

The American occupation succeeded neither in changing the system nor in transforming Haitian political culture. It reduced the level of conflict within the ruling elites but failed to deliver them from their demons, eliminate their predilection for dictatorship or restore the rule of law. The *pax americana* lasted for thirty years, until 1946.

The recovery of national sovereignty began in 1930 with the re-establishment of Parliament, and was completed in 1934 with the departure of the last contingents of Marines. Apart from a brief period when an attempt was made to establish parliamentary democracy after the general elections of 1930, power was exercised in the traditional manner under the iron rule of a dictator drawing his strength from an Americanized army – one that was disciplined, hierarchical and obedient.

As in the past, no opposition was tolerated. Opponents of the regime were driven from parliament and the independent press was beaten into submission. The government controlled the entire electoral machinery, and the two legislative chambers contented themselves with rubber-stamping decisions of the executive. One difference from the century before was that the presidents were now civilians recruited from the ranks of the professions – almost all of them lawyers. In the office of president appeared a succession of five lawyers, a soldier with a law degree, and one doctor. And the government of the doctor – François (Papa Doc) Duvalier – proved to be the bloodiest and most destructive Haiti had experienced since 1804.

During the American-imposed peace, successive governments were able to carry out the affairs of state calmly and the country was relatively free of turmoil. With the end of World War II came a thaw, and notions of civil liberty, democracy, social justice, and human rights began to gain ground. Nourished by these ideas, a large opposition movement swept into power in January 1946 – an event that marked a genuine break with the past. For the first time since 1930, a government was overthrown by the popular will.



THE RESULT WAS A GREAT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHURNING giving rise to new forces: a trade union movement, professional associations, and an array of political groupings. On a political level, the upper middle class began its rise to power by noisily denouncing what it called the exclusiveness of the mulatto bourgeoisie, and by posing as the champion of the middle class and the black masses. Their black-power ideology was fused with the nationalism fashionable under the US occupation in order to justify claims to a position of dominance in the State, as well as admittance into the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

The movement gave birth to the government of President Estimé, which lasted from 1946 to 1950. But hopes were soon dashed. From this new crop of politicians, whether advocates of black power or not, emerged speculators and criminals who scandalously enriched themselves. When challenged by opposition forces, President Estimé succumbed to the temptation of a constitutional coup in order to have himself re-elected. He then fell victim himself, in May 1950, to a coup d'état organized by Colonel Paul Magloire. Taking over the presidency after thoroughly manipulated elections, Magloire was himself forced to resign six years later under the pressure of widespread popular opposition.

In 1957, political interest and unrest flared anew: the number of political parties mushroomed, newspapers appeared, and the island was awash in radio programmes. However civil war threatened, and the ensuing crisis engulfed five provisional governments before a military junta finally cleared the decks, enabling Papa Doc to defeat his principal rival, Louis Déjoie, in largely fraudulent presidential and legislative elections.

The political struggles of 1946, 1950 and 1957 proved that political power was held at the pleasure of the heads of the army. Duvalier pondered this, no doubt, and moved quickly to neutralize the military in order to ensure a lengthy stay in power. He bribed officers, “macoutized”* the army, and created his own militia and parallel police force loyal only to him.

*Papa Doc Duvalier organized a private military force, the Tontons Macoutes, to suppress his opponents.

Duvalier did not stop there. He destabilized all traditional centres of political power in Haiti through unprecedented demonstrations of force. Besides taming Parliament and assassinating his opponents, he defied the Americans, took on the Roman Catholic hierarchy and subjected the middle class to unsurpassed levels of repression. Finally, he dismantled the democratic organizations and labour unions that had sprung up during the movement of 1956–57 and terrorized the peasantry by unleashing the large landowners.

Under Duvalier, personal dictatorship took on an unprecedented criminal character. As we now know all too well, the results were catastrophic: thousands of dead and disappeared, social and political collapse, the spreading of corruption and mediocrity throughout society, the dismissal of qualified public servants, and mass emigration. Haiti lost an enormous number of trained personnel and young people – the best and brightest of an entire generation. Jean-Claude Duvalier succeeded his father, doing little to correct the disaster.



IN THE END, DUVALIERISM REPRESENTS A CRITICAL MOMENT IN the long history of a country that seems devoted to the development of underdevelopment. It was under the “macoute” regime between 1975 and 1986 that the most socially mobile and vigorous democratic movement in recent history took root, raising political awareness among Haitians, and encouraging democratic ideas. It was back room manoeuvring and public demonstrations involving the entire country in a campaign of sustained pressure and mass resistance, that finally destabilized Jean-Claude Duvalier’s government.

Unlike some earlier changes in government, the political succession of 1986 plunged the whole society into crisis. Haiti not only woke up from a long dictatorship, but it began to understand the historic failure of the bourgeoisie and the ruling elite to rise to the challenges presented by development and democracy. The present crisis is aggravated by this failure, and by the fragility of the democratic movement. The old ways, represented by the Duvalierists and the entire range of forces opposed to change, are not quite dead; while the new ways, nurtured in the institutions of civil society and democratic political parties, have not yet succeeded in asserting themselves.

The present predicament can be attributed largely to the disunity of the democratic movement in a society that has few points of reference and has lost its traditional methods of settling conflict. The usual supreme authority, the army, has disintegrated; the state is crumbling, and the ongoing crisis at the centre has cleared the way for all sorts of gangsters. To the general anti-dictatorial anger of the population, the impotent State responds with whatever is expedient. Anti-democratic elements, clinging to their privileges, respond with banditry and terror.

TO THE GREAT COST AND ANGUISH OF THE COUNTRY THE ORGANIZED democratic movement remains crippled by a lack of cohesion and strategic vision. Meanwhile, the most resolute people are also among the most criminal of the anti-democratic elements. The explosiveness of the elections to be held in December stems from the determination of the Duvalierists – seeing the advanced state of decay of the central authority and the wrangling that undermines the democratic forces – to act against the clear aspirations of the population.

The interests of various social and political camps, and the international context, would seem to indicate that the “macoute” dictatorship has no chance of returning to power. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that democracy will easily triumph. Under current conditions, successful elections represent the first basic step on the path to democracy; even if they succeed, the largest task remains to be accomplished. Democratic forces must bring together a national movement capable of mobilizing the nation’s resources to tackle the problems of democratization and development. □