

***Haiti — the significance of the island
state for Africa and the West***

by
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Competing perceptions of Haiti

Haiti has captured the imagination of the world in recent times, but not because it has strategic natural resources or particular geo-strategic importance. Haiti's significance lies in what it represents to those in both the developing and developed world. The tiny impoverished island nation has become at once both a symbol and a threat, depending on the vantage point.

To the world's superpower, the existence of a populist leader in its backyard, who spent much of the 1980s preaching liberation theology, and was democratically elected in 1990 on a social welfarist platform, was never palatable. Jean Bertrand Aristide never conformed to the mould of the 'pliant client' that could be easily dominated and influenced by its powerful Northern neighbour. The same right-wing Republicans who backed the military *coup* that ousted Aristide from power in 1990, have returned to US policy making circles under George Bush Junior, and since entering office in 2001, have pursued policies to once again topple Aristide. Their interest in Haiti is largely symbolic, with conservatives wanting to prevent another Fidel Castro from defying the US and pursuing independent policies that could be exported to other countries or protectorates in the Caribbean.

To other former colonial powers in the Western world, Haiti represents something much more deeply symbolic. As the oldest black independent Republic in 2004, Haiti celebrated 200 years of liberation from French colonial rule. Out of the ravages of slavery and exploitation, the poorly armed slaves of what is today Haiti, defeated what was in 1804 one of the most formidable forces in the world – the army of Napoleon Bonaparte. The defiance, resilience, and victory of former slaves was a humiliation for the forces of colonialism that dominated the region, and repeated attempts were made in the first half of the nineteenth century to re-conquer Haiti. Haiti not only successfully defended its sovereignty, but supported other independence movements in the immediate region, and in Latin America. Haiti also assisted in the liberation of the other half of its island, which subsequently became the Dominican Republic.

France's defeat is an historical event that it has had difficulty coming to terms with, and as a result, attempts were made to disrupt Haiti's centennial celebrations in 1904, and fierce criticism was levelled at the landmark 200 year celebrations this year. During his tenure in office, Aristide stood up to Haiti's former colonial masters, making calls for reparations from slavery. This is in stark contrast to his predecessors who capitulated to French pressure and paid 150 million francs to France as compensation for the economic losses of French colonialists following liberation. Aristide was increasingly seen as an unwanted challenge to France, and his independence a threat to France's control over other islands in the region. For cultural and symbolic reasons, France would like to maintain control of islands in the immediate neighbourhood such as Martinique and Guadeloupe. The fear existed that Aristide might try to export his revolutionary ideas to the broader region and challenge the reality of the Caribbean neocolonial state.

For Africa, Haiti's liberation struggle is deeply significant, and many have considered its attempts laudable to break away from engaging with Europe and North America and forge a new relationship with Africa. The new African

Union (AU) has attempted to embrace the impoverished nation as part of the African diaspora, and perceived it as a country facing many of the same challenges as African countries themselves. Discussions have been under way regarding the possibility of Haiti being accorded observer status at the AU. As the populist priest who came to power seeking to bring about the economic upliftment and empowerment of the people of Haiti, Aristide's vision resonated with the architects of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, who envision much of the same for the African continent. Acknowledging Haiti's governance and human rights challenges, South Africa's objective was to assist Aristide and his Government of National Unity to move towards a more accountable and transparent governance system.

Regime change in Haiti

While Haiti may not have been publicly identified as one of the targets for regime change in the US's neo-conservative vision of the new world order, it is clear that elements within the Bush administration were intent on removing Aristide from power ever since their rise to power. Numerous attacks on Aristide and his government were levied by the neo-conservatives in the US administration, and Aristide concluded early on that President Bush would try to 'wreck his Presidency'. The US used its dominance of the Organisation of American States (OAS) to declare Haiti's 2000 elections fraudulent, and insist that at least 10 senate seats won by Aristide candidates should go to a second round of voting. While some irregularities are likely to have occurred, Aristide had nevertheless won the democratic elections by a landslide – something that President Bush could not have said about his own party's performance in the US elections.

