

HAITI: A NATION IN CRISIS

Five months after Leslie Manigat's installation as President of Haiti, what are the chances for democracy?

BY CARY HECTOR

JEAN-CLAUDE DUVALIER'S flight from Haiti in the early hours of 7 February 1986, a departure facilitated by the good offices of both Washington and Paris, symbolized the collapse of almost thirty years of Duvalier family dictatorship – “hereditary” since 1971, when Papa Doc died. From 1974 on, the Duvalier administration had been subject to demands for “liberalization” both from inside and outside the country, and was severely shaken during the 1980s by a growth in popular opposition as well as conflict within the regime itself.

The years 1983 to 1985 saw a crisis that had two main ingredients: on the one hand since mid-1970 the government had found itself entangled in irreconcilable contradictions as a result of its counterfeit policy of “liberalization-democratization”; on the other was the widespread opposition to the Duvalier regime, accompanied by spontaneous calls for democratization by ever larger sections of the population.

This crisis came to a head in the summer of 1985 when the regime, which was by then almost at the end of its tether, held a popular referendum to set up a supposedly new government which would be partly parliamentary and partly presidential, all the while retaining the “presidency for life” article of the constitution. This manoeuvre boomeranged because it was so blatantly obvious in its intent, and in fact the tactic hastened the collapse of the dictatorship. It seems generally agreed that the beginning of the end for the regime was in November 1985 when the death of four school children during demonstrations in the city of Gonaïves

provoked a succession of popular uprisings.

What followed is well known: by late January and early February 1986 the game was up, particularly when the US government did an about-face on its earlier policy and decided to increase the pressure on Duvalier by withholding half the economic aid it had allotted to Haiti.

But there is more to it than that. At the root of these events is a crisis in Haitian society. After having been collectively gagged by their institutions for many years, and subjected to a system of state terrorism, Haitian society finally exploded.

There is a catchphrase used to describe Haiti – “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” The label is backed up by the standard socio-economic indicators: an illiteracy rate of seventy to eighty percent; a life expectancy at birth of fifty-four years; an infant mortality rate of 120 per 1000; and an average per capita income of about \$300 a year.

On the other hand, it is significant that the popular movement of 7 February 1986 was concerned from the very outset with doing more than simply redressing economic injustice. Large sections of the population, who had become aware of the stark contrast between their own utter poverty and the high standard of living of the privileged – five to ten percent of the population controlled fifty to eighty percent of the wealth – took to heart the expression: *fok kat-la-rebat* – “the cards should be reshuffled and dealt again.” The expression is revealing for it means that history, their history,

had gone astray and must be put back on track; a view that was by no means shared by all the various leading figures active in the process of transition from Duvalier.

THE DUVALIER DICTATORSHIP COLLAPSED as the result of actions taken by a variety of political forces:

The series of widespread popular uprisings which took place after the “Hunger Riots” in 1984; the action of the Catholic Church – particularly through the intervention of the *Ti-Legliz* (clerical societies) – in helping promote self-awareness and organization, and in acting as a sounding board for popular protest; and the youth movement, which challenged and defied authority by means of marches, protests, open letters, strikes and other similar activities.

In addition to these major forces there were a few other important ingredients worth noting. Due to the nature of the evolving popular movement – its fragmented leadership, its regional tendencies and its sporadic activities – the leaders of the existing “internal opposition” (Grégoire Eugène, Sylvio Claude, Hubert de Ronceray) showed themselves incapable of controlling it. Internal rivalries between those of different clans, different political views and different generations were causing the Duvalier regime to self-destruct. And the continuous criticism and denunciation of the regime voiced by the opposition groups abroad served to keep international public opinion alive to what was going on in Haiti and undermined the government's credibility.

It is now known that the Haitian Armed Forces (the FAD'H) was a decisive factor in the changeover from Duvalier. The Armed Forces

not only initiated “operation-departure” (Jean-Claude's exodus) but also set up the National Governing Council (CNG) that replaced him.

In the end, other political actors subsequently came to the forefront of the political scene as contenders for the new positions of power. Among these were political leaders who had returned from living abroad or from exile – Leslie Manigat among them, spokesmen for the new political parties (Konakom, the Group of 57 etc.), as well as labour leaders and leaders of the peasant movements.

FROM THE MOMENT THE TRANSITION government took office it was faced with popular demands which dominated the political scene right through to the abortive elections of 29 November 1987:

The dismantling of the Duvalier regime (“de-Duvalierization”) – the removal of those who had been principally responsible for carrying out its policy in the various state institutions, and their eventual prosecution for corruption; the breaking up of the Tonton Macoutes – that is to say the legal and effective dissolution of the Volunteers for National Security (the VSN as the Macoutes were called originally); a general rise in the standard of living of the majority to be achieved by such urgent measures as lowering prices for staples, increasing the minimum wage, reducing taxes and creating new jobs; and the creation of democratic institutions which would ensure the election of a legitimate government by universal suffrage.

The effect of these far-reaching basic demands was to make the