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Haiti Has Been a Plaything of Powerful Forces for Too Long

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — The gunmen who invaded Christelle Pierre's neighborhood in July gave her a stark choice: run or die. She was six months pregnant with her first child. The men were members of one of the ruthless criminal gangs that range unchecked across this city. They swiftly burned her neighborhood to the ground.

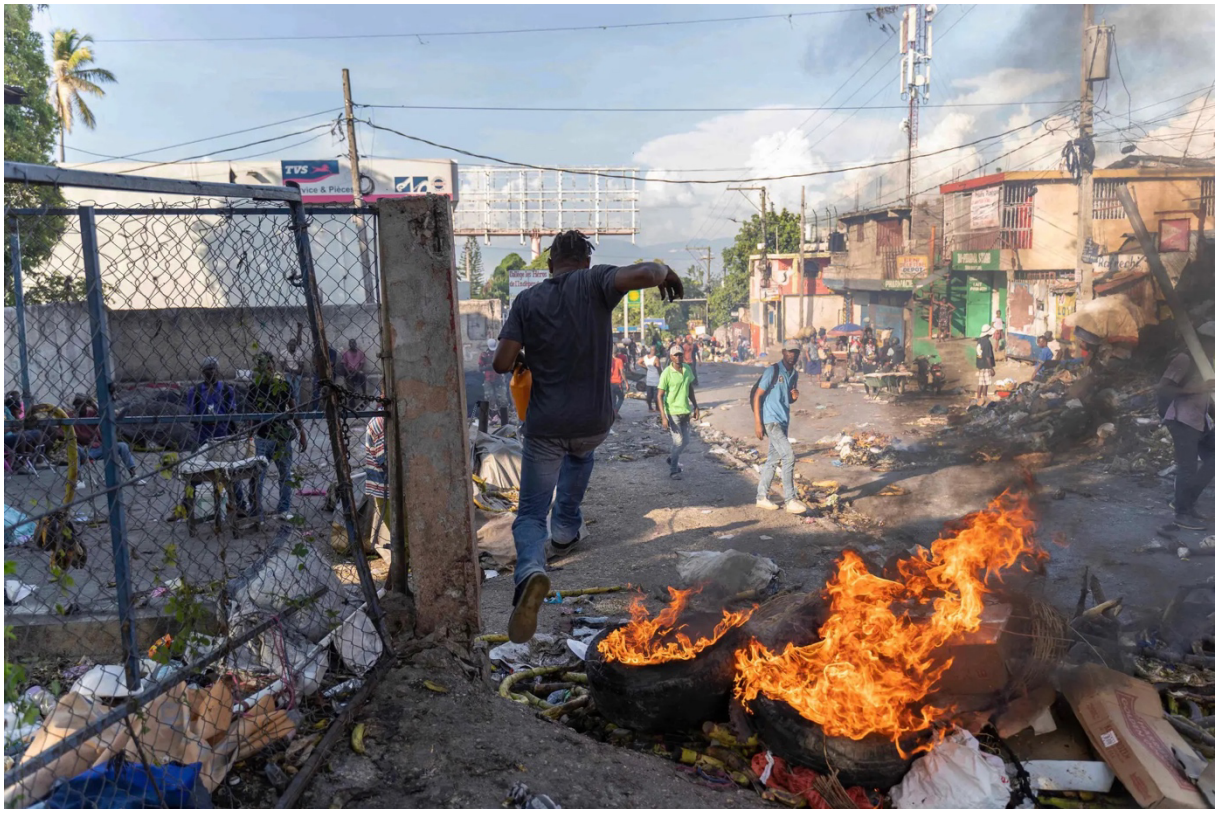
I met her here late last month, a couple of days after she had given birth atop a square of cardboard in a public park. The cloth diapers, the downy receiving blankets and the infant mattress she had carefully saved up for had burned. Gone, too, was her husband. The gangsters who overran their community shot him in the head and left his body to burn, too.

"I can't stay on the streets with a baby," she told me. "But I have nowhere to go. There is no shelter, no food, no medicine, no work. There is only chaos in this country."

Haiti is in free fall.

The most powerful person here is a gang leader who goes by the nom de guerre Barbecue (given name: Jimmy Chérizier). His men have set up flaming barricades blocking distribution of the country's sources of fuel and food. Gangs, most of which have ties to political and business leaders, have all but shut down Haiti's economy by cutting off the flow of fuel and food. Hunger is bearing down on many families. Cholera, which once killed around 10,000 people here, is once again spreading.

Officially, Haiti's government is led by a deeply unpopular acting prime minister, Ariel Henry, who came to power with the support of the United States and other major regional powers after the assassination of the former president over a year ago. He and his foreign backers have ignored a proposal from a coalition of Haitian civil society groups aimed at creating a more representative interim government and paving the way for a return to democracy. Street protests demanding his resignation have convulsed major cities for weeks. The security situation has become so dire that on Friday, Henry pleaded for an international security mission to help the overmatched police retake the streets.



