



US Press Coverage Versus Haitian Reality

MYTHS ABOUT
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US Press Coverage Versus Haitian Reality

Myth: *Elections held in Haiti in 2000 were fraudulent, therefore calling into question the legitimacy of the presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.*

"Every national election since 1997, including the one last Nov. 26 in which Mr. Aristide claimed victory, has been ruled fraudulent by independent outside observers.

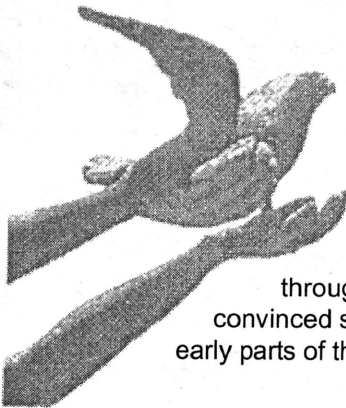
—Wall Street Journal, January 26, 2001

"Radio reports estimated that the turnout was below 10 percent"

—New York Times, November 26, 2000

REALITY

Both the May parliamentary and local elections, and the November 26th presidential elections, were historic for their non-violence and popular participation. There was a prolonged international controversy regarding the technicalities of the May 21st parliamentary elections. But the Organization of American States, as well as the governments of the US and Canada, now agree that Aristide's popular mandate is undeniable, and have recognized the need to work with his government. Presently, it is only the opposition coalition, the Democratic Convergence, that refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the Aristide government.



Voters turned out in large numbers across the country to vote in the November 26, 2000 presidential elections. The Electoral Council projected participation at 61%, a number supported by the largest group of domestic observers, KOZEPEP. A campaign of intimidation in the form of sporadic pipe bombs in Port-au-Prince throughout the week leading up to the elections convinced some people to stay at home during the early parts of the day.

Myth: Haiti is deteriorating into violence; things are worse now than under Duvalier.

"Economic deterioration, drug trafficking and political assassination of Lavalas critics have defined Mr. Aristide's Haiti."

—Wall Street Journal, January 26, 2001

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REALITY

Since Aristide was first elected in 1990, Haiti experienced a bloody military coup d'état that resulted in the political assassination of some 5,000 people. Since Aristide's return to Haiti in 1994, and his abolition of the military in 1995, state-sponsored terrorism is no longer part of the daily lives of Haiti's citizens. Freedom of speech has been one of the most prominent gains in the post-1994 period. Critics from all sides can and do speak out in Haiti. Despite this progress, political violence in the form of assassinations and assassination attempts has continued with leaders on all sides of the political spectrum falling victim, including the sister of Lavalas President Préval.

Haiti's democracy is young and fragile, the police force is inexperienced, and the justice system, which for the first 200 years of Haiti's history served only those who could buy justice, will take years to transform. However, there has been progress. The trial of police officers for the murder of residents in Carrefour-Feuilles in September 2000, and the October 2000 conviction of 19 former military and paramilitary members for their roles in the Raboteau massacre, were landmarks for human rights. These cases show that the justice system and the current government are not only capable of prosecuting crimes committed during the coup, but also of holding its own police force accountable for crimes committed now.

Mainstream media focus on violence in Haiti completely obscures the progress of the past few years. The following are just a few milestones:

- ◆ Haitians have elected local governments for the first time, a major step towards the process of decentralizing power away from the city and into the countryside.
- ◆ Haiti launched a major land reform program, which, while not without its critics, has put land tenure at the center of national policy with

peasant farmers directly participating in the process for the first time in history.

- ◆ The Haitian government has made major investments in agriculture, public transportation and education, with more schools built in Haiti between 1994-2000 than between 1804 and 1994.

Myth: Aristide has refused to condemn violence by his supporters.

“Political violence that has left three dead and 16 injured spread to Haiti’s provinces Wednesday as the government threatened to arrest opposition leaders, repeating the very warnings that sparked the latest attacks ... Aristide, in his first public statement on the issue, did not condemn the attacks but said he was ‘asking all citizens to promote peace.’”

—Associated Press, March 21, 2001

REALITY

The March 21st headline of Haiti’s center-right paper, *Le Nouvelliste*, reads: “Aristide condemns without reserve all acts of violence.” The actual text of his speech reads: “Because we want peace, we condemn without reserve all acts of violence.” In the particular incident referred to in this article, the AP writer failed to mention that while Lavalas supporters threw rocks at the office building of the Democratic Convergence, individuals within the building were reaching out the windows and shooting into the crowd with automatic fire. The three killed were all Lavalas supporters.

