

# The Denial of Self Determination: Haiti and the International Community

Haitians' battle for sovereignty and social justice is more than 200 years old

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*Originally published in Spanish in America Latina en Movimiento (Latin America in Motion), December 2010 issue, <http://alainet.org/publica/alai461.pdf>.*

## Author's Translation:

If any nation in the history of humanity has been terrorized by the naked brutality and hypocritical logic of modernity, it has been Haiti. One would assume that the Haitian Revolution in 1804 would be looked upon as a pivotal moment which helped to shape the ideas of freedom, equality and justice. This was not the case. Since it's independence in 1804, Haiti has been the victim of both history and hypocrisy. The small nation that fought for freedom, dignity and justice has been met with a nightmarish hell of slavery, genocide, racism, isolation, extreme oppression and economic terrorism exercised in the name of modern civilization that has not disappeared in the 500 years since Christopher Columbus first landed on the island. The recent turmoil surrounding the Haitian elections on November 28<sup>th</sup> must be seen as an extension of international determination in undermining the Haitian people's right to self determination.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Haiti, then known as Saint Domingue, became France's most valuable colonial possession. By the mid 1700's, Saint Domingue became the most lucrative colony in the world, producing more wealth than the 13 colonies of what would eventually become the United States of America<sup>[1]</sup>. This relationship of exploitation would continue until 1791, when a slave uprising led by Toussaint L'Ouverture began. A thirteen-year war led Haiti to become the second independent country in the hemisphere, and the first black republic in the world.

In response to the newly established republic, the international powers of France, the United States, England and Holland put aside their colonial rivalries and were determined to strangle this revolution in its infancy, as it had the potential to bring down the whole system of slavery and colonialism. Haiti would not be allowed to become a success, as it would turn the racist, capitalist global order on its head. The only way Haiti could exist was if it was turned into the basket case of the hemisphere. The "failed state" of Haiti that we read about today has been consciously constructed over 200 years by the world's industrial powers. France and the United States played a particularly aggressive role in bleeding Haiti to death financially.

Facing extreme isolation, and with a French warfleet sitting offshore, Haiti agreed in 1825 to take out a loan from a designated French bank and pay compensation to French plantation owners for their loss of "property," including the freed slaves. In exchange, Haiti won diplomatic recognition from France. It would take another 40 years before the U.S. would do likewise. In effect, Haiti was paying twice for its freedom; one time with blood, the second with money. The amount of

the debt totalled \$150,000,000 Francs. Today, that amount would equal \$21 billion dollars[2]. No mention was ever given to the fact that the land and people were both stolen to begin with.

If the economic stranglehold imposed by the international community was not enough, Haiti happened to be the leading target of US intervention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The United States was determined to make sure that Haiti's economy complemented their own. Haiti was to engage in export agriculture, producing coffee, sugar, cotton and tobacco for American consumption. The US invasion of 1915 brought back slavery to Haiti in all but name and rewrote the Haitian constitution of 1804, giving US corporations free rein.

Haiti may have been the first nation to escape colonialism through revolution, but Haiti also became the first "third world" nation in the traditional sense, as they were poor and overburdened with debt. The Haitian government could not build schools, hospitals or roads because nearly all of the available money went to pay France. In 1915, for example, 80% of government revenues went to debt service[3]. Haiti did not finish paying the loans that financed the debt until 1947[4]. Over a century after the global slave trade was recognized and eliminated as the evil it was, the Haitians were still paying their ancestors' masters for their freedom.[5]

As Haiti was in a desperate financial position due to economic blackmail, the United States saw it as a potentially dangerous hotspot for "communist subversion." Under the dictatorship of the Duvalier family dynasty (1957-1986), notable public assets such as the railroads, public utilities and the Haitian National Bank were auctioned off to Citibank and the Haitian Corporation of America for next to nothing.[6] When Jean Claude Duvalier was forced into exile in 1986, he reportedly landed in the French Cote d'Azur with a comfortable net worth of \$1.6 billion.[7]

It was this debt riddled framework of the new global economic order, fighting against the unjust demands of the IMF, World Bank and the United States, that led a Roman Catholic priest named Jean Bertrand Aristide to become Haiti's first democratically elected president, in 1990. Aristide's grassroots support among the poor of Haiti led to his landslide victory with 67% of the vote[8].

Aristide led calls against further rounds of privatization of the Haitian economy. These concerns did not sit well with the United States or France resulting in a coup in September 1991. Due to international as well as internal pressure, the Clinton administration helped facilitate the restoration of Aristide, but he was not allowed to complete his full 5 year term. In 2000, Aristide was elected once again, with 91.8% of the vote[9].

The international powers instituted an embargo of aid and development loans against the newly elected government. Aid funding was instead shifted to NGO's, many of which were, or became, hostile to the government, and organizations like the Group of 184 which were controlled by Haiti's elite but masqueraded as being a part of Haitian civil society. Much of the money went into funding what were little more than anti-Aristide militias – known as "democracy enhancement groups" – who would replace the disbanded Haitian army as a tool of the rich.[10] In February 2004, Aristide was overthrown again, after advocating for the reparation of Haiti's odious \$21 billion debt to France, by paramilitaries from the former army (disbanded by Aristide

in 1995) with key backing from U.S., French and Canadian military forces. He was forced into exile. The nation was ripe once again for the picking by U.S. and other corporations.

