

Haiti a failed state history essay



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Haiti has had a long and troubled history, marked by its relations with the outside world. It has produced popular uprisings whose implications have extended beyond its own borders, provoking international responses that have helped to shape it internally. Yet Haiti presents a unique case for the study of popular movements, and the sobering realities of an unequal international system. Indeed in few places in the world are the problems of economic underdevelopment, authoritarianism, instability and inequality displayed so starkly; T. D. Allman described the country as “to this hemisphere what black holes are to outer space. Venture there, and you cross an event horizon” (cited in Farmer 1994, 225).

Studies of Haiti rarely fail to point out the fact that once the world’s richest colonial protectorate, and the first free black republic, Haiti has since become the poorest country in the Western hemisphere by a fair distance. It also stands as the most unequal country in a region which already has the highest levels of inequality in the world; with 1 percent of its population in command of more than half of the country’s wealth, and 5 percent in ownership of most of the arable land (Sletten and Egest 2004, 6). Whilst inequality and poverty are commonplace in Latin America and the Caribbean, Haiti stands apart from its regional neighbours in this regard; its GDP per capita being less than half of that of Bolivia (the second lowest), and with 56 percent of its population living beneath the absolute poverty line, compared to less than 25 percent in all other countries in the region with the exceptions of Nicaragua (45 percent) and El Salvador (31 percent) (ibid, pg. 9/10). The implications of Haiti’s poverty in terms of infant mortality, health,

literacy, life expectancy, and the day to day lives of its population are staggering and have been well documented (See xyz).

As an extension of this sharp inequality, it is often noted that Haiti's political system has long been marked by instability and repression of the population: "only seven of its forty-four presidents have served out their terms, and there have been only two peaceful transitions of power since the beginning of the republic" (Fatton, 2006, pg 1). Those who have run the country for most of its post-independence history, namely a small cluster of wealthy families, along with the military contingent they are tied to, argue with some confidence that force is a necessary product of such deep poverty, in that it is required in order to police it (Farmer 2004, 15).

Recognition and discussion of these two aspects of Haitian life - namely its poverty and chronic authoritarianism - usually form the empirical backdrop of most readings of Haitian society and its political system. Yet discussion of the causes and possible cures of these societal maladies tend to explain the country in terms of its internal components, and the attendant domestic failures of the Haitian state. This notion, not always bluntly stated, helps to buttress the familiar designation of Haiti as a country defined by economic failure, with no democratic tradition and perpetually in need of Western assistance (expand + references). Haitian anthropologist Robert Fatton remarks on this trend that "with few exceptions, the literature on Haiti has tended to emphasise the role of individual leaders in the making of a country's politics; [leading] many to assume that the crisis confronting Haiti is nothing but the consequence of 'bad leaders' and thus the solution to the crisis is the coming to power of 'good' leaders", an assumption which for

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him overlooks the “ predatory structures of the country” and the way these sharply constrain individual choices (Fatton 2007, ix).

Yet whether attributed to ‘ bad leaders’ or the predatory socio-economic structures of Haitian society, the way the notion of a ‘ failed state’ is presented and discussed in regards to Haiti tends to imply that the problem is internally contained, a product of distinctively Haitian, and in the last analysis, usually ‘ cultural’ factors. For instance a Strategic Studies Institute report reviewing the merits of various U. S. foreign policy options towards Haiti in the aftermath of the 1991 coup notes that attempts to establish democratic institutions in Haiti “ would encounter trouble in a political culture marked by authoritarianism, demagoguery, intolerance, suspicion, intrigue, violence, corruption, and class hatred. Nor should one expect democracy to flourish, even if Aristide is restored, for he too is a product of that culture” (Schulz and Marcella 1994, cited in Wisner 1995, 44). Likewise, former head of USAID (footnote) Lawrence Harrison’s ‘ Voodoo Politics’, an extended essay in Atlantic Monthly deals primarily with the vexing question of “ Why [this] benighted country [has] experienced since independence a virtually unbroken chain of brutal and corrupt leaders?”:

“ Why have repeated efforts to encourage democracy and due process – including the US occupation – failed? Why are the vast majority of Haitians illiterate? Why has the abuse of power at all levels permeated Haitian history? Why is the country that was once the richest in the Caribbean now the poorest? ... I believe that culture is the only possible explanation for Haiti’s unending tragedy: the values and attitudes of the average Haitian are profoundly influenced by traditional African culture, particularly the voodoo

religion, and slavery under the French.... sustained by long years of isolation from progressive ideas, open political systems, and economic dynamism.” (Harrison 1993, cited in *ibid*, 45; see also Rotberg 2004; Herbst 2004).

Other studies do not subscribe to this cultural thesis yet still follow much the same pattern in confining the source of Haiti’s problems to its internal structures. Wiarda’s work on US policy in Latin America invokes purely endogenous factors in explaining why Haiti is so politically and economically unstable. “ Its topsoil has been eroded over the centuries, it has almost no resources or democratic infrastructure (political parties, trade unions, peasant associations, pluralist interest groups, functioning governmental institutions), no democratic tradition” (1995, 38). BLAH BLAH BLAH.

Central argument

This paper will look at Western policy toward Haiti, and the effect that this has had on Haiti’s political and economic development, both historically and in response to the election of Reverend Jean-Bertrand Aristide in YEAR. It will be argued that, contrary to the above, Haiti’s destiny is only partially in the hands of Haitians, and in fact a major part of Haiti’s future lies in policies that are pursued abroad, notably in the United States as well as international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF that Haiti have now become heavily dependent on. Furthermore, the international community, far from being an ineffective but dependable source of assistance has itself over the years played an important role in the country’s collapse, and continues to influence the trajectory of Haitian political and economic development, in conjunction with on-going class conflicts internal to Haiti. As Paul Farmer argued, while

“ Haiti may capture the headlines of the American press, understanding of what is at stake here remains, at best, persistently superficial.... journalistic and even scholarly commentary on Haiti has tended to depict the country as isolated and disconnected – a static country of backwards peasants caught in a time warp.... It is far more comforting to attribute the on-going violence in Haiti (or Guatemala or El Salvador) to factors native to that setting. Among the most popular explanatory models are those invoking ‘ cultural’ factors: voodoo, in particular... But depicting Haiti as divorced from ‘ the outside world’ turns out to be a feat of Herculean oversight, given that Haiti is a creation of expansionist European empires – a quintessentially Western entity. There is, simply, no other way to understand Haiti” (1994, 45, 53, 56).

In short, Haiti’s failures and challenges ought to be seen within the context of the larger historical system in which the country is embedded. The reduction of on-going violence and crisis in Haiti to domestic factors, such as its long history of authoritarianism, economic underdevelopment, archaic formal state structures, or of some of the cultural factors invoked by Harrison is problematic in that, while all of these internal phenomena are surely important factors, they are (a) not the only ones; (b) nor are they strictly speaking internally contained at all, since they emerged out of Haiti’s colonial history and have been influenced by Haiti’s relations with the outside world ever since.

With this in mind, the discussion will look at some of the formative episodes of Haiti’s colonial and post-colonial history Before exploring the domestic and international impact of Haiti’s Lavalas movement in sweeping into power its own candidate Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the role played by political forces

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both inside and outside of Haiti in undermining this government and shaping the political landscape that followed up until the 1990s. The conflicts that characterize Haitian society today are rooted in and very much formed by the enduring effects of these earlier periods, and neither the significance of Aristide's presidency nor the coup and policies that followed can be adequately explained in isolation from them. Indeed the very “ structural basis of Haiti's social polarization and its economic vulnerability is a direct legacy of colonial slavery and its aftermath” (Hallward, 2010, 9).