For all its seeming complexity, the current upheaval turns on the same question that has driven almost every crisis on this island for the past 230 years: Who will rule Haiti? And will Haitians ever truly have the chance to resolve that question for themselves, or will outsiders once again play the decisive role in the country's future?

It is a question I had been wrestling with since I first went to Haiti as a young reporter for The New York Times. It was on the eve of the 2004 bicentennial of Haiti's independence, after the only successful modern revolt by enslaved people. My experiences in Haiti made self-determination and self-rule for the formerly colonized people of the global south one of the central subjects of my career as a correspondent in Africa and Asia. And it was the question of self-determination that brought me back here now. Haiti has long had independence, but where was its true freedom? It has long had elections, but where was its true democracy?

At that time Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a charismatic former Catholic priest who had become the country's first democratically elected president, faced a surge of protests — some backed by his longtime enemies in the country's tiny, wealthy elite, along with formerly staunch allies who now viewed him as a burgeoning autocrat. The most recent round of parliamentary elections hadn't been held, and Aristide was essentially ruling by decree. The United States and European partners each blocked hundreds of millions of dollars in promised aid as a form of political pressure. Human rights activists said Aristide was empowering street gangs to protect his government and intimidate and even kill critics of his government.

I was dropped, suddenly, into this complex story. When you are a daily news reporter on a big breaking story, it is easy to get lost in the incremental changes. I spent my days in the streets interviewing ordinary people, most of whom were loyal to Aristide,

who had come up from the city's slums. Their anger was palpable and played out in violent street clashes.

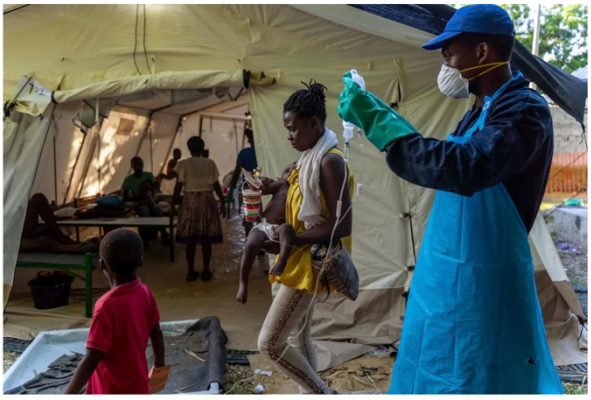
Like many foreign correspondents in Haiti at that time, I spent my evenings learning about the country from young Haitians who were like me: 20-something, college educated in North America, fluent in English and French, cosmopolitan in outlook. Their wealthy parents owned businesses threatened by Aristide's redistributive policies, and they supported political parties and candidates that wanted to remove him from office. Over endless bottles of Prestige beer and platters of chicken djon djon, my views were perhaps inevitably shaped by theirs, subtly softening the stark reality of what was unfolding: a usurpation of the will of a majority of the Haitian people.

By the end of February 2004, an armed insurrection pushed Aristide from power and onto an American jet taking him into exile. American Marines arrived soon after, with President George W. Bush declaring that "it is essential that Haiti have a hopeful future. This is the beginning of a new chapter."

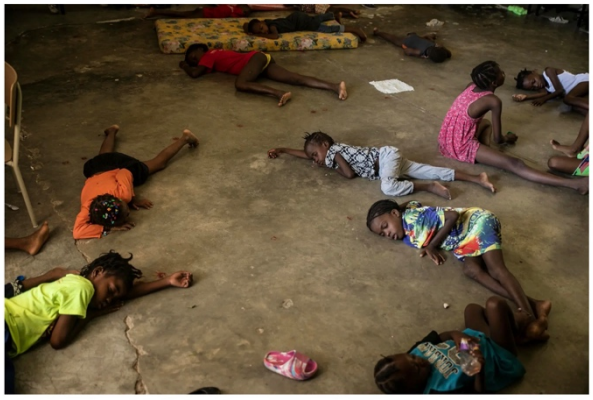
Who had wanted Aristide gone? I had attended many street protests against his government and saw that the opposition was not entirely confined to a small wealthy elite. But given his enormous popularity among the poor, it seems unlikely that a majority of Haitians wanted him out.

Aristide had made powerful enemies. He had demanded that France pay Haiti $21 billion, recompense for the repugnant debt it placed on its now liberated colony. The French were among the first nations to demand his ouster. Aristide's allies would later call his departure a kidnapping; the French ambassador at the time recently told The New York Times that the United States and France had effectively carried out a "coup." U.S. officials have long rejected both characterizations. Later, investigative reporting in The New York Times would demonstrate how a powerful conservative American organization helped shape the opposition — and raise fresh questions about the United States' role.

In another place, a leader like Aristide could have served out his terms in office, faced defeat and then nursed his political grudges and meddled with his enemies from the sidelines. What is self-rule other than the right to choose your own disappointment? But this is Haiti, a country where all but a handful of leaders have left office one of two ways: in exile or in a coffin.



