

“Baby Doc” Duvalier arrested in Haiti

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Haitian authorities arrested Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier Tuesday, barely two days after the former dictator flew back to the country after a quarter of a century in exile.

Riot-equipped police surrounded the upscale Karibe Hotel in the wealthy suburb of Petionville, where Duvalier and his entourage had encamped after their arrival at Port-au-Prince’s Toussaint Louverture airport Sunday night.

The Port-au-Prince chief prosecutor and a judge met with the 59-year-old Duvalier before he was taken away in an armored SUV equipped with bulletproof windows.

A small group of the former dictator’s supporters tried to chase the vehicle, chanting “Free Duvalier.”

Haiti’s Chief Magistrate Harycidas Auguste subsequently announced that Duvalier was being charged with “government corruption, embezzlement of funds, money laundering and assassination.”

During the nearly three decades of US-supported rule by the Duvaliers—first Francois “Papa Doc” and then Jean-Claude “Baby Doc”—tens of thousands of Haitians were murdered and tortured by the regime and its hated Tonton Macoutes secret police, while hundreds of millions of dollars were embezzled and funneled into the dynasty’s foreign bank accounts.

A lawyer for Duvalier reported only corruption and embezzlement charges against him. They would be presented, he said, to a judge who would determine whether there was enough evidence to go to trial. Meanwhile, it was reported that the ex-dictator had been returned to his luxury hotel.

Duvalier’s return to Haiti was staged on January 16, which was to have been the date for the second round of the country’s hotly disputed national elections. Now the run-off has been postponed indefinitely. The ex-dictator’s arrival in Port-au-Prince coincided with the formal issuing of a report by the Organization of American States (OAS) calling into question the official results.

According to the findings of the OAS mission, popular-singer-turned-politician Michel “Sweet Micky” Martelly came in second—not third as officially recorded—beating Jude Celestin, the hand-picked successor and son-in-law of incumbent President Rene Preval. Haitian electoral law

precludes Preval succeeding himself.

Critics of the OAS findings have called into question the methodology of the mission of “experts” in arriving at its recommendation to switch the second- and third-place winners. What is indisputable, however is that the November 28 election itself was a travesty, with barely 27 percent of eligible voters going to the polls and just 22 percent having their ballots counted.

The controversy has spilled over into violent clashes, with dissatisfaction over the election coalescing with the deepening popular anger over the abject failure of the Preval government and its backers in Washington and Europe to alleviate mass suffering, much less begin any real reconstruction, fully one year after the devastating earthquake that killed more than 300,000 Haitians. Conditions for masses of people have become even more intolerable as Haiti confronts a spreading cholera epidemic that has claimed at least 3,800 lives.

Duvalier claimed upon his arrival in Haiti that he was moved by the earthquake’s terrible toll and “willing and determined to participate in the rebirth of Haiti.” While he had scheduled a press conference—first for Monday and then postponed to Tuesday—to issue a further explanation, he was taken into custody before it happened.

It seems clear, however, that the former dictator hoped that the situation in Haiti had become sufficiently desperate that he could recoup some of his former political power.

The initial reaction of the political elite seemed to justify such hopes.

Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive responded to Duvalier’s arrival by declaring the ex-dictator a “citizen of Haiti who returns home as he has the right.” He was given an official car and an escort by the Haitian police and troops from MINUSTAH, the UN “peacekeeping” force.

The front-running candidate in last November’s poll, Mirlande Manigat, has deep ties to the old regime. She is the wife of Leslie Manigat, who served as an intellectual apologist and political supporter of the Duvalier dictatorship before being installed as president in the wake of its downfall by means of a fraudulent, military-run 1988 election.

Martelly, the former compa singer who the OAS recommendation would make a contender in the run-off, was reported by the *Miami Herald* to have been “closely identified with sympathizers of the 1991 military coup that ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide,” and has even been accused of having participated in death squad operations against Aristide’s supporters. During the course of the recent campaign, he spoke nostalgically of the Duvalier years.

