

An Excuse to Destabilize Haiti’s Democracy

By Regan Boychuk, activist, Canada Haiti Action Network in Calgary.

In the most fair and accurate analysis of Haiti’s recent plight, Peter Hallward writes: “The May 2000 elections were arguably the most remarkable exercise in representative democracy in Haiti to date.”¹

A fair characterization—but that’s not how you’ll find the 2000 elections described by the Western media and government-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

An *Associated Press* timeline run by the *Globe and Mail* the day after the coup said observers had called May 2000’s voting “flawed” and that the international community froze millions in foreign aid until the results were “revised.”² (In reality, it was hundreds of millions in aid and these funds were not restored even when the results were revised, as we’ll see below.)

The next day, a correspondent

for Canada’s national newspaper explained to readers that Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide had shown “an inability to compromise” and was accused of “rigging the 2000 elections.”³

In other words, we shouldn’t lose too much sleep about Aristide’s removal from office.

To appreciate the absurdity of “an alliance of Aristide’s foreign and domestic enemies” managing “to persuade most of the independent media to present the government elected in 2000 as undemocratic and illegitimate,”⁴ we need to understand Haiti’s 2000 elections and their consequences.

Haiti’s constitution, reflecting an understandable desire to preclude the appearance of any more “Presidents for Life,” prevents such leaders from serving consecutive terms. However, having stepped down in 1995, Aristide was eligible to run for a second and final term in 2000.

Still overwhelmingly popular, he was universally expected to regain office. But Aristide’s “preferential treatment for the poor” was fated to clash with the preferential treatment for the rich that is favoured by Washington, Ottawa and their allies.

In hindsight, Aristide’s return to office with almost 92% of the vote actually marked the beginning of another dark chapter in Haitian history.

A manufactured crisis over the vote-counting methodology used to determine the winners of an insignificant number of seats in the May 2000 elections served as a pretext for the international community’s refusal to observe the November presidential elections and for their imposition of an aid embargo that crippled the Haitian government.

In the spring of 2001, the U.S. board member at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) asked the bank to halt \$148 million in already-ap-

What does this term really mean?

“[We operate in] a witch-hunt environment, where the term *chimère* is used as a code word to justify slaughter.”⁵ Reporter, Haitian Information Project.

“*Chimère* is a derogatory term for the unemployed that has become synonymous with both ‘gangster’ and ‘Aristide-supporter.’”⁶ Lyn Duff (U.S. journalist posted to Haiti, Israel, Croatia, Vietnam and was a non-embedded journalist in Afghanistan)

“After [the 2004 coup of] February 29, [NCHR-Haiti] continued to cite abuses by ‘*chimère*,’ whom they call simply ‘Aristide gangs,’ without documenting the connections.”⁷ Tom Reeves (retired history professor from Boston who organized nine human rights delegations to Haiti.)

“*Chimère* is a derogatory term, often applied to those who are poor, black and supportive of the Lavalas movement.”⁸ Institute for Justice & Democracy Haiti.



“Since the kidnapping of Aristide, the process of legal accusation has been reduced to name calling: the word ‘*chimère*’ is used like a death sentence. This is how all the political prisoners, members of Lavalas, were rounded up during the coup.”⁹

Lawyer Mario Joseph (Director, Haiti’s Bureau des avocats internationaux.)

“Haiti’s poor, largely Aristide supporters, have been branded with the words ‘bandits’ and

‘*chimère*,’ terms that were created by Haiti’s elite for political use in the everlasting war between the rich elite of 1% and the very poor 85%.”¹⁰ Christian Heyne (Canadian founder of the Haiti Art School Project.)

“[Slum residents] are bestialized by the national and international press with the pejorative label ‘*chimère*’—a reference to the mythical monster.”¹¹

Andréa Schmidt (independent Montreal-based journalist and activist)

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Taking Aim at Haiti's pro-Democracy “People Power” Movement

In March 2004, U.S. troops took aim at pro-democracy advocates in Haiti who protested against the kidnapping of their president and the brutal hijacking of their elected government. In the photo above, an unarmed civilian symbolises his brave support for Haitian democracy by using a popular “five-finger” gesture. This gesture is widely used at mass demonstrations to show support for Aristide’s constitutional right to finish his five-year mandate as the country’s duly-elected president.

proved loans for improving roads, education and the public health system.

According to Tracy Kidder:

“This was unusual. No member nation is supposed to be able to stop the disbursement of loans already approved.

