Haiti: The Dynamics of Stagnation

by Jean-Jacques Honorat

Much to the dismay of most observers and friends of Haiti, Haitians have found themselves bogged down over the past four and half years in a situation of political stagnation. The situation is characterized by the success of the beneficiaries of the past in continuing to control and manipulate all societal power structures. And conversely, by the inability of those who demand, promote, advocate, and or claim to be fighting for change to actually have any significant impact on the mechanics of socio-political power.

In fact, as everyone now clearly understands, the demise of Jean-Claude Duvalier on February 7, 1986 was not, as believed at the outset, a triumph of the people’s drive toward democracy. Instead, it was a political maneuver of the very beneficiaries of the former sociopolitical system embodied and typified by the Duvalier dynasty to eliminate a figurehead that had become an embarrassment for the entire system, and thereby save the latter from being contested, targeted and eventually wiped out by popular unrest. Thus, all the economic, social and political forces of what is labelled “duvalierism” (but actually constitutes Haiti’s traditional dominant power structures) remained intact and in command. It is drastically true that the more things were changing, the more they were remaining the same. The succession of military governments and coups d’Etat, the dominance of military figures created by the Duvalier regime, the persistence of government cronyism, administrative corruption and political banditry are all indicative of the continued control of the forces of the past over the present which impedes the advent of a new future.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, those who claim to be the artisans of a democratic future have thus far demonstrated a distressing incapacity to set up the political conditions of change and progress. Failing to understand that the fundamental demand elicited over the past three decades by the peasant community action movement called for a new pattern or organization...
within the Haitian body politic, they have confined themselves within the narrow and no longer appealing limits of the traditional system of patronage. Ignoring the fact that after having been betrayed for over 186 years by charismatic political leaders Haitians are no longer desirous of mobilizing behind any new Messiah, these same pseudo-leaders have lamentably remained content with offering words and promises where only an articulate platform was expected and would be able to dismantle the general distrust and apathy of the population.

Adding to the political confusion thus created and taking advantage of it, small groups of extremists have had to widen the political vacuum by spreading nihilism and anarchy. By contrast, those from the extreme right use their weaponry and criminal know-how to create an artificial climate of fear dubbed 'insecurity' by Haitians. Those from the extreme left use the violence of words, hoping that through permanent agitation they will finally be able to create some political space for themselves and their ideologies.

The Haitian Studies Association (HSA) is an independent organization that seeks to promote scientific research on Haiti and Haitians, identify and catalogue contemporary publications on the subject, collect and disseminate scientific information, formalize Haitian Studies as an academic subject, and establish a network of experts competent to address Haitian issues from multi-disciplinary perspectives. HSA is not associated with any public or private institutions in or outside of Haiti.

Membership in the association is open to all persons interested in advancing its goals and objectives, regardless of ideological persuasion, ethnic origin, occupation, residency, or academic discipline. HSA is headed by a Steering Committee which is responsible for setting the organization's policies and orientation.

The Association was formally established in 1989 by a group of scholars, educators, professionals, and community residents. It is incorporated as a not-for-profit charitable and educational organization pursuant to the General Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

HSA sponsors an annual conference, publishes conference papers and a quarterly newsletter (first edition, June 1990), and will initiate other activities to further Haitian Studies.

HSA welcomes articles, announces and commentaries. Articles must be limited to three double-spaced typed pages. Please address articles and other correspondences to: Haitian Studies Association, P.O. Box 1451, West Somerville, MA 02144.

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### NOTES

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND ANNUAL HSA CONFERENCE**

Eleven presentations from the second annual Haitian Studies Association conference held at Tufts University on June 15 and 16, 1990 have been edited for distribution to members and the wider community. The proceedings were assembled by VéVé Clark and Alix Cantave, and may be purchased for $10 from the Haitian Studies Association, P.O. Box 1451, West Somerville, Massachusetts 02144. The volume includes papers by community activists, scholars and artists addressing important issues divided into five panels:

- 1. Contemporary Haitian Politics
  - Jean-Jacques Honorat, “Haiti: The Dynamics of Stagnation”
  - Henry F. Carey, “Free Elections and the Haitian Military”