3. 2 Slavery and Independence: an unsightly spectacle

As is often noted in studies of Haitian history, Haiti emerged not just as “the first free nation of free men to rise within, and in resistance to, the emerging constellation of European empire” (Lowenthal 1976, cited in Farmer 2006, 163), but the only recorded case in human history of an enslaved population successfully overthrowing colonial rule and establishing an independent polity governed by the former slaves. Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) under French administration was the world's richest colony, and responsible for a significant proportion of France's wealth today; generating more revenue for France than all of its other colonies combined (Kim 2000, 66). The unrivalled output of Saint-Domingue's plantation economy was maintained in large part by the density of the labouring population (far higher than other colonies), and the unmatched brutality of its slave system, which is widely regarded to have few parallels in history (FOOTNOTE). The capital drawn from this production system, not just in Saint-Domingue but across the New World propelled the development of virtually all of the major European cities, with

France benefiting disproportionately from the leading commercial engine under its auspices (James, 1980: 98(QUOTE)-see scribd).

Yet the extreme violence meted out so routinely was a sign that the status quo was a brittle one; and the slave system's rigid internal class divisions, stratified along such polarising, racially defined lines, played an important part in its eventual collapse and the shape that Haitian society would take into its transition to independence. Power was divided, broadly speaking, among three groups: the wealthy white plantation owning elite, a privileged stratum of Mulattos who had property and freedom but little to no political rights; and the imperial representatives of French power in the island (Hallward 2011, 10). That Saint-Domingue's slaves were able to rise up in a well organised slave revolt and defeat a colonial power with no outside support, while beating back successive onslaughts from not only French, but also Spanish, British and American forces – who themselves had booming business with the colony, and saw an opportunity to seize the prize from France – reflects both the magnitude of the interests involved in the island, and the remarkable achievement of the popular forces there (Robinson, 1996: 259; Matthewson 2003).

Needless to say, the emergence of an independent black republic was not a welcome sight in a colonial system still dominated by European slavery; and the precedent set was outrageous and threatening for commercial powers and slaveholding countries elsewhere still heavily invested in the slave system, and well versed in the racism that underpinned it. The French foreign minister Charles Talleyrand wrote a few years after Haitian independence that “ the existence of a negro people in arms, occupying a

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country it has soiled by the most criminal acts, is a horrible spectacle for white nations... There are no reasons... to grant support to these brigands who have declared themselves the enemies of all government" (cited in Lawless 1992, 48). The event had major and lasting repercussions internationally; not only altering the distribution of imperial power in the Caribbean, but also inspiring slave revolts and independence struggles across the slaveholding world, including within the United States (FOTTNOTE). Haiti was formally free, yet the reprisals Haiti would face for this were such that as Mintz put it " No other country in modern times has confronted freedom under such discouraging circumstances" (1995, 80).

Other powers immediately supported one another's efforts to isolate Haiti, which became an international outcast, made to suffer a multilateral boycott, and face " a level of hostility sufficient to induce Haiti's new leaders to devote much of the limited resources to building a series of extravagant fortresses in anticipation of further assault" (Hallward 2010, 12). That being said, the most enduring blow to Haitian independence and economic development, still felt today, was France's claim to an indemnity of 150million francs as compensation for the loss of their slaves. This demand was, under threat of invasion, eventually signed and accepted by an emerging Haitian elite who desperately saw diplomatic recognition and the lifting of a joint embargo as vital to their own survival in entering the international market on terms tolerable to them, and thus saw the debt as a very large but unavoidable business expense (Farmer 1994, 76). Through the amount was eventually reduced to 90 million francs, Haiti, being already devastated economically and ecologically by war, had to borrow at

extortionate rates of interest to pay a country who already owed much of its prosperity to exploiting Haitian land and slave labour.

“ By the end of the 19th century Haiti’s payments to France still consumed around 80 percent of the national budget. France received the last instalment in 1947. Haitians have thus had to pay their original oppressors three times over – through the slaves’ initial labour, through compensation for the French loss of this labour, and then in interest on the payment of this compensation. No other single factor played so important a role in establishing Haiti as a systematically indebted country” (Hallward 2012, 12).

