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Haiti's double bind

It's not just the state which is failing, but an international community that preaches democracy while financing a corrupt elite

Two aircraft carriers in the Caribbean Sea, a media circus, and a dramatic speech by then US president Bill Clinton – that was how, back in 1994, operation 'Uphold Democracy' in Haiti began. It returned the democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to office after he had been deposed by a military junta three years earlier. Like Afghanistan and Iraq, Haiti was one of the many examples of US interventionism justified by the mission to establish or protect democracy. 'Now, three decades, ten international missions, and 30 billion US dollars later, Haiti holds the world record in failure,' wrote the former Organisation of American States (OAS) envoy, Ricardo Seitenfus, in an article for the Haitian newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*.

It's hard to dispute it: Haiti is still suffering from a lack of democracy, stability, and development. In early 2021, four years after the last UN peacekeepers left, the country's capital Port-au-Prince is once again the centre of unrest, as barricades burn again – this time, because of yet another of the endemic state crises.

The causes are, from a European perspective, hard to understand. It's not a right-vs-left issue, for instance: Aristide was a left-leaning priest and poverty activist on election, but ended up as a corrupt dictator propped up by bloodthirsty militiamen. It's also not just a question of colonial guilt, either: although there is plenty of historical justification for seeking the culprits in the French as one-time colonisers (and racist opponents of Haiti as the first independent black republic) or in modern US imperialism and the forces of capitalism, they are not, by themselves, enough to explain the situation now.

Seen from outside, Haiti can look like a mesh of wires which, every time someone tries to untangle it, only gets even more tangled up. The primary reason is that, behind the façade of its manifold institutional conflicts, there lies a complex set of deeper seated power struggles within a half-criminal state run by predatory clans. In view of the country's

dysfunctional political structures, the international community has, in some areas, replaced the state – and this entangles it in the complex power nodes, robbing it of its credibility as a neutral arbiter and complicating matters even further.

Pressure from the streets

Without entering too much into these complexities, we can say that the current crisis has come about as follows. In 2017, President Jovenel Moïse was sworn in after a 2016 election which was contested and repeated following intervention from the international community, leading to a year-long delay in him taking office. He has since gone on to reconstitute the army, increase fuel prices, and doc the power of the country's Court of Auditors after it revealed that he had embezzled funds from international aid following the devastating 2010 earthquake. Never popular, the preferred successor of his singing predecessor Michel Martelly had secured support from the country's invisible elite and the US embassy, winning the election with the votes of 18 per cent of the general population with an overall turnout of 25 per cent). Known as the 'Banana King', businessman Moïse has therefore been the target of street protests since the day he was sworn in, with only the pandemic to take the pressure off for a short period.

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Now, the pressure on him is mounting again as a loose opposition coalition of unions, politicians, judges, intellectuals, and youth activists has responded to a ruling by the Superior Court of Justice that Moïse's term of office had come to an end on 7 February: the judges count the five years of his term from 2016, when an interim president was in office pending the repetition of the election. The opposition agreed on the eldest of the Superior Court's judges, Joseph Mécène Jean-Louis, as provisional president, who has since disappeared entirely from the public eye, presumably out of fear that he will be arrested. There is now no clear path forward, with disagreement over whether to bring forward the next presidential election or to set up a constitutional council.

From his residence in Kenscoff, high up in the cool mountains above Port-au-Prince, Moïse has roundly rejected both options, speaking in a video address of an 'attempted coup' by a group

of 'oligarchs' and having those he considers the conspirators arrested. He underlined his intention to stay in office until February 2022, promising that elections will be held in September. The international community is in favour; the opposition does not believe a word – after all, Moïse never held the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2019, and has been ruling without the assembly by decree for a year now. Another reason the opposition is sceptical is the president's stated aim of reforming the constitution prior to the election in order to strengthen the role of the president and reintroduce conscription; the latter is a particularly delicate topic in a country which remembers all too well the horrors of military dictatorship.

