

HAITI, A LAND CRIPPLED BY CHAOS

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Last week, Haiti's embattled President Jovenel Moise appointed Joseph Jouthe as Prime Minister, the third in less than a year, disregarding opposition calls and popular protests demanding his own resignation. A former agricultural entrepreneur, the President has refused to hold legislative elections, due last October. This sparked a violent unrest which has resulted in the deaths of at least 40 people. Mr. Moise is trying to alter the Constitution to enable any piece of legislation to become law if parliament does not approve or reject it within a stipulated time frame. This proposal has raised many eyebrows. His predecessor had delayed the 2015 parliamentary elections for some months. When the polls were finally conducted, they were riddled with serious irregularities.

The current political paralysis in Port-au-Prince predates the devastating 2010 earthquake that left about 2,00,000 people dead and displaced millions. The period after the three-decade-long dictatorship of François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier, which ended in 1986, was marked by military coups and short-lived democratic rule. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Roman Catholic priest with left-wing leanings, was deposed first in 1991 and then in 2004.

The role of the UN Stabilisation Mission deployed in the following months, with heavy U.S. influence, has been derided by critics as championing "investor rights, not human rights." A survey in a 2006 edition of *The Lancet* found that 8,000 people were murdered and 35,000 women victimised in the greater Port-au-Prince area after the exit of Mr. Aristide. Crucially, the perpetrators were political actors and UN soldiers.

The UN Mission, which was scaled down in 2017, continues to attract controversy. Another study in December 2019, by a website called 'Conversation', disclosed further evidence of several peacekeepers sexually assaulting minor girls, leaving them destitute and with children. In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, many UN bases were accused of discharging sewage into the tributary of Haiti's main river, triggering the outbreak of a cholera epidemic, which killed over 10,000 people.

The Mission was also criticised for standing by when a former president in 2011, Rene Preval, sought to impose a U.S.-backed successor. Mr. Moise's own election in 2016 was mired in controversy, when the turnout was only 18%. Within months of taking office, Mr. Moise fired the head of the Central Financial Intelligence Unit. That decision is said to have influenced the move to clear his own name in a money laundering case.

In October 2017, Haiti's Senate report found that billions of dollars were misappropriated from the Petrocaribe oil programme, intended for education and infrastructure development. This was corroborated last year by the country's court of auditors, which also implicated a firm managed by Mr. Moise. Part of a regional initiative by then Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Petrocaribe allowed Haiti to buy oil at 60% of the price and the remainder to be settled in deferred payments over 25 years. The slump in global oil prices brought to an end the Petrocaribe programme, as also the government's fuel subsidies. The decision was eventually reversed, but only after the resignation of then Prime Minister Jean-Henry Ceant and violent protests across Haiti. The embezzlement of large sums has deepened the sense of outrage and betrayal among ordinary Haitians and loss of credibility among international aid agencies.

Haiti is Latin America's first country that won independence in 1804. But millions of dollars paid in French reparations over the next 100 years, U.S. occupation early last century, the Duvalier

dictatorship, and continuing misrule have crippled the economy. More than half the population lives below the poverty line. One of the world's poorest nations, Haiti's people have borne the brunt of some of the worst natural disasters in recent times. While the country needs a democratic renewal, others must respect Haiti's sovereignty.

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