Myth: Aristide is a dictator, violently suppressing the opposition.

REALITY

Protesters in the streets of Port-au-Prince have been demanding the arrest of Gérard Gourgue, the leader of the Democratic Convergence. They are supporters of Aristide who feel strongly that the Convergence is waging an illegal campaign to destroy a democratically-elected government. However, Aristide has repeatedly condemned the violence on both sides, and has asked for negotiations with the opposition leaders. Aristide stepped down as president in 1995, marking a peaceful transfer of power almost unique in Haitian history. His inauguration on Feb. 7, 2001, repeated this rare event. Aristide abolished the army in 1995 after the end of the military-led coup. Gourgue, the “virtual president” of the opposition, has repeatedly called for the army’s return.

Myth: Haiti is a major drug-trafficking country.

“Colombian narcotics traffickers have established a firm beachhead and, with their Haitian confederates, have largely succeeded in consolidating a narco-state in Haiti.”

—Senator Jesse Helms, along with Congressmen Gilman and Goss, issue a statement on Haitian elections, December 8, 2000

REALITY

Haiti's proximity to the US has resulted in an increase in drug transport from Colombia to the US by way of Haiti. Cocaine is neither produced nor consumed in large quantities in Haiti. In fact, Haiti has allowed the US Drug Enforcement Agency to board ships in Haitian waters and to inspect Haitian ports. Haiti has a small police force, a tiny coast guard, and extremely limited resources to fight drug trafficking. It is absurd to expect Haiti to stem the flow of drugs. Like many other countries in the Caribbean, Haiti is a victim of geography, sitting as it does between a site of drug production in South America and the huge drug market in the United States. The Haitian people are suffering an increase in crime and arms trading as a consequence.

Myth: The United States has spent billions of dollars to bail out Haiti and this money has all been wasted.

“Haiti is one of the world's poorest countries, and yet, says Georges Fauriol (Center for Strategic and International Studies), its proximity to the United States gave it a golden opportunity. Mr. Fauriol: ‘Unlike most other countries in the world, Haiti has, in fact, ironically, been provided with an unusual set of circumstances of goodwill from the United States, from the international community. And that goodwill has been, in many ways, wasted.’”

