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Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin visited Haiti November 14 in a show of support for the interim government that was born of the bloody coup that ousted the country's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, last February 29.

Viewed as illegitimate and incompetent by the mass of Haitians, criticized by international human rights organizations for mounting human rights violations, and denied recognition by the Community of Caribbean nations (CARICOM), Gérard Latortue's beleaguered government is desperate for financial, political, and military-security assistance. Hence, Martin, the first Canadian prime minister to make an official Haitian visit, was accorded a grand reception.

Martin, for his part, was eager to embrace Latortue, because Canada's rulers came to view Aristide's populist regime as an impediment to their economic and geo-political interests and because bolstering Haiti's shaky interim regime will find favor with the Bush administration.

The highlight of Martin's one-day visit was a meeting with Haitian political leaders at the National Palace at which he gave a sermon on the need for democracy and national reconciliation.

If truth be told, however, Martin's Liberal government is among those responsible for subverting democracy in Haiti and imposing on the Haitian people a regime completely beholden to Haiti's traditional venal economic and political establishment and to Washington.

The Martin-Chrétien Liberal government worked hand-in-glove with the Bush administration in mounting a four-year aid embargo against Haiti, so as to force Aristide, who was viewed as insufficiently pliant to IMF dictates, to integrate members of the right-wing opposition in his government.

Then, this past February, Ottawa joined with Paris and Washington in encouraging the self-styled "democratic" opposition to use an armed rebellion, led

by leaders of Haiti's disbanded armed forces and the FRAPH death squad, to chase Aristide from power.

Only after US security personnel had bundled Aristide onto a plane to take him into exile did US, French and Canadian troops begin to deploy in the environs of Port-au-Prince so as to prevent the rebels—whom Colin Powell had himself termed thugs—from capturing the National Palace and seizing power.

US, French and Canadian troops did not intervene, however, to stop the rebels from exacting bloody reprisals against Aristide supporters—reprisals in which scores, possibly hundreds, were massacred.

Nine months after Aristide's ouster, the rebels, who have been reinforced by thousands of other army veterans, still control much of the country. According to a recent report by the Western government-sponsored International Crisis Group, "The transitional government has failed to establish its authority in most of the provinces where former military are acting unlawfully as security providers."

Latortue periodically issues calls for the rebels to disband. But he has no intention of challenging them or their bourgeois patrons, for they constitute the most significant domestic support of his government. Soon after taking power, Latortue proclaimed the rebels "freedom fighters." He has brushed aside criticisms of a daylong trial in August that struck down a murder conviction of one of the principal rebel leaders and has repeatedly sought to negotiate with the rebels over their demands for financial compensation, integration into the national police and reconstitution of the army.

On the other hand, his government has struck out repeatedly against the supporters of Aristide's party, the Lavalas Family. This repression has reached a new pitch since police opened fire on a September 30 demonstration in Port-au-Prince demanding Aristide's return from exile in South Africa.

In October, several senior Lavalas leaders were

arrested on claims that they were instigating anti-government violence. Also, the Latortue regime now routinely refers to the *chimères*, the Port-au-Prince slum gangs that support Aristide, as “terrorists”—a designation that in the current international climate bears the threat of a campaign of extermination. Indeed, a recent Amnesty International delegation to Haiti found evidence of summary executions of slum-dwellers by members of the Haitian National Police.

The new wave of repression against Aristide’s supporters has three causes. First, the government is aware of its ever-increasing unpopularity. Twice in the past six months Haiti has been ravaged by tropical storms, which left thousands dead and showed the government to be woefully inept. An estimated 70 percent of the population is unemployed, and pledges of aid money from Canada and other countries have failed either to materialize or to translate into any improvement in living conditions. Second, there is increasing dissatisfaction among sections of the elite over Latortue’s failure to deliver a crushing blow to Lavalas. Lastly, the government is concerned that Brazil, which leads the UN force that took charge of stabilizing Haiti after US troops withdrew in June, appears willing to include Aristide in its attempts to negotiate a political settlement.

If Martin used his meeting with Haitian political leaders to call on the government to include Lavalas in the elections promised for next year, it is because Ottawa recognizes the vulnerability of the Latortue government and fears that economic collapse and mounting political violence could plunge the country into chaos. Ottawa’s hope is that a weakened Lavalas, or important elements of it, can be re-incorporated into the official politics of the Haitian elite, so that Lavalas can continue its traditional role as a populist party that deflects the masses from a genuine challenge to the capitalist order and imperialist domination.

Speaking to a gathering described as the most representative since Aristide’s ouster,

Martin urged leaders of the government, Lavalas and 13 other (anti-Aristide) parties to “put aside their grudges.” Later he told a press conference, “I think it is absolutely necessary that the opposition party Lavalas participate in the elections. You cannot have democratic elections if, really, a substantial portion of the population boycotts it.”

The Latortue government will probably ignore Martin’s advice, however, and continue its persecution of Lavalas. It is aware that the Bush administration is ferociously hostile to Aristide, never having forgotten the defrocked priest’s association with the popular upsurge that followed the overthrow of the Duvalier dictatorship.

When Louis Gérard Gilles, the Lavalas representative at the meeting with Martin, raised the question of the thousand of Lavalas members and supporters who have been detained, Latortue tartly dismissed him with the claim there are no political prisoners in Haiti. His government, moreover, continues to insist that it will soon obtain an international warrant for Aristide’s arrest.



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