Despite Aristide's efforts to placate the opposition and share power with the 15 party opposition alliance known as the Democratic Convergence, the US still pressured the international financial institutions and aid agencies to suspend their financial assistance to Haiti. The IMF, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and the OAS did precisely that on US instructions. The right-wing policy makers in the Bush administration knew that such a comprehensive suspension of aid would throw the country into socioeconomic collapse, and make it difficult for Aristide's government to deliver on its promises to the Haitian electorate.

To add to the paralysis brought on by a suspension of aid, Haiti's Government of National Unity was a recipe for disaster. Aristide had attempted to forge a political consensus in the country by bringing together those on the left and his traditional supporters, with those from within the Democratic Convergence who had traditionally been on the right. These overtures won Aristide no friends, as those on the left accused him of betraying the cause he had fought for by working with the right wing, and those on the right continued to undermine his efforts to find a resolution to the crisis. The marriage of convenience may have been necessary for political survival, but with a cabinet filled with former Duvalierist ministers, former *coup d'etat* participants, and neoliberals, Aristide was unable to govern effectively. The Democratic Convergence is perceived to have no popular legitimacy or grassroots support by Haitians on the ground. They are merely viewed as the political elite who represent only themselves, and want to dominate for fear of being dominated.

There is much evidence to suggest that the opposition connived with its international backers, and was being manipulated to a large extent by US and European forces. Right-wing Republicans in the US funded and supported the opposition, encouraged their obstructionist tactics within Aristide's government, and indirectly contributed to Aristide's failure to govern effectively. It is no surprise that street protests ensued, as Haitians expressed their frustration that the government was failing to deliver on its promises of basic services, economic growth and stability. As was the case in many other contexts in Latin America throughout the 1970s and 1980s, elements within the US backed the right-wing opposition and militias on the streets of Haiti, fomenting disorder and ultimately anarchy. US manipulation of political dynamics on the ground, and Aristide's powerlessness to control the political environment, created conditions conducive for US intervention under the guise of trying to restore law and order in the country. With US marines on the ground, US policy-makers could force Aristide's exit from power, just as easily as the Clinton administration had intervened in 1994 and orchestrated Aristide's reinstatement as President.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell gave Aristide little chance to manoeuvre in early March 2004, calling on him to step down. With Aristide being told he would be killed if he remained in Haiti, the embattled President had little choice but to be escorted out of his own country. Aristide later accused the US of orchestrating his kidnapping and

in effect, implementing a *coup d'état* – what would be Haiti's 33rd *coup*. Given the conditions under which Aristide was forced from power – being held hostage in a plane and denied the right to know where he was being taken or being able to make contact with the outside world, he was in every sense a prisoner. The Republicans successfully saw their strategy carried out to completion, with the installment in the Presidency just days later of a long time friend of the American right, Gerard Latortue. Reminiscent of US imposed democracy in Iraq, Latortue was elected by a panel of 'wise men' who were appointed by the US to select a new President.

Latortue had lived in Miami for a number of years, and was briefly Foreign Minister after the military *coup* that overthrew Aristide in 1990. That *coup* was heavily supported by the Republican administration of George Bush Senior at the time, supplying the dictatorship with oil and other essentials. US support for the military regime had continued for three years, despite the fact that the regime was one of the most brutal of Haiti's history, presiding over the killing of approximately 5000 Haitians by death squads. Tens of thousands of Haitians ultimately sought refuge on US shores as a result, arriving in overcrowded boats, with many dying along the way. It was only as a result of the Haitian refugee crisis of 1994 that the new Democrat administration under President Clinton took the decision to reinstate Aristide in order to restore a measure of stability to the country.