This decision surely contributed to retarding Haitian economic development and marked the beginning of Haiti’s dependence on foreign donors, turning “ a country whose revenues and outflows had been balanced up to then into a nation burdened with debt and trapped in financial obligations that could never be satisfied” (mars, cited in farmer 2004, 2).

The colonial period left its mark in other more fundamental ways on the structure of Haitian society. Some core features of the slave system, namely “ authoritarian military power and extensive corruption – became so deeply entrenched in the colony that they survived through the following 200 years” (Prince 1985, 13-14). More importantly, the polarizing class structure expressed largely in ethnic terms under Saint-Dominguan slavery also endured beyond the expulsion of the French, as the tiny fraction of the population (overwhelmingly mulatto) who were already free, and thus able to pursue education, administrative experience and acquire property were able to dominate over commerce and state management (FOOTNOTE) along with

revolutionary leaders and already “ had adopted the cultural values of dominant white French society” in contrast to the vast majority of the population (Schmidt, 1971: 20). The immediate post-independence era – an important phase in Haitian class formation – was characterised domestically by struggle between the rural peasantry and a predatory, mulatto based elite ties to the new state, eager on the one hand to reinstitute an export based economy orientated towards international markets, and on the other hand to bleed the peasantry from a distance through various regressive fiscal policies. Divisions between inward looking feudal landlords and an outward looking commercial contingent would later emerge out of these two sources of capital accumulation. The peasantry found itself totally isolated from the capital, both politically and “ spatially” thanks to restrictions on merchant activity to port cities (Farmer 1994, 81), with no contact except for relinquishing disproportionate amounts of tax with almost none of the money returning to the areas in which it was generated in the form of infrastructure or public services (smith 2001, 21). The net effect was to reproduce and maintain an extreme expression of the disjuncture between civil society and the state, feudal structures that remain to the present day in Haitian society (Trouillot 1990, 23; farmer 1994, 82).

4. US occupation 1915-1934

The USA was the last major power to formally recognise Haiti in 1862, once the fate of its own slave population was already settled. Yet the contempt for the idea of self-governing blacks among the world’s owners was still palpable, and the ensuing period was one marked by continuous uninvited visits of European and American gunboats into Haitian waters to make

claims against the treasury at gunpoint, sometimes under ridiculous pretexts, which became more frequent as the Haitian leadership struggles to meet its various debt repayments (Farmer 1994, 86-90). Historian Hans Schmidt notes that the US navy alone had sent warships into Haitian ports to “protect American lives and property” nineteen times since formal recognition (1971: 31), culminating in the eventual invasion and almost two decade long occupation of Haiti by US marines in 1915, under the humanitarian pretext of “[re-establishing] peace and order” (US Rear Admiral Caperton, (FIND ORIGINAL SOURCE) cited in Weston 1972, 217) following a five year period during which the Haitian presidency had changed hands seven times; the final time ending in a massacre of 167 political prisoners before the president was lynched in the town square.

The United States assumed the political, financial and administrative control over the country, establishing the customs receivership it was unable to secure through diplomatic channels (FOOTNOTE), and censoring the press. Haiti’s constitution was rewritten and the Haitian parliament dissolved once it refused to pass the new US drafted constitution that would permit American and European corporations to purchase Haitian land, undoing laws against foreign ownership going back to the revolutionary period (Footnote) (Schmidt, 1971: 97-99). While capital and foreign investment indeed poured in, and infrastructure, hospitals, schools and irrigation were greatly improved in parts of Haiti, the occupying force reinstated forced public labour crews to build roads in Port-au-Prince (resistance to which brought thousands of casualties); and many peasants found themselves dispossessed as a result of new land leases, driving down the overall wage level (George Sejourne

estimated 50, 000 peasants displaced in the North alone - REFERENCE). As Farmer observed, " for many [investors] the real draw was not land, but cheap labour" citing the Financial America's 1926 report that " Haiti offers a marvellous opportunity for American investment... The run-of-the-mill Haitian is handy, easily directed, and gives a hard day's labour for 20 cents, while in Panama the same day's work cost \$3" (1994, 95). Yet while the interests of various US investors and banks certainly played their part in the occupation, the decision to invade was driven principally by strategic concerns with regional hegemony, dislodging the German presence in the country (1995, 56-62.)

