



The fight for control of government and seats in the Parliament appears increasingly irrelevant.

Photo by Leah Gordon

A full house but nobody home

Almost one year since elections that returned a Parliament completely dominated by President Aristide's Lavalas Family Party, the political scene in Haiti continues to waiver between farce and tragedy.

The group of political parties most virulently opposed to Aristide have formed a coalition that rejects the results of last year's elections. This coalition, the Democratic Convergence (see centre pages), supported by powerful backers in the United States and France, wants to force the Lavalas Family out of power.

In response to the Convergence's unwavering opposition, the Lavalas Family leader, President Aristide, has bent over backwards to convince the all-important foreign powers of his willingness to compromise. Even though the Organisation of American States electoral observers only quibbled with the Senate results, the Lavalas Family has offered to hold new

elections next year for not just the disputed Senate seats, but for all 83 seats in the lower house too.

Further efforts to placate the "international community" have included the appointment of the 1991-94 coup regime's Prime Minister, Marc Bazin, as Minister of Planning and External Cooperation, and the return of Stanley Théard to head the Ministry of Commerce, a post he last occupied under former dictator, Jean-Claude Duvalier. The appointment of a new nine-member electoral council was notable (and shocking for those who fought so long against the dictatorship) for the inclusion of four former Duvalier supporters.

These moves to the right however failed to impress either the Convergence or their foreign backers, and international development funds earmarked for the central government remain on hold pending a resolution of the post-electoral dispute. The Convergence appears to be a following a strategy designed to perpetuate the crisis so

that the Lavalas government is unable to implement any of its programmes. The hope is that the Lavalas Family Party will thus lose the electoral support that most everyone agrees it enjoyed last year.

This process appears to already be in full swing as the Haitian public realises that the Lavalas Parliament, convened last August, is now not even meeting. The absence of members of both Houses has caused a Parliamentary paralysis with the result that neither laws nor the annual budget have been passed. On the heels of the abject performance of the previous OPL-controlled Parliament, the Lavalas Family's pathetic efforts are bringing the institution into even further disrepute.

March was a month of violent altercations between partisans of the two protagonists, bringing disruptions to daily life for ordinary people who are already waging

one mighty struggle just to survive. More and more it appears that these political conflicts are mainly concerned with winning power in order to grab foreign funding, and it would not be surprising to find the population ever more disenchanted with their so-called leaders.

The weekly newspaper *Haiti Progrès* comments that "politically, the Lavalas Family and Democratic Convergence increasingly resemble each other, having no strategic differences. Both have integrated Duvalierists and putschists into their ranks, and both argue that Haiti must adhere to the neo-liberal policies prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank."

Supporters of the original Lavalas slogans of 'Openness, Justice and Participation' are beginning to distance themselves from the political parties' unsightly, and ever more irrelevant, disputes. The only light at the end of the tunnel is that with the traditional leaders of both Lavalas and the Convergence losing credibility, there is a chance for progressive activists and organisations to initiate a long-awaited political realignment in the interests of the poor majority.

"Politically, the Lavalas Family and Democratic Convergence increasingly resemble each other."

What is the Democratic Convergence?

In the days following the 21 May 2000 Parliamentary and local elections, when it became clear that the Lavalas Family Party had won a landslide victory, a coalition of political parties banded together as the Democratic Convergence. In order to explain their abject defeat, these small parties claimed that the elections were rigged, and they refused to participate in the second round of voting. Although international observers found that the elections were, on the whole, free and fair, and only denounced the method used to calculate the Senate contests, the Democratic Convergence has continued to question the credibility of the whole process. The coalition refused to contest the Presidential and further Senate elections in November, and subsequently

claimed that low voter participation reflected a high level of support for them.

