



HAITI ALERT:

Toward Democracy or Tyranny?

by Hans Tippenhauer

Aristide Supporters Riot

On Saturday, April 8, 2000, at the Sylvio Cator stadium in Port-au-Prince, the national funeral for Jean L. Dominique gave way to several acts of violence. While still at the funeral, people who identified themselves as supporters of former president Jean Bertrand Aristide chanted slogans in favor of Aristide's return to power in 2001. After announcing their intentions, the self-proclaimed Aristide supporters burned down the headquarters of one of the opposition parties, L'Espace de Concertation. Although police forces were there 15 minutes before the arrival of the rioters, they did nothing to stop the vandalism. The demonstrators, who declared themselves to be members of several grassroots organizations known for their links to the ruling Lavalas party, also went after RadioVision 2000, throwing rocks and attempting to break into the radio station, known to be of the opposition.

Unable to accomplish their objectives, the rioters announced that they would return, adding that they might also go after the Chamber of Commerce and some other opposition parties.

On Monday, April 10, several leaders of the opposition publicly condemned the fact that both Aristide and President René Preval, who were present at the funeral, said and did nothing to stop the riots. Although Aristide, who visited the United States last week, declared that he was in favor of elections for a regulatory parliament as soon as possible—followed by presidential elections—he has not officially addressed the matter in Haiti. President Préval has also remained silent concerning the attacks against the opposition. The murder of Jean L. Dominique, who was a close friend of Préval and a personal adviser, is an indirect threat to the president, as was the attempted murder of his sister last year. It is said that the climate of terror that currently reigns is linked to drug trafficking and the fight for absolute power, against which Jean Dominique had been very vocal. Dominique spoke out particularly against one of Aristide's protégés, ex-chief of police, Danny Toussaint, who is currently running for the Senate.

Overview

- Assassination of veteran media figure and political activist, Jean L. Dominique, sparks further violence and vandalism.
- Current climate of terror and political intimidation undermines further likelihood of credible elections, and may also be increasing pressures for Haitian exile flow.
- Some opposition parties are calling for a provisional government to manage free and fair elections.
- The Organization of American States is exploring the possibility of applying multilateral sanctions.

Loss of Faith in Electoral Process

In the last few weeks, several ministers have resigned. These members of L'Espace were appointed last year to the coalition government, the alleged role of which was to hold elections. Although Prime Minister Alexis declared that the police would continue to give protection to all endangered citizens, the actions of the police have not manifested such a will. The opposition parties all declare that they no longer have faith in the government or in its willingness to actually hold fair elections. They have also lost faith in the electoral council, which has been preparing elections for more than a year now, and which has been described (off the record) as incompetent, even by some highly ranked officials in the government. In recent polls, the various opposition parties have shown clear advances over the government party for disparate parliamentary positions. The formation of a coalition between opposing parties is therefore the only likely means of countering the Lavalas party, which remains the most organized group in the field. The Lavalas candidates' ability to access important, though questionable, sources of financing from Aristide, places them in an advantageous position over the opposition.

Sadly, due to the general atmosphere of mistrust, even if elections were held today, it may not be the ideal solution to the present crisis. In fact, some parties like the Patriotic Movement for the Rescue of Haiti (MPSN), have already declared that they have absolutely no faith in the electoral process and are calling for a provisional government to organize free and fair elections. Ironically, in 1990, such a provisional government, led by Ertha Pascal Trouillot, organized the first internationally sanctioned democratic elections in the country. These "elections" brought Aristide to power. Today, however, after 10 years in power, the Lavalas party knows it has failed in its mission of bringing peace and prosperity to Haiti. The country is experiencing its worst recession ever, aggravated by political terrorism against all opposition parties and civil society. Some have even had to leave the country. The current president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Haiti had to run for his life after having been very vocal last year. He had organized a peaceful march against the government that was interrupted by grassroots linked to the Lavalas party.

Both President Préval and Aristide seem to be hostages of their own movement. Members of this "movement" have used their political connections to participate in drug trafficking and terrorism. These drug lords are said to have ties to the Lavalas party, and some of them are even running for office in an effort to seek immunity. A climate of terror, comparable to the worst days of dictatorship, is developing in the country, worsened by the presence of Cuban activists-some pose as doctors. In addition, it is a well-known fact that a large number of weapons have been distributed to some organizations. All of these factors, combined with Jean Dominique's death and the burning of L'Espace headquarters, have contributed to a prevailing wind of panic throughout the country.

OAS Threatens Sanctions, Haitians Fear Violence

The Haitian population was ready to go to the polls and exercise their voting rights, although they still remember November 27, 1987, when the first elections held after the rule of Jean Claude Duvalier ended tragically with attacks on voting bureaus by mercenaries who were said to be linked at the time to some military factions. The Organization of American States (OAS) is exploring the possibility of implementing multilateral sanctions, condemning recent acts against the opposition, the press, and more generally, civil society as violations of the Santiago Declaration of 1991. A similar action by the OAS in 1991 led to sanctions against the regime that had overthrown Aristide.

After distributing more than 3 million electoral cards, more than in any previous election, the population is demoralized. If a date for the elections is finally agreed upon, the same low turnout that occurred in the very controversial elections of 1997, when only 6 percent of the population voted, might happen again. Although most voters will be fearful for their lives, those whose security is assured because of their political links will still vote to the advantage of the Lavalas

party. It is well known that in Haiti the party that wins the elections is the one that controls the electoral machine and not necessarily the party that garners the most votes. For the first time since 1990, the overwhelming desire of the population to take part in the electoral process reflects a clear decision to vote the Lavalas party out of power.

A new parliament with no Lavalas majority would indeed create a real handicap for the current government, which has been governing unconstitutionally for 15 months. The new parliament, according to the Haitian constitution, would have the double task of electing a new Permanent Electoral Council (in concert with the president) for the next presidential elections and validating the candidacies of the different candidates. As former president of the republic, Aristide would need to receive an official validation of his term in office in the early 1990s. He is not assured such an accreditation from a parliament dominated by the opposition. In the event that he was elected president again, he might also have to cohabit with a prime minister from the opposition. Should Aristide not be cleared, the consequences could lead to legal action—mostly "misappropriation of state funds."

About the Author

Hans Tippenhauer is a senior consultant with Group Croissance SA in Haiti, in charge of new business development, and is also a member of the *CSIS Caribbean Leadership Group*. He is also the vice president of the Haitian Environment Foundation (FHE). He has previously been associated with the National Association of Producers (APRONA) and the Manufacturers Association of Haiti (ADIH), as well as with Caribe General Electric (Puerto Rico), and Haiti Packaging SA. Tippenhauer also teaches at Quisqueya University in Haiti, and is supporting the creation of an industrial engineering department. He is a radio show host with RadioVision 2000, *Le Rendezvous de L'excellence*, a highly rated news and analysis program. Tippenhauer holds a degree in industrial engineering from the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico.