Haitian government in crisis as protests spread

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The government of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, inaugurated at the beginning of this year after an election in which only 20 percent of eligible voters participated, is already in deep crisis.

Last Tuesday, as thousands took to the streets in Port-au-Prince, the government flew a surveillance drone over the protest. Shots were fired into the air from the back of a white pick-up truck; rumors spread on social media that the truck belongs to the national lottery, which denied the charge.

The protests, which have been going on across the country since the beginning of September, have met with fierce reaction from the Haitian National Police (PNH) and its tear gas guns. In Les Cayes at the beginning of October, tear gas fired by police at protesters sent a dozen students from a nearby school to the hospital.

At the end of September, ten workers in the city of Ouanaminthe were injured during a protest against the imposition of an income tax on textile workers, who make only 365 gourdes (less than US $6) per day. *Alterpresse* reported that two of the injuries were from bullets.

To justify its violence, the government has pointed to the burning of several cars in Port-au-Prince during a protest on September 12.

At the end of September, the mayors of nearly 50 cities and towns in the Nord, Nord-Est, and Artibonite departments organized a three-day strike to protest Moïse's budget, which makes no mention of funds for local governments. All services were suspended during the strike.

More protests are planned this week in the cities of Hinche and Port-au-Prince, and the Sud department. A protest near the SANOPI industrial center in Port-au-Prince, where textile workers struck for better pay in May and June, is planned. The Ethnology Department of the Université d'Etat d'Haïti has been closed since June, when a student was hit and killed by the Dean's car during a protest.

In a dictatorial move, on October 22 the public prosecutor for Port-au-Prince, Clamé Ocnam Daméus, ordered that "all images and recordings on audio-visual media pertinent to any act of banditry and violence committed in the the course of protests in the streets of" Port-au-Prince be turned over to the Haitian National Police. The effect of the order is to turn journalists into surveillance agents of the state.

The web site *Tout Haiti* reported on October 21 that violence against the protesters has been carried out by paramilitary groups—including former soldiers—paid by the government of Moïse and Prime Minister Jacques Guy Lafontant. The tactic has caused infighting in the highest levels of the Haitian National Police (PNH), with some threatening to resign, and the government seeking to install a director "totally devoted to its cause to transform the PNH into a political militia."

The growth of the PNH to a force of 15,000 members was used by the United Nations as a reason to end its hated MINUSTAH "peacekeeping" mission in October. MINUSTAH not only introduced cholera to Haiti, causing an epidemic that has killed more than 10,000 people, but also supplied soldiers who engaged in sexual trafficking.

Nonetheless, it is being replaced by a UN mission with a different name (MINUJUSTH) but the same purpose of policing the population. Seven of the 11 police units of MINUSTAH are being maintained as is, "in order to preserve the progress accomplished in recent years in the domain of security thanks to the operational support given to the national police."

MINUJUSTH is being coordinated closely with the

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PNH's strategic plan for the period 2017-2021. That strategic plan includes an increase in the size of the PNH from 15,000 to 18,000 by the end of 2021, and, in a nod to identity politics, calls for "the participation and representation of women at all levels."

Mamadou Diallo, the interim head of MINUJUSTH, announced last week that his mission will not support attempts to reinstate the Haitian army, instead pursuing the "reinforcement of … the national police, courts and tribunals, and penitentiary administration."

In keeping with the imperialistic purpose of the mission, Diallo also declared that "whether or not the [Haitian] parliament ratifies the agreement related to the new mission of the UN will not have any consequence."

The government, however, is reinstating the army. At a press conference last week, Prim Minister Lafontant declared that the army had never really been dissolved, only "administratively demobilized" under the first administration of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. 2,350 young army cadets have been recruited since July.

Many of the anti-government protests are being organized by Fanmi Lavalas and the Pitit Dessalines movement, whose candidate, Moïse Jean-Charles, lost to Jovenel Moïse in the presidential election. These elements see the protests as a means to both further their own careers and keep public anger under control. Senators and parliamentary deputies are also joining in the calls for protests. Jean-Charles said last week that "we're now preparing the after-Jovenel. There won't be elections after his departure. We will put in place estates general which will reevaluate the whole system of government."

After returning from his first speech before the UN General Assembly in September, Jovenel Moïse took part in a pro-government demonstration starting at the Toussaint Louverture airport in Port-au-Prince. Despite being heavily guarded by the PNH, the march was cut short because of rocks thrown by counter-demonstrators.

The protests occur in the midst of high inflation and miserable poverty for the vast majority of Haitians. According to *Alterpresse*, poverty caused an extremely low attendance by school children at the beginning of September, with only four showing up at one of the schools in Port-au-Prince. In recent years, teachers have had to go for months without being paid.

More than 8 million Haitians have no access to electricity, the highest rate in the Caribbean. The 2017-2018 budget, which imposed fees that sparked many recent protests, includes only $249 million for public works and $139 million for agriculture. These amounts are pennies compared to the damage caused by Hurricane Matthew—estimated at $2.8 billion, according to the *Miami Herald*—and subsequent rains.

While the lack of government revenues is used as excuse to bleed taxes out of underpaid workers, numerous government agencies in banking, aeronautics, the lottery, ports, water treatment, etc., provide revenue for the pockets of government figures rather than social services. At the beginning of October, *Le Nouvelliste* reported that the equivalent of US $ 8 million in revenues—"a pittance," according to one senator—is expected to go toward actual government revenues this year.

At the end of August, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Roosevelt Bellevue was fired by the Prime Minister for having pocketed nearly US $1 million in a scheme involving subsidized school supplies for the children of factory workers.

In keeping with such crimes, President Moïse's promise to bring electricity to poor households 24/7—mainly through small, unnetworked solar generators—will likely turn out to be just a cash cow for the politically connected.

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