

Pre-election terror and repression in Haiti

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While the Bush administration and the US mass media focused enormous attention on the recent elections in Iraq—promoting them as supposed proof of Washington’s “democratizing” mission—preparations for another vote taking place in another invaded and occupied country just a few hundred miles off US shores are virtually ignored, and for good reason.

The country, Haiti, was invaded in February 2004 by US Marines, who completed the bloody work of US-backed ex-soldiers and death squad leaders of the former dictatorship in toppling Haiti’s popularly elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide of the Fanmi Lavalas Party. To this day the country remains occupied by United Nations troops, sent largely by Latin American governments of countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Chile, currying favor with Washington by relieving Marine units badly needed to suppress the resistance in Iraq.

The elections, set for January 8—though it is widely expected they will be postponed yet again—are shaping up to be nothing but a cynical and tragic farce, carried out under the barrel of a gun.

The government installed as a result of the coup and occupation, headed by unelected Prime Minister Gérard Latortue, has reset the election date four times in the last five months, violating Haiti’s constitution, which requires the interim government to hold elections within 90 days (this period expired on June 1, 2004). In the meantime, Latortue has found time to prioritize the awarding of back pay to soldiers of the former military dictatorship that Aristide had disbanded in 1994.

This latest election schedule calls for a first round of presidential and legislative elections on January 8, runoff elections on February 15, and local elections on March 5, 2006.

The number of polling stations has been reduced from 12,000 to 600, leaving people in poor rural areas that had supported Aristide at a disadvantage in getting to the polls. The complicated electoral card process requires voters to listen carefully for announcements for card distribution on the radio and television, when many Haitians are so poor that they have no access to either. Registration alone took over five months, and cards must be distributed in about five weeks, a period that includes the Christmas holiday, Haiti’s independence day on January 1, and the beginning of Carnival season on January 8.

Most critically, the list of candidates excludes nearly all former Fanmi Lavalas members, including the most outspoken critics of the coup and the interim government that it installed. Many political opponents of the current regime are in jail, hiding or, in Aristide’s case, forced into exile in South Africa. Most political prisoners haven’t seen a judge, though this would probably do little good anyway, as the judges have been hand-picked by the interim government.

It is estimated that under Latortue 1,700 political prisoners are locked up in Port-au-Prince alone, and only a few have been charged.

Among the political prisoners rounded up by the coup government is the popular Catholic priest and the most likely Lavalas candidate, Father Gerard Jean Juste, who is recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. He has been imprisoned for four months despite the lack of any evidence of wrongdoing. “[T]hey don’t want to release me in time for the elections,” Jean Juste stated. Meanwhile, his health is

failing due to cancer. There has been an outcry by the Haitian public demanding that he be allowed to seek immediate medical treatment in the US, but the authorities have ignored the request.

Former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune has spent 17 months in prison, which even the US ambassador admitted was a “violation of human rights, injustice and abuse of power.” Popular Haitian folksinger and grandmother Annette “So An” Auguste has been imprisoned without charges since May 2004, when US Marines used grenades to attack her house, while she and her children were sleeping. A Lavalas deputy named Jacques Matelier spoke with Isabel MacDonald of the Haiti Information Project. Matelier explained that he has been in jail for 17 months merely because he’s a “Lavalasien” party member. Louis Joinet, the UN’s Human Rights Commission expert on Haiti, has spoken out on the illegal jailing of political oppositionists.

Such pretense of concern by the UN or occupation forces represents nothing more than Orwellian public relations double-speak. The UN’s role is to legitimize the US military intervention and overthrow of Haiti’s elected government. Numerous reports from Haiti have confirmed that the UN has cooperated and assisted the coup government’s police in a reign of terror aimed at suppressing all opposition from the working class and the poor.

Lyn Duff, writing in the *San Francisco Bay View*, reported that in the Cité Soleil section of Port-au-Prince, a poor neighborhood of 300,000 that votes largely Lavalas, “[t]he UN troops were seen arresting civilians and occasionally shooting into crowded residential areas.” Duff reported a 15-year-old girl was shot and “UN troops shot into a yard where several children were playing, wounding an adult” and two bystanders. The UN claimed the children were used as “human shields” by “gangs.” The reality is the occupation forces are instituting a campaign of intimidation and assassination along with the Haitian National Police against political opponents of the installed coup government. This includes Haitian police firing upon unarmed protesters at demonstrations.

Dave Welsh, who works with the Haitian Action Committee and returned from a fact-finding delegation to Haiti, reported that the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH) randomly fires explosive projectiles from armored vehicles and helicopters into the densely populated shantytowns. On November 10, Welsh interviewed a Haitian human rights worker who described three tanks shooting randomly in Cité Soleil, resulting in 15 wounded and two dead—a young woman and a middle-aged man. Welsh described the 7,800 troops under MINUSTAH as an “assault on the civilian population.”

In another example, Welsh cited a Haitian woman in her fifties who spoke of fleeing from her home at 3 a.m. due to UN troops and helicopters firing into their neighborhood. The shooting killed her pregnant daughter and two grown sons. The MINUSTAH massacre on July 6 reportedly killed about 50 people when UN troops assassinated Dread Wilme, a community leader that MINUSTAH and the coup government labeled a “bandit.” To accomplish this summary execution, they destroyed homes of other residents and dropped explosives on Wilme’s residence.

Seth Donnelly, who was in Haiti during the July 6 killings as part of a human rights delegation sponsored by the San Francisco Labor Council,

told the *Democracy Now!* news program of seeing homes “riddled with machinegun blasts as well as tank fire.” Neighborhood people took Donnelly into their homes and showed him dead bodies from the massacre. He stated, “People were hysterical still. And they claimed that UN forces fired into their homes, had fired into their community....”

