

Mass protests in Haiti against president's authoritarian power grab

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Tens of thousands of people protested Sunday in Port-au-Prince and other Haitian cities against President Jovenel Moïse, who has taken steps over the past two weeks to consolidate a presidential dictatorship. Protesters chanted "down with the dictatorship," while the police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

With the full backing of Washington and imperialist-led institutions like the United Nations and Organization of American States (OAS), Moïse is violating Haiti's constitution by remaining in power after his five-year term expired on February 7.

He is preparing to hold a referendum in April to establish a more powerful presidency on the grounds the country is currently ungovernable. Proposed changes include: abolishing the post of a prime minister accountable to the legislature; replacing the current bicameral parliament with a unicameral one; and eliminating the prohibition in the constitution on a president serving two consecutive terms. This last measure was introduced as a democratic safeguard following the downfall of the Duvalier dictatorship.

Sunday's protests denounced the United States and other foreign powers for backing Moïse. The protest's route included stops in front of the OAS office in Pétion-Ville on the hills of Port-au-Prince and the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (also known by its French-language acronym BINUH) in nearby Juvenat.

Three journalists were injured in the clashes, and a protester was burned alive by suspected members of an armed gang believed to have ties to Moïse.

The president has allowed the police and armed gangs to go on a rampage against popular protests in recent weeks. Two local journalists, Alvarez Destiné and Meus Jeanril, were shot while covering protests on the Champ de Mars across from the grounds of the National Palace. Jeanril reportedly remains in critical condition.

The US-backed president has vastly expanded his authoritarian powers over the past year. In January 2020, he effectively dismissed the country's parliament by allowing the terms of most deputies to expire without organizing

constitutionally-mandated parliamentary elections. He has ruled by decree ever since and has dismissed all of the country's elected mayors and imposed hand-picked replacements.

The absence of a legislature, which under the Haitian constitution is tasked with approving appointments to independent bodies and the police, enabled Moïse to fill these posts with close supporters.

He has also stacked the committee that is preparing his anti-democratic constitutional reform and the Election Commission with his own appointees.

Among Moïse's most controversial initiatives is the creation of an intelligence service that reports directly to him. He has also broadened the definition of "terrorism" to include fires and roadblocks, which are common forms of popular protest.

In the latest round of attacks on his political opponents, Moïse ordered the arrest of 23 people, including a Supreme Court judge, whom he accused of plotting a coup because they opposed his unconstitutional actions.

In addition, he has ordered the removal of three Supreme Court justices named by the opposition as potential presidential candidates. According to article 177 of the constitution, Supreme Court justices are supposed to be irremovable.

Moïse has justified his authoritarian power grab with the specious claim that his presidential term only began on 7 February 2017, and that he therefore still has a year to serve. In reality, his term started one year earlier, when his predecessor and political mentor, Michel Martelly, stepped down and handed power to a provisional president in the aftermath of the 2015 elections, which were marred by fraud.

Both Martelly and Moïse are closely associated with the dominant faction of the Haitian ruling class that backed the Duvalier dictatorship, which savagely oppressed the Haitian people until it was brought down by a popular revolt in 1986.

Moïse has received backing from the military, which was

only reconstituted by him in 2017 following its formal dissolution in 1995. In an interview with a local radio station, Jean Baptiste Joseph, a commander in the Haitian military, said he was “ready to do anything” to ensure Moïse remains in power.

Moïse’s power grab has been backed by the United States and other imperialist powers. Underscoring the utter hypocrisy of their claims to be defending democracy and the rule of law, it is worth recalling that when it came to Jean-Bertrand Aristide they argued the exact opposite. When Washington under Bill Clinton returned Aristide, who had been deposed in 1991 by a coup backed by Bush administration, to the presidency, it insisted that the three years Aristide had lived in exile be counted as part of his five-year presidential term.

Washington has no such qualms about Moïse. “He was sworn into office on February 7, 2017 for a five-year term, which is therefore scheduled to end on February 7, 2022,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said on February 5. “In accordance with the OAS position on the need to proceed with the democratic transfer of executive power, a new elected president should succeed President Moïse when his term ends on February 7, 2022.”

State Department spokesman Price disparaged the recent mass protests and implicitly endorsed the violent police response, commenting, “The remarkable lack of popular response to calls for mass protests in recent weeks indicates that Haitian people are tired of endless lockdowns [mass protests shutting down the capital] and squabbling over power.”

This blank cheque to Moïse and his corrupt allies issued by the Biden administration is entirely in keeping with US imperialism’s historic crimes against the Haitian people, which stretch back over a century. In addition to backing the vicious three-decade-long Duvalier dictatorship to the hilt, Washington and its allies, including Canada, have repeatedly sent troops to occupy Haiti and suppress the Haitian people, including on multiple occasions in the 35 years since the overthrow of Baby Doc Jean-Claude Duvalier. (See: *Haiti and the ugly face of Biden’s human rights imperialism*)

The corrupt and widely-despised Moïse regime, which has faced repeated upsurges of mass protests since 2018, is capable of clinging to power only thanks to Washington’s continued unstinting support. Under the far-right President Trump, Washington backed Moïse during weeks-long protests involving tens of thousands during the fall of 2019, which were triggered by the worsening social situation and Moïse’s involvement in a massive corruption scandal that saw the siphoning off of some \$4 billion in aid from Venezuela by his cronies in Haiti’s venal bourgeois elite.

The fact that the Biden administration has so decisively

reaffirmed its backing for the regime, even as Moïse intensifies his authoritarian policies, makes a mockery of the Democrat’s claim that American foreign policy will be based on upholding “human rights” and “democracy” under his administration.

The alliance between US imperialism and a series of corrupt puppet governments in Port-au-Prince has presided over a further deterioration in the already catastrophic social situation in Haiti. The poorest country in the western hemisphere, Haiti has a per capita gross domestic product of just \$797 and is ranked 169 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index. The Moïse regime has overseen a worsening of this social crisis, with a sharp devaluation of the currency and rampant inflation putting basic necessities out of reach for large sections of the population. At the same time, it has guaranteed the profits of the major agribusiness, clothing, tourism, and mining interests that ruthlessly plunder the country.

These horrific social conditions have been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Although reported cases are relatively low compared to other countries, this is largely due to the absence of health care infrastructure to track the progress of the deadly virus. According to the World Bank, inflation is expected to surpass 20 percent and the fiscal deficit will double to over 6 percent of GDP compared to a pre-pandemic forecast of 3 percent.

The official bourgeois opposition to Moïse has nothing to offer Haiti’s impoverished masses. While criticizing the President’s increasing authoritarianism, opposition politicians have concentrated on issuing pathetic appeals to the imperialist powers to defend democracy in Haiti, i.e., the very same powers that have imposed desperate social conditions on the impoverished country for decades. As opposition leader André Michel commented, “Clearly, Jovenel Moïse has ceased to be the constitutional president of Haiti. It is up to the population to continue to mobilize, to induce them to step down from power ... We ask the international community to take into account the decision of the Haitian judiciary, which noted the end of the constitutional mandate of Jovenel Moïse. It must help Haiti to make the transition a success.”



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