

Ayiti: occupation or freedom?

Aba lenperyalis! Viv larevolisyon!

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

February 14, 2007

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Haiti makes it to the news only when there's turmoil or a disaster. But for most of the year, the silent drama of the poorest country of the Western hemisphere is conveniently ignored by the world. Last year, on the 13th of February, Haiti made it to the news as the masses took to the streets to denounce electoral fraud and defend the most popular candidate in an election with over 50 presidential candidates that were nothing but a bunch of makouts¹ and businessmen devoid of any political proposal. This candidate was René Garcia Préval, former prime minister of Aristide (1990) and former president (1995–2000). He was seen by the masses as a figure they associated with the populist Aristide, up to this day the most popular Haitian politician.

Usually, elections in Haiti are seen at best with indifference by most of the population. What was special about this particular elections is the context in which Haiti is now: since the coup orchestrated by the CIA and approved by France in 2004, that resulted in a bloodshed at hands of the former makouts, armed and trained in the Dominican Republic by their yankee master, and the kidnapping of Aristide, Haiti has been under foreign military occupation, first by Canada, USA, France and Chile, and since June 2004, by the MINUSTAH, a UN mission of blue helmets. This occupation has been continuously denounced for various reasons:

- Though supposedly a peace-keeping mission, some 10,000 people have been killed since their deployment and 35,000 women have been raped. Not only they have failed to provide security to the population from the right-wing paramilitaries (makouts) but they have taken an active part in the political elimination of prominent militants from groups opposed to the government installed by the coup or loyal to Aristide. There have been widely-reported punitive actions against whole neighbourhoods like the recent massacre in Sité Soley on the 22nd of December when nearly 40 people were massacred.
- The composition of the mission consists of armies that have an appalling human rights record, such as Jordan, Nepal, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Pakistan, etc. So the above-mentioned participation in massacres and rapes should not surprise anyone really. Even a former agent of Pinochet's political police (CNI) got to be, for a brief period, head of the MINUSTAH armed forces.
- Any occupation is an obnoxious presence in one's country. But it is all too clear in this case that what MINUSTAH is about is being an armed wing of the Haitian bourgeoisie and of their imperialist masters in the absence of a local army (let us remember that back in 1995 Aristide dissolved the army for its role as coup-mongers). This is a very worrying sign, because it has set a precedent for the first time of Latin American countries invading another one, demonstrating a new modus operandi of imperialism in the region by actively mobilizing its allies in the region when unable to cope with a new military pressure, since the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. But as well, the occupation is showing the changes in the balance of world power, with the decline of the absolute hegemony of the US and the ascendance of new regional powers: Brazil, in the Latin American case (they want to show through this occupation their credentials to gain a permanent seat on the UN's Security Council). I would say certainly that we are in the presence of an act of sub-imperialism taken to a parody with the meeting in Lima on the 12th of February, where

¹ Name given to a supporter of the former dictator Duvalier, who created a political police called Tontons macoutes back in the late 50s early 60s that spread terror until the fall of his son in 1986. Up to this day, the former makouts act as right wing paramilitaries.

the Latin American governments with troops in Haiti met to discuss Haiti with the same arrogance as the US would regarding the Middle East.

So when the people came out to protest last February it was not just a simple electoral affair: they wanted to denounce the occupation and the oppressive de facto government. They saw an alternative in Preval and they saw this vote as a protest. They put him in power with a clear mandate: an end to the occupation and a change in social policies to meet the needs of the vast majority of the population, that live in abject poverty.

PREVAL IN POWER

However, since Preval took office in May last year, he has consistently disappointed bitterly everyone who had any hope in him. Basically, he has not challenged the occupation, the most sensitive issue for Haitian people and, not happy with that, after his electoral victory was admitted by a still-wary bourgeoisie he toured Brazil, Argentina and Chile congratulating the rulers from those countries for the “splendid” work MINUSTAH has done as a putschist army in Haiti (I wonder if the girls raped by the blue helmets interviewed recently by the BBC would agree). He has not even criticised the notorious abuses and excesses of MINUSTAH, let alone demand respect for the self-determination of the Haitians. Instead, he has loudly asked for the troops to remain. Furthermore, after releasing a handful of high profile political prisoners, Preval has kept the bulk of them (around 1,000) still rotting in Port-au-Prince dungeons. Despite the numerous protests of the Haitian people and the numerous abuses and massacres they have been subjected to at the hands of the occupation forces, they seem to have come to stay for a while...

