

Haiti: Aristide regime shaken by mass protests

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Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide emerged from a meeting with Caribbean leaders January 31 professing support for proposals aimed at ending the cycle of political violence which has engulfed Haiti in recent weeks.

The measures to which Aristide has agreed include the joint appointment with opposition forces of a new Prime Minister, a “reform” of the police force, and the disarming of pro-government gangs. Earlier Aristide had pledged he would call legislative elections—the current parliament’s mandate has effectively expired—but the opposition has indicated it will boycott any vote held while Aristide remains in office.

Last Saturday’s negotiations were preceded by meetings in mid-January between representatives of the 15-member, intra-state Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and leaders of the Haitian opposition, which comprises most of the business establishment, remnants of the political machine of the Duvalier dictatorship, and disgruntled Aristide supporters.

CARICOM’s attempt to mediate an end to Haiti’s current political crisis has been undertaken at Washington’s behest. In a statement last month U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said he was “very concerned by the situation in Haiti” and backed a November proposal by the leadership of Haiti’s Catholic Church for the setting up of a nine-member council with government and opposition representatives to oversee new parliamentary elections. This would, according to Powell, “bring some order to the political process and open a constitutional avenue for the people to express its will.” (Church leaders have since backed off from their proposal and all but embraced the opposition’s demand that Aristide—whose presidential mandate runs until early 2006—step down immediately.)

It is no secret that the Bush administration and the Republican right are hostile toward Aristide, a former priest who came to political prominence in the 1980s as an exponent of liberation theology and as a critic of US imperialism. The administration of George Bush Sr. all but publicly supported the 1991 military coup that deposed

Aristide just eight months after he first won election, and much of the Republican Party openly opposed the US military intervention that resulted in Aristide being returned to power in 1994.

Nevertheless, the current Bush administration has continued the policy of the previous Clinton administration, which consists of using the opposition as a means of pressuring Aristide and his Lavalas party to continue imposing IMF restructuring, rather than pressing for the regime’s ouster.

Last month, as clashes between government forces and anti-Aristide demonstrators became virtually a daily occurrence, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared that the “United States Government believes the crisis in Haiti must be resolved through peaceful means and dialogue.” Boucher then lent support to calls for opposition elements to be incorporated into the government, saying that Aristide “must undertake the fundamental reforms necessary to restore the rule of law in Haiti.”

Behind this stance lies the Bush administration’s fear that the political crisis in Haiti could spiral out of control, triggering mass unrest in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and a new influx of refugees to Florida. With U.S. forces in occupied Iraq facing growing popular resistance, Washington’s lies about Iraq’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction in tatters, and the US economy hobbled by mounting current account and budget deficits, the Bush administration does not want Haiti to suddenly become a flashpoint of regional instability—all the more so, as 2004 is an election year.

However, Aristide’s opponents sense that he is vulnerable and hope to convince their patrons in Washington he can be dispensed with. Indeed, Aristide has done such a good job of imposing the demands of the IMF—privatization, the destruction of public sector jobs, and the elimination of price subsidies—that he has nearly used up that one asset that made him a useful tool of imperialism—the popular support he won from Haiti’s impoverished masses because of his outspoken opposition to the Duvalier regime and the military juntas that

succeeded it.

Nearly two decades after the fall of Duvalier *fils*, Haiti's social and economic fabric lies in utter shambles. Living standards are actually lower than in the early 1980s. And the Aristide regime, unable to offer any progressive solution to the crisis, has become increasingly reliant on corruption to maintain support in its own ranks and on repression to stifle dissent.

Although Aristide came out of last week's meeting with CARICOM leaders saying that "now is the time for compromise," the opposition vows it will only call a halt to the protest movement when he quits the presidency. Washington's attempt to broker a compromise between the rival claimants for state power thus seems unlikely to succeed and Haiti is set for a period of escalating political instability and violence.

Widespread protests

Since the end of last year, anti-Aristide demonstrations have been taking place on an almost daily basis since in the capital city, Port-au-Prince, and in Cap-Haïtien and other major provincial towns. The protests have attracted thousands of people, mostly of middle class origin. University students have been particularly prominent in the protests and have borne the brunt of the government repression. In Port-au-Prince, protesters have invariably gathered in the up-scale neighborhoods of Pétion-Ville, situated on the hills that surround the capital, and then marched down to the city's center.

The reaction among broader layers of the population has been one of passive support for, or at least tolerance of, the anti-Aristide protests. This speaks volumes as to the widespread anger at Aristide's transformation into a corrupt and tyrannical president who has piled up immense wealth for himself and his cronies while the conditions of life for the great majority have become ever-more intolerable.

According to a recent appeal by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, "In recent months, the living conditions of the poor have deteriorated markedly. The bankruptcy of pyramid-structured national banks and cooperatives, and the doubling of fuel prices in the first months of 2003 hit Haitians very hard." Children have suffered the most. More than 1,200,000 of them, reports the FAO, "are affected or infected by HIV/AIDS and other diseases. One in four children under 15 is an orphan, disabled, a domestic servant or living and working in the street." Out of a total population of 8 million, a staggering

"3,800,000 people are unable to secure their minimum food requirements," says the FAO.

The urgent need to put an end to such horrible social ills is not what motivates the opposition movement. It is led by a loose coalition of disgruntled former Aristide followers, old figures of the Duvalier era, supporters of the bloody 1991 military coup, and a traditional Haitian elite known for its hatred for the "populace." Cynically exploiting the mass disillusionment with Aristide, these elements are pushing for his removal from power, so that *they* can have their turn at plundering government assets.

Lacking any credibility among the popular masses, their hopes of sharing in the spoils of power rest on efforts to so disrupt the country as to render it ungovernable and thereby provoke a U.S. intervention. This was spelt out by a leader of the Student Federation at Haiti University, one Hervé Santilus, who was quoted in the *New York Times* last week as saying: "We're just going to keep demonstrating to push Bush and the State Department to come get this toxic garbage [Aristide] out of here as fast as they can."

Aristide's hold on power has been further weakened by the recent resignation of three of his ministers. His response has been to try to rally support among sections of the urban poor through a combination of bribery and demagogic appeals and the resort to violence. Anti-Aristide demonstrators have repeatedly been met by mobilizations of government supporters. Above all, the government has come to rely on the police force and the use of tear gas and live ammunition to disperse its opponents. At least fifty people have been reported killed in such clashes since September.

Opposition leaders have also played a direct role in the escalation of violence. In an interview with Montreal's *La Presse*, opposition leader and prominent businessman André Apaid justified the opposition's use of criminal gangs, claiming that that was the only way to counter government violence. The Haitian weekly *Haiti en Marche* reported last week that in Gonaïves and Saint-Marc, two cities north of the capital reputed to be centers of anti-Aristide sentiment, "public buildings, homes of government or police officials ... are being set on fire every day" by opposition supporters.



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