

## **Haiti's Road to Democracy: Ambiguities & Paradoxes**

**Robert Fatton Jr.**

What happened in Haiti between the 1986 fall of Duvalier and the presidential elections of December 1995? Who were the political contenders? What were their aims, their strengths, their weaknesses? How have they survived the coup of 1991 and President Aristide's return?

This essay suggests that the transition from authoritarianism to populism that has marked the recent history of Haiti is a result of the rise of civil society -- in particular, of popular civil society. It contends, however, that the old balance of class power and the repressive organs of the Duvalierist state survived the departure of Jean-Claude Duvalier and endanger further transformation.

The 1991 coup that overthrew President Aristide reflected the persisting capacity of the Haitian ruling class to unleash the most brutal violence against those forces that threatened to make the change of regime become a change of state. The American military intervention that restored President Aristide to office in October 1994 demonstrated again that violence remained the decisive moment in Haitian politics and the only means to prevent a return to dictatorship.

The intervention, however, has paradoxical implications. It revises the difficult process of democratization and weakens the repressive organs of the state; but it also protects the old balance of class power and sets constraints to economic transformation. The result is a change of regime rather than the creation of a new state.

This change of regime may generate wider popular struggles leading to profound alterations in the nature of the state. Thus, in spite of severe constraints stemming from the domestic balance of class power and external patterns of acute dependence, the future of Haitian society is not foreclosed. Real democratization is possible even if the existing constellation of forces makes it difficult.

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## **The Rise & Contradictions of Civil Society**

Until the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier's dictatorship in 1986, the predatory character of the Haitian state inhibited the public development of a democratic culture and forced it to remain a "hidden transcript." Both civil and political society stayed underground. Civil society and subordinate classes expressed only in coded words their outrage at those lording it over them.

The fall of the dictatorship, however, indicated that subordinates hitherto quiet had finally mustered the means, the resources, and the courage to break their silence. They exploded into the public stage as a collective, historical actor. Suddenly, the "hidden transcript" spoke directly to the teeth of power.

The Haitian process of democratization reflects the capacity of major segments within civil society to defy and ultimately overwhelm the predatory state through mass political defiance. In the 1980s, many organizations challenged the abuses of Duvalierism and began calling for social justice and human rights. Prominent among these organizations was the radical wing of the Catholic Church, known as *Ti Legliz* (little church), which articulated within a Theology of Liberation a devastating public critique of Macoutism. Macoutisni, - a label associated with Duvalier's *Tonton Macoutes*, came to symbolize everything that was wrong with Haiti: class exploitation, arbitrary political rule, corruption, and state violence. For *Ti Legliz* and the vast majority of Haitians, real change demanded a massive social, political, and economic transformation, a revolution that would overturn almost three decades of Duvalierist domination.

In the 1980s, many groups were bent on curbing the predatory reach of the Haitian state. Soon, however, Lavalas (The Hood), whose name symbolized the huge power of the nascent and loosely structured mass movement of the destitute, dominated them all. It was Lavalas that carried father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a radical advocate of *Ti Legliz*, to the presidency in 1990, in free elections that Aristide won with close to seventy percent of the vote. Lavalas came to embody the united movement of the poor, the revolutionary flood that would sweep away all the vestiges of Duvalierism as well as the parasitic and exploitative bourgeoisie.

Clearly then, Haitian civil society is a potentially liberating force. It is riot, however, a democratic *dens ex machina*, Crippled by material limitations and class impairments, it remains the preserve of middle and privileged classes in spite of a strong populist basis.

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Rather than reflecting a coherent social project, Haitian civil society embodies many – and sometimes mutually exclusive – projects that are not necessarily democratic. As a plural realm, it broadly comprises three different "private spaces" articulating respectively the interests of three blocs or coalitions:

- 1) an authoritarian coalition around the neo-Duvalierists, bent to maintain the predatory state;
- 2) a "reformist" bloc of bourgeois, quasi-bourgeois and middle sectors, with vague neoliberal proclivities; and
- 3) the social-democratic and radical Lavalasian sectors.

These three groupings are neither frozen entities nor hermetic communities. As they compete for state power, they are involved in continuous struggles, negotiations, and compromises. A certain political opportunism has in fact marked the history of these three blocs. Leaders and even groups can circulate from one sector to another. Dramatic changes of allegiance or position are common among the Haitian political class. Defection and expulsion from political families as well as reintegration and co-optation into them, are prime characteristics of the conflictive nature of Haitian civil society.