A child with cholera symptoms is brought to a clinic in Cité Soleil. Richard Pierrin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



Children slept on the floor of a makeshift shelter after they were forced to leave their homes because of clashes between armed gangs. Odelyn Joseph/Associated Press

Standing on the tarmac at the airport here on Feb. 29, 2004, watching the American plane that carried Aristide into exile, I could not help but feel something irretrievable was lost. The best of what he represented — a demand for just redistribution, from without and within, as a route to true democracy and equity, was gone. What remained was his worst impulse: the gangs that had helped secure his presidency. It was a trauma from which Haiti has never really recovered, leaving it a broken nation living in the shadow of the most powerful country in the world — a boogeyman, a headache, a pawn.

What does the world owe Haiti today? First and foremost to leave it alone. To give Haitians the time, space and support to imagine a different future for their own country.

Dan Foote, a former U.S. special envoy to Haiti, has since become an exceptionally blunt critic of Washington's policy. He told me that "American foreign policy still believes subconsciously that Haiti is a bunch of dumb Black people who can't organize themselves, and we need to tell them what to do or it's going to get really bad. But the internationals have messed Haiti up every time we have intervened. It is time to give the Haitians a chance. What's the worst that can happen? They make it worse than we have?"

Haiti has been used and abused by more powerful nations since Christopher Columbus landed on the north coast of the island in 1492. The United States has seesawed between shunning and smothering Haiti, initially refusing to recognize the country, then invading it in 1915, turning into a quasi-colony for 19 years. Cold War calculations ensured that the United States retained deep influence over Haiti's politics and economy, sometimes uneasily, throughout the brutal regimes, from 1957 to 1986, of the Duvaliers, father and son.

Over the past dozen years, Haitian politics has grown ever more fractured as the country has been battered by a shattering earthquake and a series of storms and hurricanes. The political scene has been dominated by American-backed center-right leaders credibly accused of corruption and connections to criminal networks.

Between the isolation and foreign meddling, the country's political culture curdled into a noxious stew of fratricidal paranoia. In the absence of a modern industrial economy, the country quickly stratified. There is a mercantile class that makes most

of its money importing goods and selling them to everybody else — desperately poor people surviving on subsistence wages and remittances from a thriving diaspora in the United States, Canada, France and beyond.

These years have battered Haitians' faith in elections. In the first truly democratic election in 1990, more than half of eligible voters cast ballots. In the last election, less than 20 percent did.

Haitians also, understandably, have little faith in outsiders. Jean Rosier, a 53-year-old security guard, echoed what many people in Haiti told me.

"The international powers don't want change in Haiti," he said. "They prefer that we are weak, that we are poor. They want us to have our hands out so they can spit on them."

If the United States once valued Haiti as a playground for American capitalism and a bulwark against encroaching communism, it now simply wants to keep Haitian migrants out.

History has given the United States much to answer for in Haiti, and yet the two countries have become so enmeshed that even inaction by the United States is a kind of action.

Juan Gonzalez, the senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs on the National Security Council, said last month that the United States is not putting its finger on the scale to support any faction. "There really is not an easy fix in Haiti," he said. "I also think that just leaving it up to Haitians to resolve their problems, I think ignores the really, really concerning and deteriorating situation inside the country."

The current crisis presents a seemingly impossible puzzle. The existing government is weak and has no legitimacy; it remains in place largely through the support of the United States and other Western powers.

The impulse of just about every outsider, as well as the current government, is to try to hold elections as soon as possible to replace the extra-constitutional government with one that represents the wishes of Haiti's people. But in a country where there is no security, it is hardly possible to hold a credible election. And an election, even a technically fair and free one, is necessary but not sufficient for true self-rule. Much more will be required to restore a modicum of trust and faith in government here.

In my conversations with Haitians, I found a slender but persistent wisp of hope that this is finally the time to declare a kind of political bankruptcy, clear all old political debts and begin anew, with a fresh compact to carry Haiti forward.

A broad swath of Haitian society, including rival political parties, trade unions, grass-roots community groups and human rights activists, have come together to propose a detailed framework for a political transition.

Their compact, called the Montana Accord, calls for an appointed interim president, and the members of the group elected a former Haitian central bank governor named

Fritz Jean as a consensus candidate for the job early this year. Jean told me the country needs time to rebuild its institutions and work toward elections. He pledged that he would not be a candidate for the presidency in those elections.

For much of this country's history, the Haitian people have been playthings of powerful forces from without and within — of colonial and neocolonial powers, of economic elites, of global criminal networks, of politicians seeking to line their own pockets.

There is a word in Haitian Kreyól, "granmoun." Translated literally, it means "big person." But the actual meaning captures something deeper. To be a granmoun is to be the owner of your destiny, in control of your life and future. A granmoun is a sovereign being.

Magali Comeau Denis, a leader of the group trying to put in place the Montana Accord, introduced the word to me, when explaining how she sees Haiti's future. Then, she said: "This is the first time in Haitian history where we have really talked about our future with the economic, social, political and community groups together, directly at the table, giving their input and making changes and having their objections heard," she told me. "This is it. This is our chance."

The first step to helping Haiti fulfill its destiny, to be the independent Black republic its revolution promised, may be for the rest of us to get out of its way.

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