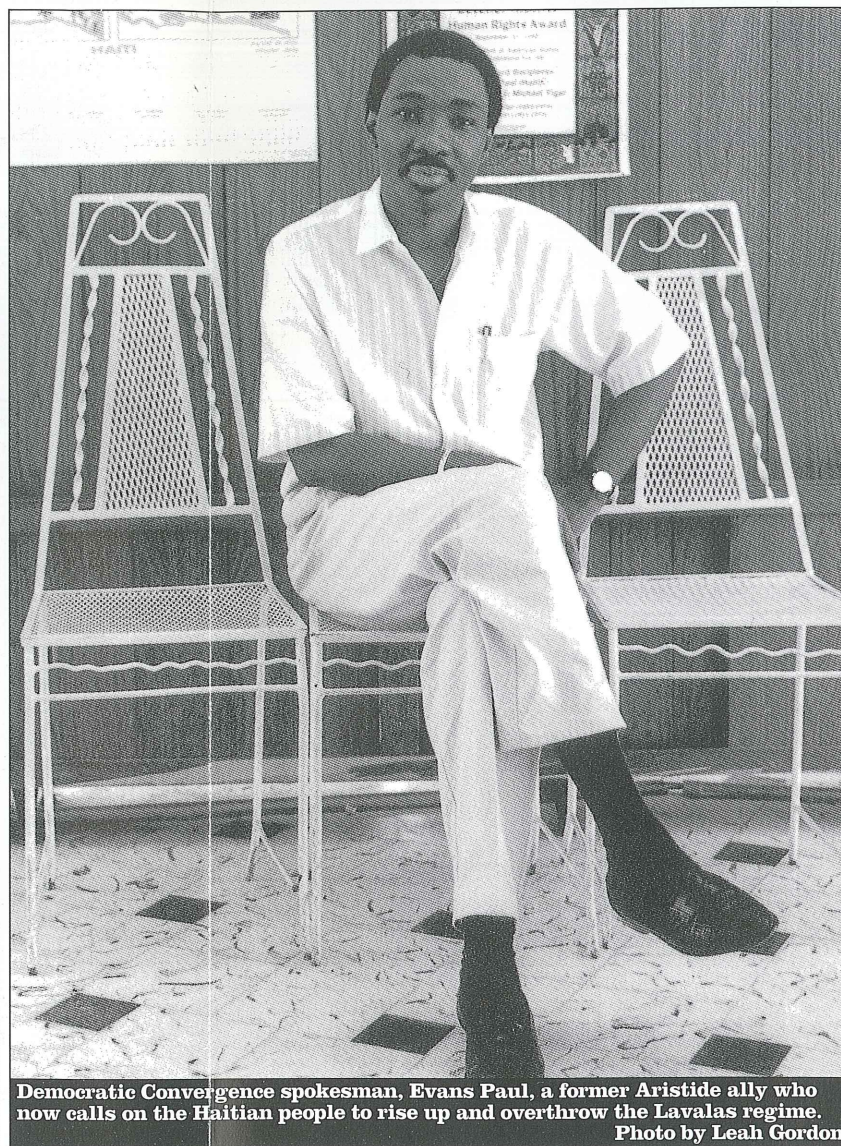
As *The Washington Post*, amongst others, has reported, the Convergence was formed with help from the International Republican Institute, an organisation that is closely identified with the US Republican Party. It includes a wide-range of parties and individuals who are linked only by their opposition to President Aristide and his Lavalas Family Party, although, according to the cynics, they also share a liking for foreign funding for their struggle for 'democracy'.

The parties

The Democratic Convergence parties are:

- Organisation du Peuple en Lutte (OPL), a social democratic party allied with Aristide until 1996;

- Mouvement Chrétien pour une Nouvelle Haïti (MOCHRENA), a new right wing Protestant party;
- Rassemblement des Démocrates Nationaux Progressistes, a centrist party led by former President Lesley Manigat;
- Parti Démocrate Haïtien, a tiny social democratic party;
- and two coalitions:
- Espace de Concertation, an assortment of five small political organisations, including the Parti National Progressiste Haïtien (PANPRA) and the Congrès National des Mouvements Démocratiques (CONACOM), both members of the social democratic Second International; and a group led by former Port-au-Prince mayor and one time Aristide ally, Evans Paul;
- Mouvement Patriotique pour le Sauvetage National (MPSN), a grouping of six small neo-Duvalierist parties.



Democratic Convergence spokesman, Evans Paul, a former Aristide ally who now calls on the Haitian people to rise up and overthrow the Lavalas regime. Photo by Leah Gordon

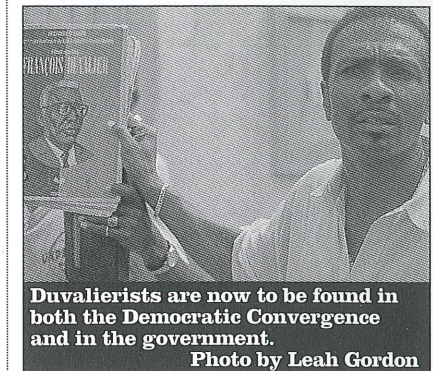
These are not political parties of the type that are part of the political scene in Europe and elsewhere. Apart from the OPL, MOCHRENA and the Espace coalition, which recorded modest tallies in the May 2000 elections, these parties, or more accurately 'parties', enjoy very little support. They are mainly vehicles for the personal ambitions of wealthy or well-connected individuals.

