

Haiti's Massive Protests Are a Repudiation of Authoritarianism and US Intervention

Via [Europe Solidaire](#)

Since February 14, thousands of Haitians have taken to the streets every weekend in the capitol of Port-au-Prince and elsewhere to protest President Jovenel Moïse's refusal to abdicate power. Moïse, who was elected with the backing of the United States in November 2016, has exploited a supposed loophole in Haiti's constitution stating that the duration of the president's term is five years. The constitution clarifies that terms must begin in February, but Moïse insists that his election in November – the delay stemming from previous US meddling – entitles him to more time in office. Thousands of Haitians disagree, but their demonstrations have been met with police violence, leaving dozens dead.

The rallying call of Haitian demonstrators has been, "Where is the Petrocaribe money?" Ostensibly a simple question of accounting, it points to the depth of corruption in Haiti under Moïse and his predecessor, Michel Martelly, who have squandered or stolen billions of dollars' worth of oil and funds provided by Venezuela as part of Petrocaribe, a program meant to support regional development.

The combination of corruption and repression has critics branding Moïse and Martelly "neo-Duvalierists," in reference to Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the father-son dictators who ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1986. The Duvalierists stand in contrast to Fanmi Lavalas, a social-democratic party founded by Jean-Bertrand Aristide,

who became Haiti's first democratically elected president in 1991 – before being deposed by a US-backed coup later that year.

Jacobin contributor Arvind Dilawar spoke with Kim Ives, an editor at [Haiti Liberte](#), about the current protests, the government's brutal response, and the United States' ongoing complicity in the repression of the Haitian people. Their conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

AD | What was the spark that set off the current protests?

KI | The latest protests stem from Moïse not stepping down on February 7, 2021, as Article 134.2 of Haiti's 1987 Constitution dictates. He had been making it clear that he was not going to step down in the months leading up to the date, but it came to pass in a very belligerent way. The people did not pour out on February 7 precisely, expecting maybe that he would step down at some point, but he did not. Every weekend since, the demonstrations are growing in size, and the tone is becoming sharper.

There is a little contradiction in Article 134, which says that the president will serve five years. But there is a clarification in 134.2 that, in fact, he will have to start his term on February 7 of the year of the election. So even though the election took place on November 20, 2016, that constitutional article insists that he start the clock on February 7.

There have been constant demonstrations throughout the presidency of Moïse, as there were for his predecessor, Michel Martelly. There were on the order of [eighty-four demonstrations per month](#) during the end of 2020, which is saying something, given that COVID was in place. So we could say that it wasn't exactly "the spark," but the straw that broke the camel's back.

I don't see these demonstrations subsiding as they have

periodically in the past. Heightened demonstrations have been taking place since July 2018, when Moïse had to drastically hike fuel prices in the country due to the fact that Petrocaribe oil and money were no longer flowing into the country. The IMF, who had to step in to fill the breach, said, you have to hike the gas prices or you're not going to get a loan. So they did. And that really began the past two and a half years of demonstrations on an almost weekly, if not daily, basis.

AD | Are there larger structural problems that have kept the Haitian people seething?

KI | The Martelly government was shoehorned in by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in January 2011, when she traveled to Haiti to basically read the Riot Act to then president René Préval and tell him that he had to put Martelly in the runoff. He had come in third, according to the Electoral Council, so she overrode the Electoral Council and said, no, Martelly is going to be in the runoff, and he won.

That marked the beginning of neo-Duvalierist rule in the country, after twenty years of alternating Lavalas [party] and semi-Lavalas rule, between Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his sometimes-called "twin," [René] Préval. The US ushered in this neo-Duvalierist group, who brought with it all the hallmarks of Duvalierism: corruption, repression, lavish excess, complete insensitivity to the people's demands, and complete openness to US, French, and Canadian imperialism doing as they wish in the country. In fact, that was their slogan: "Haiti is open for business" – which, not coincidentally, was the slogan of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier in the early 1980s, before his overthrow. The people of Haiti have essentially been demonstrating since the arrival of the Haitian Bald-Headed party, as Martelly called his party.

This is the backdrop to all the demonstrations, which have been against corruption and repression, primarily. But the

demonstrations became more ferocious and larger in 2018, because the spigot that the Petrocaribe fund that Venezuela was providing Haiti was turned off. At one point, Martelly's prime minister said that 94 percent of the government's special projects were being funded by the Petrocaribe fund. When that money all disappeared, Moïse, who had made all sorts of fantastic promises to the people – that they would, in the space of eighteen months, have 24-7 electricity, etc. – was left with an even more angry population.

AD | How bad is corruption in Haiti?

KI | The largest part of it, which really has become the background for this movement, is the money stolen from the Petrocaribe fund. This became the call shortly after the gas hike in July 2018, which began on social media after an artist put up a picture of himself saying, where is the Petrocaribe money?