But Preval has been as subservient of the occupation forces as of the capitalist class. Haiti has traditionally had a peasant economy; notwithstanding that, the politics of the last 30 years have increasingly deteriorated the peasant economy and have produced a massive exodus from the countryside to the slums in the big cities, where the population dwells in inhuman conditions, starving and living with unemployment. Many factors contribute to this: first, the fact that the Haitian State has long relied on heavy export tariffs, that are usually passed on from the merchant and the middle-men to the peasant. Secondly, since the adjustment measures pushed by the IMF and implemented during the first Preval government, tariffs for imports have decreased to a ludicrous level (3% for rice), ruining the local peasants that have to compete with subsidised farmers in the US. As a result, dependence on foreign food imports has increased and so has hunger. Also, the lack of electricity makes around 70% of the population dependent on charcoal and this is a major factor in erosion. But above all, the concentration of land into the hands of a few has destroyed the old peasant economy, has left numerous acres of land idle and is a major cause for the lack of incentive for the peasant. Yet, not a single word from the government about Agrarian reform, not a single policy to effectively address this major issues that are plunging the majority into desperation.

With the exodus to the big cities, the number of unemployed has been on steady rise. It is among this milieu that numerous local and foreign sweatshops do fabulous business by exploiting Haitian labour for US\$ 1.85 a day, with no safety conditions and in extenuating long hours. This has not created any kind of Caribbean Taiwan as was promised back in the ‘70s, and nor has it solved the problem of unemployment. All this fake development has done is to increase the dependency and vulnerability of Haiti’s economy and bring wages and conditions to the ground.

Sweatshop workers in the Free Trade Zone of Ouanaminthe, near the Dominican border, were brutalised for attempting to unionise and were, at some point, forced to work at gunpoint during 2004. However, we saw the government of Preval all excited about the HOPE Act approved by the US parliament in December, that allows some Haitian products (mainly from the textiles industry) to enter the US market with little or no tariff. Great news for the bourgeoisie. As for the workers, we don't expect it to improve their lives even a bit. The government insists that it will create new jobs; but it has been proved that this kind of investment not only fails to create jobs, but depresses the general conditions of life. As well, this is an all too hypocritical line of argument, considering the efforts of Preval to further shrink the public sector and his reluctance to deal with the peasant crisis.

PREVAL AND THE DISCOURSE OF INSECURITY

Often the news about Haiti is deliberately distorted in order to conceal the true nature of the exploitation and oppression underlying the crisis. The problem of "insecurity" has grabbed most people's attention over the last couple of years. No one talks any more about poverty and exclusion. The biggest sole problem in Haiti seems to be insecurity. And insecurity can "only" be fought efficiently with an iron fist.

We denounce all this hype around insecurity to be politically motivated. To be honest, there were over 30 kidnappings in January. That is a lot, no doubt. But this problem completely pales in the face of the bigger issues of Haitian society. While everyone talks of the "bandits", no one talks about real unemployment bordering 80%, no one talks about the non-existent social services, about infant mortality. Haiti is a society full of misery and deprivation, in which conditions of life are just desperate. Criminality is only the expression of those factors and, naturally, it is a problem felt mainly by the tiny privileged classes of Haiti, who really don't mind if the poor starve, as long as they don't come to rob in their neighbourhoods. But faithful to his bourgeois politics, Preval gives the rich a wink and promises them a heavy hand in solving their insecurity headache, while neglecting the problems that affect the vast majority of the population – that are the source of criminality in the first place.

Unable to understand society beyond repression and the "respect for order" (that is to say, the rich will remain rich, you starve but we want to see you smiling), their answer is purely military and the recent incursions of MINUSTAH in some popular neighbourhoods prove his contempt for the popular masses who put him into power and his willingness to serve the interests of the tiny oligarchy. He seems quite ready to fill the already overcrowded jails with more of them "bleeding bandits", so the rich are not disturbed in their privileged lifestyle, like an island in an ocean of misery.

But not only has the discourse of insecurity proved useful to distract attention from the most pressing needs of the Haitian people: it has also been useful as a way to veil naked repression. Not surprisingly, though crime is well known to exist in all of Haitian society (having quite a prominence as an extra-job of the police force), the only neighbourhoods that seem to be systematically targeted by the anti-crime efforts, are those who are in opposition to the occupation or loyal to Aristide. "Gangs" and "bandits" are terms of abuse that could well be synonymous of "opposition" today. Whenever they want to get a popular militant into jail, they just blame him or her of gangsterism and voilà, they can shoot to kill or lock them up and throw away the key.

Certainly the phenomenon of political gangs does exist, but it is completely understandable in the face of the level of violence in that society, in the face of the military occupation and because of the lack of a tradition of a consistent political organisation. Still, it is absolutely misleading to treat all opposition as gangsterism (thus dismissing the legitimacy of resistance) and not to distinguish between the political gangs and the non-political (many of which have been formed by Haitian criminals deported from the US).

