

Does Haiti's "non-violent" opposition want a bloodbath in Port-au-Prince?

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Haiti's self-proclaimed, "non-violent" political opposition has rejected a settlement to the impoverished Caribbean nation's political crisis sponsored by the US, France, and Canada. The press has labelled the failed settlement a power-sharing agreement. In fact, it gave the opposition Democratic Platform—a coalition led by the political representatives of Haiti's autocratic, traditional elite—virtually everything that it has been demanding, save the immediate resignation of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the country's democratically-elected president.

Under the settlement, Aristide would have been reduced to a figurehead president, with his powers transferred to a prime minister chosen by a tripartite commission in which Washington would effectively have the deciding vote. This commission would also have been charged with organizing new legislative and presidential elections and with reorganizing the security forces so as to limit "political", i.e., Aristide's, influence.

In an attempt to persuade the opposition to drop its objections to the plan, Washington further stipulated that there would be regular assessments, possibly as often as weekly, of whether Aristide and his Lavalas Party were complying with the terms of the "peace accord". The US also let it be known that if it were dissatisfied it would depose the president.

According to the *New York Times*, the opposition's rejection "surprised Bush administration officials, who had drafted the power-sharing plan and seemed confident of their ability to deliver opposition support." But the Bush administration handed the opposition the whip hand in the negotiations when it declared that—under conditions where much of the country had fallen to an armed rebellion led by fascistic thugs—it would prop up Haiti's constitutional government only

if and when Aristide reached a deal with the Democratic Platform.

The democratic pretences of the opposition have always been threadbare. It includes disgruntled followers of Aristide, but is led by former supporters of the Duvalier and Cédras dictatorships, and has a long and close relationship with the Republican Party leadership, which, under the presidency of Bush senior, supported the 1991 coup that ousted Aristide, then bitterly opposed his restoration by the Clinton administration.

And like Washington, the opposition has been using the armed rebellion that broke out in the north of the country February 5 and which is led by former leaders of the disbanded Haitian army and the FRAPH death squad to press for regime change in Port-au-Prince.

Initially, leaders of the Democratic Platform welcomed the uprising. Later they re-dubbed themselves the "non-violent" opposition in a facile attempt to put some distance between themselves and the gunmen. Yet on Monday, Hans Tippetshauer, a prominent Haitian businessman, told an opposition news conference that the rebels were "freedom fighters." Fearing Tippetshauer had let the proverbial cat out of the bag, Andre Apaid, the sweatshop-owner and US citizen who is the opposition's principal spokesman, interjected: "We remain a non-violent and peaceful movement."

In rejecting the US-sponsored power-sharing plan, the opposition calculated that the Bush administration would never snub them in order to shore up the reviled Aristide. Indeed, Washington has responded to the collapse of its plan by insisting that it is continuing to negotiate with the opposition and stepping up the pressure on Aristide. The Associated Press reported last night, "Two Western diplomats said they and

colleagues were preparing a request to ask Aristide to resign.”

However, the opposition’s cavalier dismissal of an accord that effectively ended Aristide’s rule and its indifference to the prospect Haiti will be plunged into a humanitarian disaster and civil war, cannot but raise the question as to whether it—or at least important elements within it—are preparing for and plotting a bloodbath in Port-au-Prince. This could take the form of welcoming an attack by rebels in the north, but more likely would involve an independent bid for power as the national police force and government continue to disintegrate. Haiti’s business elite already has at its disposal a vast number of private security forces, many of whose personnel were formerly part of the Haitian army.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no brief for Aristide. He played a pivotal role in aborting the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed Haiti between 1985 and 1991, has implemented social incendiary IMF restructuring plans, and turned to violence and corruption to retain power.

But the opposition’s claims that Aristide is worse than Duvalier, perhaps even the devil incarnate, are not mere right-wing demagoguery. Haiti’s privileged elite identify Aristide with a challenge from below and see his removal as the restoration of the country’s natural order—an order which has consigned the overwhelming majority of the country’s inhabitants to illiteracy and abject poverty.

It remains to be seen just how far the “non-violent” opposition will go—with Washington’s connivance—in seeking to exact revenge on the slum-dwellers of Port-au-Prince who propelled Aristide to power. But already the likes of Hans Tiphpenhauer have been publicly feting the advance across northern Haiti of rebel forces led by the armed thugs of previous bloody dictatorships.



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