—NPR, March 10, 2000

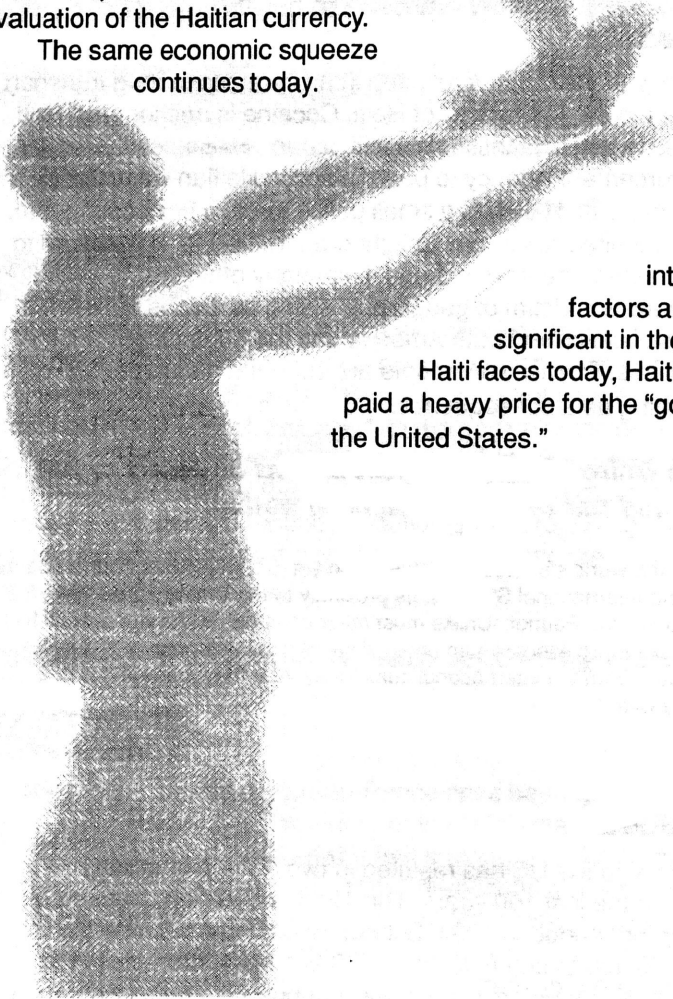
REALITY

Haiti's proximity to the US has resulted in two American military interventions in the last 100 years. The 1915 occupation, inspired by the Monroe Doctrine, ended in 1934, but not before Haiti became the number one source of cheap labor for US business interests in the Caribbean. US intervention in 1994 was supposed to restore democracy to Haiti, but the US never disarmed the para-military terrorists of the FRAPH and other former military operatives. The U.S. continues to harbor death-squad leaders and to withhold 60,000 pages of FRAPH and military records which document human rights abuses committed

during the coup. All this helped lay the groundwork for the current insecurity in Haiti.

The 1994 US intervention was also accompanied by strict conditions of IMF-backed structural adjustment programs that have resulted in an increased marginalization of the poor population, an inability of the Haitian government to support national agricultural production, and a serious devaluation of the Haitian currency.

The same economic squeeze continues today.



While internal factors are also significant in the crisis Haiti faces today, Haitians have paid a heavy price for the "goodwill of the United States."

What's At Stake in Haiti?

In 1893 Frederick Douglass, then U.S. minister to Haiti, said he felt compelled to defend Haiti against the prejudices of “newspaper correspondents and six-day tourists” by pointing out that Haiti seemed capable of enduring crisis without “falling to pieces and without being hopelessly abandoned to barbarism.”

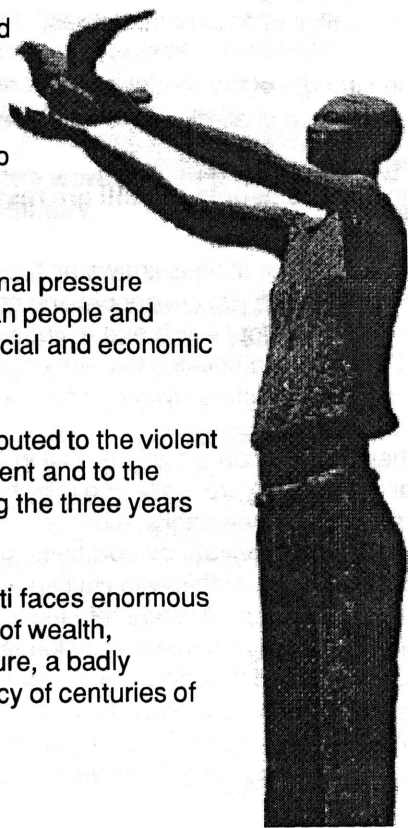
Not much has changed. According to much of the mainstream media, Haiti is still on the brink of chaos. Despite the fact that President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected with over 70% of the popular vote, the press casts Aristide as an illegitimate ruler, while it touts an elite opposition with no demonstrable popular support as a “shadow government.”

Laced with racism and condescension, corporate media reports depict Haitians as failures at democracy and incapable of running their own country. Just as in 1990 when President Aristide was first elected, there is now a concerted campaign to destabilize and isolate the Haitian government.

At a minimum, this intense international pressure severely limits the ability of the Haitian people and government to create progressive social and economic change.

In 1990, this type of campaign contributed to the violent overthrow of Haiti's elected government and to the deaths of some 5,000 Haitians during the three years of military dictatorship that followed.

Under the best of circumstances Haiti faces enormous challenges: a harrowing polarization of wealth, economic poverty, lack of infrastructure, a badly damaged environment, and the legacy of centuries of education denied to the majority.



Why are the United States government and its media mounting a campaign against a country and people struggling under such difficult circumstances towards genuine democratic development?

1. Haiti has a vibrant and well organized popular movement.

During the 1980's a highly diverse and organized popular movement grew up in Haiti. Made up of thousands of urban neighborhood groups, peasant organizations, women's and human rights groups, this movement led the fight to overthrow the Duvalier regime in 1986, paved the way for Haiti's first democratic elections in 1990, and heroically resisted the coup d'état of 1991. The coup period devastated organized grassroots groups in Haiti.

The years since have seen a slow but steady rebuilding with many groups turning their attention to the long-term work of building cooperative economic structures, and of healing the land.

The strength of the Haitian popular movement and its history of struggle represents a challenge to the dominant economic model of globalization.