As well, there's an absolute double standard when it comes to the discourse of insecurity: insecurity is not poor Haitian kids in the slums of Port-au-Prince being shot by MINUSTAH in the dead of the night; it is not popular organisers being targeted by the makout death squads such as the Lamé Ti Manchet. Insecurity, in their dictionary, means rich or middle-class kids getting kidnapped and that's it. Worst of all is that behind the discourse of "insecurity", all the nostalgic makouts of duvalierism are gathering behind the lead of prominent thug Youri Latortue (nephew of the Latortue, prime minister during the dictatorship of 2004–2006) to demand the reform of the army. They are gathering momentum and they are looking forward to re-establishing the pre-1986 status quo. Preval, by deeds and words (as well as by his silence) has proved to be in the nauseating trench of imperialism and capitalism.

HAITI, THE CRISIS OF THE STATE, THE CRISIS OF REFORMISM

Some say that, given the precedent of the 1990 coup that toppled Aristide, Preval is being cautious and doesn't want to confront openly the dominant block. But Preval cannot be excused. He has not just been cautious: he has obediently and enthusiastically applied the politics of his predecessor. He consciously chose the worst political option ahead of him in the particularly complex political circumstances he faced when elected: being at the centre of the tensions between a bourgeoisie that mistrusted him, with an occupation force that has the last say and with a popular movement pressing for demands of its own as well. Limited as his margin for options was, he did have options but he chose the most reactionary path possible. Right now, he is just the "democratic" and "popular" facade of the occupation and the capitalist plunder of Haiti.

But no matter how wrong the positions taken by Preval are, we feel it would be too simplistic to understand his turns as a mere act of treason. The current situation unequivocally expresses a much deeper crisis: first, of the form of capitalism in Haiti, one of the most unproductive and parasitical we can think of (heavily reliant on cash crops and cheap labour, with no significant production and where every item has to be imported), that has produced an absolutely deformed State that acts as a machine to enrich the parasitical classes of society. Actually, in a country with such a limited internal market, politics have been in many cases the only possible job for the middle and rich sectors of Haitian society. This has been done historically through the indirect taxation of the peasants and more recently through the provision of cheap labour (in the Free Trade Zones) and through open corruption. This last way of getting rich through politics has been exacerbated by the collapse of the precarious and dependant Haitian productive structure. This is too obvious when we see that money laundering, drug trafficking and humanitarian aid play much a bigger role than any productive activity.

Secondly, Haiti has proved the limits of its reformist experience: reformism requires a public sector of economy in order to carry on projects in education, health, etc., that tend to increase standards of life in third world countries. But in Haiti, the room for reformism is extremely

limited, almost non-existent. Everything has been privatised, the economy has collapsed and since the adjustment agreed as a condition for Aristide's return in 1994 (that made Haiti one of the most open economies in the world) there are no conditions necessary for the accumulation of capital to invest in public services. 80% of public services in Haiti are provided by international charity and 65% of this year's budget came from international donors. The State is nothing but a hollow shell to pay foreign debt and get the politicians brand-new cars (not even can fulfil its repressive role, having to rely on international occupation!). It is as hollow as Preval's promises of more schools.

In the face of such a grim scenario, some reactionaries want Haiti to be declared a failed state so it can openly become a US or UN protectorate: they are right in one thing only, that the political, economic and social model developed in Haiti for most of its republican life has proved completely failed. But this is no failure of the Haitian people. Neither is it a failure of the slaves of 1791 or of their offspring. This is the failure of the tiny but powerful block of the Haitian ruling classes and their imperialist patrons in Washington and Paris. So, we strongly reject any such proposal by the reactionaries, who are afraid above all of the popular masses taking power into their own hands: the solution to the failure of the Haitian State and economic model can only be solved through revolutionary means, by the popular masses stepping decisively onto the scene. There has long been an absolute dislocation between the State and the institutions of the people themselves². Well, then it is these people, from the grassroots, from the bottom up, that need to surprise the world once again with their creative capacity to break away from the old order and build a new one: capitalism can't be reformed, it needs to be buried under the foundations of socialism. The State has to succumb to institutions better suited to the very nature of the Haitians, which can empower the poor, the workers and peasants, the bulk of society, and decentralise the country. The answer to how these institutions might work can be found in the vast organisational networking and experience of the Haitian toiling classes.

Haiti is a prime example of a country completely ruined by imperialist interventions, by the rapacity of its dominant class and by fake aid. We see no way out other than a radical break away from this order. Difficult it might be, extremely difficult for sure, as difficult as it was to abolish slavery in the late XVIII Century, but to reform the present system is just impossible. Despite everything, the Haitians will sooner than later master their own destiny.

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote a famous book eloquently called "Haiti, State against Nation".

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Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
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