While the neo-Duvalierist coalition and the reformist bloc have always had more material resources and organizational skills than the poorly structured Lavalas movement, they lacked the power of numbers and democratic legitimacy that characterized Lavalas. Formed in the difficult struggles against the Duvalier dictatorship, expressing a sense of communal defense against the abuses of state power, the Lavalas movement has clear social-democratic impulses. Transcending mere parliamentarism and privileging initiatives "from below," Lavalas called for the establishment of political citizenship, civil citizenship, and social citizenship within a participatory democracy. Lavalas represented the decisive social force that compelled predatory rulers into accepting a politically more accountable regime and ultimately to free elections. Lavalas's empowerment was determinant in the making of the Haitian democratic transition.

Neither the predators of the neo-Duvalierist bloc, nor the reformists of the bourgeois and middle sectors favored such empowerment. Subordinate classes had to wrest it from them. At most, the neo-Duvalierists tolerated some measures of liberalization as a means to contain democratization. They knew, however, that even a limited relaxation of the dictatorial system could open a Pandora's box and engender a series of unexpected political consequences leading to a full-scale democratization.

The reformists, in turn, were prepared to go beyond a superficial liberalization of the dictatorial system. They sought to establish a liberal democracy – a regime in

which political leaders are freely elected to uphold individual rights, the sanctity of private property, and the pursuit of market gains. Their commitment to democracy was, however, largely opportunistic. It reflected both their incapacity to share power with the neo-Duvalierists and their growing exclusion from a shrinking pool of clientelist gains. Hence, the reformist bourgeoisie and middle-sectors came to depend paradoxically on Lavalasian support to realize their own class project. Necessity transformed them into liberal backers of the democratic transformation.

The quasi-bourgeois bloc and a mobilized Lavalas movement thus entered into a tactical alliance to push for an effective democratic transition in the immediate aftermath of Jean-Claude Duvalier's forced departure. However, once the neo-Duvalierists had vacated the seats of power and a founding election had taken away their right to rule, the alliance began to unravel. Threatened by an increasingly assertive popular civil society, the quasi-bourgeois bloc lost all reformist dispositions and welcomed General Raoul Cedras's coup of 1991. Indeed, that bloc became the social basis of the military dictatorship.

This was no surprise: the reformist bourgeoisie and the middle-sectors have always resisted the ascendancy of popular forces. They have always feared that such ascendancy would tilt the balance of class power too far away from what they perceived to be their fundamental interests.

## **Political Uncertainties & Democratic Closure**

Between the fall of Duvalier in 1986 and the 1991 overthrow of the Aristide regime, Haitian liberalization thus navigated between the Scylla of unsettling democratic outcomes and the Charybdis of coups and violent chaos. In this perspective, the end of Duvalier's dictatorship created political uncertainty. It implied neither the end of authoritarianism nor a successful democratization. Indeed, democratization failed miserably with the violence that went on during the 1987 presidential elections and during the 1991 coup. The uncertainties of democratic elections with their potential to upset power holders twice induced the neo-Duvalierists into brutal putchism.

If liberal democracy was to succeed at all, it had to equalize and regulate these uncertainties. It could not tolerate the erratic, capricious, and arbitrary absolutism that had historically characterized Haitian presidential monarchism. Democratic governance required a different sort of uncertainty, an uncertainty contained within – and

structured by – a predictable system of rules. Most critically, political actors had – at a minimum – to be convinced that the difficulties of defeat did not outweigh the gains of a possible future victory. The precondition for the establishment of such convictions was the institutionalization of uncertainty within a predictable framework where outcomes would neither be permanent nor arbitrary.

## **Transnational Relations & the Balance of Class Power**

The incentives to join into the democratic game are themselves contingent upon the existence of certain power relations. Many political scientists remind us that although the balance of power among different classes and class coalitions is crucial to democratic transformation, it is complemented by the character of the state and by the impact of transnational relations.


In the Haitian context, the process of democratization would have been aborted without the full impact of transnational power relations. The country's history shows that, barring an occurrence like the recent US military intervention, political actors will not accept compromises that may be in everyone's interests just to avoid the ugly realities of a hellish war of all against all.

The American military occupation of the country – sanctioned by the United Nations – was determinant in re-installing Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The United States continues to influence powerfully the Haitian transition with its military might and intelligence services as well as its own non-governmental organizations. Indeed, external factors continue to influence the shape of Haitian politics, especially since the country's material well-being is utterly dependent on the vagaries of the world economy and the demands of foreign financial organizations.