Nevertheless, the IDB complied. The Haitian government also lost access to loans it could have received from the IDB over the next several years, worth another \$479 million.”⁵

But as pretexts for undermining Aristide’s government, the elections in May and November 2000 are exceedingly dubious.

The May 2000 elections saw Haitians choose between almost 30,000 candidates, 19 senators, 83 deputies, 133 mayors and 7000 local assembly representatives. With the participation of 60% of Haiti’s four million registered voters, it was the largest voter turnout since Aristide’s overwhelming victory during the 1990 election.⁶

The day after voting was completed, international observers declared the polling to be free and fair.

The Organization of American States (OAS), which observed the elec-

tions, told CNN: “we observed no major irregularities.” Even the U.S. State Department congratulated Haiti on the elections, which it said were held “in a persuasive atmosphere of nonviolence and high voter participation.”⁷

But that was before the results were known.

Following the June 1 announcement of the results (which reported the landslide victory for Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas movement), the OAS Electoral Observation Mission made a public statement criticizing the tabulation of votes for a handful of the 7000+ seats.

Although the OAS was deeply involved in election preparations and was obviously aware of the methodology being employed, it protested the case of eight senatorial seats, arguing that there should have been a run-off vote before the Lavalas candidates were declared the winners.⁸

In any case, “Had the senate run-offs been held,” writes the Robert Maguire, director of the Haiti program at Washington’s Trinity College,

“observers agreed, [Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas party] would have won most, if not all, of the races, particularly since it is doubtful that the frac-

tured opposition to Aristide would have been able to rally around a single opposition candidate in a run-off.”⁹

The day after the May election, opposition to Aristide had organized itself (with the help of the U.S. government-funded International Republican Institute) under the name “Democratic Convergence.” Within a week, they called for a boycott of further elections.

Using the dispute over the elections as a convenient pretext, the Clinton Administration redirected U.S. aid away from the Haitian government and through NGOs. This severely limited the Haitian government’s ability to pursue its electoral agenda.

And, much of the redirected aid found its way to supporting the Haitian government’s unpopular opposition. Even according to U.S. government-sponsored polls, the so-called “Democratic Convergence” never registered more than 12% support among Haitians.¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is this opposition’s narrative (shaped, as it was, by foreign government-sponsored patronage and training) that was largely adopted by the international commu-

nity and the mainstream media. Bolstered by such support, the political opposition boycotted the November 2000 presidential elections.

The Democratic Convergence had good reason for their sudden allergy to democracy. A Gallop poll conducted in Haiti less than three weeks before the presidential elections found that less than 4% of Haitians expressed trust in the members of the Democratic Convergence.¹¹

And, there were good reasons that fewer than 1 in 25 Haitians trusted them. Many in the opposition expressed a desire to resurrect the murderous Haitian military, which has something like 50,000 Haitian skeletons in its closet.

Running virtually unopposed, Aristide received more than 90% of the vote.

Nevertheless, the unpopular Democratic Convergence continued to challenge Aristide’s mandate, even after the OAS had accepted Aristide’s plan to resolve the dispute over the eight senators during the May elections.¹²

Illustrating their reverence for democracy, opposition leaders in the Democratic Convergence rejected the government’s compromise, announcing that it was highly unlikely that they would accept “a solution that leaves the top and bottom and most of the rest of Aristide’s power structure intact.”¹³

The U.S. government agreed and used the May 2000 elections as a pretext to trigger the devastating aid embargo against Haiti’s elected government.

While funnelling an average of \$68 million a year to suitably complicit NGOs, a U.S. Agency for International Development official told reporters that Aristide’s administration “would never receive a dime of American aid.”¹⁴

Predictably, the aid embargo disabled the already-impoverished country’s economy. Without vital international aid, Haiti’s GDP growth fell from +1% to almost -2% between 2000 and 2001. By 2001, per capita GDP growth was approaching -4%.¹⁵

Commenting on the effects of the embargo in the *Lancet* journal of medicine, researchers noted that:

“Although the Haitian government mismanaged foreign aid during the

Duvalier family dictatorship, generous aid continued to flow during much of that time, mainly from the USA.”

They added:

“when sanctions are leveled against an elected government, there is no collateral damage; ordinary citizens, who made the ‘wrong’ choice at the polls, are the targets. Their suffering and the social discord that necessarily ensues seem to be the intended result.”¹⁶

Some perspective might help the reader appreciate the scale and impact of the embargo.

Toronto, a city of about 2.5 million, has an annual *municipal* budget of well over \$5 billion. Haiti, a country of about 8 million, has an annual *federal* budget of about \$300 million.

The aid that was denied to the Haitian government by international donors—under false pretenses—totaled well over \$500 million.