According to Peter Hallward, “the period that began with the military coup of September 1991 is best described as one of the most prolonged and intense periods of counter-revolution anywhere in the world. For the last 20 years, the most powerful political and economic interests in and around Haiti have waged a systematic campaign designed to stifle the popular movement and deprive it of its principal weapons, resources and leaders.”[\[11\]](#)

The devastating earthquake on January 12<sup>th</sup> and the tragic aftermath are being used as a backdrop of excuses to mask the engineered irregularities of the recent election. The November 28<sup>th</sup> election is the most recent step in the international community’s attempt to stifle the demands of self determination by the Haitian people. Fanmi Lavalas, founded by Aristide and his colleagues in 1997 and arguably the nation’s most popular political party, has been banned in every election since the overthrow of Aristide in 2004. The exclusion of Lavalas continued into the November 28<sup>th</sup> elections based on the party failing to meet last-minute technicalities invented by Haiti’s highly controversial (including non-constitutional) Provisional Electoral Council – heavily influenced by current President René Préal. Fanmi Lavalas and 14 other political parties were excluded from participating in the November 28<sup>th</sup> elections without any transparent reasoning.

Ignoring reports highlighting the irregularities of the November 28<sup>th</sup> election from civil society organizations both domestically and abroad, the international community continued to support and finance the highly flawed process. As early as June, the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti issued a comprehensive report titled *The International Community Should Pressure the Haitian Government for Free and Fair Elections* (<http://ijdh.org/archives/13138>) but the international community did not pay attention to the warnings of political turmoil resulting from their backing of highly flawed elections.

The reasoning behind such vehement support for Haiti’s current flawed elections is simple. There is over \$10 billion in reconstruction contracts waiting to be awarded[\[12\]](#), an amount too large to be trusted to any independent, or heaven forbid progressive, candidate who would channel the money into the building of much needed public services and infrastructure to serve the Haitian people. What the international community expects from these elections is a president who will rubber stamp any of their self serving development projects. An article in the Washington Post titled, “Would-be Haitian Contractors Miss out on Aid,” further demonstrates the self serving nature of aid to Haiti. It states that of every \$100 of US contracts, only \$1.60 makes it into the hands of Haitian contractors.[\[13\]](#)

There must be a movement away from the further “NGOization” of the nation, and a strong movement towards the development of public institutions which will serve the most poor and vulnerable. Public health, education and water systems should be priorities for any reconstruction effort – however the plans outlined by the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Committee (chaired by William Clinton) simply call for more of the same failed policies which have devastated Haiti. The IHRC is intent in enforcing policies which will turn Haiti into a protectorate of offshore slavery for American garment manufacturing corporations.[\[14\]](#)

The engineered collapse of the Haiti through both economic and political action offers an important example of how power shapes relations to the benefit of the stronger party through both conditionalities and military intervention. Haiti stands as a devastating example of what is wrong with the current economic order. Haiti has paid the costs over and over again, simply for its people wanting to exercise their right to self determination – whether through rebellion against slavery and colonialism, or through the demands to participate in a free and fair election. All the Haitian people have demanded is freedom and respect – and they have been punished without an equal for these demands ever since.

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Notes:

[1] Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick. "The Context of Haitian Development and Underdevelopment". In Haiti: The Breached Citadel. (Canadian Scholars Press, 2004.)

[2] "Building on the foundation of democracy: an overview of the first two years of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's presidency", February 7 2001-February 7 2003 Embassy of the Republic of Haiti in Washington D.C., 2003

[3] Farmer, Paul. "Haiti: Short and Bitter Lives." Le Monde Diplomatique. June 2003.

[4] Regan, Jane. "Haiti: In bondage to history?" NACLA Report of the Caribbean, Feb. 2005, Vol.38, No. 4

[5] Phillips, Anthony. "Haiti Needs Justice, Not Charity." The South Florida Sun-Sentinel. July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006

[6] Miles, Melinda. Let Haiti Live: Unjust US Policies Towards it's Oldest Neighbour. (New York, Educa Vision, 2004).

[7] Lundahl, Mats. "History as an Obstacle to Change: The Case of Haiti." The Journal of InterAmerican Studies and World Affairs. Vol. 31. No 1. 1989.

[8] Farmer, Paul. Getting Haiti Right This Time: The U.S. and the Coup. (Monroe, Common Courage Press, 2004).

[9] Eberstadt, Nicholas. Haiti in Extremis, The Weekly Standard, Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Volume 12, Issue 6, pg. 23

[10] Griffin, Thomas M. and Irwin P. Stokzky. Haiti: Human Rights Investigation: November 11<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004. (Center for the Study of Human Rights, The University of Miami Law School, January 2005)

[11] Hallward, Peter. Haiti 2010: Exploiting Disaster.

[12] Kim Ives. International Donors Conference at the UN: For \$10 Billion of Promises Haiti Surrenders it's Sovereignty. Haiti Liberte. April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Available Online: <http://www.haitianalysis.com/2010/4/20/international-donors-conference-at-the-un-for-10-billion-of-promises-haiti-surrenders-its-sovereignty>

[13] Mendoza, Martha. Would be Haitian Contractors Miss out on Aid. Washington Post. December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Available Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/12/AR2010121201566.html>

[14] Maxwell, John. *Shameless and Graceless*. The Jamaica Observer. February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Available Online: <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/Maxwell-Feb-14>