Incongruous line-up

The Convergence's figurehead is their self-styled 'provisional President', Gérard Gourgue, a 75-year-old lawyer and human rights activist who was Justice Minister in the junta that replaced dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. Gourgue was favourite to win the 1987 Presidential election until it was aborted by the military, which then organised a controlled election that was 'won' by Leslie Manigat. He was soon deposed by a military coup, and a short time later, General Prosper Avril was installed as President. Bizarrely, Avril too is now part of the Convergence – this is the same Avril against whom Evans Paul, and PANPRA leader, Serges Gilles, along with four others, brought a suit in a US federal court in 1994. They won a \$41 million judgment against him for ordering their torture. Completing a totally incongruous line-up is Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, the leader of the MPP peasant movement that suffered so much military repression during the 1991-94 coup regime.

Apart from a total abhorrence of Aristide and his party, the only aspect of the Convergence's platform to have been

thus far revealed is its support for a revival of the Haitian Army. On 7 February, Gérard Gourgue – apparently forgetting the recent history of bloody coups and repression – claimed that the Army "exists to safeguard lives and goods as far as possible, to obey civil authority, to impose order and finally to guarantee security for all." He continued, "in all countries where the police sometimes lack effectiveness, one has a second force called the Army which has the authority to intervene..."



Duvalierists are now to be found in both the Democratic Convergence and in the government. Photo by Leah Gordon

Speaking to *The Washington Post*, other Convergence leaders went further, and with a promise of anonymity, "freely expressed their desire to see the US military intervene once again, this time to get rid of Aristide and rebuild the disbanded Haitian army. 'That would be the cleanest solution,' said one opposition party leader. Failing that, they say, the CIA should train and equip Haitian officers exiled in the neighboring Dominican Republic so that they could stage a comeback themselves."

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HAITIAN ARMY?

As common crime and political violence continue to increase, some in Haiti are calling for the return of the Army. With the Democratic Convergence calling for the force to be reconstituted, and former soldiers demonstrating on the streets of the capital, CHARLES ARTHUR answers the question: where are they now?

In early 1995, President Aristide disbanded the 7,000-strong Haitian Armed Forces. The move was immensely popular with the Haitian people, who had not only experienced a string of military coups d'état, but also suffered daily human rights abuses at the hands of soldiers and police.

Some of the top military officers, fled the country after US forces landed in September 1994 – most of them to the neighbouring Dominican Republic, but others made their way to the United States. According to a high-ranking officer, Colonel Carl Dorelien, who said he received a five-year visa from a friendly US military officer, some entered the country with the knowledge – and even the assistance – of US government officials. Dorelien, told *The Boston Globe* that 15 high-ranking military officers – the entire junta, with the exception of Raoul Cedras and Philippe Biamby, – had been allowed to immigrate to the United States.

Jackson Joanis, the infamously brutal commander of the police Anti-Gang and Investigation Unit during the 1991-94 coup regime, recently resurfaced in south

Florida, when, late last year, US immigration officials detained him with a view to returning him to Haiti where he is wanted on charges of murder and torture.

Recycled into the new police

However, the majority of the lower ranks, and all the ordinary soldiers and policemen, remained in Haiti. Thousands of them were recruited into an Interim Public Security Force, a stop-gap until a new police force could be trained and deployed. Incredibly, within a short time, some 1,500 of these interim force members were integrated into this new, US-trained, Haitian National Police (HNP) force. According to the 1997 Human Rights Watch report, former military officers assumed the top positions in the HNP, and in 1996, a further 130 former officers of the rank of 2nd Lieutenant and above were added to command positions. The report continued, "Significant numbers of former military personnel also are serving at lower levels of the HNP, particularly in the notorious Port-au-Prince police stations known as Anti-Gang and Cafeteria, and in the Traffic Police. HNP

leaders incorporated 699 former soldiers into these units in December 1995, adding to the roughly 450 former soldiers already serving in the palace and presidential guards."

