

Haiti in extremis: Disillusioned with democracy

From the Editors in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

When the last remnants of Operation Uphold Democracy—a UN peacekeeping force but predominantly American for much of its duration—left Haiti a few weeks ago, some observers voiced dire predictions of a descent into chaos and civil war. Time will tell. But others argued that the situation could hardly be worse than it is. Undertaken in 1994, the primary purpose of the U.S./UN mission was to restore to power in tyranny-ravaged Haiti its first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Though the charismatic Aristide—at that time a Salesian priest—had won a landslide victory (67 percent of the vote) in 1990, he was ousted by a military coup after only seven months in office, and during his three years of exile the Haitian army and paramilitary groups killed some 4,000 unarmed civilians, most of them Aristide supporters.

In returning Aristide to power, the U.S. hoped also to restore stability to Haiti—giving stability priority over democracy, though it achieved neither. The U.S. worked some infrastructure wonders, building and repairing roads, schools, wells and latrines, but politically the intervention was largely a disaster. Well-meaning Green Berets, who thought they had been sent to the island to protect the innocent, found themselves being ordered not to curb the violence but—with the Somalia debacle in mind—to protect themselves first of all; hence the title of Bob Shacochis's recent book on Haiti, *The Immaculate Invasion*. The Haitian army was disbanded without being disarmed, leaving a troubled nation overflowing with a wealth of weapons. Killers who took part in the coup were not held accountable.

Incredibly, Washington chose to regard the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (FRAPH), a euphemism for the country's largest death squad, as a legitimate opposition party and the moral equal of the Aristide government. Its head, Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, though wanted in Haiti on charges of murder, torture and rape, is enjoying safe haven in New York, "living," says Shacochis, "the exemplary life of a retired terrorist, his brain packed in an electric fog of cocaine. His

erstwhile band of thugs remain scattered through Haitian society, popping up every so often to commit robbery and homicide.” When he fled to the U.S., the FRAPH chieftain was briefly detained by the INS; his being set free perhaps had something to do with the fact that—as he likes to boast—he was on the payroll of the CIA (which, incidentally, conducted a campaign to try to discredit Aristide as a mentally unbalanced radical).

When he returned to Haiti in '94, President Aristide unfortunately made promises to the people that were beyond his capacity to deliver on. Moreover, though supplying considerable aid, the U.S., ambivalent at best about Aristide, did nothing to support his populist and redistributionist agenda—and, according to some, actively sought to subvert that agenda. Nor did Aristide have time to accomplish much; a U.S. condition of his return was that he not seek to regain the three lost years (and the Haitian constitution bars consecutive presidential terms). His successor, René Préval, though a more practical man, has not been very effective either. Long at loggerheads with an opposition-dominated (and obstructionist) parliament, Préval eventually dismissed that body; in effect, he rules by decree—such rule as there is. But with no budgets being passed, foreign aid and loans have declined sharply. The government essentially is in a state of paralysis. Though Préval was Aristide's choice to succeed him, they are rivals now—partly because Préval has been more willing than Aristide to accede to the severe austerity measures demanded by the U.S., the IMF and the World Bank as conditions of aid and loans. In Aristide's view, these measures—such as privatization and the virtual abolition of tariffs—will in the long run benefit only Haiti's tiny elite.

In Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, formal unemployment is close to 70 percent, and 85 percent of the population live in dire poverty. The illiteracy and infant mortality rates are extremely high, and in Port-au-Prince alone, 4,000 homeless children wander the streets. Last summer Lafanmi Selavi, the center for street children that Aristide runs (and which he writes about in this issue), was taken over by a well-armed group of young men for more than 12 hours—until police firing tear gas forced most of them to surrender; about 30 were arrested but some got away. The attackers claimed that Aristide had promised them jobs and had lied to them. A spokesman for Aristide said the youths were “gangsters” who had been paid to smear Aristide's reputation. Perhaps so. But some of them were graduates of the center—and in any case the incident is illustrative of Haiti's economic plight.

Elections, both parliamentary and municipal, are scheduled for later this month in Haiti, but it will be a near miracle if they take place. They have been postponed several times already. In fact, the country has not had a parliamentary election since April 1997—an election that was marred by charges of vote fraud, and for which only about 7 percent of the voters showed up.

But despite their increasing disillusionment with democracy, the Haitian people remain hopeful. There will be a presidential election in December, and Aristide—now a husband and a father, by the way—will probably be a candidate; he is eligible this time. And though his movement has fractured and his following is smaller than it once was, he will probably win. A passionate man, Aristide sometimes comes out with provocative rhetoric he later regrets. “I have serious gaps here and there,” he himself has said. But for all his flaws, Aristide may very well be Haiti’s best hope—especially a mellower, less mercurial and less confrontational Aristide. After all, he is—quoting Shacochois—“the only Haitian president who ever attempted to lead his people out of darkness: the only Haitian chief of state who ever seemed to display an ideology beyond self.”