

HAITI'S LONG UNHAPPY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

The hopes of many Haitians are riding on the outcome of national elections set for December.

BY CLAUDE MOÏSE



HAITI IS AN ASTONISHING COUNTRY WHICH AROUSES MIXED feelings of admiration and sorrow. It gained national independence in 1804, at a time when most of the Americas were still European colonies, and yet today, after a turbulent history, its level of human and social development can only be described as disastrous. In addition to bankruptcy, Haiti must contend with political repression, widespread corruption, contempt for human life and personal freedom, and the continuing exodus of its people to nearby islands and the large cities of Europe and North America.

The fall of Jean Claude Duvalier in February 1986 raised hopes that Haiti would rediscover the path to dignity, justice and democracy. However, since the dictator fled, observers and citizens alike have been further discouraged by a seemingly interminable transition period marked by violence, coups d'état, shortages, decay of public infrastructure and an inability to establish civil institutions. Anyone acquainted with Haiti's history might well be tempted to view the present situation as a tragic repetition of its tumultuous past – an echo of the many misfortunes that plagued the island throughout the nineteenth century.

HAITI WAS BORN IN VIOLENCE. THE EUROPEANS WHO FOLLOWED CHRISTOPHER Columbus in 1492, slaughtered the indigenous people, and repopulated the island with slaves from Africa. Under the impulse of burgeoning European capitalism, the land's resources were exploited to the hilt. Thus the foundations were laid for the colonial, slave-owning, racist society within which Haiti incubated for three centuries, until the general upheaval of the 1789 French revolution.

Between 1789 and 1804, white colonists, freed slaves, representatives of colonial power, poor whites and black slaves, struggled to preserve established privileges or gain new rights. Revolts, insurrections, civil wars, foreign campaigns and wars of independence led to the overthrow of colonial rule and Haiti emerged as an independent nation in 1804.

With independence, the victorious coalition of freemen from colonial times, the newly-free elite created by the revolutionary wars and liberated slaves, inherited the task of constructing the new state. Their first obligation was the preservation of Haiti's independence, but there were other challenges: a trade embargo imposed by France, putting the country's economy back on its feet, sharing out colonial wealth and guaranteeing civil liberties. In short, a new social contract had to be written.

Faced with these challenges, the "sacred union" formed against the French under the leadership of General Dessalines, the first Haitian head of state, began to fall apart almost immediately. While all social classes were united in striving towards the consolidation of national independence, they could not agree on economic and social issues. A power struggle had already broken out during the 1791–1804 revolutionary period between two factions of the ruling class. Now the farmers, former slaves, laid claim to land and showed little inclination to working for new masters.

To this background of nineteenth century Haitian political history we must add the danger of war and the threat of attack by the former colonists. Repeated peasant revolts reflected discontent in the country-

side, but the conflicts and power struggles within the ruling classes were the major cause of Haiti's chronic political instability. The assassination of Dessalines by generals from the south of the country marked the beginning of this struggle. It continued with the outbreak of civil war and the partition of the country into a northern state and the Republic of the East and South (1807–1820). Haiti suffered insurrections, conspiracies and plots, civil wars, and *pronunciamentos* (army coups d'état) until the American occupation in 1915.

MILITARISM IN HAITI IS A LEGACY OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WARS; THE army attended the birth of the nation. It was the military which advanced the nationalist, anti-slavery cause and coordinated the political struggle. The army was the guarantor of the interests of the nation, particularly of the emerging oligarchies, and provided a natural incubator for leaders of the new state. Through the nineteenth century, twenty-four of Haiti's twenty-six presidents were soldiers.

The role of the army became even more central because governments created by coups believed they could survive only by eradicating their opponents. Adversaries, real or potential, had to be kept under close surveillance, and were often driven into exile or physically eliminated. A vicious cycle of repression and conspiracy resulted in irreconcilable government and opposition views. In fact, an opposition as such did not exist in the Haitian system.

Haiti's level of economic and social development deteriorated over time, with problems getting worse on all fronts: population growth, over-exploitation of land and resources, declining productivity, a deteriorating public infrastructure, and financial anarchy. The State existed only during the short lulls between "revolutions." Between 1913 and 1915 the National Assembly elected four presidents; three of whom came to power by *pronunciamentos* and were retroactively approved by the Assembly. It was then that Haiti – like Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua – fell like ripe fruit into the hands of an American imperialism eager to ensure stability in the Caribbean basin and to extend its domination over Central America.



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HAITI WAS OCCUPIED BY THE US MARINES FROM 1915 TO 1934, breaking the cycle of coups d'état and scattering the traditional army. With the collapse of the ruling classes' political structure, the Americans imported their own solutions, and imposed their own peace. They had the existing National Assembly elect a new government, overhaul the regime and restore the administrative apparatus. The Americans replaced the army with a police force which, after battle hardening in the struggle against peasant guerrillas from 1915 to 1920, became a central pillar of government authority after the occupation. Under American tutelage, the government was stabilized and political turmoil greatly reduced by the simple expedient of replacing parliament with a Council of State, the composition of which was left in the hands of the executive.