More than half of Haiti’s population are under the age of 21 and have no memory of the Duvalier years. If right-wing politicians are able to generate even a small measure of sympathy for the ex-dictator, it is because of the horrific conditions that have confronted the masses of Haitians in the 25 years since his ouster and the failure of the Lavalas movement identified with Aristide to find a way out of Haiti’s historic backwardness and oppression.

The former slum priest, who had been strongly identified with the popular uprising that drove Duvalier from Haiti, became president as a result of the country’s first genuinely popular election in 1990.

Within just eight months of his inauguration, Aristide was overthrown in a bloody September 1991 military coup backed by the administration of George H.W. Bush in Washington.

He was restored to power three years later as part of a settlement brokered by the Clinton administration that saw him briefly returned to the presidential palace alongside an occupation of the country by 20,000 US troops. In return for Washington’s support, Aristide agreed to implement a series of IMF-imposed policies that included sweeping privatizations, the opening up of Haiti’s markets and cuts in state spending.

Despite these policies, which spelled deepening misery for Haiti’s working class and oppressed, neither Washington nor the Haitian elite forgave Aristide for his association with the mass popular movement that overthrew the Duvalier dictatorship. In 2004, three years after Aristide had managed to return to power in an election, he was again overthrown in a US-backed coup and forcibly removed from the country. Once again, US Marines occupied Haiti.

Both the Obama administration in Washington and the Sarkozy government in France deny any role in or any foreknowledge of Duvalier’s return to Haiti.

“This was not a plot. We did not know he was coming,” French Ambassador Didier Le-Bret insisted. Duvalier, he claimed, is just “a simple French citizen; he’s allowed to do what he wants to do.”

Similarly, the spokesman for the US embassy in Port-au-Prince claimed that Washington had been taken unawares by Duvalier’s return. “We are surprised by the timing of the

visit,” said the spokesman, Jon Prechowski.

There was widespread speculation in Haiti, however, about backing for Duvalier’s return, both from within the Haitian political establishment and from foreign backers.

“I’d be very surprised if the DGSE (French intelligence), the Haitian government and the US administration had not been informed of the trip by the former dictator,” Haitian journalist Liliane Pierre Paul commented.

Indeed, it strains credulity to believe that neither US nor French intelligence had any knowledge of Duvalier’s plans, given the massive surveillance, particularly related to air travel. The ex-dictator was allowed to travel on an expired diplomatic passport, issued by the regime installed by Washington following the 2004 coup that ousted Aristide.

Whatever the nature of the involvement, the return of Duvalier to Haiti almost 25 years after a US Air Force plane flew him to his exile on the French Riviera underscores the criminal role played by US imperialism in the unspeakable conditions that have been inflicted upon the people of Haiti.

The Duvalier dynasty begun by “Papa Doc” in 1957 was founded, in the first instance, upon the power of the US-created Haitian army, which handed him the presidency.

Over the next 29 years, Washington poured in arms and military aid to sustain the dictatorship, which was hailed as a bulwark against “communist subversion” as it murdered upwards of 50,000 Haitians suspected of opposing the Duvaliers and subjected hundreds of thousands of others to illegal imprisonment, torture and exile.

That Duvalier was not put in handcuffs and thrown in a Haitian prison the moment he landed in Port-au-Prince is a travesty and an international scandal.

It also underscores that the mass struggle undertaken by the people of Haiti 25 years ago for the “uprooting” of Duvalierism remains uncompleted, with the conditions of oppression and capitalist exploitation upon which the US-backed dictatorship rested still firmly in place. The liberating tasks posed by the mass uprisings of 1985 and 1986 can be realized only by the Haitian working class carrying out a revolution to put an end to imperialist oppression and capitalist exploitation in Haiti as part of a global struggle for the socialist transformation of society.



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