Although some former soldiers are among the hundreds thrown out of the HNP for abusive behaviour or corruption, an apparent shortage of other qualified candidates means that former military officers have continued to be promoted into the force hierarchy. In 1999, the US weekly, *The Nation*, reported that according to US and Haitian officials, "more than 50% of the top police commissioners are recycled Haitian Army personnel."

The perhaps predictable consequences of this policy were highlighted last year by two events. First, the Port-au-Prince police commissioner and two other police officers, all former members of the military, were found guilty of executing eleven people in Carrefour Feuilles in May 1999. Then, just last October, a number of other police chiefs were implicated in coup plot to overthrow the government, and fled to the Dominican Republic. It transpired that they were part

of a group who had trained as military cadets in Ecuador during the 1991-1994 coup regime, and had later been integrated into the HNP.

Privatised gangsters

As for the other former soldiers and police who were not recycled into the HNP, some threw away their uniforms, sold their guns and recreated themselves as peasant farmers or urban workers in the so-called 'informal sector'. Some others probably stuck to what they knew best, and formed the criminal gangs that now plague the country. Former officers are also believed to be running Colombian cocaine through Haiti – after all, the contacts for this lucrative trade were established by the military top brass in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

During 1996, demobilised soldiers actively campaigned for financial compensation for their dismissal. After various violent demonstrations, the then Prime Minister, Rosny Smarth, responded to these demands by publishing a communiqué stating that the government, with the help of the international community, was drawing up a

plan to compensate them. Since then, little has been heard.

"Long Live the Army!"

That is until 6 March, when former Haitian Army soldiers marched through the capital, and demonstrated in front of the National Palace and the French and US Embassies. Media reports of the numbers involved, ranged from a few hundred to as many as one thousand. Ostensibly a demonstration to demand payment of the demobilised soldiers' state pensions, the ex-soldiers chanted, "Long Live the Army of Haiti!" as they handed in petitions at the foreign embassies demanding the resignation of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The demonstration's leader, Gérard Dalvius, a former Army major and leader of a small party allied to the Democratic Convergence, was quoted as saying, "This is a movement to uproot Lavalas which is preventing people from living, which does everything which is bad in the country, which has put a bunch of false leaders at the head of the country, and which has created anarchy in the country."

Himler Rébu, a former army colonel and head of the Leopard unit set up by the US to protect the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, warned the government to take the soldiers' pension demands seriously, or face an armed confrontation.

In response to these developments, and to the Democratic Convergence's call for the Army's revival, Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, of the 30th September Foundation human rights organisation, staged a public exhibition of the Army's atrocities in Haiti. On 14 March, the first photos of soldiers' atrocities were displayed at the Place Des Martyrs in Port-au-Prince. The goal of the exhibition was, he said, to remind everyone of the potential for abuses posed by the possible return of the Army.

Although the Haitian Army was effectively dissolved by Aristide in 1995, it has not been formally abolished by parliamentary vote. However, in March, the heads of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies wrote to Pierre-Antoine reassuring him that the Haitian Parliament would soon deal with legislation regarding the final status of the Haitian Army.

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Book review

The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States

edited by **Edwidge Danticat**

Someone should do the young people of Haiti a favour and have this book translated into Creole. If they could read the eloquent and immensely moving stories in this wonderful anthology, then perhaps they'd think again about leaving home in pursuit of the 'American dream'.

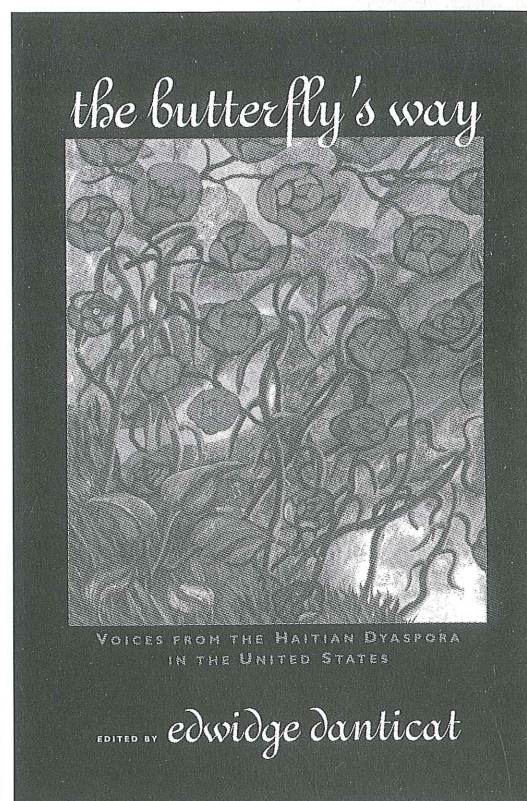
Joanne Hyppolite writes of growing up in Boston's racially segregated neighbourhoods where "when you tell people you are from Haiti, they ask politely, 'Where's that?'" For Martine Bury, dating with white men proved to be surreal and disturbing. "There is something cruel and unforgiving when your lover leaves you because of the possibility of beige babies. Or because his family is truly irked by you." Racial prejudice was hard for Garry Pierre-Pierre to ignore after he married a white woman. They had to learn "to stay away from places where either one of us would be uncomfortable, to choose our friends carefully (we have more black friends than white) and to live in