By mid-2001, Aristide had convinced seven of the eight senators at the center of the controversy regarding the May 2000 elections to resign. The term of the eighth expired shortly thereafter.

As Dr. Paul Farmer commented, “that should have been the end of the aid freeze if it was ever about the electoral process; yet it continued throughout Aristide’s tenure.”

Clearly the election controversy was simply an excuse. As Farmer continued “You’d think this might be newsworthy—the world’s most powerful nations join forces to block aid and humanitarian assistance to one of the poorest, but for three years this story was almost impossible to place in a mainstream journal of opinion.”¹⁷

During those three fateful years, the U.S., France and Canada worked fervently to bring down Haiti’s democratically-elected government. A central plank in their campaign—which came to fruition in the 2004 coup—was, as Farmer has remarked, “one of the most impressive and improbable propaganda exercises in contemporary politics”: presenting “the government elected in 2000 as undemocratic and illegitimate.”¹⁸

Canada’s role in this exercise

was aided greatly by the ignorance and cynicism of the Canadian media and by the propaganda produced by various CIDA-funded NGOs, including those based in Haiti and in Canada. If such supposed ‘humanitarian interventions’ are to be prevented in the future, we would do well to pay particular attention to the example of Haiti and to the use of its 2000 elections as a pretext for promoting destabilization and regime change.

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Canadian “NGOs” Aid antiAristide Election Rhetoric

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

All the quasi-governmental Canadian agencies that took a stand on Haiti’s 2000 elections, sided with the anti-Aristide fringe parties that lost miserably in those legislative and presidential contests.

Even with backing from the world’s wealthiest governments, Haiti’s elite—using its almost complete control of the mass media—could not stop that country’s poor majority from giving Aristide and his Lavalas party another landslide victory in 2000.

Although it could not possibly win the elections, Haiti’s elite did manipulate debate within foreign “non-governmental organizations” (NGOs). By unfairly attacking the legitimacy of the elections, Canada’s government-funded NGOs undermined Aristide’s ability to govern. This was part of an intense destabilization campaign led by Haiti’s corporate elite and supported by a panoply of groups financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The stage was thus set to use the elections as a pretext to starve Aristide’s government of money and demand that he resign before the end of his five year mandate.

Alternatives

Although numerous articles published by this Montréal-based NGO stated that Haiti’s 2000 elections were illegitimate, there are no Alternatives’ critiques of the illegal ascent to power by the regime that was handpicked to replace Aristide and his elected government during the 2004 coup.

For example, Alternatives’ website has an interview with Susy Castor, of Haiti’s Center of Social Research and Economic Training for Development (CRESFED) that refers to the 2000 presidential contest as a “fraudulent election.”¹ CRESFED, which belonged to the CIDA-funded Group of 184 (G184), received \$54,000 in CIDA funding.²

In 2005, during the illegal coup-

installed dictatorship, two Alternatives’ articles stated that “less than 15%” of Haitians took part in the 2000 presidential elections. One of these articles, by Alternatives’ communications director and editor, François L’Écuyer, used this bogus “15%” statistic as if it were a matter of fact.³ Another Alternatives’ spokesperson, Pierre Beaudet, also refers to this fanciful figure. Neither of these prolific Alternatives’ writers provide references in their articles, let alone source this phoney pseudofact.

What’s more, Beaudet’s article states that the presidential elections of 2000 “were rigged to the extent that most of the opposition boycotted the futile exercise.”⁴ He doesn’t explain that Aris-

the opposition. So, even without the eight seats in question, Aristide’s party won by a massive landslide.

On the eve of the coup, Alternatives published a timeline of Haitian history describing the 2000 “legislative and presidential elections” as “marked by numerous irregularities.” It said the government’s “legitimacy is strongly contested by the international community and the national opposition.”⁸ By “international community,” Alternatives must be referring to a handful of countries like the U.S., Canada and France, while by “national opposition” it must mean that tiny faction in Haiti, dominated by its corporate elite, that were trounced in the elections.

Of the three Haitian groups that Alternatives invited to the 2007 Quebec Social Forum, two were members of the G184. The third was Groupe Médialternatif. Its delegate, Rene Colbert, is the editor of *AlterPresse*, the most complete online source of G184 propaganda. Colbert told author Yves Engler that there was no coup in 2004 because Aristide had not been elected in 2000.⁹



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tide’s opposition saw the election as “futile” because they knew they did not have the slightest chance of winning. Even the U.S. government admitted that Aristide’s political opponents could not collectively win 12% of the vote.⁵ Neither did Beaudet mention the Gallop Poll that found only 4% of Haitians had trust in the anti-Aristide “Democratic Convergence.”⁶ Nor does he explain how Aristide can be accused of “rigging” an election when it was Haiti’s pathetically small political opposition that boycotted the vote.

