Haiti

Political Rights: 7 ↓
Civil Liberties: 6
Status: Not Free

Ratings Change: Haiti's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the lack of a democratically derived sovereign authority resulting from the ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, the imposition of an ineffective interim government, and the deployment of an international security force.

Overview:

On February 29, 2004, Jean-Bertrand Aristide resigned from the presidency and went into initial exile in the Central African Republic. Despite efforts to maintain a constitutional façade, the government continued to govern through force and intimidation, as Haiti became a dictatorship in all but name.

Since gaining independence from France in 1804 following a slave revolt, the Republic of Haiti has endured a history of poverty, violence, instability, and dictatorship. A 1986 military coup ended 29 years of rule by the Duvalier family, and the army ruled for most of the next eight years. Under international pressure, the military permitted the implementation of a French-style constitution in 1987.

Aristide was first elected in 1990. After having called on his supporters to use force in defending his government, he was deposed by a military triumvirate after only eight months in office and sent into exile. While paramilitary thugs terrorized the populace, the regime engaged in blatant narcotics trafficking. The United States and the United Nations imposed a trade and oil embargo. In September 1994, facing an imminent U.S. invasion, the officers stepped down. U.S. troops took control of the country, and Aristide was reinstated. Aristide dismantled the military before the June 1995 parliamentary elections got underway. International observers questioned the legitimacy of the June election, and Aristide's supporters fell out among themselves. The more militant Lavalas Family (FL) party remained firmly behind him, while the National Front for Change and Democracy (FNCD), a leftist coalition that had backed him in 1990, claimed fraud and boycotted the runoff elections. The FL won an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

The FL nominated Rene Preval, who had been Aristide's prime minister in 1991, as its presidential candidate in the fall. In the December 17, 1995 election, marred by irregularities and fraud, Preval won about 89 percent of the vote with a turnout of less than one-third of those eligible; he took office on February 7, 1996. The United Nations had planned to withdraw its troops by the end of the month. The new U.S.-trained Haitian National Police (HNP), however, lacked the competence to fill the void. At Preval's urging, the United Nations extended its stay, but by June cut its presence to 1,300; the final U.S. combat force had withdrawn two months earlier.

Aristide, previously revered as a defender of the powerless, was swept to victory again in November 2000. The elections were boycotted by all major opposition parties and held amidst widespread civil unrest and voter intimidation. Aristide ran on a populist platform of economic reactivation; opponents claimed he was bent on establishing a one-party state. Aristide's nearly

92 percent of the vote in the presidential election was mirrored in contests for nine Senate seats—all won by his FL party—giving his new government all but one seat in the upper house. In parliamentary elections, which opponents claimed were rigged, the FL won 80 percent of the seats in the lower house.

Although constitutionally elected, Aristide ultimately lacked the domestic legitimacy and international backing to stay in power. Seeking to prevent chaos and the taking of power by the armed opposition, the United States and France landed a peacekeeping force. Aristide's troubled government, unable to overcome the fraudulent elections of 2000, which had given it a stranglehold over power, found itself alone in power as the mandates of 4 senators and all 83 deputies expired on January 12, 2004.

With no possibility for popular elections to be held in January and left with only 15 sitting senators—9 had already resigned—Aristide would be forced to govern by decree. The opposition, united under the Democratic Convergence (DC), remained unwilling to negotiate a political solution that kept Aristide in office. In the meantime, an armed insurrection, led by the Front de Resistance, that had gradually taken shape in the previous months, crystallized on February 5. This development raised the prospect that the country could fall to an organized group of armed ruffians, many of whom had been Aristide supporters, previously known as the Cannibal Army (AC).

Upon Aristide's resignation in February, in line with constitutional procedures, Boniface Alexandre, head of the Supreme Court, was sworn into office as president. Yvon Neptune, an Aristide loyalist, agreed to remain in office to help the transition process. Political decay continued throughout the rest of the country. By March 1, the National Resistance Front for the Liberation of Haiti, led by the controversial Guy Philippe, a former soldier and the U.S.-trained chief of police of Cap Haitien, rolled into Port-au-Prince. Without a mandate to disarm the new arrivals, the peacekeeping force limited itself to patrols, while generalized looting took place.

