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# The Hit on Haiti's President

International observers have stood by as Haiti's political crisis escalated.

By [Catherine Osborn](#), the writer of *Foreign Policy*'s weekly Latin America Brief. JULY 9, 2021, 6:00 AM

## Helping Haiti Back From the Abyss

The steady, corroding blaze of Haiti's political crisis reached such heights in recent weeks—with more than 13,000 people fleeing gang violence since June 1, according to the United Nations—that more than one close observer of the country's politics described Wednesday morning's assassination of President Jovenel Moïse by a hit squad as shocking but not surprising.

Moïse had been ruling by decree since January 2020. He had faced on-and-off anti-government protests since 2018 and was preparing to oversee highly controversial general elections and a constitutional referendum. He had reduced trips outside his house in recent months, having told *El País* in February that economically powerful families threatened to kill him. Meanwhile, gangs including current and former police officers have grown increasingly powerful and received support from government officials in their targeting of opposition neighborhoods, according to watchdogs.

At the time of writing on Thursday afternoon, Haitian authorities said police had killed four people suspected in Moïse's assassination and arrested six. But even if the perpetrators were correctly identified, Haiti's turmoil is deeper than ever. While interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph declared a 15-day state of siege Wednesday, Ariel Henry, whom Moïse had selected to replace Joseph on Monday but was never sworn in, told Haitian newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* that he is the rightful prime minister and disagrees with the siege declaration.

International actors adrift. Until now, international actors such as the United States, United Nations, and Organization of American States (OAS) have mostly failed to pour water on Haiti's political crisis even despite their immense influence in the country, long history of intervention, and clear junctures where stronger mediation could have been appropriate. Washington, for example, supported Moïse's plan for September general elections at least until his death, despite the fact that, in the words of Haitian journalist and former U.N. official Monique Clesca,

“There is no credible voter registration process, there is no security from violence, there is no independent electoral machine to guarantee fair and honest results.”

As recently as late last month, the OAS issued what the *Nation’s* Amy Wilentz called a “blithely optimistic report” on the situation in Haiti, recommending that elections proceed. Wednesday’s assassination prompted increased calls for international actors to get off the sidelines.

An alternative path. Instead of rushing into a vote that could inspire widespread mistrust, the international community should push for the necessary conditions for credible elections, the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Georges Fauriol wrote for *Global Americans* last week. As far as an eventual constitutional referendum, “it can only be achieved by a government whose mandate is not being questioned,” he wrote.

Clesca, for her part, called for international backers to look to Haitian civil society groups such as a four-month-old commission that has held dialogues with political parties, the private sector, grassroots groups, and others on an agenda to exit the crisis. Until now, “our voices were not heard,” she told *Americas Quarterly*. “The international community instead chose to side with an autocrat. They accompanied this man, so they bear a responsibility in what is going on now.”

The specter of intervention. In response to insecurity in Haiti and the ease with which an apparent mercenary group killed the country’s president, the *Washington Post’s* editorial board called for “swift and muscular international intervention.” This alarmed many Haitians; as the *Post* itself noted, a U.N. stabilization mission between 2004 and 2017 introduced a severe cholera epidemic in the country, and its troops faced credible allegations of rape and sexual abuse. They reportedly fathered hundreds of children with poor women and girls.

“We need the international community to stop imposing what they think is correct and instead think about the long term and stability,” Haitian policy expert Emmanuel Douyon told the *New York Times*.

In the short term, beyond the need for political support, Haiti faces a dire humanitarian situation. Over 40 percent of the country was experiencing food insecurity in February, up 80 percent from a year earlier. And the country has yet to begin its COVID-19 vaccination campaign.