

The overthrow of Haiti's Aristide: a coup made in the USA

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The violent overthrow and forced exile of Haiti's President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has ripped aside the democratic pretensions of Washington and the other major powers to expose the brutal and predatory character of resurgent imperialism. The actions taken by the US government in Haiti demonstrate the farcical character of its claims that the aim of the US invasion of Iraq was to inaugurate an era of democratization and freedom in the Middle East and around the world.

Aristide's overthrow is the outcome of a bloody coup orchestrated by the Bush administration and aided by the Chirac government in Paris. It was executed by a band of killers drawn from the disbanded and discredited Haitian army and the CIA-backed death squads that terrorized the population under the former military dictatorship that ruled the country in the early 1990s.

Among those leading the armed bands that overran the country are Louis-Jodel Chamblain, a former Haitian army officer sentenced to life at hard labor in connection with the 1993 assassination of political activist Antoine Izméry, and Jean-Pierre Baptiste, likewise sentenced to life for his role in a 1994 massacre. Both were leaders of the FRAPH, or Haitian Front for Advancement and Progress, a CIA-backed organization that carried out state terror against opponents of the military regime that ruled the country from 1991 to 1994.

Another leader of the armed bands is Guy Philippe, a former member of the Haitian military who received training from US Special Forces in Ecuador in the 1990s and was then sent back to Haiti, where he became a brutal police chief and sought to organize a coup in 2000. He is suspected of involvement in cocaine trafficking.

These heavily armed terrorists invaded Haiti from across the border with the Dominican Republic. There is convincing evidence that they were trained, financed and armed by Washington, provided with M-16 rifles, grenade launchers and other weapons out of stockpiles originally sent to the Dominican army.

Hundreds of Haitians have died as a result of this made-in-the-USA coup. In cities that fell to the gunmen—Gonaives and Cap-Haitien—they have reportedly carried out a house-to-house manhunt for government supporters, executing those who failed to escape.

Port-au-Prince itself is threatened with a bloodbath. Residents have erected barricades and armed themselves to repulse an assault on the capital. Leaders of the armed thugs have vowed to march into the city, despite Aristide's flight into exile, for the purpose of restoring "order."

Having systematically blocked any intervention to defend Aristide's constitutional government from violent overthrow, Washington's attitude toward this threat appears ambivalent. "The wild card is the rebels. Are they with the program?" a State Department official told

the Reuters news agency. "We want to make sure we neutralize them. Not necessarily by going after them, but the timely insertion of some kind of deterrent is important."

What constitutes "timely" is the key question. The change that is being effected in Haiti by means of armed violence and an extra-constitutional coup d'état cannot be consolidated without a reign of terror against the country's workers and poor. Allowing the death squad leaders free reign in Port-au-Prince, even if only for a limited period, may be seen as a desirable outcome by both the so-called "political opposition" and its patrons in Washington.

The "political opposition," organized in the Group of 184 and the Democratic Platform, is dominated and controlled by the privileged classes of Haiti, which harbor a pathological hatred for Aristide. This stems from Aristide's identification during the waning days of the Duvalier dictatorship with the strivings of the workers and poor people of the Western Hemisphere's most impoverished country, where the richest one percent of the population controls nearly half the wealth.

Whatever Aristide's subsequent corruption and capitulation to international finance capital, Haiti's wealthy elite has always seen his presidency as tainted by this association. They are seeking not merely Aristide's ouster, but a settling of accounts with Haiti's oppressed masses.

Whether this takes place imminently or in a more protracted process in the months ahead remains to be seen. One of the principal demands of the death squad leaders is that the Haitian Army be reestablished, presumably with them at its head. Historically, this institution, disbanded by Aristide in 1995, has served as a brutal instrument of internal repression, dedicated to defending the wealth and power of the country's ruling families.

There were reports Sunday that a 2,200-strong US Marine expeditionary force could land in Haiti within hours. Whether this will take place, and what precise mission the force will carry out, has yet to be clarified. That Washington is prepared to carry out such an intervention, however, conclusively exposes the duplicity of the Bush administration's earlier attempts to pose as an arbiter between Aristide, Haiti's ruling elite, and the right-wing terrorists.

Less than two weeks ago, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared: "There is, frankly, no enthusiasm right now for sending in military or police forces to put down the violence that we are seeing." Instead, he insisted, a "political solution" was necessary, based on a deal between Aristide and the opposition that would have turned the elected president into little more than a figurehead of a regime largely controlled by Washington.

While Aristide accepted this arrangement, the opposition rejected it,

demanding the unconditional removal of the president. The Bush administration's reaction to this defiance was to side with the opposition and demand that Aristide leave. Thus, on Saturday, White House press secretary Scott McClellan issued a statement demanding that Aristide "examine his position carefully, to accept responsibility and to act in the best interests of the people of Haiti."