International factors, however, cannot obliterate the internal logic of the country. That logic, which reflects the domestic balance of class power and the clashes of a conflict ridden civil society, shapes and structures the process of democratization. Democracy in Haiti is primarily a function of the domestic balance of class power. The denser and more hegemonic popular civil society, the more likely is the implantation and consolidation of democracy. Only when the forces of civil society and in particular Lavalas institutionalize political society, will such a consolidation have a real chance of materializing.

Political society is the constitutionally regulated realm in which political forces organize themselves as effective blocs to conquer state power and achieve their objectives. Without consolidated political organs and rules, without intraparty alliances, the extrication from

authoritarianism is likely to fail, as the 1991 coup demonstrates.



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Critical among these organs are political parties as agents of mediation between state, civil society, and political society. The creation of mass parties capable of representing and articulating the interests of subordinate classes is a sine qua non for the establishment of a balance of power from which democracy can emerge. Haiti's democratization, however, has given birth to social movements rather than mass parties, to "one manism" instead of collective structuration. The parties that have crystallized have tended to be based on clientelist and personalistic criteria. In fact it may well be more appropriate to describe them as *groupuscules*.

Paradoxically, in the short term, such *groupuscules* may weaken the opposition from predators, reformist bourgeois, and middle-sectors to the process of democratic transition and consolidation. Weak or fragmented radical mass parties channel the mobilization of subordinate classes into divisive clientelist and particularistic parties. They reassure dominant elites that the electoral process poses no major threat to their fundamental interests.

Liberal democracy is thus full of constraints and limitations to the exercise of popular power: it impairs the ascendancy of subordinate classes and privileges the interests of dominant classes. Its structures are biased, bent to curb the scope and expansion of democratic practice. Compromises are its necessary means of survival. Indeed, as President Aristide has found out in his "second coming," the democratic project of subordinate classes cannot be realized without a tactical alliance with the middle-sectors. The alliance is necessary for several reasons: the poor's daily struggles for survival in

conditions of extreme deprivation, their limited organizational resources, their long habituation to powerlessness. Moreover, the limited size of the I Haitian working class and the difficulties of institutionalizing peasant interests stretches further the erosion of the power of the subordinate classes.

Haitian popular civil society is thus politically weak. If the democratic project is at all feasible, it entails, at least initially, the combined mobilization of the reformist bourgeoisie, the middle classes, and the popular sectors. That mix, however, is full of ambiguities and contradictions, and not at all insured. The initial popularity of the Cédras military dictatorship with the dominant classes and the middle-sectors indicates how unreliable is their opposition to predatory regimes. While the middle-sectors may support the idea of a minimal liberal state, they may quickly feel threatened by the mobilization of popular society and opt for an easy compromise with an emerging dictatorship. Given their ideological individualism and their fear of the subordinate classes, the middle sectors are prone to opportunistic defections from the democratizing coalition and personal accommodations with authoritarian forces.

## The Obdurate Limits of Class

The Haitian democratic experiment thus rests on a precarious foundation. Further, acute material scarcity limits severely the capacity of the political system to deliver resources with which to co-opt, and integrate social actors into a more accountable public realm. Still, while poverty is a formidable constraint on democratic governance it need not be an absolute obstacle. Some prominent political scientists now argue that the implantation and consolidation of democracy are really matters of political crafting and constitutional engineering.

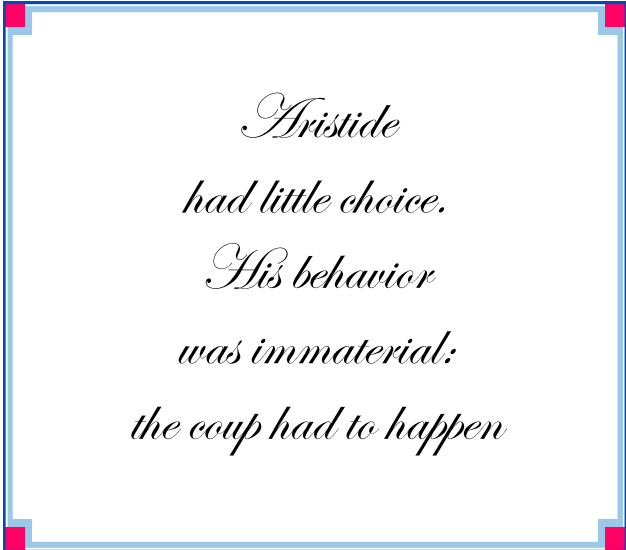
In the Haitian case, many observers contend that the "prophetic" style of Jean-Bertrand Aristide was partially responsible for his overthrow in 1991. Aristide, they suggest, ruled as if he had never been elected President of the Republic. He governed as a leader of the opposition, with a wild and unnecessarily antagonistic rhetoric. He lacked attributes that could move some of his opponents into his orbit. He was a prophet who had yet to acquire the adroitness of a Prince.

