

Popular Democracy Under Attack in Haiti

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Haitian President Michel Martelly has managed to inspire popular opposition to his regime almost since his election in May 2011. Martelly, who came to office in a grossly unrepresentative process which excluded Lavalas, the country's most popular party, has been closely linked with figures around former dictator Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. That in itself is enough to garner distrust among the majority of Haitians. Martelly warmly welcomed the January 2011 Haitian return of Baby Doc, one of the most brutal dictators of the 20th century, after the despot's decades of luxurious exile in France.

The demobilization of the widely feared Haitian military was probably the most popular act of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was twice ousted in U.S.-backed coups which Martelly supported. Martelly's announcement in September 2011 that he intended to bring back the Haitian military was the first of many unpopular moves. Martelly also sang the praises of well-armed paramilitaries who emerged in militia camps in early 2012.

In October 2011, Martelly ordered the arrest of a sitting member of Parliament, Arnel Belizaire. The President targeted Belizaire after a verbal altercation. Two of Martelly's government ministers roughed up Port-au-Prince airport security employees after an unauthorized entry into a high-level security area during Belizaire's arrest, in a manner reminiscent of Duvalier's Ton Ton Macoute death squad. The illegal arrest and violence resulted in popular opposition which forced Martelly to let Belizaire go free.

In early February 2012, just before carnival, Martelly marched with a band in the streets and then decided to crash an international conference at the State University's Ethnology School. Denied entrance, Martelly's thugs attacked students, arresting and wounding several. University property was also damaged.

In early 2012 popular sentiment grew against the announced reinstatement of the military, along with opposition to forced evictions of earthquake survivors in refugee camps. In the community of Jalouzi, impoverished people who had been living in the neighborhood for generations were given notice to leave in order to create a more pristine view for a new luxury hotel. Opposition to bulldozing of these residents led to a number of demonstrations between May and July of 2012.

Also in July 2012, veteran activists with MOLEGHAF (Movement for Liberty and Equality by Haitians for Fraternity), an organization spearheading Port-au-Prince demonstrations, were arrested on dubious charges. One of the activists was subsequently transferred to the extremely overcrowded and inhumane national penitentiary.

Martelly compounded these insults to free speech with his behavior toward reporters. In a September 2012 report, The Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti documented "intimidation, threats, destruction of their media equipment, and retaliation by President Martelly and his administration against progressive journalists for critical reporting, which has created an atmosphere of fear and a chilling effect on journalists' freedom of expression."

Corruption scandals have bedeviled Martelly. Award-winning Dominican journalist Nuria Piera broke the story in April 2012 (later reported in Time Magazine) that Martelly was alleged to have accepted \$2.6 million in bribes during and after the 2010 election to ensure that a Dominican Republic construction company would receive contracts under his Presidency. When travelling, which he does often, Martelly's entourage receives an outrageous per diem from the Haitian government. According to Senator Moise

Jean-Charles, Martelly gets \$20,000 a day, his wife \$10,000 a day, his children \$7,500, and others in his inner circle get \$4,000 daily.

Questionable new taxes have also fed controversy. A \$1.50 tax on money transfers and a 5 cent per minute tax on phone calls to Haiti are alleged to support education, but the poor majority continue to face unaffordable school fees, and critics say no money from this tax has gone to schools. Moreover, Haitian teachers have been marching to demand back pay. Martelly's new taxes were not ratified by or presented to Haiti's Parliament, making them illegal. Critics also charge that these funds are being managed by a firm owned by Martelly and his close associate, Haitian Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe.

Combined with popular outrage at Martelly's proposed changes to the Haitian constitution and the oppressive cost of living, strikes and other actions spread throughout Haiti in September and October of this year. On September 30, the anniversary of the 1991 coup d'etat against democratically elected President Aristide, large crowds took to the streets in protest against Martelly's policies and his support of that coup. On October 10, Haiti Liberte reported, "Large crowds are now calling on President Martelly to step down, accusing his government of embezzlement, waste, corruption, nepotism, drug trafficking, lying, bluffing, and failure to keep its promises." Cap Haitien, Gonaives, Nippes, Jeremie, Les Cayes, Petit Goave, Trou-du-Nord, Fort-Liberte, Belladere, and Port-au-Prince all experienced anti-Martelly demonstrations, some swelling to thousands of protesters, in early October. One such action occurred Oct. 4 in Petit Goave, when President Martelly inaugurated 1 km of road funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Martelly's security guards clubbed protestors, burned motorcycles, and fired tear gas which killed an octogenarian Haitian.