The statement declared that chaos in Haiti—the result of a CIA-backed rebellion—was "largely of Mr. Aristide's making." It amounted to an endorsement of the death squads' campaign and a stinging rebuff to Aristide's vain hopes that the US would intervene to prevent his overthrow. Now that the desired "political solution" has been achieved—the toppling of an elected president—US military forces are bound for the island nation.

This was made clear by the US Ambassador to Haiti, James Foley, who officiated at the swearing in of Aristide's interim successor, Supreme Court Justice Boniface Alexandre. Foley declared, "International military forces, including US forces, will be rapidly arriving in Haiti to begin to restore a sense of security."

Earlier, Foley had said Aristide supporters would "burn, pillage and kill"—this after watching placidly as the CIA-backed force massacred hundreds. The comment left little doubt as to which forces the Marines are being sent to repress.

Fully complicit in this conspiracy is the French government. Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin repeatedly insisted that Aristide surrender power as the only solution to Haiti's crisis. Paris had played a direct role in fomenting this crisis, lavishly financing the activities of Aristide's political opponents among Haiti's ruling elite.

For those persuaded by France's opposition to Washington's unilateral invasion of Iraq that French imperialism represented some kind of benign alternative to its American counterpart, the events in Haiti serve as a sobering experience.

France, Haiti's former colonial master, surrendered control over the country only after being defeated militarily at the dawn of the nineteenth century by a slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. It then financially blackmailed the fledgling black republic, imposing crushing indemnity payments, and lured Ouverture to France, where he was cast into a dungeon to starve.

The French ruling class ensured that an independent Haiti was born in ruins, incapable of freeing itself from poverty and oppression and leaving it prey to the rising imperialist power in the Western Hemisphere, the United States. Washington sent Marines into Haiti in 1915 and militarily occupied the country for nearly 20 years. The US left behind as the legacy of its occupation the Haitian army, a bulwark of repressive violence, and subsequently backed the murderous 30-year dictatorship of the Duvalier dynasty.

The ouster of Aristide and the proposed foreign military intervention constitute a clear demonstration of resurgent imperialism on a world scale. Haiti has been relegated to the status of a "failed state," a category that includes those countries whose economy and social fabric have been destroyed by the predatory policies of international finance capital. Washington—and Paris as well—arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the existing regimes in such states—elected or not—as it sees fit, in order to defend strategic economic, political and military interests. The result is a revival of the kind of arrogant colonialism that existed in the early twentieth century.

A US-led military intervention in Haiti will only deepen the oppression of the country's eight million people and lay the foundations for another US-backed dictatorship. It is part and parcel of an eruption of American imperialism that has seen two wars in less

than two-and-a-half years and the deployment of US military forces in over 100 countries.

The flight of Aristide into exile has also exposed the collapse not only of his own populist political movement in Haiti, but of the entire perspective of opposing imperialism on the basis of petty-bourgeois nationalism. It is a testament to the bankruptcy of this political outlook that a few hundred well-armed thugs were capable of conquering virtually an entire country and forcing its president into exile.

Incapable of achieving or defending any significant social gains on the basis of a nationalist policy, Aristide saw his base of support melt away. While masses of Haitians remained hostile to the well-heeled political opposition, they lacked any confidence that the Aristide government would lead any more of a struggle against the privileged elite and its armed thugs than it had against the draconian policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the foreign banks.

His anti-imperialist rhetoric notwithstanding, Aristide never sought to overthrow the state structure that was the product of two centuries of foreign oppression. He never sought to create any alternative foundations of popular rule, based upon the working class.

Haiti's workers and poor already had the experience of 1991, when the newly elected Aristide was overthrown by a US-backed military coup and fled to the US itself, leaving his supporters to face the consequences. An estimated 5,000 were murdered.

He was restored to power through a US military intervention, carried out with the understanding that he would execute the demands of the IMF and contain the social struggles of the Haitian people. The result was a corrupt and politically impotent regime that presided over the continuing deterioration of conditions of life in the impoverished country.

The tragic results of the two decades of struggle since the upheavals that toppled the Duvalier dictatorship have exposed the blind alley of the type "left" nationalist demagoguery that Aristide espoused in Haiti. The attempts by Washington and its clients in the Haitian business class to re-impose a colonial-style dictatorship will inevitably deepen social tensions and class antagonisms.

Among the most politically advanced layers of the Haitian working people, there must be a critical evaluation of this bitter strategic experience and its fundamental lesson: imperialist oppression cannot be overcome on a nationalist basis. It requires a unified struggle by the working class and impoverished masses of Haiti, the Caribbean and the United States itself against the global capitalist order.



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