The Venezuelans gave Haiti \$4 billion worth of cheap oil, about twenty thousand barrels a day. Haiti only had to pay 60 percent upfront, and 40 percent went into this capital fund, which was supposed to pay for clinics and hospitals and schools and roads and anything that would benefit the Haitian people.

But instead of being used for that, it was pilfered and misspent and embezzled into a myriad of fake projects – from invisible stadiums to fake food distribution programs to fake home-building programs, etc. On the order of \$1.7 billion disappeared in this manner, by the Martelly government. That corruption, that embezzlement of the Petrocaribe funds, is the rock that is sticking in the craw of the Haitian people.

It should be said that Haiti also reportedly received some \$13 billion worth of funds for earthquake rebuilding. Ironically, they used in Haiti the same slogan they're using [in Washington] today, "Build Back Better," but it did not go to

building back better. Not only was it frittered away and intercepted by various middlemen and NGOs, but what did get through to Haiti also seems to have been misspent by the Martelly government, which received the lion's share of that as well.

That, though, has not been as much in the people's consciousness as the Petrocaribe funds, which was a more appreciated solidarity fund than the earthquake fund, which was headed by Bill Clinton – which Haitians felt, almost from the get-go, was probably not going to end up doing much for them.

AD | How has the Haitian government responded to the protests?

KI | Very fierce repression. Moïse, in November, returned to service [Léon Charles](#), who was in charge of the Haitian National Police right after the coup d'état against Aristede on February 29, 2004. His reign was characterized by very bloody and fierce repression against the rebellious masses of, primarily, Cité Soleil and Bel Air, Port-au-Prince's two largest slums. Moïse brought him back, and he has lived up to his past record – and has even been given new powers. Moïse, who has been ruling by decree since January 13, 2020, has also decreed a new Gestapo force, the National Intelligence Agency, which gives its agents the power not just to spy on the public, but to arrest them, and even kill them, because its agents are armed. On top of that, they cannot be prosecuted, they have complete immunity.

This is a force very similar to the Tonton Macoute of the Duvalier dictatorship. The Tonton Macoute had the same extrajudicial powers. They were the eyes, ears, and fists of the Duvalier dictatorship and allowed it to stay in power for three decades.

That repression has been on display in the past weeks. Dozens of demonstrators have been killed in the past months of

demonstrations. Sometimes they're hit by tear gas grenades in the head, and others have been shot by police forces who apparently act as snipers, shooting into the demonstrators.

In addition, another decree made it an act of terrorism to carry out certain forms of demonstration and street protest. This gives the so-called legal framework for the severe police repression – even though the decrees themselves are completely illegal, because, as even the US State Department has said in their dismay over the optics of this, the decrees are supposed to be used for caretaking questions and not for creating legislative initiatives of this nature.

On top of it, part of this decree mania that Moïse has exhibited has been to not only form his own new, handpicked Electoral Council, which he proposes will hold the election in the coming year, but to rewrite the constitution. Again, these are all tactics that Francois Duvalier in the early 1960s employed to establish his presidency for life.

AD | What do you think will be the results of the current protests?

KI | I will be surprised if Moïse can stay in power until February 7, 2022, as he intends to. This really is the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object right now.

The US seems to be having a little bit of doubt. Julie Chung, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemispheric Affairs, tweeted last month that she was alarmed by the authoritarian and undemocratic moves of the government. But they stopped short of saying that they were pulling any support. They seem to be keeping the same basic policy that the Trump administration had, which is to encourage Moïse to hold elections – which he was supposed to have held in 2018 and '19 – and pass the sash and repopulate the parliament and the mayor's offices throughout Haiti. (There are right now only eleven elected officials in the country: Moïse and ten

senators.)

The Biden government has certainly got to be seeing the size of these demonstrations. The other factor is that, as the demonstrations grow in size and ferocity, the US Congress is putting increasing pressure on the Biden administration, saying that Moïse should step down and be replaced by a provisional government.

Will all that pressure push the US to remove him? The reasons why they might balk are because the last time there was a civilian transition, the president elected was Aristide, a liberation theologian priest and anti-imperialist that the US did not approve of in any way and carried out a coup d'état against him eight months after his inauguration in 1991. Secondly, the very important role that Haiti is playing in the anti-Venezuela campaign of Washington. For those two reasons, they may feel that they should just ride out the storm, continue to pump money to him.

The other thing we have to fear, especially with the hawks and warmongers who are now populating the Biden administration, is a third foreign military intervention in Haiti in the past thirty years – of course, probably dressed up as a “humanitarian” intervention. This would be like throwing a rock into a hornet’s nest, because the Haitian people, I can say without any equivocation, are fed up with foreign military occupations.