

## Aristide's Fall: The Undemocratic U.S. Policy in Haiti

Interview by IRC's Policy Director Tom Barry with Robert Maguire, director of the Haiti Program at Trinity College in Washington, DC. | February 27, 2004

What should be U.S. policy with respect to Jean-Bertrand Aristide's future as Haiti's president?

I strongly believe that U.S. policy should support a government that won power in a legitimate election and which is recognized as a democracy throughout the hemisphere. Mr. Aristide should be permitted to finish his five-year term. Washington should strongly declare its support for this democratically elected president, and should not be equivocating about this.

But the Bush administration has been equivocating.

It took some time for the Bush administration to state that it recognized Aristide as the legitimate president of Haiti. It adopted this position because it feared that Aristide might be cooking the books, changing the law so that he could run for another term. The Haitian constitution permits two terms but only if they are nonconsecutive. So, the Bush administration decided to back Aristide, but in doing so warned him that he had only his five-year term, not a day longer.

Recently, the whole calculus has changed. Aristide supporters hold up one hand, with their fingers extended, and say "Five Years." No longer is there any talk about Aristide continuing beyond five years. But as the calculus has changed, the administration's recognition of the legitimacy of that five-year term has also changed.

What is the role of the political aid programs of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in the political process in Haiti?

NED and USAID are important, but actually the main actor is the International Republican Institute on International Affairs (IRI), which has been very active in Haiti for many years but particularly in the past three years. IRI has been working with the opposition groups. IRI insisted, through the administration, that USAID give it funding for its work in Haiti. And USAID has done so—but kicking and screaming all the way. IRI has worked exclusively with the Democratic Convergence groups in its party-building exercises and support.

The IRI point person is Stanley Lucas, who historically has had close ties with the Haitian military. All of the IRI-sponsored meetings with the opposition have occurred outside Haiti, either in the DR or in the United States. The IRI ran afoul of Aristide right from the beginning since it has only worked with opposition groups that have challenged legitimacy of the Aristide government.

Mr. Lucas is a lightning rod of the IRI in Haiti. The U.S. could not have chosen a more problematic character through which to channel its aid.

Recently, NED has apparently distanced itself from the IRI's programs in Haiti.

CIPE [Center for International Private Enterprise] is involved in Haiti, and worked with the De Soto development groups, among other groups.

To what degree is U.S. policy responsible for the current situation?

First, it should be recognized that there has been a lot of miscalculation, bad judgment by Aristide, who is in many ways his own worst enemy. But on the other hand, he has faced a chorus of criticism from the U.S. and a lack of cooperation—and stridently so, both from Washington and the political opposition.

We should remember that from the first day of Aristide's term, the opposition set up a provisional government. My own observation then was that things in Haiti had changed. This never would have been permitted before. It was a sign that Haiti seemed to be becoming a more tolerant place.

One of the major voices of the administration has been Roger Noriega, who has always talked **at** the Aristide government not **with** it—constantly disparaging and criticizing Haiti in the OAS. Noriega has always refused to comment on the work of the IRI in Haiti.

This is not a U.S.-led coup. But if you ask who's to blame and what led up to this, then you need to cast blame on the Bush administration for its failed policy, for its contributing role.

It has not been very constructive. Policy has been run by subordinates like Noriega. When you engage, you



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have much more influence than when you disengage, as the U.S. has during the Bush administration.

## What about France, which first called for Aristide to step aside?

France was never enamored with Aristide, mainly because France has always followed the lead of the Socialist International representative—a member of the political elite in Haiti—who is very anti-Aristide. Over the last year Aristide has made a big issue of reparations from France, which upon Haiti's independence demanded and got 150 million francs from the new government to gain France's recognition. Aristide has said that this should be returned by France with interest—some 21 billion francs. Aristide did this as part of the run-up to the bicentennial. This really tweaked the French in the wrong way, and they wanted Aristide gone, as an annoyance. The French government sent Regis DeBray to meet with Aristide—hoping to talk him to death on the issue. Basically, France wanted to get rid of Aristide.

## Why do popular organizations seem to want Aristide to resign as president?

There are two main sectors known as popular organizations:

First, there are the so-called popular organizations that are neither popular nor organized. These are basically urban youth and street gangs. It has long been the practice in Haiti to win their support through political bidding. Aristide felt compelled to do the same, which was one of his main mistakes. He fell into the pattern, when he could have broken with it. For them, politics means access to resources and power. The gang leaders—the *chimeres*—would have loved a job, but there were no jobs because Aristide was put under sanctions, and ostracized from international aid and support after the flawed parliamentary election of May 2000. Aristide was forced to manage scarcity, and managing scarcity means managing the powers that be. When you depend on street

gangs for hire, allegiance can shift easily, as it has in the past several months. One reason for the shift last year was that Aristide was pressured by the U.S. to go after the drug leaders and rein in the street gangs. This happened after a September 19 meeting with the U.S. ambassador in which the U.S. put new pressure on. Gangs felt betrayed at the hands of the government.

Then, there are the peasant organizations. They became disaffected for two reasons. One, the Lavalas or their underlings often turned to intimidation as part of this effort to manage scarcity, particularly in rural areas. The second reason is the Aristide government's inability to deliver projects and jobs. It faced sanctions, with no resources. But there was hope that this was beginning to change late last year when IDB [Interamerican Development Bank] and World Bank signaled that they would renew aid. The government was on the verge of getting money, which would have fortified Aristide because of the ability to provide jobs and projects. You could argue that's why things suddenly got hot. Opposition wanted to get rid of Aristide before this happened. The opposition was scared to death of foreign aid, which would have resulted in renewed support for Aristide. His popularity would have spiked enormously.

## FOR MORE ON U.S. POLICY IN HAITI:

Robert Maguire, "U.S. Policy Toward Haiti: Engagement or Estrangement?" *Haiti Papers*, No. 8, November 2003, Trinity College, Washington, DC, at:  
<http://www.trinitydc.edu/academics/depts/Interdisc/International/PDF%20files/hbp8.pdf>.

Beth Sims, "Populism, Conservatism, and Civil Society in Haiti," IRC Right Web at:  
<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/analysis/2004/0403ned-haiti.php>

Conn Hallinan, "Haiti: Dangerous Muddle," IRC Americas Program at:  
<http://www.americaspolicy.org/articles/2004/0403haiti.html>

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### Recommended citation:

Tom Barry, "Interview with Haiti Expert Robert Maguire: Aristide's Fall: The Undemocratic U.S. Policy in Haiti," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, February 27, 2004).

### Web location:

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