

# Haiti: Thousands march in Port-au-Prince against US-backed coup

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A crowd, estimated by Reuters at more than 10,000, marched on the US embassy in Port-au-Prince Friday to denounce the US-orchestrated coup against Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and demand the withdrawal of US and French troops from the Caribbean island country.

The demonstrators chanted "Bush terrorist," urged that Aristide, who is now in exile in the Central African Republic, be allowed to complete his five-year presidential term, and charged that the ex-Haitian army personnel, death squad leaders and criminal gang members that Washington used to oust Aristide—the so-called rebels—are inflicting terror on the slums of Port-au-Prince.

According to Reuters, one demonstrator shouted, "The bourgeoisie joined with the international community to occupy Haiti and get rid of President Aristide. The bourgeoisie never did anything for us, the masses. Now they took away our president."

The demonstration erupted one day after the disappearance of gun-toting rebel commandos from the downtown streets of Port-au-Prince. From Sunday through Wednesday, the rebels had run amuck in Haiti's capital, terrorizing and killing Aristide supporters, under the watchful eyes of the US Marines, who had begun arriving in force on Sunday once Aristide had been hustled out of the country.

Only when the rebels and their supporters marched on the house of Prime Minister Yvon Neptune did the Marines intervene. Washington will soon dispense with Neptune figuratively, if not literally—all his fellow cabinet ministers have either fled the country or been driven underground. But under conditions where he nominally remained Haiti's prime minister, US authorities deemed it politic to keep him out of the hands of a lynch mob.

If by mid-week, Bush administration officials were issuing ever-sharper warnings to the rebels, urging them to—in the words of Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega—make themselves "scarce," it was because they were disrupting Washington's efforts to hide a bloody coup behind a ramshackle democratic façade.

It wasn't the killings so much. A pliant international press could be counted upon to explain them away as a settling of accounts with the *chimères*, the armed gangs on whose support Aristide had increasingly relied. What disturbed Washington was the rebels' swaggering before the international press. Rebel commander Guy Philippe had gone before the world's cameras, the notorious FRAPH death-squad leader Louis-Jodel Chamblain at his side, to proclaim himself in charge of security in Haiti and for all intents

and purposes the country's next political strongman. When asked if he would disarm, Philippe refused to recognize the authority of the US-led expeditionary force.

Bush administration officials thus found themselves compelled to repeatedly castigate Philippe and his commandos as thugs and criminals. But all this shouting cannot drown out the truth: Washington invited these elements into Port-au-Prince so as to realize its longstanding goal of regime change in Haiti.

Only last week, the *Weekly Standard*, a standard-bearer for the Republican right, was exalting, "Both France and the United States now appear to see that only those with guns were capable of rising against the Aristide thugocracy."

So blatant was the US's support for the rebels—culminating in their entering into Haiti's capital simultaneously with US and French troops—that the Bush administration is now frantically trying to rewrite history. According to the latest version, the US never demanded Aristide's resignation.

Washington only demanded that Aristide "reconsider his position" while it blocked the dispatch of an international security force to Haiti to put down the armed coup. US officials told Aristide that if he did not flee the country he would be killed and that the US would not intervene to spare his life, and blocked the Haitian president's efforts to enhance his security.

According to a report by Juan O. Tamayo of the *Miami Herald*, Aristide had requested that an extra contingent of bodyguards be dispatched from the US security firm that had been contracted to provide him with protection. "US officials blocked a last-minute bid by Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to bolster his bodyguard—mostly former US Special Forces members," Tamayo reported, citing "knowledgeable sources". Washington, he said, "forced a small group of extra bodyguards from the San Francisco-based Steele Foundation to delay their flight from the United States to Haiti" until it was too late to prevent Aristide's ouster.

The governments of the impoverished Caribbean island states hardly have a history of challenging Washington. But the readiness of the region's principal powers—the US and France—to conspire against a constitutional and democratically-elected government has given them pause. CARICOM, their inter-state organization, is demanding an investigation into the role played by Washington and Paris in Aristide's ouster, warning that the manner in which Aristide lost power "sets a dangerous precedent for democratically elected governments everywhere."

Referring to the UN Security Council decision to sanction the

dispatch of troops to Haiti, Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson said, “We could not fail to observe what was impossible on Thursday [February 26] could be accomplished in an emergency meeting on Sunday [February 29]” once Aristide had been deposed. “We are disappointed in the extreme at the failure to act.”

