

# Martelly government cracks down on Haitian protests

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A series of protests have swept Haiti in recent months sparked by government corruption, spikes in the prices of staple foods, and the anniversary of the September 30, 1991 coup that overthrew former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The government of President Michel Martelly has met these challenges with violence.

Underlying the popular upheavals is protracted social deprivation. Nearly three years after the January 12, 2010 earthquake, one third of the 1.5 million Haitians who were left homeless are still without permanent shelter. The cholera epidemic, a result of the UN's military occupation of the country, has killed more than 7,400 people, and this past spring had developed a new strain, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In July, *The New York Times* reported that the epidemic had killed 400 people and sickened 50,000 over the previous three months.

Against this backdrop, Martelly—a former musician who was given the nickname “Sweet Mickey” by the head of the national police after the 1991 coup—has put forward the slogan “Haiti is open for business.” In other words, he intends to repress any popular movement that threatens profits.

Hundreds of anti-government protesters took to the streets of Port-au-Prince on October 2 to protest living conditions in the city's slums. On October 5, another protest led by teachers demanding a base salary of 50,000 gourdes (\$ US 1,200) per year drew thousands of workers into the capital's streets. That such a small amount has to be fought for shows the disdain with which Haiti's ruling elite treats its workers.

Protesters have shouted “Madame Martelly is pocketing money ... while the people collapse from hunger and can't send their children to school” and “down with the high cost of living,” according to *Haiti Liberte*.

One protester told the AP that “The president has made

so many promises but nothing has become a reality ... it's only a clique of his friends who are making money.” Early on in his presidency, Martelly promised a free education for the country's 1.5 million school children.

Videos of a September 30 protest in Port-au-Prince show demonstrators holding up red cards against the government, borrowing the soccer symbol that a player has been ejected from the game. Martelly, returning from a trip to the United States, responded by walking from the airport to the site of the presidential palace with supporters. *Haiti Liberte* reported that this march included “musical groups who are in the pay of the Interior Minister.”

In response to the protests, Martelly told *Le Nouvelliste* that “destabilizing elements” will be “pursued by justice.” This veiled threat has already been realized in the form of violent police reaction in cities across the country.

According to *Haiti Liberte*, a 19-year-old man was killed on October 8 when police opened fire on protesters in the city of Fort-Liberté. On the same day, four protesters were wounded by bullets during a demonstration demanding the restoration of electricity in Belladère. On October 4 in Petit-Goâve, a woman in her 80s was killed when Martelly's security guards fired teargas at protesters while he attended an event sponsored by USAID.

Counter protests in the city of Gonaïves have been organized by Senator Youri Latortue, a Martelly advisor whose power was “likened ... to that of a mafia boss” in a US embassy cable released by WikiLeaks.

The miserable conditions confronting Haitian workers are being made even worse by a shortage of staple foods and spikes in the price of cooking oil. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN reports that dry weather in May and early June reduced the domestic corn harvest this spring by 20 percent from that of 2011.

Neoliberal trade diktats have severely damaged Haiti's domestic rice production, leading to an emergency importation of 288,00 sacks from Japan this fall.

When the Clinton administration reinstated Jean-Bertrand Aristide as Haiti's president in 1994, it included a demand that Haiti cut its tariff on rice to only 3 percent. In addition, the US Government heavily subsidizes its rice farmers. According to US Commerce Department figures, imports of US rice in Haiti jumped from 88,000 tons in 1994 to 192,000 the following year. By the year 2000, this number had increased to 219,600, and dwarfed the 130,000 tons of domestic Haitian production of this staple crop.

Significantly, in September Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe expressed nostalgia for the Duvalier era: "Haiti needs to regain its food sovereignty," he told the press. "Before 1987 we were self-sufficient." Martelly ran for President as the candidate of Repons Peyizan (Farmers' Response), and is likely to use the current crisis to stir up right-wing populism.

The government is also using the crisis to stoke up tensions with the neighboring Dominican Republic. Gary Mathieu, an agronomist and Coordinator of the National Council for Food Security, has alleged that between 30,000 and 50,000 tons of imported rice are smuggled from Haiti to its neighbor every year, according to *Le Nouvelliste*.

The rise in the price of cooking oil, another staple, has also contributed to social tensions. Oxfam International released a report in September about the effect on its cost of EU biofuels mandates. It notes that before the 2008 food riots the price of the most popular brand in Haiti almost doubled. As of May 2012, the price of cooking oil was higher than the 5-year average in many cities, including Port-au-Prince, Hinche, Jacmel, and Jérémie.



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