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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Will Haitians get the chance to determine their future — without foreign interference?

The current crisis could push Haitians to seek a more democratic society.

By Robert Fatton

The July 7 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse was the brutal culmination of the country's decades-long crisis. As investigators scramble to identify those who commandeered, financed and carried out the murder, there's much more to this story. Irrespective of the individuals responsible, it is the zero-sum politics rooted in old and deep structures of inequality and widespread poverty that provides the context for the assassination of Haiti's president.

Haiti has a long history of foreign interference

Since Haiti's revolutionary founding in 1804, governing the country has been based on the illicit acquisition of wealth through the capture of public office. Politics has increasingly become a business through which people seek to escape conditions of scarcity — a scarcity ingrained in both the domestic political economy as well as how that economy was integrated into the world system. Simply put, the Haitian people have suffered from the opportunistic convergence of interests between the country's ruling class and its more powerful external "partners."

For the past three decades Haitians have endured the presence of U.S., French, and United Nations (MINUSTAH) troops on their soil. While that foreign presence generated a facade of stabilization, it did not alter the structural inequalities dividing Haitians, nor help build solid government institutions. Moreover, the U.N. never adequately compensated Haitians for the sexual misconduct of MINUSTAH soldiers — or their role in spreading a cholera epidemic that killed thousands of Haitians.

Haiti's current political crisis has the contours of past conflicts insofar as it was prompted by the contested, allegedly fraud-ridden 2016 election of Jovenel Moïse, an election supported by the United States. The opposition claimed that Moïse's presidency was illegitimate, while accusations that the president embezzled funds from Venezuela's PetroCaribe assistance program led to massive protests and calls for his resignation.

To hold on to power, Moïse resorted to authoritarian measures and began ruling by decree. Defying judicial and constitutional authority and ignoring popular condemnations, he refused to step down in February when his term ended.

Who is Haiti's legitimate leader now?

After Moïse's death, Haiti inherited two de facto prime ministers — the “incumbent” Claude Joseph, formerly Moïse's foreign minister — who was initially supported by the international community only to be snubbed in favor of Ariel Henry, a neurosurgeon whom the president had “designated” prime minister just days before his death.

On Tuesday, Henry was sworn in, pledging to hold new elections in 120 days. For now, Haiti has no president, no functioning parliament and a broken-down judicial system. Haiti's politics have now totally superseded constitutional strictures and guidance, aggravating the void of legitimate public authority. It is the balance of local social forces as well as the decisions of major foreign powers that will determine the immediate and perhaps long-term future of Haiti.

Will Haitians have the space to build their own government?

Avoiding another international intervention, whether in the form of a direct U.S. military occupation or under the blue flag of the United Nations, means ordinary Haitians — not just a self-appointed handful of Haitian politicians — need space to devise their own pathways toward a national consensus before the next electoral campaign.

The country's current predicament is scary, but it also offers a historic opportunity to create a more democratic society in which all Haitians treat each other as equal citizens. This new dispensation is impossible without the inclusion of “civil society” organizations, marginalized groups and the large, increasingly vocal, youth population. The process may be unruly, but without it, those traditionally in control will likely revert to past strategies, which seem likely to produce another version of the present.

Haiti's devastating earthquake in 2010 offers a recent example of a similar, though unrealized, opportunity. In the earthquake's aftermath, less than 1 percent of relief funding found its way into government institutions, foreign nongovernmental organizations monopolized resources and controlled reconstruction efforts which produced meager results.

The record suggests that nongovernmental aid is not a long-term solution. Observers may be inclined to label the Haitian state as “fragile” or “failed,” but this popular notion tends to blame local political and cultural factors for Haiti's collapse, while minimizing the destructive impact of foreign powers and their institutions. “Fragile” states do not spring out of an anti-modern collective pathos; they are to a large degree created by their subordinate integration into the world system.

My research, for instance, describes how for the past 40 years major international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund promoted a neoliberal program of open markets, privatizations and NGO-led development. Moreover, the policies of these international institutions neglected domestic food production while prescribing an urban

export-oriented development based on ultracheap labor. These strategies gutted the Haitian government of its capacity to provide minimum social benefits to its population and fueled a mass exodus to the major cities. Moïse continued along this path that contributed to economic, political and social collapse.

The neoliberal model has generated a situation where Haiti produces and exports little, and imports virtually everything it consumes. This has also led to an acute food crisis — in March, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that over 40 percent of the Haitian population (4.4 million people) will require emergency assistance to meet their basic needs.

Haiti's ability to avoid continued dependence on the international community will require a government that can actively support public and private production. To be clear, state-building does not require centralization of power nor the crushing of grass roots organizations, but rather harnessing their energies and giving them the coherence and means to succeed.

Crucially, bridging divides across class and color requires curtailing private wealth's hold on political power. The task is complex, but the current moment does offer an opportunity to begin building this alternative. Most will see this optimistic scenario as unlikely if recent history is any a guide. The gravity of the current crisis, however, could compel Haitians to break with that past if the international community stays out of their way.

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