

## Aristide, Jean-Bertrand (b. 1953)

THIERRY SAINTINE

Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the leader of the Haitian Rebellion of 1980–90, which culminated in the deposition of the US-imposed dictatorship of François and Jean-Paul Duvalier. As a young Catholic priest in the 1980s, Aristide used his pulpit to rally the destitute peasantry for economic justice and democracy. He was instrumental in organizing the Haitian peasantry to engage in mass resistance against the military-dominated government through advocacy of economic equality and democratic rights for all citizens of Haiti. Following the overthrow of the Duvalier regime, Aristide decisively won a popular election as the first democratic president of Haiti since independence in 1804.

Aristide was born on July 15, 1953 in Port-Salut, Haiti, but grew up in Port-au-Prince, under the care of priests of the Salesian order of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly he was educated in Salesian parochial schools. He then studied at the University of Haiti and left Port-au-Prince for advanced biblical studies in Israel, Egypt, Canada, and Britain. He was ordained in the Salesian order in 1982 but in 1988 was expelled for preaching radical ideas and criticizing Haiti's lack of democracy. He was accused of inciting the poor against the state by increasing their awareness of their oppression.

In the early 1980s Haiti was dominated by the Duvalier dynasty. The US-backed army installed François "Papa Doc" Duvalier in 1957, and he was succeeded by his son Jean-Paul, "Baby Doc," in 1971. Aristide's

career as a preacher began under Baby Doc's reign, enforced by the *tontons macoutes* ("cannibal uncles") military corps, whose sole purpose was to report, arrest, and kill all opponents of the government and to counter all emergent opposition movements. The militia was known for its fierce brutality and slaughter of thousands of Haitians seeking greater equality and democracy. Aristide used the pulpit to publicly denounce the dereliction, inequality, injustice, corruption, and violence of the Duvalier government and *tontons macoutes*.

In 1985, at the age of 35, Aristide founded Ti Legliz (little church), a theological liberation group composed mainly of peasants and urban workers, which spread rapidly throughout the nation through the Haitian Catholic Church. Aristide used the Catholic Church to reach out to Haiti's poor and dispossessed in both the rural areas and major cities. It was the first time in Haiti that a priest was delivering liberation and anti-oppression speeches instead of biblical scriptures. He faced many threats and assassination attempts, but he continued his radical and revolutionary sermons, in effect launching a national mobilization against the Duvalier regime.

On February 7–8, 1986, after months of popular demonstrations and aided by the army and its chief, General Henry Namphy, Duvalier was forced out of office and out of the country. Namphy proclaimed himself the new ruler of the country until new elections, which he promised would take place in November of the same year. Instead, the country went through four years of coup after coup and leader after leader, and the result was Haiti's rapid economic, social, and political deterioration.

During those four very tumultuous years, Aristide's popularity and political presence grew stronger. For one, amidst the violence and power struggles, the country's other leaders had lost all respect and trust of the Haitian population. Aside from that, two events played important roles in Aristide's rise into the presidency. The first was one of the several attempts on his life in September 1987 while he was leading mass at his parish of St. Jean Bosco. At about 9.15 a.m. on Sunday morning of September 11, 20 men, all wearing red handkerchiefs on their left arm (sign of the *tontons macoutes* corps) and armed with guns, machetes, and sticks, took the church and its congregation hostage, threatening to kill them all if they did not turn over Father Aristide, who had mysteriously disappeared with the help of some of the parishioners. Sixty to seventy people were severely wounded and a dozen killed; Aristide blamed himself for the massacre. Then, months later, the St. Francis De la Sale priests' association expelled Aristide from the church and priesthood, accusing him of using the church for his personal and political agenda. These last two events brought home to Aristide the depth of the political anarchy clouding the island and led him to run for president to push forth his social agenda.

Aristide won the December 1990 presidential election with nearly 70 percent of the total votes. At age 37, then, he entered history by becoming the first democratically elected president of Haiti since its birth in 1804. Once in power he remained true to his radical and revolutionary ideologies: "Power for the people." It was also the first time that there was a direct relation and communication between the government and the population. Several local and regional movements were formed to keep the government abreast of the various communities' needs and requests. Even Haiti's judiciary and legal system, nearly nonexistent since the fall of the Duvalier regime, seemed

functional again. Economically, the country appeared to be moving toward a brighter path as well. Aristide's senior delegation, sent to Paris to attend a World Bank international lenders conference, was successful in obtaining promises of a \$442 million loan for the reconstruction of the country. Haiti finally seemed to be taking steps toward a promising future.

Seven months into the presidency, the army staged a coup. Joseph Nerette was made president, but army commander Raoul Cedras held the real power. Cedras justified the coup on the claim that Aristide was forming a secret and personal armed corps of about 300 men (later known as "Attachés") and that he was creating a dangerous conflict between the affluent class and the poor. Many prosperous business men and women who lived in the hills of Port-au-Prince and owned more than 70 percent of the country's wealth echoed Cedras's latter claim, insisting that during the seven months of Aristide's reign, they were in constant fear for their lives and property. They cited Aristide's speeches, such as the one in which he told listeners: "my famished, unemployed, uneducated and broke men, women and children, if the sun is burning you, if your stomach is growling, your kids can't go to school ... and you look up in the hills at your brothers and sisters who have more than they need, I say go to those hills and ask them for a slice, a piece of bread, a penny, ask them for shelter" as the reason for their fear.

Aristide rallied international support and the military regime was forced to back down. He returned to Haiti in late 1994 to complete his presidential term. He then disbanded the Haitian army and created instead a civilian police force. The Haitian constitution does not allow for consecutive terms, so when Aristide's presidency expired in 1996 his ally and former prime minister, Rene Preval, ran as his successor and garnered 88 percent of

the vote. This was the first democratic and peaceful power transition in Haiti.

Aristide ran for a second term in 2000 and won under the newly created Fanmi Lavalas Party. However, most opposition parties boycotted the election, creating a crisis in legitimacy from the beginning. Aristide's government was dependent upon foreign aid, and the US, Canada, and France led an embargo on some types of aid, leaving him vulnerable to a coup attempt. This led to a rebellion by an armed gang sponsored by the US and France in 2004, and Aristide's departure from Haiti for a second time, in what many observers view as a kidnapping. He went to South Africa and earned a doctorate in African languages from the University of South Africa in 2007.

SEE ALSO: Haiti, Democratic Uprising, 1980s–1991; Haiti, Foreign-Led Insurgency, 2004; Haiti, Protest and Rebellion, 20th Cen-

tury; Haiti, Resistance to US Occupation; Haiti, Revolutionary Struggles

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