More recently, in reaction to the government's lackluster aid after widespread damage from Hurricane Sandy, activists in Grand Goave barricaded roads to show their outrage. The Movement for Liberty and Equality by Haitians for Fraternity has been holding weekly demonstrations for social justice in front of the Ministry of Social Affairs. On Thursday Nov.8, that group joined four other grassroots organizations (Platform de Employees des Entreprises Publique, Fanm Geto Leve, Rezistans Neg Geto, and Debats Jeunes) in staging a mass protest against the Martelly government. The demonstration brought thousands into the streets of Port-au-Prince. Protestors demanded an end to waste and corruption, rehiring of public employees sacked through privatization of state run enterprises, and "aba gran gou woz" or "down with pink hunger" — pink being the color of Martelly's political party, hunger being the chronic state of Haiti's masses. The protesters united in marching against the entire neoliberal agenda, which Haitians have been calling "the death plan" since the late 1980s.

While anti-Martelly demonstrations have rocked Haiti, right wing pressure on human rights activists has escalated.

Along with pressure on journalists, among those targeted by rightists have been Mario Joseph, Newton Saint Juste, and Andre Michel, three Haitian attorneys who have been outspoken in their defense of human rights. The Haiti Action Committee recently released an alert in support of the three embattled lawyers.

An Amnesty International alert called Joseph "a prominent human rights lawyer who is involved in sensitive judicial cases such as proceedings against former dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier, complaints against the UN for their alleged involvement in spreading the cholera epidemic in Haiti, and cases of forced evictions of people made homeless after the earthquake." The Amnesty report continues, "As head of the International Lawyers Office (Bureau des Avocats Internationaux), he addressed the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights last July, requesting to visit Haiti to investigate human rights violations."

When a Haitian judge dismissed political violence charges against Jean-Claude Duvalier on January 30, 2012, Attorney Joseph held a press conference denouncing the judge's order as legally baseless and politically motivated. After the press conference, which was attended by many journalists and widely reported in Haitian media, Joseph received regular violent threats on his telephone.

The caller never gave identifying information, and always called from lines that could not be traced. The caller said "we are going to kill you," "we are going to put a bullet in you," "we are going to burn down the BAI office," or similar threats.

Joseph is now the leading lawyer for victims in the prosecution of Duvalier. The Duvalier regime killed or imprisoned tens of thousands of political opponents, while stealing hundreds of millions of dollars designated for development of Haiti's infrastructure and economy. When Duvalier returned to Haiti in January 2011, Joseph began representing victims of Duvalier's bloody regime and working with international human rights groups to develop international support for the prosecution.

Duvalier still has many supporters in Haiti, some of whom are armed and have a history of killing political opponents. Many Duvalier victims contacted by Joseph and his colleagues, even some living in the U.S., refuse to testify out of fear of retaliation. In September, a group of the former dictator's supporters and lawyers closed down a press conference in Port-au-Prince, where Joseph's clients and other Duvalier victims were scheduled to speak in support of an Amnesty International report calling for Duvalier's prosecution.

Saint Juste and Michel are, with Joseph, among the most outspoken critics of the Martelly administration. They have also been targets of death threats at their homes and offices.

On October 17, Michel, representing 77 grassroots organizations, wrote to the U.N. peacekeeping head, Mariano Fernandez, denouncing the presence of the UN mission in Haiti. The letter read that the 1987 Constitution has been put on hold "because the presence of UN troops is a hindrance to its application."

Michel and Saint Juste recently traveled to Washington to describe the situation in Haiti to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The two lawyers also met with human rights organizations, members of Congress and the State Department on the issue of corruption in the presidential family. Together with American lawyers, they plan to initiate prosecutions for money laundering against Martelly's family.

Saint Juste and Michel have been key figures in attacking alleged schemes by which Martelly set up his wife and son as head of projects syphoning off large amounts of state monies, and which the Haitian senate has no jurisdiction over. St Juste has sued the Martelly family, saying they are wasting government money without any accountability.

Pierre Labossiere of the Haiti Action Committee told me, "Our sisters and brothers in Haiti need international solidarity as they stand up to continued attacks on popular democracy. The Martelly regime has shown what it is about, and, as the Occupy Movement would put it, the 99% in Haiti have had enough of the 1% elites around Martelly." Labossiere urged concerned readers to stay in touch via www.haitisolidarity.net.

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