

Measuring the change in Haiti from one Duvalier to another

By Renaud Bernardin

In April 1971, after naming his son to succeed him as "President for life" of the Republic, François Duvalier died in his bed. For 14 years he had imposed an unrelentingly cruel dictatorship on Haiti. A popular uprising was expected, and in order to prevent it the United States sent warships on patrol just outside Haitian territorial waters. The uprising did not take place. Brought to power by his father, Jean-Claude Duvalier held on to it with the help of the American State Department, and the U.S. Ambassador, Klinton Knox, became known as the power behind the throne. The official and clandestine masters of the state skilfully proceeded to mollify and dupe public opinion by building a propaganda campaign round the "liberalization" and "openness" of the new regime. The Government is now changing its tune; "Jean-Claudisme" is the new watchword on everybody's lips. By changing its name, has "Duvalierism" simply donned a new mask, or has it actually undergone a transformation?

Observers of François Duvalier's Government usually stressed only its dictatorial exercise of power. No serious effort was made to penetrate the reality behind the nightmarish, exotic and folklorist image of Haiti that Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians* projected round the world. This pessimistic view of the Haitian situation, fostered by charitable organizations in their attempts to alleviate the effects of Government waste and corruption, masked the efforts by the Haitian people to free themselves from Duvalier's bloody tyranny. Instead of taking account of the

strong desire for change underlying this unequal struggle, commentators merely lamented the revolting consequences of the dictatorship.

At the time of Duvalier's death, Haiti was known only for the horrible crimes of the *Tontons Macoutes* and its deplorable economic situation — it was the only country in the western hemisphere rated among the world's 25 poorest nations. François Duvalier was a psychological obstacle to large-scale international aid, for it was a matter of record that his Government suffered from unbridled corruption and that he allocated more funds to the machinery of repression than to the departments of health, education and agriculture combined. As a result, other governments shied away from too close an involvement.

Although the horror of tyranny had caused isolation, Duvalier ensured that his country continued to play the role of producer and supplier of raw materials and consumer of industrial goods — the role assigned to the entire Third World in the international division of production activities. He had no desire whatever to break with the liberal West. This was well understood by the defenders of the Haitian status quo, who though they would have preferred a more honourable associate, were nevertheless satisfied with a reliable ally. Duvalier was initially given emergency assistance to remain in power, then a little more help so as to obviate any threats of changing political allegiance. Finally, studies were undertaken, and their conclusions would have justified the massive aid he was clamouring for.

His death came at the right moment and helped to consolidate a government that, though clearly reprehensible, was considered by many to represent stability in the Caribbean area, which had already been shaken by the death of Trujillo, the 1965 intervention of the U.S. Marines in the Dominican Republic, and the establishment of assertive, nationalist governments in Trinidad and Tobago and in Jamaica. Jean-Claude Duvalier was con-

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