On March 10, a commission of elder statesmen announced that Gerard Latortue, who had been in exile in Miami, would become the country's new prime minister. The multinational peacekeeping force gradually extended its reach from the capital and was renewed by the leadership of Brazil and forces from Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, as well as others. These forces, however, continued to be spread thin, and violence still erupted around the country. Destructive floods that took more than 2,000 lives in May exacerbated the political chaos. In September, gangs of ex-soldiers challenged the by-now UN-led peacekeeping force. A protracted struggle led to an uneasy peace, with the peacekeepers holding nominal control over the country, but having a continuous presence only in major cities.

Political stability has not followed the anarchy that coincided with the departure of Aristide. After leaving the Central African Republic, his brief presence in neighboring Jamaica (before long-term exile in South Africa) fueled the discontent of his many followers, some of whom remain unconvinced that he departed of his own will. The government of Prime Minister Latortue, lacking a strong political base, continues to try to establish order, primarily through the use of a retrained police force. Negotiations with the opposition have not yet led to a clear indication of when parliamentary elections will take place, or if the presidential elections to be held in February 2005 can go on as scheduled.

Haiti has the lowest life expectancy and highest infant mortality rates in the Western Hemisphere. Haiti's people are among the poorest in the Western Hemisphere and have the lowest levels of human development, including a literacy rate of less than 50 percent. In August

2004, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization announced that 50 percent of Haiti's population lacks "food security," or the food needed to live a healthy and active life.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Citizens of Haiti cannot change their government democratically. Haiti's 1987 constitution provides for a president elected for five years, an elected parliament composed of the 27-member Senate and the 83-member Chamber of Deputies, and a prime minister appointed by the president. Credible charges of irregularities and fraud have beset every election since 1990. The FL party has manipulated most elections, including the presidential POLL of 2000. Until the departure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the FL controlled the presidential, legislative, and judicial branches, while most local and regional elected leaders were members of the same party.

Haiti received the dubious distinction of being ranked with Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International in its 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech and the press continues to be limited, and violence against journalists is common. International observers find that media outlets still tend to practice self-censorship over fear of violent retribution. There are a variety of newspapers, including two French-language ones, with a combined circulation of less than 20,000 readers. Many newspapers include a page of news in Creole. While opposition to the government can be found in the written press, access to such views is beyond the reach of most, primarily because of illiteracy and cost. There are 275 private radio stations, including 43 in the capital. Most stations carry news and talk shows, which many citizens regard as their only opportunity to speak out with some freedom. Television is state-run and strongly biased toward the government. There are five television stations, and although satellite television is available, it has a minimal impact, as most Haitians cannot afford access to television. The few stations carrying news or opinion broadcasts express a range of views. There is no censorship of books or films, and access to the Internet is free.

There is freedom of religion. The official educational system was hostage to patronage and pressure from the FL.

Freedom of assembly and association, including labor rights, are not respected. Unions are too weak to engage in collective bargaining, and their organizing efforts are undermined by the country's high unemployment rate.

The judicial system continues to be corrupt, inefficient, and dysfunctional. The legal system is burdened by a large backlog, outdated legal codes, and poor facilities; business is conducted in French, rather than Creole, Haiti's majority language. Prison conditions are harsh, and the ponderous legal system guarantees lengthy pretrial detention periods. International reform efforts ended in 2000 following allegations of corruption involving the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. Justice Department contractors, and others.

The 5,200-member Haitian National Police (HNP) force has been politicized by the FL, is inexperienced, and lacks resources. The HNP has been accused of using excessive force and mistreating detainees, and accusations of corruption are frequent. The HNP was increasingly used against protesters attacking the government. Police brutality is still on the rise, and there is credible evidence of extrajudicial killings by members of the HNP.

Mob violence and armed gangs pose serious threats in urban areas. Former soldiers and others linked to the former military regime, as well as common criminals, are responsible for much of the violence, including political assassinations. Break-ins and armed robberies are commonplace, and many observers tie the growing violence directly to increases in the drug trade and local narcotics consumption. Haitian officials also say that the rise in crime is due to the repatriation of convicted criminals from other countries, particularly the United States. Turf wars between rival drug gangs have resulted in the killing of scores of people, including several policemen. Private security forces that carry out extralegal search and seizure are flourishing.

Trafficking of drugs and people is a serious problem. There is widespread violence against women and children. Up to 300,000 children serve in *restavec* ("live with" in Creole), a form of unpaid domestic labor with a long national history.