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Haiti, democratic uprising, 1980s–1991

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Following the overthrow of the dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier early in 1986, a democratic rebellion unfolded in Haiti that opposed the restoration attempts by the elite class of the Duvalier era. In the presidential election at the end of 1990, the strength of this democratic movement found expression through the clear victory – despite the restorative attempts within Haiti and by the US – of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the candidate of the progressive social movements. After seven months in office, a violent coup forced the president into exile. The democratic movement was then subjected to years of persecution.

The Overthrow of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986

The Dictatorship of the Duvalier Family

The rule of the Duvalier family over Haiti lasted nearly 30 years. It began with the election of Jean-Claude's father, François Duvalier, to the office of president in 1957. Formerly a country doctor, François Duvalier had the support of the Army when he ran for president; after his election, however, he quickly consolidated his power by purging potential opponents within the military and by creating, beginning in 1959, the *Volontés de la Sécurité Nationale* (VSN) (the Free Corps for the National Security), a separate armed apparatus for repression. In 1964 Duvalier named himself "president for life" and initiated a bizarre personality cult.

The VSN was recruited primarily from the lumpenproletariat of the capital city, Port-au-Prince, and grew to a strength of 10,000 men and women. The VSN took over the key positions within the police and secret services. Its goal was to crush all opposition before it could begin. Feared among the populace as the *tontons macoutes* ("cannibal uncles"), the VSN embodied state terror under Duvalier. Between 30,000 and 50,000 were killed by the regime (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1987).

A member of the Ethnographic Institute, François Duvalier built his power base with the support of the black middle and upper classes. His rule was ideologically nourished by a form of black nationalism (*noirisme haïtien*) that was directed against the mulatto bourgeoisie and presented as a popular movement drawing on the cult of voodoo. To secure his rule, Duvalier instrumentalized longstanding social and economic conflicts between the black and mulatto populations. In addition to obtaining the support of the black middle and upper classes and of the urban lumpenproletariat, he secured the support of the Levantine merchant class, which competed against the mulatto bourgeoisie for economic influence. Within this constellation, Duvalier built up a malevolent and intimidating base of political and economic power that depended upon favoritism and the systematic appropriation of government revenues derived from state enterprises as well as from supposedly charitable foundations.

The rule of François Duvalier was characterized not only by corruption and terror, but also by economic collapse and social exclusion. Per capita income fell annually by an average of 1.4 percent. Infrastructural and social development fell well below that of other Latin American countries.

After the death of François Duvalier ("Papa Doc") in 1971, the presidency was transferred to his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc"). He transformed the political base of the family's domination and entered into a *pacte de domination* (Dupuy 1997, 2007) with the mulatto elite, consolidated through his 1980 marriage to Michèle Bennett, of the mulatto bourgeoisie. Under Jean-Claude Duvalier, the Army was strengthened both in manpower and in logistics, and a new unit to suppress rebellion was created. In contrast to his father, who had ruled as an autocrat by decree, Jean-Claude Duvalier built his rule upon a technocratic state apparatus and upon economic incentives to foreign investors as well as the participation of the mulatto bourgeoisie. However, to a large extent he lost the support of the black middle class.

The son further developed the kleptocratic system of the father. The Duvaliers absconded with a total of between 600 and 900 million US dollars (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1987), including 120 million US dollars diverted from the state treasury between January 1983 and February 1986, of which 86 million was transferred into foreign bank accounts.

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The Forces and Movements in Opposition to the Dictatorship

That the Duvalier system stood on clay feet, despite repression and favoritism, became apparent when the opposition dared to come increasingly into the open in the 1980s. The rejection of Duvalier by large sectors of the Church, along with the spread of grassroots Catholic parish organizations (*Ti Legliz* = "small churches"), was decisive. The visit of the pope in March of 1983 and his call "*Fòk sa chanje*" ("things must change") encouraged the forces within the Catholic Church of Haiti that wanted to bring about change.

From 1985 on, the opposition movement against Duvalier grew ever stronger. Demonstrations were organized and communications networks (radio projects and so on) created around the demand for *déchoukaj* – a "clearing," meaning the complete eradication of the Duvalier system. The youth movement played an important role both within and outside the Catholic Church. Student groups were founded in the universities. The Youth Council that was held in Jérémie from April 8 to 14, 1985, complained in its "Manifesto of Youth" of bad living conditions, repression, and corruption and demanded freedom of speech, agrarian reform, and investment in health care and education. During a demonstration in Gonaïves in November 1985 in which primarily young people took part, the Army and *tontons macoutes* killed three students. As a result, the country became increasingly restless, and the protests grew.