places where we feel safe and secure."

Annie Grégoire experienced a painful adolescence, "believing that (her) dark skin was inferior" and therefore often prevented from "living openly; walking along the beach; dancing wantonly at school parties; feeling attractive in a deep red dress; or laughing at someone's joke." She writes that "Keeping quietly to myself, I hoped to attract as little attention as possible."

The experience of such pervasive racial tensions explains why so few rich Haitians exchange the homeland, for which they show such disdain, for a new life in the United States. In Haiti, the light skinned Marie-Hélène Laforest was regarded as a member of the white elite, but on moving to New York as a child she found herself seen as black and was stared at by her white neighbours. "Their silence was ominous like their stares," she writes, "I did not associate this with racism until much later."

This book is burning with anger, not just against the ignorance and



racism of US society, but against the Haitian elite whose abuse of the Haitian majority has driven so many thousands into exile. Caught between a life of alienation and rejection in the US, and exploitation and abuse at home, the Haitian Diaspora is ground between two stones.

The thirty-odd authors assembled in this anthology display a talent for immensely powerful and personal writing. A seething and vibrant collection that is warmly recommended.

Roots music band, RAM, coming to a town near you

Mixing African, indigenous Western influences with hypnotic and thumping Haitian street rhythms, the unique sound of RAM is as haunting as it is sensuous. Traditional Haitian drums play alongside electric guitars and keyboards to create songs that travel from the silky sounds of Haitian pop, to the driving force of rara.

Famed for their performances at Port-au-Prince's Oloffson Hotel, RAM first appeared in the UK at the Edinburgh Festival last year.

● For more details, contact:
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email: dorothy@amendmnt.demon.co.uk; web: www.ukarts.com/opera/ram.htm

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tambours
underpinning an
infectious dance
music sung in
Creole patois,
led by subtle
keyboards and
funky rock
guitar... an hour
is far too short!"
The Scotsman

RAM TOUR DATES:

JUNE

5th – Alnwick, Playhouse,

Tel: 01665 510785

6th & 7th – Newcastle, Playhouse,

Tel: 0191 230 5151

9th – Salisbury

10th – Norwich, Maddermarket

Theatre, Tel: 01603 620917

14th-17th – Liverpool, Oye festival

19th-21st – Bath, Theatre Royal,

Tel: 01225 448844

22nd & 23rd – Bradford Festival,

Tel: 01274 309199

23rd – Huddersfield, Lawrence Batley

Theatre, Tel: 01484 430528

24th – Jersey, Opera House,

Tel: 01354 617522

26th – Llandudno, North Wales

Theatre, Tel: 01492 872000

27th – Cardigan, Theatr Mwldan,

Tel: 01239 621200

28th – Brecon, Theatr Brycheiniog,

Tel: 01874 611622

JULY

1st & 2nd – London, Stratford Circus,

Tel: 0208 279 1000

4th – Southampton, The Gantry,

Tel: 023 8022 9319

5th – Bexhill-on-Sea, De la Warr

Pavillion, Tel: 01424 787949

6th – Camberley, Arts Link,

Tel: 01276 707600

7th – Leicester, De Montfort Hall,

Tel: 0116 233 3111

8th – St Donat's Arts Centre,

Tel: 01464 799100

12th – Shrewsbury, The Buttermarket

13th – Tewkesbury, The Roses

Theatre, Tel: 01684 295074

14th – Oxford, Rhythm Sticks,

Tel: 0207 921 0613 & Zodiac Club,

Tel: 01865 420042

15th – Lincoln, International Dance

& Music Festival, Tel: 01476 406158

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