

The Heritage Foundation **Backgrounder**

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DEMOCRACY A CASUALTY OF ARISTIDE'S BID FOR POWER

(Updating *Executive Memorandum* No. 394, "Avoiding the U.N. Trap in Haiti," October 3, 1994; *Executive Memorandum* No. 391, "Now Comes the Hard Part: The U.S. Occupation of Haiti," September 20, 1994; *Backgrounder Update* No. 231, "After Invading Haiti, Then What, Mr. President?" July 29, 1994.)

While U.S. occupation authorities police the country, pick up the trash, and foster general good will, Haiti's President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, has quietly paved the way for one-man rule by decree. This has taken place despite the compact to "restore democracy" between Aristide and President Clinton and despite the strict internal control exercised over Haiti since September by the U.S. military. In fact, the U.S. occupation and declared support for Aristide have provided the opportunity for his radical Marxist *Lavalas* ("flood" or revolutionary tide) movement to dominate local Haitian politics. In short, the United States is on the verge of tacitly providing cover for another Haitian dictatorship, threatening an eventual breakdown in the internal order established by U.S. troops since their occupation nearly six months ago.

Aristide has taken clever advantage of his American tutelage. In the first 100 days since his return as president, he has made public overtures to human rights groups and private business, thereby placating the Clinton Administration and the U.S. media.¹ In the meantime, he has moved behind the scenes to tighten his authority over politics, the courts, and the military, all of which he has done illegally and in concert with the *Lavalas* movement. With these actions, Aristide has moved Haiti back into one-party rule, the exact opposite of his original promises and U.S. intentions.

In retrospect, none of President Aristide's actions should have been surprising. The seven months of his first tenure as president and his public statements revealed an antidemocratic bias,² which puts him in good company with the elected despots who preceded him in office. As he consolidates his power and marginalizes the opposition, Aristide is following a classic Haitian model established by most of his predecessors. Like Aristide, they won open elections by large majorities, promised democratic reforms, and—without exception—reverted to a dictatorship as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Aristide's Stranglehold on Haitian Politics. The latest event in Aristide's consolidation of power occurred on February 4, when the elected parliament's term expired. After Aristide had returned to Haiti, an agreement was made that parliament would be dissolved on that date. Local and new parliamentary elec-

1 See, for example, Douglas Farah, "Conciliatory Aristide Courts Haiti's Business Community to Revive Economy," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 1994, p. A39; Larry Rohter, "Haiti's Capital Throbs With New Life," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1994, p. A16; "Premier Sees Rosy Future for Haiti," *The Washington Times*, February 2, 1995, p. A15.

2 Lawrence T. Di Rita, "Aristide in His Own Words," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 37, September 16, 1994.

tions also were to be held by December 1994. Although elections were not held, parliament was dissolved anyway, leaving Haiti in a political vacuum and Aristide ruling by virtual decree. The electoral process has been postponed repeatedly; elections now are scheduled for June 4, six months overdue.

Other undemocratic acts by Aristide include:

- X **Packing** the nine-member electoral commission and naming two close allies, Anselme Remy and Marie Laurence Jocelyn Lassegue, as president and secretary, respectively. Official protests by opposition parties have been ignored.
- X **Forcing the resignation** of the Minister of Justice, Ernst Malebranche, who had protested Aristide's unconstitutional replacement of life-term judges with hand-picked *Lavalas* protégés.
- X **Replacing** Justice Minister Malebranche with a political ally and the packing of the Supreme Court with *Lavalas* members.
- X **Circumventing** the 1987 Haitian constitution by the dismissal of all army officers above the rank of major and reduction of the army from 7,000 to 1,500 men. The ranking officer is now Major Dany Toussaint, a long-time Aristide security guard and confidant.
- X **Creating** an interim public security force composed of hundreds of Aristide allies, many with a history of human rights violations. U.S. pressure subsequently forced Aristide to dismiss these men, but only after prolonged and intense negotiations.
- X **Protracted and ongoing governmental intimidation** against non-Aristide candidates, including beatings, organized demonstrations, and personal harassment. Aristide has urged neighborhood vigilantes ("brigades de vigilance") to demonstrate in support of *Lavalas*. According to one report from the city of Limbe, for example, armed *Lavalas* thugs have erupted in a wave of violence.
- X **Using state-controlled press organs** for government propaganda, with opposition groups given little chance of airing their views in Haiti.³

The U.S. Role: Stop the Drift Toward Dictatorship

Aristide's undemocratic acts have come under the watchful eye of U.S. occupation authorities. Once these actions become better known, the Clinton claim of "restoring" democracy to Haiti can no longer be taken seriously. The Administration and Congress must take immediate steps to halt the erosion of U.S. credibility in Haiti and to prevent trapping U.S. troops in the middle of an anarchic breakdown of authority. Thus:

- ✓ The Clinton Administration should suspend the \$207 million in economic aid and the \$11.2 million in electoral aid for 1995 until Aristide establishes a more balanced and representative electoral commission and judiciary.
- ✓ Congress should condition additional financial support for the U.S. military force in Haiti on establishment of a fair and balanced political process before the local and parliamentary elections.
- ✓ Congress and the Administration should agree on the establishment of a bipartisan observer mission to Haiti. If the Administration resists, the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader should designate their own observer mission.

3 Larry Rohter, "Haitian TV Reporters Strike Over Official Meddling," *The New York Times*, January 23, 1995, p. A3.

- ✓ Congress and the Administration should insist that the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute send observers to oversee the upcoming local and parliamentary elections in Haiti.⁴ If the elections are judged unfair, U.S. forces should be withdrawn from the U.N. . . peacekeeping operation that is expected to begin in April.

Conclusion

With 6,000 troops still in Haiti, the U.S. has a stake in resisting Aristide's efforts to ride roughshod over democracy in his bid to consolidate power. The cycle of despotism which has existed throughout Haiti's past is reappearing in President Aristide's manipulation of existing institutions and processes for his personal gain. If he succeeds in this bid for total control, it will negate all the effort and expense of the U.S. occupation. More important, an Aristide dictatorship in Haiti will extinguish permanently any remaining hope that Haiti's 200-year cycle of tyranny and despotism can finally be ended.

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⁴ Both organizations were established under the National Endowment for Democracy to assist in the spread of democracy overseas.