As these observers would have it, Aristide's incapacity to trespass his own political base precipitated his downfall. In their view, structural constraints and the obdurate opposition of classes are not seen as determinant of the outcome. Rather, such an outcome is seen as dependent on the free choices of political actors who have multiple alternatives at their disposal.

It is one thing to argue that political leaders have multiple choices, it is another to assume that those choices constitute fundamental and plausible options. While politics can be protean, choices that really do matter can be nullified by the structure of power and the balance of class forces. In Haiti's case in 1991, the class power of the bourgeoisie still rested on brute military force and the class power of the subordinates on rhetorical exhortations. In that context, Aristide had little choice. His behavior was immaterial: the coup was bound to happen.

Similarly, it is highly unlikely that a different constitutional system would have prevented the coup. Whether Aristide headed a presidentialist or parliamentarist regime was irrelevant. The balance of class forces and the Lavalasian program blocked the type of compromises--so useful at breaking deadlocks--that parliamentarism entails. The same factors also prevented Aristide's effective use of the "imperial rule" that is latent in presidentialism. Further, the balance of class forces and the role of the military as the last trench of the dominant classes' power made the design of institutions largely irrelevant. Institutions have never prevented, nor will they prevent, dominant classes from violating and destroying whatever constitutional framework they had adhered to, once they perceive that their fundamental interest is endangered. This, at least, is the hard lesson of the recent Haitian experience.

Thus, the balance of class power and the constellation of external forces bode poorly for a radical transformation of Haitian society. Indeed, given Haiti's entrenched class divisions, given the constraints imposed both by a liberal democracy and the external sources of power, one wonders if the Lavalasian project is at all realizable. Ironically, the conditions of Aristide's return may spell the end of the project itself.



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## The Ambiguities of the Future


The US-led restoration of Aristide's presidency clearly dampened his populist appeal and mutilated his social democratic project. It forced him to accept the inclusion of old opponents in his new "enlarged" government of national reconciliation. It was the fear of such a fate that explained Aristide's ambivalence toward an American military intervention. In the end, however, Aristide had no choice: his return was totally dependent on the exercise of American power over which he had no control.

In spite of its huge ambiguities and contradictions, the American intervention was the only means of ending the military dictatorship. Paradoxically, the intervention tilted politically the balance of class forces toward Lavalas. It facilitated the total neutralization of the army and compelled the Haitian elites into accepting Aristide as president. Neither new institutions nor drastic changes of heart could have led to such an outcome. The decisive moment in Haitian politics remained the brute force of arms, even if on this occasion it originated from without.

If the American intervention has politically strengthened Lavalas, it has diluted its social democratic economic platform. The intervention has inevitably deradicalized Aristide transforming him from an anticapitalist prophet into a staunch American ally committed to the virtues of the market. He is now the Prince, but a Prince partially déplumé whose failure to bring the opposition into accepting his initial social-democratic project has led him to adopt a conservative structural adjustment program. The major contradiction facing Haitian society is thus the coexistence of left-wing politics with right-wing economics; it is a contradiction that is not likely to survive for long. If the experiences of other "revolutionary" regimes are any lesson, economics will eventually prevail and establish the harsh realities of market rationality. It is true that the Aristide government may have no alternative but to embark on a program of structural adjustment. Initially, such a project may even enjoy widespread popular support, since the urban poor and the peasantry never enjoyed the profligate spoils of the state.

A sense of economic fairness and efficiency is, however, difficult to foster in the midst of profound structural adjustment. By promoting market rationality, and simultaneously transforming property relations, structural adjustment is likely to generate urban discontent and plunge society into the uncertainties of polarized instability. In such conditions, the Aristide government, or its successor, is likely to retreat from the process of economic reform altogether. Confronted with renewed challenges from above and below, the new

Haitian government may be forced to choose between either abandoning structural adjustment or relapsing into authoritarianism in order to impose it. Structural adjustment is thus likely to have gravely debilitating effects on the consolidation of Haitian democracy.



