

Behind “the Blockage” in Haiti Today: Uprooting the Corrupt State, Rescuing Haiti’s Sovereignty, and Renewing the Economy

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In early November 2019, Haiti was “blocked.” *Ayiti bloke*. Transportation stopped; schools and hospitals closed. There were widespread food and medicine shortages. For more than a year leading up to the impasse, demonstrators had been calling for an end to corruption and the resignation of the current president. Many demonstrators had been killed, including by police. The massive, popular mobilization in Haiti today can be understood in the interconnections between national (Haitian state), hemispheric and global political and economic forces, authorities and histories in Haiti’s sovereignty has long been at stake.

To start with the demonstrations demanding the change of leadership at the head of the state, there are the controversial electoral politics leading to the inauguration, if not the fair election, of Jovenel Moïse, an agricultural entrepreneur known informally as “The Plantain Man” (Nèg Banann). He was one of 56 qualified candidates in the 2015 presidential election. Marred by claims of fraud and violent protest, a long-delayed run-off was eventually held, which did little to quell doubt about its fairness. The questionable process was a recapitulation of the dubious election in 2011 of Moïse’s predecessor and mentor, President Michel Martelly, whose dictatorial tendencies were barely kept in check during his five-year term. As in Martelly’s suspect ascendance to the presidency, the US again intervened after the election to ensure that their favored candidate would qualify for a run-off. Confidence in Martelly’s (and the United States’) hand-picked successor was low from the start, and

it has plummeted with widespread calls for Moïse’s removal and loss of support from nearly all sectors of the population (*Haiti Times* 2019).

One name, PetroCaribe, has come to symbolize the popular critique of government corruption and their demand for regime change. By 2018, the rhetorical question, “Where is the PetroCaribe money [Kot kòb Petwokaribe a]?” had become a stinging meme. PetroCaribe stands for an Energy Cooperation Agreement initiated in 2005 by Venezuela to aid development by offering preferential oil loans to Caribbean countries. The receiving state was supposed to use the savings to develop the nation’s infrastructure and social programs. Haiti received about \$2 billion in Venezuela’s oil loans. In 2018, Haitians’ suspicions that the dearth of promised investments were caused by the diversion of the needed funds into private hands were confirmed in scathing audits accusing President Martelly, then-businessman Moïse, and Haitian and Dominican firms of embezzlement (and leaving the Haitian nation with the oil debt) (Charles 2018). Meanwhile, the decline of Venezuela’s oil industry, the ensuing Venezuelan political crisis and the loss to Haiti of an important benefactor (and counterweight to the influence of the United States and the international lenders) renewed Haiti’s vulnerability to energy shortages. In mid-2018, the International Monetary Fund conditioned its renewal of a short-term loan to the debtor state on the latter’s agreement to raise the price of fuel between 38 and 51 percent. Resentment toward President Moïse, from the simmering story of PetroCaribe, transformed into

massive protests to remove him from office and to put “Haiti in lockdown” (Ayiti lòk) until he leaves office (Nugent 2019).

If President Moïse were to resign, what would happen next? An interim government will have to be appointed. According to the Haitian constitution, elections must be held within 90 days. Questions arise as to how the election will be financed given Haiti’s empty coffers. Haiti’s recent elections have been financed (and influenced) by foreign powers. Will “the international community” step in and will those who mobilized for change welcome it? President Moïse has insisted that resigning in the middle of his five-year term would be “irresponsible” and to demonstrate his taking of responsibility, on November 28, 2019, a photograph of his meeting around a table with ten or so men appeared in the news with the caption “Moïse chairs a Council of Ministers on the great challenges of the moment” (*Haiti Libre* 2019). If he refuses to leave, can the Parliament impeach him? The constitutionally scheduled parliamentary elections did not take place in 2019 and, as a result of postponing those elections, the parliament will not be able to function as of mid-January 2020 (*Le Nouvelliste* 2019).

The popular mobilization to resist President Moïse has unfolded on a scale rivaling the unprecedented protests that took down the Duvalier dictatorship (Ives 2019). But that successful uprising was swiftly co-opted by the United States to define and take control of Haiti’s “democratization” process. Haitians bitterly recall the series of military strongmen the United States put in place to lead that “transition to democracy,” as it was called, including their cynical promises of elections and murder of politicians and voters at polling places. They will recall the surprise landslide electoral victory in 1990 of a liberation priest and critic of US imperialism, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the toppling of the president in a US-supported coup less than nine months after he took office, followed by a bloodbath of his *lavalas* (deluge) supporters. A decade later, the United States and the “international community” (which tends not to include Latin American and Caribbean states) responded to the Haitian electorate’s defiant return of Aristide to the presidency with more direct action: this

time, the removal of the elected president was followed by a US military intervention. Haitians called it the Second Occupation, a sequel to the US occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934, a sustained violation of Haiti’s sovereignty and Haitians’ human rights. In 2004, the US transferred its martial authority over Haiti to the United Nations peacekeeping force. Although Haiti was not, and indeed had never been “at war” (as an independent state since 1804), the Second Occupation, which lasted until 2017, left a similarly controversial legacy to the First Occupation, involving human rights abuses, notably rape, causing a cholera outbreak, and impeding recognition and response to the ensuing epidemic. Given Haiti’s history with the United States and the “international community,” Haitians have mixed interest in appealing for help in this political crisis if the price is further disrespect for their sovereignty and more violations of their human rights, as reiterated by a group of Haitian leaders who met with Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in June 2019 (Charles and Taylor 2019).

The uncertainty facing the Haitian state and the Haitian nation transcends political, diplomatic, and military dimensions. It is part and parcel of the global realignment of resources and labor defining late modern capitalism, which is leaving a path of unemployed, discouraged young citizens in its wake. A good portion of Haitian youth are educated and trained for professions in which there are no jobs except for the already well-off and well-connected. Their frustrations are intensified by inordinate increases in the costs of living, food, housing, education, and healthcare. Haiti’s inflation rate in 2019 was about 20 percent (Fonds Monétaire International 2019). The issues on the minds (and placards) of protesters in Haiti are not dissimilar from those of demonstrators in Chile and Bolivia today or in New York City in 2011. A few decades ago, the Haitian economy was primarily agricultural, but rural agriculture has been eviscerated as a result of climate change including drought and more powerful and more frequent hurricanes, erosion, importation of lower-priced food, and other state policies undermining small farming. A similar multifaceted onslaught has devastated the fishing industry of this island nation. There are few viable alternatives beyond

the tiny and low-paying industrial sector. Haiti's modern youth, who are the bulk of the protesters, face precarious futures with little opportunity. They hold the state accountable for its corruption and indifference to their plight and they vow to keep mobilizing until these structures begin to change.

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