Another similarly partisan Alternatives article was written by Franklin Midy who said that one of the ways “Aristide had begun to monopolize power” was by “rigging the 2000 legislative elections.”⁷ Midy does not mention that only eight of the more than 7,000 political seats decided in that election were ever called into question by

Concertation pour Haïti (CPH)

In February 2004, during violent attacks against Haiti’s elected government, Canada’s most virulently anti-Aristide network of NGOs,¹⁰ most of which received financial aid from CIDA, issued a statement called “Why Aristide should leave?”¹¹ In this call for Aristide’s demise, which spoke highly of the G184, the CPH labelled his government a “regime of terror.” Saying “Aristide is anti-democratic” and corrupt, the CPH asked rhetorically if he was “a legitimate president.” Its answer hinged largely on a grossly exaggerated view of the 2000 elections, saying Aristide was: “elected by less than 5% of the electorate, without the participation of opposition parties, in a context of unresolved electoral irregularities.”¹² Such statements illustrate CPH’s alignment with the most extreme antiAristide elements in Haiti’s elite-led opposition.

Development and Peace (D&P)

The most excessive rhetoric used by a Canadian, CIDA-funded NGO, to twist the truth about the 2000 elections, occurred in March 2004 when hundreds were being killed after Haiti’s coup. Speaking for the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, Marthe Lapierre addressed the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, saying: “Was the Aristide regime a democracy or a dictatorship? For me, the answer is clear: it was a dictatorship.” To explain, she outrageously stated:

“The OAS did not recognize the results of those parliamentary elections in May of 2000, or at least partly questioned them.... Then the opposition decided to boycott the presidential elections. It didn’t even take part. Also, only 5 per cent of the population actually voted.

...[T]his government was not elected appropriately, because the results are questionable.... [I]t is clear that we’re talking about a dictatorship in the case of Aristide. Indeed, that is how all of our partners in Haiti describe the regime.”¹³

Two years later, a nuanced D&P report stood by this biased account:

“Although Aristide’s *Fanmi Lavalas* had won many of the seats in the legislative elections of May 2000, the party’s desire for complete control and its refusal to tolerate any opposition led it to manoeuvre an irregular vote count of the Senate results.... [T]he opposition parties formed the Democratic Convergence coalition and boycotted the December 2000 presidential elections. In the absence of any genuine political contest...these elections were marked by a very low turnout. After the elections...Aristide was declared winner with 92% of the vote.”¹⁴

This report later states that “in the case of Aristide, it can be argued that he did not come to power for his second mandate [in 2000] in a democratic manner, as the elections were held in a climate of fear, with a low voter turnout and with an opposition boycott making the results a foregone conclusion.”¹⁵

In another report, D&P refers to “the electoral fraud” of 2000.¹⁶

D&P also made blanket statements about Haitian history displaying its utter contempt for the 2000 election: “In the last 50 years, if exception is made of short periods in 1991 and in 1994–1997, the Haitian people have never experienced democracy.”

D&P then calls Aristide’s government “a regime which, although definitely totalitarian, proclaimed itself to be a ‘popular’ or grassroots government.”¹⁷

D&P created a new concept of “democracy” to rationalize opposition to Aristide’s elected government. D&P thus speaks of the “notion” of electoral democracy saying that while it

“supports the notion of the legitimacy of an elected president, it also believes that democracy cannot be restricted to coming to power in a democratic manner, but is also about the democratic exercise of power.”¹⁸

Along these lines, D&P spoke, not long before the 2004 coup, of the “Need to Rethink Governance” saying: “The Aristide regime is sharply criticized and has practically no legitimacy. Still, there is no political alternative on the horizon.”¹⁹

The D&P message here is self-contradictory. On one hand it discounts the results of the 2000 election saying Aristide’s “regime” “has practically no legitimacy,” while simultaneously it acknowledges that a “political alternative” to Aristide is nonexistent. This exemplifies what George Orwell called “doublethink,” namely the ability to hold:

“two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient.”²⁰

Entraide Missionaire

Two months before the 2004 coup, when Haiti’s elected government was under attack at home and abroad, this Catholic missionary group was unhappy with Canada’s efforts to weaken Aristide. EMI criticised the Organization of American States and Canada’s government saying they “continue to grant President Aristide and his government a legitimacy that must be questioned.”²¹ Referring to “reported irregularities during parliamentary elections in May 2000,” EMI said “the legitimacy of the current government is still questioned.”²²

