What a foul-up

In the April elections for nine Senators and 700 seats on new local assemblies only 5% of the registered electorate cast their votes. Commentators proffered various explanations for the pathetic turnout, ranging from the absence of a tradition of meaningful elections, to election fatigue, this being the fifth set of elections since 1994. Most though agreed that it was a boycott of the electoral process by voters passively protesting against continued hardship and poverty.

While most Haitians turned their backs on a system that had failed to deliver, the two main Lavalas parties fought over the spoils of the meagre first round vote. The threat to the ascendency of the ruling government party, the Lavalas Political Organisation (OPL), came from the Lavalas Family (FL), the new party of former president Aristide. The FL had out-polled the OPL, winning over 50% of votes cast, and therefore the seats, in two of the Senate contests, and well-placed to win the second round run-offs in the rest.

The OPL cried foul, complaining that the blank ballot papers should have been counted as valid votes and therefore part of the overall percentage, in which case the two FL candidates would not have passed the 50% victory mark. Not so, said the Electoral Council, pointing out that not counting them was accepted practice in previous elections in which the then Lavalas coalition had triumphed. As the date for the second round approached, the OPL refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Electoral Council, accused it of rigging the vote in favour of Aristide, and withdrew from the contest.

With the second round postponed, and with Aristide and the OPL trading insults, the Prime Minister, Rosny Smarth, himself an OPL member, dramatically resigned in June. Enter the US, blatantly tram-

pling all over a sovereign country's internal affairs. Having previously declared the election free and fair, Washington took fright at Aristide's increasingly forthright opposition to the government's neo-liberal reforms. Summoned to the US Embassy, President Préval was told either to have the second round of voting cancelled, or US aid to Haiti would be stopped. Needless to say the election was cancelled.

As the US State Department warned Aristide to back off and give Préval a chance to govern, a stalemate ensued with neither the OPL nor the Electoral Council backing down over the disputed April election. Meanwhile, Préval searched for a candidate willing to accept the poisonsed chalice and agree to be nominated Prime Minister of a deeply unpopular government.

The twisted political scene took a new turn in mid-July when the US ambassador to the UN visited Haiti, and secured Aristide's support for an extension of the UN force's mandate in return for US acceptance of the April results. However, the UN special envoy to Haiti continued to question the credibility of the Electoral Council, and suspended technical assistance to it.

By the end of August, Préval had finally come up with a nominee for PM. Eric Pierre, a former employee of the US Embassy and the Inter-American Development Bank, was apparently selected because he was familiar with the requirements of the international lending institutions. His nomination was rejected by the Haitian Parliament.

After three years of the international community's attempt to 'uphold democracy' in Haiti, there is a government with no Prime Minister, and no popular support, and an electoral system regarded with understandable disdain by the vast majority of voters.
At the end of July, the United Nations Security Council agreed to extend the mandate of its military mission in Haiti until the end of November. The UN force, which numbered some 6,000 when it took over from the US intervention force in March 1993, has steadily been reduced in size. Its latest incarnation, authorised to remain in Haiti until the end of November, now consists of 50 UN military commanders, 700 Canadian and Pakistani soldiers, and 150 police monitors.

As the third anniversary of the UN-authorised intervention to restore democracy approaches, Haitians are questioning the continued presence of the foreign troops.

On July 28 a nationwide general strike was called by a coalition of dozens of popular organisations to demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign military forces and an end to the Haitian government’s neo-liberal policies. There are earlier popular organisations had also organised a “sit-in” of about 150 people in front of the UN headquarters in Port-au-Prince. Samuel Madinistin, one of Haiti’s 18 serving senators, said, “I have always said that the foreign troops should leave…This (the Haitian government’s request for the UN presence) was all done in an unconstitutional manner; in the complete disrespect for Haitian norms and laws.”

In the other house of Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, 25 (out of a total of 81) elected deputies formed a new “anti-neo-liberal and anti-occupation” bloc. On August 20, the bloc announced that it would struggle against all governments which support the structural adjustment programme, and called for the end of the occupation of the country by foreign troops.

Why Haitians are turning against the UN

One explanation for the growing resentment of the UN forces (and the 500 US troops stationed in Haiti under a bilateral agreement) lies in the nationalist spirit of the Haitian people. Two hundred years ago the Haitian nation was forged in the epic revolutionary struggle against French, British and Spanish attempts to restore slavery. More recently, the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 stirred both the resistance from Haitian peasants, and an intellectual ‘black power’ movement.