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For the moment, however, the American-led occupation of Haiti has succeeded in restoring Aristide, guaranteeing new elections and preventing the country's descent into bell. It has opened up the social space necessary to rebuild a popular civil society so brutally squelched under the military junta. It has offered people a chance to re-establish and consolidate fragile democratic structures while weakening those institutions that had historically kept the overwhelming majority destitute. Indeed, the virtual abolition of the armed forces is President Aristide's single most important contribution to the empowerment of the common people. With the army intact, the threat of coups would continue to hang over Haiti's society, and the despotic power of the bourgeoisie would have remained unrestrained. Finally, the American intervention has made possible a struggle for a more equitable pattern of economic development. By restoring Aristide's presidency and securing new elections, it has helped rekindle hopes for a better future.

Such hopes, however, should not mask the enormous obstacles confronting those who seek to construct a more democratic and egalitarian Haitian society. Haiti still hovers on the verge of political catastrophe. It faces

economic ruin, ecological destruction, and the mass starvation of the poor. While bewildered by the American occupation, the ruling class has not surrendered. On the contrary, it is regrouping and it may block any strategy of development that it deems antagonistic to its interests. Promises of massive international assistance do not guarantee economic growth, let alone social equity. In fact, the government's lukewarm conversion to the magic of the market and privatization may generate more inequalities and undermine its popular support.

Neither the return to electoral politics nor the partial disarmament of the repressive organs of the state are sufficiently institutionalized to insure the success of democratic consolidation. The government's attempts to seek both national reconciliation and the rule of justice remain problematic. A prompt return to social normalcy also means accepting the presence of unpunished torturers and murderers. Such a solution may buy temporary peace but it ultimately portends future victims. Moreover, armed *macoutes* and thugs could take advantage of the withdrawal of American and United Nations troops and their replacement by a smaller and ill prepared Haitian police contingent of 6,000 to unleash a new cycle of violence and unbalance the precarious stability of the new Préval regime. Finally, the ambiguity ties of the US role in Haiti as supporter of both the elite and the military, yet forceful restorer of Aristide's presidency, bode poorly for a democratic *déchoukaj*.

The future is thus full of uncertainties even if the conflict of classes has been momentarily subdued. That conflict is likely to re-emerge once the persistent realities of ostentatious wealth amid acute poverty dampen the euphoria of peace. But will the specter of a hellish war of all-against all permanently assuage the obdurate antagonisms of class? Or will it merely cause a temporary, deceptive calm before the flood? Only time will tell. For the moment, ambiguous signs of economic recovery and democratic renaissance coexist with morbid symptoms of political opportunism, mass misery and criminal delinquency.

The American intervention has opened the possibility of another pathway, albeit narrow and uncertain, to an alternative way of *life freed from* the legacy of authoritarianism, injustice, and destitution. It has heightened the reality that new forms are struggling to be born as the old ways of producing, organizing and governing die. In spite of its ambiguities and paradoxes, it has offered Haitians the opportunity to enter what Bertold Brecht once described as "the time of struggles between the new and the old." We must wait to see whether the promise of the new will implant its seeds and flourish, or degenerate into the ugly vulgarities of the old.

## Conclusion

I have contended that the democratization of Haiti was fundamentally dependent upon the balance of class forces: neither institutions, nor political statecraft could have prevented the overthrow of President Aristide. In spite of its huge popular following Lavalas was poorly structured. It had only the weapon of rhetorical exhortation on in its confrontation with dominant classes who controlled the use of arms. Not surprisingly, Aristide's restoration demanded another moment of brute military intervention, albeit of foreign origin. Without that intervention, the military and the dominant classes would have never relinquished power.

The American occupation is full of contradictions. It has revived the political fortunes of Lavalas and curtailed the armed power of the dominant classes, but it has also de-radicalized the economic project of Aristide's regime. The balance of class forces has been relatively equalized but it is indeed a very relative equality. It implies at most the de-militarization of the predators and their allies; by no means does it portend fundamental structural changes. The process of changing regimes electorally may be on firmer foundations after the elections of *December 1995*, but the transformation--let alone the democratization--of the state remains a project in the making. As Préval prepares to take over from Aristide, along with opportunities, the current juncture is filled with dangers.

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