

Haiti: Washington gives greenlight to right-wing coup

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Former military and death-squad leaders are attempting an armed overthrow of the elected president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, with the connivance of an elite-controlled political opposition and under the complacent eyes of Western governments. This is the bitter truth revealed by last weekend's events in the impoverished Caribbean island-nation. The poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Haiti is on the verge of civil war and a possible humanitarian catastrophe.

Yesterday, Cap-Haïtien, the country's second largest city, reportedly fell to a rebel army that is led by former officers of the disbanded Haitian army and leaders of FRAPH, a death squad responsible for innumerable atrocities during the three-year military dictatorship that deposed Aristide in 1991. The heavily-armed rebels seized control of Cap-Haïtien's airport and main police stations, quickly overwhelming Aristide loyalists who had erected flaming barricades on the city outskirts.

Earlier last week, the rebels, whose initial base was in the north-western city of Gonaïves, overran Hinche, the most important city in the north-eastern plains. With the fall of Cap-Haïtien, much, if not most, of the north of the country is now beyond the control of the government. Buoyed by the lack of resistance from the national police, the rebels are now boasting about a possible march on Port-au-Prince.

The rebel advance into Cap-Haïtien came the day after the apparent collapse of an attempt by the US, France and Canada to broker a power-sharing agreement between Aristide and leaders of the political opposition. Led by the top American diplomat for the Western Hemisphere, Roger F. Noriega, a high-level international delegation met separately Saturday with Aristide and leaders of the political opposition, the Convergence Démocratique and Group 184. Aristide

quickly agreed to the demands of the region's major powers and the Caribbean inter-state organization, CARICOM, that he cede many of his executive powers, including control over the national police force and the electoral commission, to a new prime minister to be appointed in consultation with the opposition.

But the opposition flatly refused to accept any agreement that would leave Aristide, whose mandate as president runs until February 2006, with a measure of power. "If we accept this plan without the departure of Aristide, we will disappear as an opposition," said Rosemond Pradel of the opposition group Konakom.

The deadline for the opposition to give its final answer to the international mediation effort has been extended to late Monday afternoon Haitian time, but it is generally conceded that there is next to no chance the opposition will reverse its stand. "We expect the international community to understand our position ... which will not change," maintained Gérard Pierre-Charles, a leading opposition member. Meanwhile the opposition's main spokesman, sweatshop owner André Apaid, insisted that "the population must continue its mobilization" against the current Haitian government.

The opposition—which is comprised of the political representatives of Haiti's traditional business and political elite, including prominent supporters of the former Duvalier and Cédras dictatorships, and former supporters of Aristide—claim not to support, nor have any connection, with the armed rebellion. Yet many initially justified it. And clearly the opposition is banking on the rebellion to ultimately cause Aristide to bow to their demands and resign. How else to explain their refusal to accept a power-sharing agreement that was not only proposed by their long-time patrons in Washington, but which would have given the US a key role in policing, through the deployment of a so-called

international security force?

A second no less pivotal opposition calculation was that the Republican right—which supported Aristide’s ouster in 1991, opposed his being restored to power through the deployment of the US military in 1994, and continue to view him as a dangerous socialist, although he has applied the policy prescriptions of the IMF—would, when push came to shove, not take Aristide’s side against them.

Indeed, Washington effectively handed the opposition a trump card announcing beforehand that any positive response to the Aristide government’s request for international assistance to put down the rebellion was dependent on it first obtaining an agreement with the opposition. That the US envoy to Port-au-Prince was Noriega, a rabid anti-communist associated with the far-right of the Republican Party, could not but have given further comfort to the opposition.

Throughout the current crisis the US has assumed an ambivalent and ambiguous attitude toward Aristide, whom it nonetheless has had to acknowledge is the legitimately elected president of Haiti.

Preoccupied with its neo-colonial wars of plunder against Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration said virtually nothing and did even less about Haiti as the opposition—sensing Aristide’s growing unpopularity because of his right-wing economic policies and increasingly autocratic methods of rule—went beyond the role Washington had hitherto prescribed for it—to serve as a check on Aristide—and began pressing for his immediate ouster.

Then, when the armed rebellion erupted on February 5, State Department officials deplored the violence, but indicated they would not be unhappy to see Aristide forced from power. Ultimately, Secretary of State Colin Powell was forced to issue what constituted a correction, saying the US was not seeking “regime change” in Haiti. But US officials have repeatedly said that if a formula could be found to make Aristide’s exit “constitutional” they would not object. Said Powell, after affirming Washington’s support for Aristide serving out his presidential term, “You know, if an agreement is reached that moves that in another direction, that’s fine.”

Only after Haiti’s former colonial power France floated the possibility of sending troops to Haiti to end the spreading violence, did Washington begin to take a

more active role in Haitian affairs. The Bush administration was not going to allow any incursion by a rival imperialist power into America’s traditional “backyard.”

Another factor that has spurred Washington into a more direct involvement is pressure from leading political figures in Florida, a state which could see a mass influx of Haitian refugees if the situation in the impoverished island to the south takes a turn for the worst. “If we can send military forces to Liberia—3,000 miles away—we certainly can act to protect our interests in our own backyard,” said Sen. Bob Graham, D-Florida. “Inaction can no longer be our policy.”

It is unclear at this point whether the Bush administration will continue to sit by as the forces of reaction plunge Haiti into civil war. A military intervention cannot be excluded. But if it were to take place, it would be no progressive solution to the tragic plight of the Haitian people—no more than the previous 1994 US intervention that restored Aristide to power under orders to impose socially incendiary, IMF-dictated economic policies, thus setting the stage for the current crisis.



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