While ambivalent towards a foreign military presence in Haiti was, in most cases, a tacit acknowledgement that US forces intervened to restore President Aristide in 1994, this was a bitter pill swallowed only because it was perceived as the only way of defusing the political and economic regime nightmare. To say that the three years since then have not been what the majority of Haitians hoped for is a massive understatement. Continuing violence and insecurity, and growing economic hardship are attributed to the failures of the Haitian government, but blame is also attached to the UN and the international financial institutions that are identified as the peasant’s enemy behind the throne.

Officially, the US sold the forces, initially a predominantly US operation, to Haiti to establish a safe and secure environment. The question is “safe and secure for whom?” For Father Hugo Trist, a co-ordinator of the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations, the answer is clear, “The US came down here to protect the bourgeoisie from the people, not to protect the people.”

From the earliest days of the intervention it became clear that disarming supporters of the old regime was not a priority. Father Daniel Rouxoue of the Genocide Justice and Peace Commission maintains that “there would have been nothing easier than to disarm the Macoute-military system, because the UN Civilian Observers Mission was there during the coup. They had all the names of the FRAPI, the attaches, the soldiers – and the U.S. government itself had all the information. Nothing would have been easier than to call, quietly, those macoutes and soldiers who, for their part, were not particularly courageous individuals.”

Insecurity justifies UN presence

The activities of armed gangs, and a sharp increase in criminal activity are attributed to the military regime’s thugs and to others, who, in the absence of a functioning judicial system, see that crime does pay. When waves of violence have broken out each and every time the UN mandate has come near to expiring, this providing justification for the mandates’ renewal, conspiracy theories abound. What is the invisible force that can somehow unleash a burst of killings and shootings so that the Haitian government requests the UN forces to remain – the CIA, the Haitian business elite, the Macoute sector, or the Lavalas government itself? Without venturing a guess as to who is behind it, Father Trist suggests that “there is perhaps a strategy of creating low-intensity conflict as a screen for more fundamental political and economic issues.”

The UN Special Representative to Haiti, Lakhdar Brahimi, helps explain the conundrum of rising violence, and the conundrum of the UN intervention. Before he stood down from his post in February 1996, he gave an interview to a local newspaper where he said that the UN is not a peace-keeping mission in Haiti. “The 20% [sic] who are privileged, know two things: that the political changes are inevitable, and that, on the ideological, economic and social front, they have the sympathy of Big Brother, capitalism. That’s all one can keep now. You can’t keep both the political power and the economic power. You have to share, to perhaps lose the political power and accept that the economic power you hold will only be retained with some adjustments.”

Brahimi then went on to issue a warning. “What happened in this country is that you had 80% of the population which gained their citizenship status for the first time, but this ascension itself is a generator of disorder. That’s the problem. I prefer to tell this 80% and their representatives in the popular organisations that if the liberty you have gained is to be translated into blockades and burning tires, be careful. You are in the process of putting your own liberty in danger.”

Who is in control?

Who is in control? – Lavalas control of the government, but that does not mean it can carry our radical changes to the economic structure. The only adjustments allowed will be of the structural variety in order to further integrate Haiti into the global capitalist system. According to Brahimi then, if the poor majority think that the election of its representatives in political office should be accommodated by measures to address popular demands for fundamental economic changes in a country of widespread poverty, it is wrong. If its organisations protest against the application of structural adjustment measures that have made the poor poorer still, they are in danger.

In the light of Brahimi’s extremely candid and blunt remarks, it comes as no surprise that, when the current mandate was extended at the end of July, it was announced that the UN force would be staying on to concentrate on training Haiti’s national police in crowd control, rapid reaction, and palace security. That is, control of crowds protesting against government policy, a rapid reaction force of police heavies that has already intervened to dispense demonstrations and road blocks, and security for the head of the government that is enthusiastically implementing the structural adjustment programme.

It is any wonder that more and more Haitians are asking whether the UN is in their country to provide security for the population, or rather to keep the poor majority in check so as to guarantee the stability needed for the successful application of structural adjustment policies.

Partial list of strikes and demonstrations in Haiti over the last year:

- 1996
  - August: Popular organisations demonstrate in Port-au-Prince against US interference in Haiti’s sovereignty and the high cost of living.
  - September: Navy and the state hospital in Port-au-Prince begin to strike after pay for 12 months.
  - September: Popular organisations demonstrate in Port-au-Prince against the new government.
  - November: Port-au-Prince attacked by the police rapid intervention force.
  - November: Doctors – at the new hospital in Port-au-Prince begin to strike and pay for 12 months.
  - December: In Port-au-Prince, 1500 people demonstrate against the government.
  - January: Anti-DT demonstration in Port-au-Prince attacked by the police rapid intervention force.

