Carnival performer lampoons the fat cats and 'big eaters'. Jacmel, February 1997. Photo by Leah Gordon

Lavalas splits, violence increases

The 'gran manje' - literally the big eaters - are the 'fat cats', the corrupt politicians, government bureaucrats and other officials who are getting rich on the backs of the Haitian poor. The anti-gran manje theme spontaneously erupted and dominated February's carnival. Songs and street theatre ridiculed and threatened the self-seeking functionaries, reflecting a popular perception that Lavalas politicians, and civil servants in the government ministries, are little different to their reviled predecessors. Fuelling this sense of disappointment and betrayal is an ever-worsening economic situation that is affecting the poor most acutely in the form of rising prices for basic foods.

As so often is the case in Haiti, it doesn't take long for people to see things for what they really are. One year into the presidency of René Préval, support for the new Lavalas government is fading as it fails to deliver any real improvements in the lives of ordinary people. The repercussions can already be seen as political leaders and parties from the heterogenous Lavalas movement attempt to distance themselves from an increasingly unpopular government. The Lavalas Platform coalition that won an overwhelming victory in the 1995 parliamentary elections, and then supported Préval's candidacy, has split into three parties, and a new party, led by former president Aristide, has also formed.

While the Lavalas parties attempt to redefine themselves and jockey for position in the run-up to the Senate and council elections in April and May, the country has been plunged into the worst period of violence since the end of the coup regime. In six weeks from the middle of February, over 50 people, including eight police officers, a senator's bodyguard and the Justice Ministry's chief of security, were shot and killed. The motive for most of the attacks remains unclear, although at least 15 of the deaths occurred during gun battles between gangs believed to be fighting for control of the drugs trade in the Port-au-Prince slum, Cité Soleil.

President Préval appeared to regard concerns about renewed violence as an opportunity to frighten people into backing his government. He warned, "If you don't help out our young, poorly equipped, beleaguered police, the Tonton Macoutes on the sidelines will stage a coup d'état, the same as in 1991." Yet, in the opinion of Gerard Pierre-Charles, leader of the pro-government party, the OPL, "The Duvalierists have no leadership, no ideology and no army...As a political force, they are completely finished."

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, leader of the Peasant Movement of Papay, who supports Préval yet bizarrely still insists he is opposed to neo-liberalism, claimed that "the insecurity had been planned. It's a struggle for power. Sectors within the Lavalas movement are directly involved." This seemed to be a reference to Aristide supporters. Aristide himself obliquely linked the violence to the economic direction taken by the government when he told a meeting of his supporters, "Insecurity is one means they are using to intimidate the population and make us accept the neo-liberal plan."
The truth about Disney

The truth about producing for Disney in Haiti is illustrated by the case of workers at a Port-au-Prince factory that makes Disney-branded goods.

On 26 February workers stopped sewing Walt Disney Poochontas dresses for two hours to protest the management’s refusal to hear their grievances and restore a union to press for better wages and working conditions. Currently they make the minimum wage of 36 gourdes per day (about £3.45 at current exchange rates). Vendors outside the factory gathered a crowd of 200 who demanded pay increases.

With public transportation to the factory costing most workers four gourdes each way, that means it takes half of a worker’s wages just to go to work and eat lunch and to get back home. The union is asking for a wage of 75 gourdes (£3.45 per day).

After five months of stalling, factory owner Marie-Claude Bayard finally met with the employees on 3 March, but refused to consider any of their demands. Instead, Bayard hired security guards to intimidate the workers. A guard told one worker, “If you get in the way of my gun, it’s your fault.”

Sources: Reuters, the Christian Peacemaker Team in Haiti

The Haiti Support Group is exploring the possibility of organising a speaking tour of Britain and other European countries by a member of Bayard’s staff in Haiti, who has been in contact in an attempt to set up a centre to produce the toys for Disney’s customers in the US and France.

In response to the continued unfavourable publicity arising from the protests here in the US, Disney has sent out letters claiming that its factories “are operating in compliance with foreign laws and policies.” The letter further states that the Haitian workers receive a salary well above the minimum wage, and refers to the “clean bill of health” issued by the US Embassy in Haiti after its recent visit. The letter also says that Disney’s “strongly uphold the rights of workers, including the right to collective bargaining, and the right to form trade unions.”

The letter goes on to claim that Disney’s factories are “modern” and that they have “high standards for environmental protection.”

In a recent report on the issue of the minimum wage in Haiti, the Brussels-based Centre for Research on the Global Economy (CRE) noted that “the minimum wage is deceptively low because Disney is using its claim on average wages - that is, an average calculated from the wages paid to all factory employees, including better paid supervisors and security staff. What is more, the issue of impossibly high minimum wages on the factory floor must meet in order to earn more than the minimum wage is totally ignored.”

What is the Collective?