The Role of Foreign Countries

Although the US discontinued humanitarian support for Haiti from 1963 to 1969, the US government supported – against the backdrop of the Cuban Revolution – the regime of Duvalier as a bulwark against communism. After the change in leadership from Papa Doc to Baby Doc, the US substantially increased its support.

The European Union (EU) and multilateral banks were also strong contributors. During a brief phase under US President Carter, support was conditioned upon concessions in the arenas of political and human rights. But beginning in 1980, under President Reagan, the pressure on the Haitian regime was again reduced, and the repression of the Haitian opposition was increased via arbitrary arrests, deportations, and the closing of radio stations.

Because of the widening democratic movement in Haiti, the US government was finally forced to withdraw support from the Duvalier regime so as not to lose control over the political developments in Haiti and so as to prevent further radicalization. On February 7, 1986, the US finally convinced the Duvalier government to step down; Duvalier was then flown to France rather than being brought to justice, as the opposition had demanded.

The Difficult Transition to Democracy

After the flight of Duvalier, the National Government Council (*Conseil National de Gouvernement*, CNG) took over the government. The CNG consisted of four military and two civilian members under the leadership of General Henri Namphy and was to organize free elections and to prepare the way for a democratic society.

The end of the dictatorship set into motion a grand democratic reform movement that presented itself in a great multiplicity of organizations. Ever more political parties, professional associations, trade unions, human rights organizations, youth groups, women's groups, farmers' groups, neighborhood and community committees, grassroots initiatives, and media (radio and newspapers) sprang up in all regions of the country, thereby bringing political discourse well beyond the capital city of Port-au-Prince for the first time. Within the democratic camp, there were two main tendencies. The enlightened sectors of the bourgeoisie and of the middle class had ended their alliance with Duvalier and his supporters and were pushing for civil liberties and parliamentarian democracy. The democratic movement "from below" was articulating more extensive demands for complete democratic, economic, and social participation.

On the other hand, the restorative tendencies in the CNG soon became evident. Many functionaries and elites of the Duvalier regime were largely unscathed by the change and remained part of the government and administrative apparatus. The *tontons macoutes* were not held accountable, but instead became members of the Army or fled into exile with the help of the Army. With their privileged role threatened by the democratic rebellion, the *tontons macoutes* and the Army – which for decades had been rivals – now formed an alliance that was supported by the US government and that was joined by parts of the Church hierarchy. On February 9, 1986, the

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Bishop of Cap-Haïtien, François Gayot, explained the "common-sense" reasons for this alliance: "It is time to reconcile. The danger to guard against from now on is Communism!" (cited in Aristide 1992).

The Struggle Against Neo-Duvalierist Restoration

The Military Government of General Namphy

In the course of the year it became ever clearer that the military and the neo-Duvalierists who dominated the CNG did not want to give up control of the country. Those whose courageous protest had brought about the end of the dictatorship saw themselves confronted with a "Duvalierism without Duvalier." The democratic movements felt cheated of their success by the CNG. The latter rejected the aspirations of the opposition with extreme and increasing rigidity. As a result, only 20 percent of those entitled to vote participated in the election of the Constitutional Assembly of October 19, 1986. In March and April 1986, several demonstrators had already been killed in confrontations with the Army.

In order to bring under control the electoral process that was to commence with a presidential election in November 1987, the CNG in June of 1987 issued a decree to limit the independence, power, and authority of the independent electoral commission (*Conseil Electoral Provisoire*, CEP); the CEP had been formed on May 15, comprising representatives of civil society (the churches and human rights organizations) and of the executive and legislative branches of government. Furthermore, the civilian oversight of the military was to be revoked. At the end of June and the beginning of July 1987, church groups, unions, and political parties complained about the reduction of the authority of the CEP. The Army killed at least 25 people; however, finally the decree was withdrawn. Nevertheless the intimidation of the CEP by the *tontons macoutes* increased. The CNG altogether refused to provide the CEP with the necessary protection for the electoral process.

The conflicts grew so extreme that the bourgeoisie saw its political, social, and economic privileges threatened. On July 23, 1987, in Jean-Rabel in the northwest, as many as 300 small farmers were killed, after they had made demands for land reform through their organization *Tèt Ansanm*, in a massacre instigated by large landowners.