- 1997
  - January: Anti-DT demonstration in Port-au-Prince attacked by the police rapid intervention force.
  - January: Popular organisations demonstrate in Port-au-Prince against the new government.
  - March: Popular organisations demonstrate in Port-au-Prince against the new government.
  - March: Popular organisations in Port-au-Prince demonstrate against the government.
  - April: Popular organisations in Port-au-Prince demonstrate against the government.
  - April: Mass demonstration workers demanding restoring factories in Port-au-Prince.
  - May: Health workers employed by the state stage sit-ins and strikes for back pay and a wage increase.
  - July: Health workers employed by the state stage sit-ins and strikes for back pay and a wage increase.
  - July: Political organisations call for a day of protest against the government.

'A pig’s tale'

A documentary film that explores the fall-out from the US-backed eradication of Haiti’s creole pig population in the early 1980s will be shown on Channel Four television at 11.30pm on Thursday, 23 October. Check press to confirm details of transmission time.

The film, made by Haiti Support Group members Leah Gordon and Anne Parrasio, follows a voodoo priest and a Haitian Rasta on their separate journeys across Haiti in search of the few creole pigs rumoured to have survived. The priest needs a genuine Haitian pig to placate Erzulie Dantor, his spirit mistress, and to honour the slaves who rose up in revolution. The Rasta wants to know if it was part of the fabled ‘American Plan’ to kill every last swine, and so crush the peasants’ independence.

From the air-conditioned offices of US development ‘experts’, to the smoky charcoal pits of put-upon peasants, and through the dusty rara street parties and voodoo ceremonies of the urban poor, it’s a head-spinning trip into the heart of Haiti. A Pig’s Tale is conspiracy theory, a story of cultural and political resistance, and a biting critique of US arrogance and self-interest, all rolled into one pacy piggy-back ride.

Photo by Leah Gordon

New books on Haiti

- *Haiti in the New World Order: The Limits of the Democratic Revolution* by Alex Dupuy (Westview Press) £13.95

Gage Averill’s fascinating social history of Haitian music between 1915 and 1995 blends historical narrative, firsthand accounts by musicians, and song lyrics. The development of Haitian jazz, merengue, troubadour, konpa, and the rasi (roots) music movement are explored in the context of their relationship with evolving resistance and power struggles. This is a must for anyone with an interest in Haiti’s vibrant music scene, and the synergy of culture and politics.

Haiti in the New World Order provides a comprehensive and succinct analysis of the neo-liberal model for Haiti’s economic development in the context of the momentous political events of the last ten years. Alex Dupuy argues forcefully that the IMF/World Bank free market strategy will reinforce Haiti’s underdevelopment and dependence, and details the alternative approach proposed by the Aristide government before the 1991 coup d’état. The US/UN military intervention to return Aristide to power in 1994, argues Dupuy, has ensured the application of the neo-liberal plan resulting in the denial of true democracy in the sense of an economic programme prioritising the interests of the majority.

Both books are welcome additions to the growing body of literature on contemporary Haiti.

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**EVENTS**

An Enchanted Land

Dessaline presents An Enchanted Land by Dale Wasserman, directed by Joseph Blatchley, at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London, from 11 September until 11 October, at 8pm (Sundays at 7.30pm).

Dale Wasserman’s play, loosely based on the novel *Le Crayon de Dieu*, by the Haitian writers, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin and Pierre Marcelin, is described as “a compelling, tense and complex journey of sexual jealousy, betrayal and revenge.”

In a small town in Haiti, Zeline, a former prostitute, is desperate to keep her past behind her. She plans to entice the freely individual Diogene, a seductive womaniser, into marriage, but he rejects and humiliates her. Without warning, Lourdes, her virginal young daughter, returns from life spent in a Catholic convent.

When Zeline discovers that Diogene and Lourdes are lovers her fury turns her to voodoo, with disastrous consequences.

For details and bookings telephone the Riverside Studios theatre box office: 0181 741 2255

Oné, Rospé

Exhibition of Haitian art that includes paintings, sculptures and flags. A celebration of the spiritual and cultural connections between Miami and Haiti at The Garden Gallery, Pallant House, Chichester, West Sussex, from 27 September until 8 November. Phone 01243 774557 for details.