The Bush administration has dismissed CARICOM’s concerns. “There is nothing to investigate,” declared State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. “We did not advocate” Aristide’s “stepping down.”

No less spurious is the Bush administration’s pretence that the rebels and the self-proclaimed political opposition to Aristide and his Lavalas Party—the Democratic Platform—are discrete forces, one tainted by past associations with murderous repression, the other speaking for civil society. The same venal economic and political establishment that supported the Duvalier, Avril and Cédras dictatorships leads the Democratic Platform. It was quick to embrace the rebels, its enthusiasm mounting as the rebels swept the north of Haiti and then threatened to march on the capital.

On Monday, Democratic Platform leaders like Evans Paul, former mayor of Port-au-Prince, fawned over rebel commander Guy Philippe. According to Michel Gaillard, another Democratic Platform spokesman, the meeting “went very well.” He added, “We have established that the Army of the North is free, powerful and has great popular support. We are in no way antagonistic toward it.”

On Friday, the rebels and politicians met again. The day before, Evans Paul told France’s LCI television, “We will need to work with Mr. Philippe and other sectors of the country that played an important role in the great insurrection that swept Mr. Aristide from power.”

While trumpeting their readiness to work with the rebels, the Democratic Platform is braying for the blood of their Lavalas Party opponents, demanding the arrest of Neptune and scores of other Lavalas leaders.

The Bush administration’s rhetoric about the rebels’ future role may at present differ in tone from that of the leaders of the Democratic Platform, but there is every reason to believe that not only will the rebels not be called to account for their crimes against the Haitian people, they will continue to be held in reserve to terrorize the Haitian masses.

Bowing to US demands, Philippe has said the rebels will disarm. But the US military has made clear that it has no intention of ensuring this takes place. “We are not disarming,” Army Major Richard Crusan, spokesman for the US-led international force in Haiti, told reporters. “That is a job for the Haitian police. We don’t even want to touch [the rebels’] guns.”

Much of the National Police, of which Guy Philippe is himself a former commander, is openly sympathetic to the rebels. When the rebels entered Port-au-Prince last Sunday, the National Police immediately joined them in united sorties against Aristide supporters.

The rebels’ “political spokesman,” Paul Arcelin, a former Haitian ambassador to the neighbouring Dominican Republic, has publicly boasted that the rebels will not disarm. Asked what they are doing with their weapons, he said, “We hide them.”

With the connivance of Washington, Haiti’s elite has for decades ruled all but exclusively through dictatorship and terror. This is the only means to suppress the popular anger that is born of social inequality and mass poverty unequalled in the Americas. Although Aristide’s popular support had crumbled because of his imposition of IMF austerity measures and increasing reliance on racial demagoguery and violence to remain in power, the Bush administration and the sweatshop owners and retail merchants represented by Democratic Platform had ultimately to resort to the rebel thugs to oust Aristide, because they could generate no mass popular support.

That said, it must be recognized that it was the petty-bourgeois nationalist politics of Aristide that paved the way for the resurgence of reaction in Haiti and the reaffirmation of the rule of Haiti’s traditional elite, in alliance with Washington.

Aristide was brought to power as the result of the popular social upheaval that toppled the Duvalier dictatorship and convulsed Haiti for the ensuing five years. For that he never lost the enmity of either Wall Street and the Republican Party establishment or the dominant wing of the Haitian bourgeoisie. But when ousted from power in a US-backed coup in 1991, he instructed his supporters not to resist. Rendered by his class outlook incapable of appealing to the international working class to oppose imperialism and its Haitian clients, Aristide threw himself at the feet of Washington, arguing that because of his popular support he would be better able to contain the social ferment in Haiti than the generals.

Once returned to power in 1994, he abandoned his program of minimal reforms, and over the next decade, whether formally in office or the power behind the throne, applied the socially-incendiary economic policies of the IMF. In so far as Aristide opposed Haiti’s traditional elite, it was based on securing the support of Washington, which historically has played the principal role in maintaining Haiti in economic and national bondage. And when that patronage was decisively withdrawn, his regime proved powerless in the face of what was a well-financed and well-armed, but nonetheless tiny band of rebels.

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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