L ast June, members of the Haitian Collective were asked by Yves Sanon, a member of the Collective to mobilise against the IMF and Neo-liberalism, Sanon, whose political activities in the Dominican Republic founded the newspaper Rutte in 1984, has been a founding member of the NEDH (the National Federation of Haitian Students) since 1989, a grassroot organisation in the neighbourhood committees in Port-au-Prince, and a spokesperson for the National Alliance of Popular Organisations. As a leading member of the Collective, he has been a vocal critic of the USA’s occupation of Haiti and the neo-liberal policies of the Aristide and Preval government.

What the Collective is for:
- To support the democratic movement in Haiti and the Neoliberal policies of the Aristide and Preval government.
- The Collective includes anti-colonial organisations, youth and neighbourhood organisations, and individuals. It formed in January 1993 in order to analyse the Paris Plan (the economic strategy signed by the Haitian government and the International financial institutions) and organise mobilisation against it. The main aims of the Collective are:
  1) To spread information and educate the public about the Paris Plan
  2) To depoliticise the government

What the Collective is against:
- The government has not allowed for any back and forth negotiations; it has refused to discuss its policies with the people of Haiti and it has not cooperated with the French government. The Paris Plan has advanced slowly over the years and the government’s policy does not make any sense. The government’s dream is to make Haiti into a holding company to be used by the US and European corporations.
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CONSERVATION WORK BRIGADE

The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), in conjunction with the Haiti Support Group, is offering a two-week working ‘holiday’ in Haiti this September. The BTCV has a long tradition of volunteer conservation work in the UK. During the summer it offers people the chance to participate in conservation work abroad. This is the first time that the BTCV has had the opportunity to work in Haiti.

Ten people, including a qualified BTCV leader, will work for two weeks with a small peasant group in the south of the country. The work will be to build drainage ditches along the contours of mountain slopes to help prevent soil erosion. These ditches will be reinforced with stone walls, revetments and tree breaks. This is an ideal opportunity to learn both conservation skills, and find out about the serious environmental problems facing peasants in Haiti.

Peasant family in the mountains of southern Haiti. Photo by Leah Gordon

The trip will also include a meeting with a local expert who will give an overall view of the environmental situation in Haiti and the grassroots initiatives to combat the problems. Once at the site, in the mountains south of the capital, Port-au-Prince, volunteers will stay at a local school. Please note, the accommodation is basic and there is a steep half hour walk to and from the work site. When not working, volunteers will be able to go on guided nature walks in the surrounding countryside, play football with local residents, and visit the port of Jacmel.

The cost, to cover accommodation, food and local transport, will be approximately £320 per person. The air fare to Haiti (approximately £650) is extra. An interpreter will be available at all times. If you are interested contact the Haiti Support Group or the BTCV - Tel: 01491 839 766.

The Aristide Factor by Leslie Griffiths

Reviewed by Mary Boley

"It is highly unlikely that Aristide will bow out of public life now that he’s no longer President. He’ll want to throw his hat in the ring again in December 2000 and be Haiti’s head of state for the bicentenary of her independence in the year 2004, or I’m a Dutchman.”

So concludes “The Aristide Factor”, the new book by Leslie Griffiths. In it, he interprets the 43 year life span of Jean Bertrand Aristide, “once and future president” of Haiti, placing it in the context of Haitian history as a whole, and informed by a love of Haiti that dates back to the years he lived and worked there as a Methodist minister in the early seventies.

Initially I was confused by this book - biography or autobiography? As it transpires, it is neither, but the uneasy tandem of both, especially at the beginning of the book, does not work, and the intrusive autobiographical note of the author detracts rather than adds to the narrative.

This book will interest those with more than a passing knowledge of Haiti. Although there is no definitive analysis of the Aristide ‘factor’, it places centre stage the challenge that someone like Aristide represents for the status quo. The book highlights the double-speak of US foreign policy, the inadequacy of the United Nations, the vacillations of the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church, and the entrenched position of a powerful Haitian elite. Despite attempts at vilification by some or all of these bodies (extremely well-documented by Griffiths), at all times throughout the narrative, Aristide and the people, i.e. the poor, remain a constant. Aristide is an irritant to the Vtican and the local church hierarchy. “They prefer a priest not to be president”, especially when he champions the Church’s ‘option for the poor’ and challenges the status quo.

In one of the few glimpses of Aristide in action, Griffiths quotes him, “Ask yourselves the question: When are we going to wrap our faith and our commitment together to build a people’s church with a people’s power that will boil over and become a revolution.”

Both Aristide and the people know what they are saying. Currently, with Structural Adjustment programmes being debated on the international stage, the “Aristide Factor” challenges us to listen to what is being said by the poor, rather than hearing what we want to hear. The economic development strategies that Haitians are proposing as an alternative to the IMF/World Bank programme, if implemented, could be the millennium challenge for international development organisations that choose to listen instead of dictating how change should come about.

Readers of Haiti Briefing can order copies of The Aristide Factor at the special price of £16.50 including post and packing. The normal retail price for this hardback, published by Lion, is £17.99. Please make cheques payable to the Haiti Support Group.