The threat to the democratic movement by the restorative elements necessitated increased consolidation and organization by the opposition. In January 1987, a broad array of social democratic organizations founded the KONAKOM (*Komité Nasyonal Kongrè Oganisasyon Démokratik*), which would henceforth have important influence in the political discussions and which would serve as a counterweight to the neo-Duvalierists. In August 1987, more than 50 organizations within the KONAKOM founded a political platform named FNC (*Front National de Concertation*), in order to take part in the electoral process to come and, by this means, take over the power from the neo-Duvalierists. The FNC named the human rights activist Gérard Gourgue as its presidential candidate. Further political alliances were formed, primarily within the moderate bourgeois spectrum, including the ANDP (*Alliance Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès*), launched by Marc Bazin, who was formerly a government minister under Duvalier and an official of the United Nations as well as of the World Bank.

But on election day, Sunday, November 29, 1987, the fledgling democracy was drenched in blood. The presidential election that was to have taken place on this day had to be abruptly canceled after the *tontons macoutes* massacred the voters at the polls. The presidential candidates withdrew their candidacies. The election was nevertheless repeated as "farce" on January 17, 1988. But then, only a small number of voters participated, resulting in the election of the Christian Democrat Leslie Manigat as president. His cabinet stood in a continuum with the CNG, especially in the person of the defense minister, General Williams Regala, who had previously been a member of the CNG and who was accused of having been involved in the massacre of November 29, 1987.

But on June 20, 1988, Manigat was removed from office, and General Namphy himself took power again. He was strongly supported by the Duvalierist hardliners and the former *tontons macoutes* in the Army. The terror against the democratic movement increased again and reached a new climax in the massacre of September 11, 1988, when approximately 100 *tontons macoutes* forced their way into the Jean-Bosco Church in the north of Port-au-Prince –

where the Catholic priest and grassroots activist Jean-Bertrand Aristide was preaching – and killed 13 people.

The Putsch Government of Avril and the Transition to Democracy

Namphy was, however, increasingly confronted with rivals within the Army. On September 17, 1988, there was a military putsch by General Prosper Avril, who immediately began to purge the *macoutes* from the upper ranks of the Army. And in 1989, against the backdrop of the end of the East–West confrontation, international pressure grew to clear a way for a transition to democracy. The US government and, increasingly, the Haitian bourgeoisie calculated that the more quickly this transition could be made, the more difficult it would be for the forces of the left to organize themselves – and the more likely it would be that the forces of the moderate right could prevail in an election.

Avril saw himself increasingly isolated from the US, from the Church, and from the bourgeoisie. Like his predecessor, he turned to the neo-Duvalierists and increased the repression until, finally, he received the telephone call of the US ambassador in Port-au-Prince, who demanded that he resign (Dupuy 1997, 2007). General Avril left the country on March 12, 1990.

A Supreme Court judge, Eartha Pascal-Trouillot, was appointed temporary president. She was provided with a provisional council, on which 11 political parties were represented. Despite the conflict between the president and the council, and despite the attempts of the Duvalierists to make use of this conflict in order to delay the process of democratization, preparations were made for the first free elections in more than 30 years, to be held on December 16, 1990.

The Grassroots Churches and the Rise of Jean-Bertrand Aristide

The grassroots movement in the Catholic parishes had created the fundamental conditions for the overthrow of Duvalier and was also the backbone of the movement against neo-Duvalierist restoration. Some 2,000 grassroots parish organizations (*Ti Legliz*) existed in Haiti at this time. They arose, beginning in the 1970s, under the influence of Latin American liberation theology. The emphasis of their work in the parishes was popular education (*éducation populaire*) and the articulation of the needs and demands of the poor. The degree of support from the official Church varied. For example, while Bishop Romélus in Jérémie actively supported the grassroots parish organizations as well as the resistance against Duvalier and the military regime, Archbishop Ligondé in Port-au-Prince remained on the side of the Duvalierists to the end.

The priest and soon-to-be president Jean-Bertrand Aristide rose quickly, beginning in 1985, to become a leading figure in this grassroots movement. Bishop Romélus fostered his rise, but others in the Church hierarchy vigorously opposed him.