Isabel MacDonald witnessed similar scenes in which MINUSTAH opened fire “where people congregate to talk, wash clothes, and children play. Suddenly, [MacDonald] saw four UN armored personnel carriers—also manned by Brazilians—drive slowly along the longest road in the vicinity. MINUSTAH bullets were suddenly whizzing by our heads. In the street alley we were in, people frantically flew in all directions....”

Among the Haitian victims of the UN “peacekeepers,” MacDonald reported, was Luckson Docius, a metalworker killed in his shop when a UN bullet tore through the wall of his home. In the last week of November, the Associated Press reported 15 residents of Cité Soleil had been killed. Doctors Without Borders confirmed 28 people were shot amidst heavy MINUSTAH fire.

In addition to UN and police terror, Brian Concannon Jr., who directs the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, reported that paramilitaries nicknamed the “Little Machete Army” attacked a crowd at a soccer game on August 20 at Grande Ravine as Haitian police stood by pointing out who in the crowd should be hacked to death. No members of this “Machete Army” have been arrested despite killing at least 10 people. Survivors from the massacre report that these paramilitaries operate openly.

These recent events in Haiti are part of a long continuum of imperialist intervention and oppression that has left this island nation the poorest in the Americas. Justifying the invasion of Haiti that he ordered in December 1914, President Woodrow Wilson explained, “Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of the state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused.”

To further these financial and colonial aims, American Marines landed at Port-au-Prince and took over Haiti’s customhouses, seizing a half million dollars of Haiti’s assets from the French-owned National Bank. The marines remained in Haiti for 19 years—into Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency—establishing a puppet Haitian army to continue their work of repression.

This proxy army—trained, funded and armed by Washington over the next six decades—became well known for torture and repression. Haiti’s president Philippe Sudre Dartiguenave—like Latortue, installed by the Americans during the first occupation—had accepted a treaty, similar to the Platt Amendment in Cuba, which granted the US the “right” to intervene militarily as well as to appoint an “adviser” to oversee the country’s Ministry of Finance.

For nearly 30 years beginning in 1957, the US backed the murderous Duvalier family dictatorship—Francois “Papa Doc,” 1957-71, followed by “Baby Doc,” 1971-1986. Occasionally, the US voiced mild protests over the murderous dynasty’s excesses, but continued to support to it to the end, when keeping it in power in the face of mass opposition simply became untenable. In this episode of regime change, “Baby Doc” Duvalier was flown into exile on the French Rivera on February 7, 1986, along with millions stolen from the Haitian treasury, courtesy of a US Air Force jet.

Duvalier’s departure was followed by five years of coups as factions of the Haitian elite jockeyed for power. A last-minute bid to run in the elections by Aristide, a Catholic priest who had won a broad following among the Haitian poor for denouncing the military dictatorship, swept him into the presidency in 1990 with 67 percent of the vote, beating the US-sponsored candidate, former World Bank official Marc Bazin, who received just 14 percent.

In September 1991, Aristide was overthrown by the military and a wave of repression followed. The leader of this coup, Lt. Gen. Raoul Cédras, had been a key US intelligence source. Emmanuel Constant, the leader of the death squad FRAPH that murdered political opponents during the coup, was also on the CIA payroll. From 1991 to 1994, thousands died in the repression, while many thousands more sought to escape as refugees to the US.

Fearing the political instability on the island and hoping to stem the tide of refugees, the US government intervened to broker an end to the regime that it had helped install (using the National Endowment for Democracy to fund leaders behind the coup, like Jean-Jacques Honorat, who became prime minister). The Clinton administration returned Aristide to power in September 1994, after the deposed president agreed to drop his previous denunciations of the imperialist exploitation of his country and to fully adopt World Bank and IMF mandates on privatization, as well as the removal of tariffs and import restrictions.

While keeping Jean-Juste and Neptune in jail, the Latortue interim government has accepted as electoral candidates individuals widely regarded as criminals. There is Dany Toussaint, a former army major who allied himself with Aristide during the 1991 coup and, after using his political office first as police chief and then as a Lavalas senator to amass a fortune, supported the second coup in 2004. He is the chief suspect in a number of political murders, including that of renowned journalist Jean Dominique, who had supported Aristide and Lavalas, but became a fierce critic of corruption within the Aristide government.

Also running is Guy Philippe, the former Duvalier death squad leader and US-trained police chief who led the 2004 coup toppling Aristide. Philippe is widely accused of involvement in drug trafficking. Then there is Marc Bazin, the former World Bank bureaucrat and US-backed candidate trounced by Aristide in 1990.

Rene Preval, a former Lavalas politician who served as Haiti’s president from 1996 to 2001, is considered the front-runner in the polls. The fact that he is being allowed to run while his own party is being ruthlessly repressed suggests that he has come to some understanding with the interim government and Washington. Nonetheless, US officials have apparently been pressuring the Latortue regime to place on the ballot Dumarsais Simeus, a Haitian-born US citizen who made his fortune running a Texas food company. The Haitian constitution bars those who take citizenship in another country from running for president.

Preval has declared that if elected he would allow Aristide to return from South Africa, which polls indicate is something supported by the majority of the Haitian people. At a December 20 briefing, a US State Department spokesman refused to say how Washington would respond to such an eventuality.

The prospects of an election held under the current conditions of foreign occupation and violent repression against the country’s workers and poor expressing in any way the democratic will of the Haitian people are nil, whether they go ahead on January 8 or are postponed once again. Even if the vote is held, it is clear that Washington continues to arrogate to itself the “right” that it has claimed since 1914 to intervene and depose any Haitian government that fails to do its bidding.



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