

Mass protests shut down Haiti

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Protests have shut down large portions of Haiti since last Thursday, the 33rd anniversary of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s flight from the country as his regime collapsed.

The current protests are demanding a similar fate for President Jovenel Moïse, who in 2015 won an election in which only 20 percent of eligible voters turned out. Last July an attempt by Moïse’s government to cut fuel subsidies led to large protests and the resignation of his prime minister.

Moïse’s government and that of PHTK predecessor Michel Martelly have been deeply implicated in the PetroCaribe corruption scandal. Last autumn, protest signs asked where the PetroCaribe money went, but now banners demand “give us the PetroCaribe money.”

A protester named Valckensy Dessin told the *Miami Herald*, “we have a little minority, rich people in this country, running this country, earn everything, and we have the mass of the population dying, hunger, and misery like this. It’s impossible.”

The protests, now called Pays Lock (Country Lock), have taken on the character of a general strike with the aim of shutting down the country until Moïse resigns. In addition to his government’s corruption, the strike is being fueled by unbearable inflation and an exchange rate with the US that has climbed to 84 gourdes to the dollar. A year ago the rate was 64 to one.

Food staples, including rice and poultry, are among the largest of exports from the US to Haiti. Over the weekend, the owner of a bakery in Jacmel complained to Alterpresse that in a very short time the price of a sack of flour has increased from 1,750 to 2,500 gourdes.

While bread is still available from small bakers despite the protests, supermarkets have been closed and the transportation of food is becoming impossible. This scarcity will only add to inflation.

Since last Thursday, banks have been attacked in

Delmas, Gonaïves, and other cities, and gas stations have been set on fire. In Cap-Haïtien and other cities, protesters have rebuilt barricades of burning tires as soon as the police clear them.

The Association of Private Hospitals of Haiti (AHPH) issued a press release Tuesday stating that its 28 member hospitals “are starting to face major challenges: lack of electricity, lack of fuel, lack of oxygen, impoverishment of medication inventories and stoppage of means of transportation and communication. These challenges bear directly on our ability to save lives.” This crisis comes on top of a chronic lack of medical care: as of the end of 2018 there were only 3,354 medical doctors in all of Haiti, fewer than 1 for every 3,000 people.

Although the police claimed to have control of the country’s second largest city, Cap-Haïtien, on Monday, *Le Nouvelliste* reported that large and small businesses, banks, schools, and public transportation were not functioning.

The building housing the Italian and Peruvian consulates in Port-au-Prince was threatened by protesters, and in St-Marc protesters tried to burn down the city hall.

The government of the Dominican Republic, which deported more than 10,000 Haitians per month in 2018, is fortifying its border, particularly near the border town of Dajabón, with troops, helicopters, machine guns and surveillance equipment.

At least ten and as many as 50 people have died across the country since February 7. In the commune of Mirabelais, a woman was killed by a car fleeing from police who had fired tear gas. The car was subsequently torched by protesters. As the situation intensified, nine police and an equal number of protesters were injured. In Jacmel, three armed men did not try to disguise themselves when they opened fire on protesters, killing one and injuring five. In Port-au-Prince an adolescent

was gunned down by police in front of his mother.

Bourgeois charlatans have attempted to exploit the protests, which are dominated by the working class and poor, in order to advance their own interests. Attorney Michel André, a protege of former first lady Mirlande Manigat, who has been groomed by the US State Department and the Organization of American States, is putting himself forward as the leader of a “democratic and popular” movement. In the 2016 presidential election, André did not receive enough votes to advance to the second round.

Moïse Jean-Charles of the Pitit Dessalines (Children of Dessalines) formation has threatened “to name an interim president in the coming days,” according to the *Daily Mail*. The 2016 Pitit Dessalines platform, on which Jean-Charles ran for president, expressed his admiration for Fidel Castro while calling for vaguely “socialist” reforms. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, for whom Jean-Charles’ movement is named, was declared Emperor of Haiti in 1804 after aiding in the arrest of Toussaint Louverture. His government then issued a constitution under which he became emperor for life.

The Core Group, composed of Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the US and others, issued a press release on Sunday calling for the imposition of austerity and “reiterating the fact that in a democracy change must come through the ballot box, and not through violence.” These countries, which have made no bones about raining down violence on Haiti since the 1790s, are keeping their current plans secret. Nonetheless, they fear that they cannot rely on the Haitian National Police (PNH), with which they have tried to replace UN forces in recent years.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Haiti (CCIH) is also calling for austerity, as though there were no protests outside its window. On Sunday it issued a press release calling for “a national dialogue” about the future of Moïse’s presidency, followed by “urgent, realizable, and measurable actions geared toward installing a regime of austerity in the government’s budget, while suppressing all non-essential expenditures.”

The lower house of parliament, on the other hand, is trying to quell the protests with a pretense of largesse, by insisting that the government increase the portion of domestic revenues budgeted for social programs from 15 to 20 percent. The budget for the 2018-2019 fiscal

year was supposed to take effect on November 1, but still has not been passed. The government, in panic, is proposing small business credits and financing for agricultural enterprises in order to kick-start the economy.

On Monday morning, presidential counselor Guichard Doré told *Radio Magik9* that resignation is not one of the options being considered by President Moïse, and that “there is not an alternative to dialogue.” Doré went on to say that “the president offers his hand to everyone” because “we have a country to build together.” However, the president and prime minister have gone silent. A second, anonymous counselor told *Le Nouvelliste* that the two are open to a UN “mediation” of the crisis.



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