

Haiti's US-installed government cracks down on opponents

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A fresh eruption of political violence in Haiti has claimed at least 46 lives in the past two weeks as the US-installed interim government of Prime Minister Gérard Latortue has sought to silence supporters of the ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in advance of the scheduled 2005 elections.

Aristide was driven to exile last February following an armed rebellion by former officers of the disbanded Haitian army and the combined pressure of Paris, Ottawa and Washington in what amounted to a US-engineered coup.

Since then, economic and security conditions in the impoverished Caribbean island have worsened. A promised \$1 billion aid package has failed to materialize. And the UN “stabilization” force, with fewer than half of the 8,300 scheduled troops, has proved unable and unwilling to make any serious efforts at disarming the ex-soldiers and armed gangs who are behind the alarming rise in kidnappings and crimes of all sorts.

Further eroding the government's legitimacy has been its open identification with the military and paramilitary thugs from Haiti's former dictatorships who led the armed anti-Aristide rebellion earlier this year.

Not only were these elements hailed by Latortue as “freedom fighters”; they have been given free reign in taking over cities throughout the country and pressing their demands for the reestablishment of the army.

A case in point was the recent acquittal in a hasty, one-day trial of rebel and former death-squad leader Jodel Chamblain, charged among other crimes for the assassination of businessman Antoine Izméry, a prominent Aristide supporter.

On top of those deeply unpopular moves was the government's response to the recent flooding of the

country's third-largest city in the wake of Tropical Storm Jeanne—a response characterized by inaction and indifference—even as the death toll in Gonaïves reached 3,000 and 250,000 city residents were rendered homeless. In addition, the same criminal elements that Latortue celebrated as “freedom fighters” in this very city just last March have hampered relief efforts by looting desperately needed aid.

Lacking any genuine base of support among ordinary people, the Latortue government also faces growing resentment from those in the country's tiny elite who had vehemently opposed Aristide but still felt excluded from the corridors and perks of power. Except for Herard Abraham, the former head of the armed forces who was named minister of the interior in Latortue's cabinet, his government is mainly composed of “technocrats” with few links to the country's numerous political cliques.

Such is the background for the political warfare of the last couple of weeks.

Things came to a head on September 30, when supporters of Lavalas, the political party formed by Aristide, called for a mass demonstration on the anniversary of the coup d'état carried out against Aristide 13 years earlier by then army chief Raoul Cédras.

This was not the first protest action against the Latortue government by Lavalas, a party that has dominated the Haitian political scene for the last decade and remains a significant political force, especially among the poor in the capital's massive slums.

The difference, this time, was the precarious position in which the government found itself. This may have prompted it to reply with desperate, police state methods, especially since Lavalas could score well if elections planned for 2005 are indeed held.

The march began peacefully, but gunfire soon erupted, setting off what has been described as “bloody battles” between armed supporters of Lavalas and the police.

Dozens of people have died in the ensuing days as snipers roaring the capital’s streets reportedly fired at random at passersby.

The official US response was, not surprisingly, to accuse so-called Aristide loyalists of a “systematic campaign to destabilize the interim government and disrupt the efforts of the international community.”

Taking his cue from his Washington master, Prime Minister Latortue has accused Lavalas of being a terrorist group engaged in Baghdad-style executions as supposedly proven by the discovery of the bodies of five policemen, three of whom were beheaded.

Without offering any evidence connecting Lavalas officials to these gruesome acts and the violence of the last days, the interim government began rounding up Aristide supporters.

Among those arrested were Gérard Jean-Juste, a well-known and respected human rights advocate who founded Miami’s Haitian Refugee Center in the early 1980s, along with three Lavalas leaders. The latter were giving an interview denying any involvement in the killings of the previous days when the radio station was encircled by fully armed police who took them away.

One of the arrested Lavalas leaders, Gérard Gilles, who has since been released, gave the following statement: “They interrogated us and suggested we were the intellectual authors of the violence. But we are not.... Every sector uses guns to destroy democracy in Haiti. Lavalas remains the most popular party. It is unwise to treat us as the root of all evil because it is a way of disdaining the people.”

Another leading member of Lavalas, former Aristide cabinet member Leslie Voltaire, rejected the accusations of beheadings thrown at his party. “This is not the practice of Lavalas, and Lavalas is not benefiting,” he began. “Those benefiting are the ex-military who need to crush the popular support for Aristide.”

One does not need to accept Lavalas’s claim to be a party of the people—it is in fact an establishment party with a populist rhetoric and its own record of violence, as inadvertently admitted by Gilles—to recognize that they are the target of a government attempt to wipe

them off the country’s political map.

In the coastal town of Petit-Goave, which has been overtaken by ex-soldiers with the tacit approval of Latortue, the homes of known Lavalas supporters have been ransacked and their occupants beaten up. Remissainthe Ravix, the self-proclaimed commander there, recently went down to Port-au-Prince to offer his “services.”

Meanwhile, Guy Phillipe, the former military officer who headed the rebel forces that helped bring Aristide down, declared: “Someone needs to take control.”

That such elements, with their reactionary dreams of a restored and strong armed forces if not an outright military dictatorship, have come to be increasingly relied upon by the US-installed government of Latortue is a serious threat to the democratic rights of Haiti’s people. It is also a clear demonstration that US government policy is fostering not democracy or freedom in Haiti, but the forces of reaction and oppression.



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