2. The people of Haiti are resisting corporate globalization.

In Haiti globalization is known as the "*plan lanmò*" or the "death plan." Since 1994 the Haitian people and government have borne intense pressure to adopt neoliberal economic policies (opening of markets to U.S. goods, maintaining low wages, austerity programs, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises).

When Aristide came back to Haiti in 1994, U.S. officials expected that Haiti's public enterprises—the telephone company, electric company, airport, port, three banks, a cement factory, and flour mill—would be quickly sold to private corporations, preferably to U.S. multinationals working in partnership with Haitian elites. In the last months of his first term as president, Aristide refused to move forward with privatization, calling instead for a national dialogue on the issue. In 1996 Préval attempted to fast-track privatization and gain US support for his less popular government. Préval faced massive popular demonstrations, which led to the fall of his first government and a protracted political struggle that left the country without a Prime Minister for almost two

years. Despite U.S. pressure, seven years later only the flour mill and the cement plant have been sold.

In recent years Aristide has continued to be a spokesperson for an alternative vision, one which places human development at the center of all economic programs.

Now that Aristide is back in power, the US is again tightening the screws, hoping to force his government to accede to Washington's economic agenda, and to severely limit the Haitian government's ability to invest in its own people.

3. Haiti has a popularly elected government that has committed itself to making health care and education its top priorities.

The Fanmi Lavalas platform on which President Aristide based his candidacy proposes decentralized rural development, funded by Haitian government resources. It prioritizes small-scale community-based projects as key to rural development. The centerpiece of the platform is a plan to build, staff and equip a primary school and primary health care clinic in each of Haiti's 565 rural sections.

4. Haiti is the only country in the world, aside from Costa Rica and Panama, with no military.

In 1995, President Aristide disbanded the Haitian military. Widely popular in Haiti, the move caught the U.S. by surprise. Created during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, the Haitian military served throughout its history as a force of internal repression against the Haitian people. As is the case throughout Latin America, the Haitian military was a conduit for covert and overt United States intervention in Haitian affairs. This conduit is now gone. The Haitian military once absorbed 40% of Haiti's national budget. Today, Haiti spends zero on the military, making it a model in devoting resources to human development rather than to militarism.

5. Haiti has built close, cooperative ties with Cuba.

On February 6, 1996, as his final act in office, President Aristide reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba. The Préval government

deepened and strengthened ties with Cuba. Cuban assistance has been concrete, effective, practical, appropriate and speedy—in stark contrast to the wasteful, fly-in-another-highly-paid expert type of “aid” offered by the United States and the international lending agencies.

Cuba has sent more than 800 doctors to Haiti as part of a joint Haitian-Cuban effort to cut infant mortality in half. Cuba has also provided critical assistance in agriculture, literacy, communications, and fisheries. This cooperation stands as a clear challenge to U.S. accomplishments in Haiti.

Long before 1804, from the moment they were taken from their homes, our ancestors began the struggle against slavery... The Revolution, when it began, took thirteen long years to achieve. Today, the weapons may be different, but we are in a similar moment of struggle, striving to realize 2004.

—Jean-Bertrand Aristide, 2000

The United States has long considered Haiti a threat.

Since 1804 when Haiti gained independence after the world's only successful slave revolution, the U.S. refused to recognize the new nation, and viewed Haitian freedom as a danger to the American system of slavery.

Even then Haiti experienced "globalization."

In 1825 Haiti was forced to assume a 150 million franc debt to France as "reimbursement" to the former slave owners. To make the first payment Haiti had to close all its public schools in what has been called the hemisphere's first case of structural adjustment. Today, as Haitians attempt to create an alternative to debt, dependence, and the indignity of foreign domination, the attacks continue. Haitian grassroots organizations are working for democracy, better health care, education, reforestation, justice for victims of violence, and for women to play a full role in Haitian society. In support of these goals, the new Haitian government has set forth an ambitious agenda for social investment. To achieve any of this, the Haitian people and government need political stability, some space to maneuver, and a degree of freedom from international harassment. We here in the US owe it to the Haitian people to help create that opening.

The Haiti Action Committee is a Bay Area based network of activists who have been supporting the Haitian struggle for democracy since 1991. Our members have extensive contacts in the grassroots movement in Haiti, and can link journalists interested in hearing an alternative view with sources both in Haiti and in the United States.

For more information contact Haiti Action Committee at (510) 483-7481 or e-mail at haitiaction@yahoo.com.

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