthrew Aristide in 1991 and terrorized the country for three years.

Its most recent recruit, for example, is none other than former General Prosper Avril, the *éminence grise* of Jean-Claude Duvalier who took power in a September 1988 coup. Before being overthrown 18 months later, Avril had several of the present leaders of the Convergence jailed, beaten up or exiled in a desperate attempt to transform his regime into a permanent dictatorship.

Without the slightest popular basis—as revealed by its crushing defeat in last May's parliamentary elections and its subsequent boycott of the presidential elections where the same fate awaited it—this opposition is entirely dependent on foreign support. Indeed, all the hopes of the Convergence lie in the new Republican administration in Washington, known for its hostility to the former priest, who was branded a “communist” by extreme-right politicians like Jesse Helms, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Given this, it is not surprising that the opposition's tactics are made exclusively of provocations, such as the demand that Aristide's mandate be reduced from five to two years, during which a “national unity” government led by a Convergence prime minister would rule by decree.

Refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the elected government, the Convergence recently formed its own “parallel government.” Its “provisional president” Gérard Gourgue calls for the reestablishment of the Haitian army, the US-founded historical pillar of reaction which was dissolved by Aristide after his return in 1994. The incendiary character of this demand was revealed shortly after, when hundreds of emboldened ex-soldiers took to the streets of Port-au-Prince in early March to demand that their hated institution be brought back. A few days later, an angry crowd

surrounded the headquarters of the Convergence leadership, who responded by having their private guard open fire on the assembled crowd leaving one young man dead and many more wounded.

Chrétien and Powell have no qualms about working with such elements. This again shows that imperialism only raises the banner of “democracy” when that fits its policy objectives of the moment.

Bush's father basically accepted the military putsch which overthrew the first Aristide government in 1991. Faced with a mounting influx of Haitian refugees and the risk of social explosion in the Caribbean nation, his successor in the White House, Democrat Bill Clinton, concluded that US interests would be better safeguarded if Aristide were returned to power.

Today, while the former “radical” priest has gone out of his way to please his US masters, easily swapping his “anti-imperialist” garb for the business suit of an IMF “reformer,” Washington and Ottawa are not ready to bet everything on him—especially now that the popular credibility which had made him so useful has been tarnished by his sharp turn to the right.

The most politically backward layers of the Haitian ruling class were able, thanks to the active support of Washington, to lock the country into a brutal dictatorship during the decades of the Cold War. They are far from having lost either their political connections with the US right-wing forces presently in office, or their political usefulness to American imperialism.

When Chrétien and Powell insist that these reactionary elements be an integral part of the country's political process, they are sending Aristide a definite message: his government must speed up the privatization of state assets and the implementation of the full “structural adjustment” program, no matter the amount of popular opposition; and it must stand ready to resort if necessary to outright repression with the expert advice of his right-wing opponents in the opposition.

Thousands came last February, mainly from the working class neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, to hear Aristide's inaugural speech. In it, the new president tossed out a few populist demands, like the creation of “150,000 jobs,” before settling on his main theme: that he would be the “president of all Haitians”—i.e., of those who opposed him and refused to accept his legitimacy, as well as of those who supported him.

On the latter promise, Aristide was quick to deliver. But the “Haitians” he was referring to turned out to be the most notorious representatives of reaction and of the socially-destructive neo-liberal program.

In an interview with Canadian public television at the conclusion of the Summit of the Americas, Aristide boasted of having integrated into his new government a former minister of Jean-Claude Duvalier (Stanley Théard) and a former cadre of the World Bank and senior minister under the military junta (Marc Bazin). “And I could cite several other cases,” he added.

Aristide knows what he is talking about. He has received at the national palace one Serge Beaulieu, a Duvalierist ideologue and broadcaster who was jailed for his involvement in an attempted January 1991 coup aimed at preventing Aristide's first presidency, only to be freed a few months later by the September 1991 coup leaders.

The Haitian president has also disbanded the previous Electoral Council, responsible for organizing elections at all levels, and formed a new one in which several of the nine members are closely associated to the Duvalier regime, including a former health minister and a former chief of protocol.

The new president has officially called for the return of the United Nations in Haiti, only a few months after its general secretary Kofi Annan had decided not to renew the mandate of the UN's “civilian mission” in the country. Announced at a time when the country's international creditors (the IMF and World Bank) and the OAS were to discuss a possible unfreezing of a desperately needed \$500 million assistance package to Haiti, Aristide's request was seen by the *Miami Herald* as a “concession to the international community.”

But all these concessions are not enough to appease that layer of the venal Haitian bourgeoisie which, blinded by its class hatred, still sees in Aristide—as incredible as it may seem—a symbol of popular aspirations for more humane conditions of life and greater social equality.

Its political weight remains important, for it includes some of the country's richest and most powerful families, who prospered under the Duvaliers and financed the bloody 1991 coup against Aristide. While the new Bush administration seems ready at the present time to tolerate Aristide and continue using his loyal services, under new circumstances it will not hesitate one second to turn to the traditional arch-reactionary Haitian elite.

In addition to Washington's present tactics of setting one rival political faction against the other to whip all of them in line with its policy objectives, Haiti's violent and insoluble political crisis under the existing order is being fed by the prospect of siphoning off millions in public funds for those who succeed in taking and maintaining state power.

Whatever the exact forms this unfolding crisis will take in the coming months, the political physiognomy of the second Aristide government is now clear for all to see. It is a right-wing populist regime which, in its balancing act between the oppressed masses on the one hand and the forces of reaction on the other, is definitely leaning towards the latter.

Not only has this government welcomed in its ranks high-level officials of previous dictatorial regimes, but it is increasingly adopting their methods, i.e., cronyism, personal forms of power and state repression of political opponents.

Can it be doubted that this second Aristide government will hesitate tomorrow to use this same state machine to silence the mass opposition which will inevitably arise in response to its IMF-dictated program of privatizations, mass layoffs and dismantling of the little there is of public services?



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