- 2. Haitian Creole
  - Frank Etienne, “Créole Haitien et Langage”
  - Hugues St. Fort, “Language and Politics in Haiti”

- 3. Haitian Immigrants
  - Karen Richman, “Voodoo and Migration”

- 4. Education, Economic Development and Rural Mobilization
  - Uli Locher, “Recent Changes in Primary Education”
  - Robert Maguire, “Haiti’s Emerging Peasant Movement”

- 5. Culture and the Haitian Diaspora
  - Jean-Claude Martineau, “Freedom Bound”

In order to compensate for their failure, self-styled “democratic leaders” have resorted to an empty discourse of demagogy enlivened by the spices of harsh anti-duvalierism. As a result, the contemporary political discourse remains unimpressive and antithetical — all sides simply projecting the two faces of what has become an obsession with the Duvalier legacy as though the political scene were still dominated by the ghost of Mr. Duvalier.

Quite paradoxically, the forces that have displayed the most noticeable qualitative change in the past few years are those from abroad, that is to say the foreign governments — Sidney Mintz would call them the external trappings of dependency. They have traditionally exercised considerable influence in the making of Haitian politics. Thanks to the revisionist efforts deployed over the past 15 to 20 years by the diaspora, influential foreign institutions and interest ceased considering Haiti for the first time in history as the chasse-gardée of only 25 wealthy Petionville families, and decided to carefully listen to the voice of voiceless and disenfranchised Haitians. The overthrow of General Ayrault and the advent of the current civilian government is a clear illustration of this dramatic turnaround in Haiti’s geo-political history. Unfortunately, the contradictions within the domestic forces that we have mentioned above have doomed the experience to impotence if not failure.

In the midst of this political quagmire, the question that everyone asks and that constitutes the crux of Haiti’s contemporary politics is the following: are elections going to be possible? Posed in this way, the problem of the upcoming elections encloses the Haitian dilemma in a vicious circle. What we now have in Haiti is a weak government that has thus far shown no capacity, or willingness, to do anything about anything. Can this government organize elections? On the other hand, while the extremists who rely on anarchy continue to disturb the political climate and perpetuate chaos, none of the so-called “democratic” candidates has thus far been able to gather any substantive popular following behind his/her candidacy. Consequently, the population wonders: why risk going to the polls where we might be gunned down again as some of us were on November 29, 1987? That consensus means that none of the candidates has proposed a platform for which people would be ready to risk being killed.

But if elections do not occur, how long can this current lame government last? Can the country continue to pay the economic price of an endless political transition? It definitely seems to me that elections are our only way out of the quagmire. Elections per se would not represent a final solution to Haiti’s problems, but they would at least mark the end of a rather long and obscure tunnel and the beginning of a new light. I do not think we have much of a choice. Elections must be made possible, and it is the duty of those who have chosen the profession of politics to see to it that they do indeed become possible. For politics is ultimately the art of making the desirable possible and the possible desirable.
RESTAVEK: CHILD DOMESTIC LABOR IN HAITI

Thousands of Haitian children lack the most basic economic and civil rights: rights to family, education, health care, childhood and leisure. This is the subject of a report published in August by the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee. The report, Restavek: Child Domestic Labor in Haiti, describes a familiar practice in Haiti whereby parents give their children away as unpaid domestic laborers. This phenomenon, known as restavek, is a rampant feature of Haitian life.

In its most typical form, the report explains, the restavek is a poor rural child given to a family living in one of the larger cities. The child’s parents hope that the urban family will treat the child as one of the family and provide him/her with an education, medical care, food, clothing and shelter. To much dismay, the child is often subject to physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuses.

Haiti does not have a process to track and document restavek children. As a result, there is no accurate figure as to the number of restaveks. A 1984 UNICEF Conference Report estimated that 109,000 or five percent of all Haitian children between the ages of five and eighteen work as domestics.

The restavek system is a most brutal form of child exploitation. It violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Children, the Haitian Constitution and other international prohibitions against practices similar to slavery, forced labor, and the exploitation of children.

The Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee makes eight recommendations to eradicate the practice of restavek.

Copies of the report are available for $7 from: Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, 430 Marquette Avenue, Suite 402, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401, Phone: (612) 341-3302 Fax: (612) 340-9518

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