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 unavailing 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 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 row 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 almighty 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 even 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 putchists 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?  

The Democratic Convergence was a political movement in Haiti that aimed to bring political reform and end the rule of President Jean-Claude Duvalier. It was formed in response to the harsh regime of Duvalier and his successor, Raoul andre. The movement was supported by various political parties and activists, and it called for democratic elections and the end of the dictatorship.

The movement was made up of a coalition of parties, including the Parti Démocratique Haitien (PDH), the Parti Nationaliste Haitien (PNH), and the Parti Socialiste Haitien (PSH). It was led by prominent figures such as René Préval and Jean Dominique.

The Democratic Convergence was a significant step towards the political reform in Haiti. It brought attention to the issues of corruption, human rights abuses, and political repression. The movement helped to pave the way for the eventual fall of Duvalier and the establishment of a democratic government in Haiti.
Book review

The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States

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 quiet 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 Laborot 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 American and 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 silken sounds of Haitian pop, to the driving force of rara.

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

For more details, contact: Dorothy Warner, Fifth Amendment, Tel: 01905 26424; email: dorothy@fifthamendment.demon.co.uk; web: www.ukarts.com/opera/ram.htm

“Unashamed good-time music” The Financial Times

“Traditional Vodou rhythms boom out from giant rustic mama and miron 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, Odeon festival
20th-21st – Bath, Theatre Royal, Tel: 01225 448084
22nd & 23rd – Bradford Festival, Tel: 01274 309199
23rd – Huddersfield, Lawrence Batley Theatre, Tel: 01484 430520
24th – Jersey, Opera House, Tel: 01534 617522
26th – Llandudno, North Wales Theatre, Tel: 01492 872000
27th – Cerdgan, Theatre Wlddan, Tel: 01239 621200
28th – Brench, Theatre Brycheining, Tel: 01874 611622

JULY
1st & 2nd – London, Stratford Circus, Tel: 0208 279 1000
4th – Southampton, The Gaunt, Tel: 023 8022 9379
5th – Bexhill-on-Sea, De la Warr Pavilion, Tel: 01424 787949
6th – Camberley, Arts Link, Tel: 01276 707600
7th – Leicester, De Montfort Hall, Tel: 0116 233 3111
8th – St Donats Arts Centre, Tel: 01446 799100
12th – Shrewsbury, The Buttermarket
13th – Twickenham, The Roses Theatre, Tel: 01661 295074
14th – Oxford, Rhythm Sticks, Tel: 0207 921 0613 & Zodiac Club, Tel: 01865 420042
15th – Lincoln, International Dance & Music Festival, Tel: 01476 406158

“A heady Haitian brew of driving Caribbean rhythms aimed so squarely at your bootie that mass dancing is the only option!” The Sunday Herald