US interests in Haiti

Why is the international community supporting Moïse, here? There are two main reasons. Firstly, he does not challenge US foreign policy interests. This is important because Haiti has become an unofficial US protectorate, a *de facto* status made clear by an anecdote from the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake.

With the airport severely damaged, especially its control tower, a team was dispatched to repair it by the UN mission (MINUSTAH). Orders came from the US to open it for the US Air Force, which promptly took control of it, but to keep it closed to flights from socialist Venezuela. The latter were ready to land before the Americans, yet found themselves forced to unload their aid supplies in the neighbouring Dominican Republic. Later, under pressure from President Donald Trump, Moïse turned against Haiti's formerly close ally (and major creditor) Venezuela and supported plans to turn the country into a sweatshop for US fashion labels.

Secondly, the international community is banking on Moise for fear of anarchy. With the opposition disunited, there is no clear leader in view who represents a prospect of stability and governability. Haiti's political system is no stranger to crises and has managed to reach a precarious equilibrium that could, at any point, come crashing down.

Haiti's dysfunctional political culture

What has become clear is that constitutional blueprints from elsewhere in the world don't work in Haiti. The semi-presidential system copied from France, for instance, was supposed to keep authoritarian presidents in check, submitting them to parliamentary consent by an assembly that nominates a prime minister. The result has, however, proved to be a lasting paralysis in the country's institutions due to a lack of political parties, depriving the president of a majority and keeping the terms of Haitian prime ministers short.

As such, it's not just Moïse that Haitians are angry with. Their anger is mixed with bitter disappointment at the position of the international community.

This points us towards the real core of Haiti's woes: the country has a political culture that does not see state institutions and other power centres as checks and balances moderating between competing interests, but simply as prizes to be taken. There is no emphasis on consensus, no willingness to negotiate: everyone is in the game to annihilate his opponents or at least block their path to power in order to claim it for himself and then share out the booty with his supporters. 'If you don't join in, they think you're a spoilsport,' was the way a former interior minister, Paul-Gustave Magloire, once put it to me.

This form of rampant power-politics also doesn't shy away from violence. There are historical grounds for this mentality. Haiti is a young nation born of a slave-state into which the French colonial rulers deliberately brought people taken from differing regions and without common languages or culture in order to make communication difficult and, so the logic, to prevent slave rebellions.

The young are questioning the status quo

Thus far, these dysfunctional power systems have hindered the emergence of a broad societal consensus, with fundamental questions such as how the country should seek to structure its economy or what the role of the state and that of the market should be remaining undiscussed.

The only people who have a clear plan for the future are those in the business elite – and their plan does not foresee any changes to the privileges they enjoy nor to the lack of educational provision, healthcare,

and infrastructure from which the population at large is suffering. And when it comes to instrumentalising the international community, this elite has a well-developed skillset, with the liberalisation in trade between Haiti and the US in the 1980s and 1990s as a notable example: conducted in line with the neoliberal economic thinking prevalent at the time, the effect of the opening of the markets was to ruin Haitian farmers and leave the population dependent on food imports from the US.

As such, it's not just Moïse that Haitians are angry with. Their anger is mixed with bitter disappointment at the position of the international community: 'They preach democracy and development while financing and propping up a corrupt elite whose actions contravene these goals,' says Jean-Ronald Joseph, for instance, Professor of Political Science at the Quisqueya University in Port-au-Prince.

The demonstrators currently out on the streets calling for a constitutional assembly are by and large young people who want a new societal consensus. Moreover, they are getting support from their contacts abroad: although the brain-drain has been a constant problem in Haiti (three quarters of Haitians with degrees emigrate), in today's globalised world, leavers no longer lose touch with their roots. Many return on frequent visits, invest in the country, and are politically active. It is the country's young who are questioning the status quo of the failed state that is Haiti. The international community should start listening to them and rethink its strategy.



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