

Press under attack in Haiti

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A series of recent events in Haiti have highlighted continuing threats to press freedom in a country where democratic rights are routinely denied in the interests of US imperialism and the local ruling elite.

Haiti's 1987 Constitution, drafted in the immediate aftermath of the Duvalier dictatorship, provides some protection to journalists, but also allows for legal restraints. Charges of defamation by journalists, allowed under the penal code, are being used to suppress freedom of the press.

On June 22 in the city of Petit-Goâve, two journalists from Radio Prevention were arrested by government commissioner Alex Civil. Ernest Joseph, a journalist and CEO of the station, and Wolf "Duralph" François, were arrested in Civil's office after he invited them to a meeting. Several thousand fans of Joseph and François gathered outside while the three were meeting, and violence broke out between the crowd, police, and MINUSTAH soldiers.

Commissioner Civil used the violence as a pretext for arresting the two journalists, even though they took no part in it and were in fact in his office. That the arrests were planned ahead of time is evidenced by the confiscation of Radio Prevention's transmitter and other equipment on the same day. According to the web site Defend Haiti, the mayor of Petit-Goâve had complained about the political satire broadcast by the station.

Joseph and François were charged with defamation and disturbing public order. *Le Nouvelliste* reported that Joseph was to be released by Judge Magistrate Jean Michel Christophe on July 2, but that François was to remain in prison.

The paper also reported on a meeting between Christophe and Guyler C. Delva, the head of SOS Journalistes, an organization which defends Haitian journalists. Delva told *Le Nouvelliste* that the Judge Magistrate described François as "responsible for all

the wrongs in the world, even though the magistrate had not yet formally studied the dossier which he had received only the day before." Delva continued, "during this conversation—which transpired in the presence of three other witnesses ... the judge magistrate seemed to be communicating the results of an inquiry that he hadn't even started yet."

In Port-au-Prince, five other journalists were fired from their jobs at the state-owned Television Nationale d'Haiti (TNH), and two were arrested a week after the election of President Michel Martelly. According to the organization Reporters Without Borders, Eddy Jackson Alexis (the station's news editor), Josias Pierre, Jacques Innocent, Guemsly Saint-Preux, and Stephane Cadet were all fired after the President-elect paid a "courtesy call" to station management.

Alexis and Pierre have been charged with criminal defamation, and could get 3-year jail sentences. Reporters Without Borders stated that "Alexis and Pierre have accused the *TNH* management of orchestrating a propaganda campaign in favour of Martelly during the run-up to the second round of the presidential election, at the expense of his rival, Mirlande Manigat." Four other journalists have been summonsed to testify against Alexis and Pierre.

Martelly is not the only highly-placed politician threatening journalists. After having been the subject of a damning two-part article in *Haiti Liberte*—based on its own reporting and a series of Wikileaks cables—Senator Youri Latortue has threatened legal action against that paper, according to *Le Nouvelliste*.

Haiti Liberte, which is working with *The Nation* and Wikileaks to release more than 1,900 diplomatic cables from the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince, based much of its article on a November 2006 cable that described Latortue as "the most brazenly corrupt of leading Haitian politicians." The cable describes a meeting between the embassy's Political Officer and Fritz

Mevs, a wealthy Haitian businessman and “colleague” who let the US Navy use his private pier after the 2010 earthquake.

Mevs’ name is redacted in the cable on the Wikileaks web site, but he has since acknowledged the conversation and issued a public apology to Latortue, a Senator from the Artibonite Department. According to the cable, Mevs “likened Senator Latortue’s authority in the port city of Gonaives to that of a mafia boss.” Citing other sources, the cable accuses Latortue of drug running, distribution of weapons, and misappropriation of humanitarian aid after the Artibonite river flooded in September 2006.

These accusations against Latortue, documented by the embassy itself, did not keep it from seeking his advice on a variety of matters described in a July 2008 cable. On July 11 of that year, the embassy’s Political Counselor visited Latortue to seek his opinions on the Haitian National Police, the prime-minister designate, and President Rene Preval. The 2008 cable concludes that despite “Latortue’s shady past (which may well continue into the present) ... Embassy will continue to maintain discreet, working level contact with Latortue in the interest of gathering information.”

The Senator continues to enjoy access to high-level American politicians, having met with Bill Clinton and Haitian presidential candidate Mirlande Manigat in February 2011.

Article 28.1 of the 1987 Haitian Constitution states that “Journalists freely exercise their profession in the framework of the law. That freedom cannot be submitted to any authorization or censorship, except in cases of war.” However, article 28.3 gives the qualification that “any press offenses along with abuses of the right of expression arise from the Penal Code,” which sets forth the defamation charges which are now being used widely to arrest journalists.

The democratic right to freedom of the press has long been suppressed in Haiti, both politically and by objective conditions. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that at least five Haitian journalists were killed “in direct relation to their work” between 2000 and 2007. In its report covering the year 2010 (issued in February 2011), the Committee also stated that 95 percent of Haitian radio stations were knocked off the air by the earthquake. While almost all were broadcasting again by the end of the year, some were

operating out of tents. As for print media, *Le Nouvelliste* and *Le Matin* published again after the earthquake, but “*Bon Nouvel*, Haiti’s sole Creole-language newspaper, disappeared under the rubble.”



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