FOCAL

In 2001, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) issued a report on Haiti financed by CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The quasi-governmental agency’s scorn for democracy is discernable between the lines of its report:

“It was hoped that the 2000 elections would symbolize a new political beginning in Haiti. Unfortunately, the electoral victories of Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his Lavalas Family party have only served to perpetuate the political crisis.”²³

In reality, it was not the “electoral victories” of Aristide and Lavalas that perpetuated Haiti’s crisis. The crisis continued because the election’s losers refused to concede defeat. Although they could not challenge Aristide at the polls, their profound sense of entitlement demanded a share in political power and a role in government. Their foreign backers (like the U.S., France and Canada) concurred.

FOCAL also gave credence to the opposition’s bogus claims of an incredibly small voter turnout, saying:

“Aristide’s legitimacy was disputed. The [Provisional Electoral Council] CEP’s report of a 60% voter turnout was strongly rejected by opposition groups who put the number closer to 20%, with some claiming that only 5% of eligible voters actually participated. Many foreign journalists and diplomats estimated a participation rate of no more than 10%.”²⁴

Rights & Democracy (R&D)

R&D is a government agency masquerading as an NGO. It joined what it called “an NGO delegation” “[w]orking with the Organization of American States electoral observation mission” to monitor Haiti’s legislative elections in 2000. Upon their return, this government-funded delegation of Canada’s most virulently anti-Aristide network—Concertation pour Haïti (CPH)—“declared the vote acceptable according to international election norms.”²⁵

Later, R&D and CPH changed their spin on the 2000 elections. In 2001, R&D signed a statement saying that “Aristide’s [2000] election came amidst widespread doubts about his own and the Préval government’s

“2000 Elections”

commitment to democracy, political disputes over earlier parliamentary elections, low voter turnout, virtually no competing candidacy, and an international community disinclined to support the new Haitian leaders.”²⁶

In a list of incidents that supposedly “dealt a severe blow to the observance of civil and political rights in Haiti,” “preceding the presidential vote,” this statement included “manipulation of the May 2000 vote for parliament.”

In a report one month before the 2004 coup, R&D included an extremely partisan statement that seemed to fault the 2000 elections for Haiti’s crisis:

“Since the first round of legislative elections in May 2000, whose results—which strongly favoured the Fanmi Lavalas party—were contested by the political opposition and foreign observers...., Haiti has been bogged down in an institutional crisis.... Préval’s decision to continue with the second round of elections despite the boycott announced by Convergence démocratique, a coalition of some fifteen opposition parties, and the resignation of the President of the Provisional Electoral Council...led to Fanmi Lavalas gaining absolute control over the Parliament and the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide as Head of State.... Since then, a large portion of Haitian society has been contesting the legitimacy of the governing power and is calling for new elections.”²⁷

This R&D statement criticises Préval’s “decision” to hold the presidential elections and seems to fault Lavalas for having such mass support. And, if such a “large portion of Haitian society” really did contest Aristide’s government, why couldn’t they win the elections?

R&D’s anti-democratic perspective can also be found on their website which also seems to blame Haiti’s crisis on Lavalas’ 2000 electoral victories. R&D even suggested that Aristide’s kidnapping and the 2004 coup were the natural result of those elections:

“Political instability in Haiti has prevailed since the highly controversial legislative and local elections of May 2000, whose results were contested. This crisis culminated on February 29, 2004, with the exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.”²⁸



World Vision

“Aristide became the FL (Fanmi Lavalas) party candidate for president in the November 2000 elections. Not surprising, he won. But capturing 91.8% of the vote was too incredulous [sic] for opposing candidates to believe. As a result, most opposition parties refused to confirm Aristide as president. Nor has the opposition recognized the legitimacy of the May 2000 and July 2002 parliamentary elections in which FL candidates won 72 of 83 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 26 of 27 in the Senate. The second Aristide presidency has been just as chaotic and violent as Préval’s, with Haitians having lost confidence in the man once revered by the poor.”²⁹

Like so many of the other statements by CIDA-funded “NGOs” about Haiti’s 2000 elections, the above comment reveals a major contradiction in logical thinking. If so many Haitian’s had indeed lost confidence in Aristide and his Lavalas party, why were they always empowered in landslide elections? Clearly, most *poor* Haitians continued to overwhelmingly support Aristide and his government, even when bitterly opposed by Haiti’s powerful elite and their foreign supporters.

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