

Haitian National Police conspire with the Senate to plan repression

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Nearly three weeks after violent street protests forced the Haitian government to rescind drastic cuts to fuel subsidies, the bourgeoisie still has not found a way out of its crisis. The Haitian National Police (Police National d'Haiti, or PNH) is taking advantage of the weakness of President Jovenel Moïse to advance its own position, while the government grasps for sources of revenue.

The cancellation of what would have amounted to a 38 percent increase in the price of a liter of gas has bought temporary peace, but on Tuesday a protest was staged in Port-au-Prince demanding the unconditional and immediate release of everyone arrested during the July 6–8 events. Attorney and student organizations, along with family members of the imprisoned, attended.

Alterpresse reported that placards included demands for a 1,000 gourde daily minimum wage. The current minimum is 350 gourdes per day, only slightly more than the price of a liter of gas had the subsidy cuts held. *Alterpresse* interviewed one woman who said: "I can't take it anymore. My husband was unjustly arrested while leaving work. He's the one who feeds the family."

Significantly, Tuesday was not the first time in recent months that the term *dechoukaj* (uprooting) has been used to describe anti-government protests. The same word was used to describe the popular uprising against Jean-Claude Duvalier and his murderous *tonton macoutes* in 1986.

President Jovenel Moïse is in a very weak position, and the Haitian National Police (PNH) has circumvented his government by arranging regular meetings with the Senate's Permanent Committee on Justice and Security to prepare for repressing future protests. PNH commanders were also scheduled to

meet with the leaders of Haiti's ten departments on Wednesday to discuss the same topic.

PNH Director General Michel-Ange Gédéon has claimed that he is not planning a coup d'état, but his meetings this week indicate that Moïse and former Prime Minister Jacques Guy Lafontant, who has since resigned, were responsible for the decision to hold back the police during the protests of July 6–8.

Lafontant's July 14 resignation happened in a manner that indicates a backroom deal. He had been summoned to appear before Parliament, and press reports describe him smiling confidently during the first half of the session as accusations were leveled against him. However, after coming back from a break he took the podium to announce that he had submitted his resignation and Moïse had accepted it. He claimed to have resigned before the session began, but Haitian law would have prevented him from entering the chamber at all if that were true.

A brief notice on *Haiti Libre* Wednesday stated that Lafontant is still giving orders, suspending all foreign travel by government ministers and forbidding any new hires by the administration.

As of Wednesday, Moïse still had not named a new Prime Minister. Lafontant, a medical doctor and close personal friend of the president, had no previous political experience when he was chosen for the job in February 2017. *The Miami Herald* reported at the time that Lafontant was unknown even to senators from Moïse's PHTK party.

The Trump administration has not yet sent its military in response to the protests, and the approximately 1,000 UN police still in Haiti did not intervene in the July events.

The US and other foreign governments have cut their financial donations significantly in recent years, leaving

Moïse to rely on IMF loans, aid from Venezuela and attempts to impose fees on licenses and passports, along with a tax on foreign remittances to fund the budget.

The cuts to fuel subsidies that triggered the July 6–8 protests were part of a bargain the government made with the IMF in return for US \$96 million worth of loans and grants. At an exchange rate of 65 gourdes to the dollar, this funding represents less than 5 percent of the current year's budget of 144.4 billion gourdes. The percentage of budget revenues coming from such sources has decreased from more than 45 percent to less than 17 percent since 2010.

Three days after the fuel protests ended, Haitian Foreign Minister Antonio Rodrique traveled to Caracas to ask permission to free up \$80 million from the PetroCaribe program for his government to spend. However, this program is now widely hated in Haiti because of corruption, and Venezuela itself is now in a weak position.

The Haitian government has therefore turned to taxes and fees. In the current fiscal year, it is expecting to collect 26.7 billion gourdes of taxes on goods and services. Last September it enraged Haitians living abroad by trying to impose a tax on all remittances. The remittances are important to families not only because of the devastating poverty in the country but also because the gourde continues to depreciate against the dollar and inflation remains in the double digits.

Less than 1 percent of the 2017–2018 budget was given to water and sanitation projects, only 0.14 percent to reforestation and environmental rehabilitation, and only 0.62 percent to building improvements for schools and universities.

In another indication of the crisis facing the Haitian bourgeoisie, one of its richest members released an open letter on July 19 decrying the damage caused to his Delimart supermarkets during the fuel hike protests. Reginald Boulos, a former Chairman of Intercontinental Bank S.A. with ties to the Clintons, also owns a car dealership.

On July 11 he told *Radio Visa* that “there are no rich people in Haiti ... When I look at my counterpart in the neighboring Dominican Republic, he sells 450 Daihatsus each month. I sell 400 or 350 per year. I am very poor compared to them.”

Boulos' July 19 open letter was equally cynical and

self-pitying. Claiming to be the victim of anti-Lebanese racism, he writes that he spent long hours building the supermarket chain and then asks, “how many more years of hard labor do I have left to reconstitute everything and repair such an injustice? Only God holds the key.”

Regardless of who may be holding a key, the PNH holds the guns and will use them to defend the likes of Boulos. Fully aware of this fact, he threatens in the letter to move his children and their business interests abroad if the government doesn't suppress social unrest.



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