Born on July 15, 1953, in Port-Salut in a small house in the mountains of the southern peninsula, the son of a farmer, Aristide moved to Port-au-Prince soon after the death of his father, but he did not lose contact with his rural homeland. He went to a school run by the Salesian Society (a Roman Catholic religious order originally known as the Society of St. Francis de Sales) and in 1966 entered the seminary in Cap-Haïtien. His work towards a degree in theology and psychology included study abroad, for example in Israel and in Greece. In 1982, he was ordained as a priest. He had always regarded the Catholic Church in Haiti critically, and upon returning from doctoral studies in Canada, he took over the parish of Saint-Jean Bosco in a slum on the northern edge of Port-au-Prince on January 5, 1985. His parish would serve him as a base for his political work against the military government and against the outrageous social injustices in his country.

Aristide quickly gained in popularity among the poor, but he also made powerful enemies. Several assassination attempts were made upon him and his supporters. On August 23, 1987, on the way back from a ceremony commemorating the victims of Jean-Rabel, his convoy was attacked in Pont Sondé near Saint Marc. As noted above, on September 11, 1988, *macoutes* forced themselves into his church and killed several worshippers. In December 1988, Aristide was expelled from the Salesian Society because of his political engagement.

His popularity did not suffer. Numerous activists in the democratic mass movement urged Aristide, the priest, to get into politics and run for president in the election scheduled for December 16, 1990. Aristide finally agreed to run

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and was nominated by the FNCD (*Front National pour le Changement et la Démocratie*), a coalition of leftwing political parties founded in 1990. However, Aristide did not regard himself as the candidate of any political party, nor of a coalition of parties. He had a low opinion of the political effectiveness of political parties, that is to say, he had no confidence that they could achieve any significant influence that would extend beyond small academic circles (Aristide 1992, 1994).

The numerous grassroots organizations seeking democratic change from below joined together in a mass movement, *Lavalas* (Creole for "flash flood") to support him in the election campaign. The candidacy of the priest of the poor, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, brought forth a surge of enthusiasm. Accordingly, there was a high level of participation in the election of December 16, 1990. Long lines formed at the polls. For the first time in the history of the country, this was an election in which the hopes and aspirations of the masses found expression. The enthusiasm culminated in mass gatherings in the capital city. The result left no room for doubt: over 67 percent voted for Aristide, while only 14 percent voted for Marc Bazin, whose candidacy was supported by the US government and by Haitian businessmen. The Church hierarchy immediately sought a confrontation: Archbishop Ligondé turned his New Year's sermon into a harangue against Aristide.

Aristide was sworn into office on February 7, 1991. On January 6, 1991, the neo-Duvalierists had already tried to prevent this through a putsch. Roger Lafontant, previously interior minister under Duvalier, as well as the ringleader of the *tontons macoutes*, stormed the presidential palace with some militias and declared the presidential election void. He was supported neither by the Army's leadership nor by the US government. An authentic national uprising came to the defense of the president. Lafontant had to concede and was arrested; Archbishop Ligondé was able to escape.

The Putsch of September 1991

On the night of September 29, however, a second putsch was carried out by the Army leadership and was supported by the Haitian bourgeoisie. General Raoul Cédras, whom Aristide had himself named Chief of the General Staff and then Chief Commander of the Army, was the leader of the putschists. Soldiers surrounded Aristide's residence and the presidential palace and stood guard throughout the city to prevent the people from again rising to defend Aristide. The putschists were supported by *tontons macoutes* who had returned from the Dominican Republic. Hundreds of *Lavalas* members were killed. Radio stations were occupied or destroyed. As a result of diplomatic pressure, Aristide was flown out of the country and thereafter spent three years in exile in the US.

On October 7, 1991, the parliament named, under pressure, a new president (Joseph Nérette; Jean-Jacques Honorat was named prime minister). The bourgeoisie applauded the coup. The resistance of the enlightened political class was weak and to some extent half-hearted. In contrast, the social movements resisted fiercely and with great sacrifice. In the following three years under the putsch government, *Lavalas* suffered massive casualties and was never able to recover from these traumatic experiences.

SEE ALSO: Aristide, Jean-Bertrand (b. 1953); Haiti, Foreign-Led Insurgency, 2004; Haiti, Protest and Rebellion, 19th Century; Haiti, Protest and Rebellion, 20th Century; Haiti, Resistance to US Occupation; Haiti, Revolutionary Revolts, 1790s; Haiti, Revolutionary Struggles; Haiti, Saint-Domingue Revolution, 1789–1804, Aftermath; Haiti, Saint-Domingue and Revolutionary France; Haitian Revolution and Independence, 1801–1804

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