Implications for Multilateralism

What some in the multilateralism camp fear the most is that part of what drove efforts for a regime change in Haiti might have actually been a dress rehearsal for regime change in other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. It has been suggested by regional analysts that US intervention at this juncture in Haiti was an attempt to measure regional as well as international public opinion towards regime change in America's 'back yard'. Given the largely muted criticism of America's handling of the Haitian crisis and the forced exit of Aristide, the hawks in the US administration are likely to become increasingly zealous in their ambitions to replicate regime change elsewhere in the region. Cuba or Venezuela could very well be targets that some neo-conservatives have in mind. It was merely two years ago that Republicans in the US administration backed the right-wing opposition to populist leader Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, causing a tide of instability to sweep the nation. Indications are that efforts to destabilise Venezuela are continuing, with links being uncovered to the American right. As Cuba confronts the reality of potential successors to Fidel Castro in the future, the Republicans might seek to have a hand in that determination as well.

This type of unilateralism is precisely what former President Nelson Mandela has referred to as 'the greatest threat to peace and security globally'. What is particularly concerning about the regime change in Haiti is that Aristide was a democratically elected President. If regime change can so easily be brought about, forcing a democratically elected President from office, this does not bode well for other democratically elected Presidents around the globe that powerful countries do not support. Such unilateral adventurism entirely circumvents multilateral bodies established precisely to restrain such wreckless international behaviour. This type of unilateralism also circumvents regional bodies that are pursuing mediation processes to bring about viable long-term solutions to political crises, in consultation with stakeholders on the ground. In the case of Haiti, the Caribbean community (CARICOM) was fully engaged in dealing with the situation, and their efforts were rendered futile by the unilateral intervention of the Americans. The type of process pursued by the Americans lacks legitimacy, and there is no way of measuring whether the new President is truly representative of the Haitian people and their interests.

Concerns regarding the circumstances surrounding Aristide's departure from Haiti, and the impression that this was nothing less than a cleverly orchestrated *coup d'état*, led the African Union to demand an investigation into the matter. South Africa and its African partners were right to ask probing questions and insist that the United Nations become seized with the issue. It is unlikely that a transparent and thorough investigation will be carried out, given the associated political sensitivities and the potential embarrassment to those who forced Aristide to step down. Such an investigation, if it were carried out, could lead to additional investigations being called for into the circumstances surrounding regime change already implemented in other countries. It is critical, however, for developing countries to challenge the basis of this new wave of unilateralism in international relations, in order to make the point that it is unacceptable in what is supposed to be a rules-based international system.

Policy Considerations

- South Africa, with its AU partners, should continue to exert pressure for an official investigation to be conducted to look into the circumstances surrounding Aristide's removal from power and from Haiti itself. The investigation needs to look into the legality of those developments considering Aristide was a democratically elected Head of State, and given that he now maintains that he was forcefully removed against his will. The investigation should examine the prevailing situation on the ground at the time of Aristide's departure, the nature of the threats against him, and the links between the opposition and foreign interests. The panel should assess the role CARICOM had been playing in mediating in Haiti, and what other alternatives could have been pursued in finding a political solution to the crisis. The legitimacy of the current Head of State should be questioned, as well as options for Aristide's return to Haiti if he so chooses. Further, mechanisms for accountability in such situations need to be identified by the international community within the context of the United Nations.
- The South African government needs to develop a communications strategy that will more effectively explain to its public why South Africa chose to engage in the 200 year celebrations of Haiti's independence, so as to counter accusations that the government is aligning itself with 'dictators'. The South African government should also raise public awareness regarding the true political reality in Haiti and the political dynamics that converged to make governance of the country virtually impossible. South Africa's dialogue with Aristide since his removal from power should be made more transparent so that the South African public can appreciate South Africa's strategy with regard to Haiti.
- South African civil society should develop links with the progressive civil society elements in Haiti as part of efforts to reach out to the African diaspora. The ANC should also identify the progressive political forces in Haiti and engage them in order to support their political programmes for the social upliftment and empowerment of the Haitian people.
- The South African government should engage in joint projects with regional and international agencies and development organisations in Haiti in order to assist in poverty alleviation, the fight against HIV/AIDS, and job creation.

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