For Haitians the legacy of the invasion was rather different. The society was heavily militarized during this nineteen year period and spent much of the occupation under martial law, while the Haitian army was disbanded and replaced with a local gendarmerie staffed exclusively with mulatto junior officers under the command of senior US marines: " The American domination over it is quite complete although an attempt is naturally made to keep this fact in the background as much as possible" (Douglas 1927, 368-369). This empowerment of the mulatto elite under US supervision at the expense of the black majority was not confined to the army, as blacks were all but excluded from public life, and a succession of mulatto client-presidents were installed by the US High Commissioner (Robinson, 1996: 265); with a crystallising impact on the racial and class divides in Haiti that should not be underestimated. As anthropologist Sidney Mintz aptly notes, " Some of the most negative achievements were of a human kind. As the occupation identified those persons in the society with whom we thought we

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could deal - who talked out language, literally or figuratively speaking - it sent a message to ordinary Haitians." Moreover, " By creating a modern army, it changed Haitian politics forever. The armed forces became the one way - other than the priesthood - for poor Haitians to rise within the system. There is no doubt that us measures in the period 1915-1934, and the care shown to the Haitian military since, have been of crucial importance to the perpetuation of traditional power" (1995, 85).

The modernised army became, and remained, the backbone of real domestic power in Haiti once us forces left in 1934, exacerbating the very problems that the marines ostensibly came in to resolve; and laying the basis for the introduction of the Duvalier dictatorships in 1957: their dreaded tontons macoutes paramilitary squads and chefs de sections (rural section chiefs empowered to extort the population for ensuring docility). That would wield an iron fist over the country for the next 29 years, causing some 50, 000 deaths in the process, along with the arrest, torture and displacement of many others (Hallward 2010, 14) (FOOTOTE). US Major Smedley Butler, who led the US occupation of Haiti, would later summarize his career in the following terms shortly before retiring:

" I spent thirty-three years and four months in active service as a member of our country's most agile military force - the Marine Corps... And during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism. Thus I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent

place for the National City [Bank] boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the rape of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street" (cited in Chomsky 1985. 98-99).

Democracy Promotion and Lavalas

Needless to say the Duvalier period was a dark one for Haitian society, the brutalities and developments of which have been documented in depth elsewhere (see REFERENCE). For the purposes of this paper, and the development of Haitian society into its current form, three related aspects of this period are of key importance. Firstly, while foreign direct investment in Haiti was certainly nothing new, the 1960's and 1970's brought with it the large scale penetration of transnational capital and the disruption and gradual breakup of the peasant economy, as the agricultural sector was badly undercut by subsidized foreign agribusiness and land concentrated ever more narrowly among Duvalierist elites, forcing significant migration of the populace out of the countryside where the overwhelming majority of Haitians were settled, to find work, much of it in the assembly export sector (Robinson, 1996: 270). These changes were also a product of domestic policy, as both Duvalier regimes proved more than accommodating to the removal of protectionist barriers to foreign capital, suppressing trade union activity, providing transnational companies with ten year tax holidays, and removing any restrictions on profit repatriation (ibid). While Washington certainly had reservations about both Duvaliers at different stages, it was policies like this, along with the regime's stringent anti-communist stance that won Duvalier on-going US military aid and financial support until he was on the verge of being overthrown; while USAID money began to pour in at

ever increasing rates as part of development programmes designed to propel the restructuring of the Haitian economy from local production into an export platform model orientated around enclave manufacturing.

It was the effect of these measures on the peasantry that provided the social basis for the growing popular movement that would eventually unseat Haiti's second 'president for life' and force the country's first free elections, as those in absolute poverty rose from 50 to 80 percent in a decade (ibid), and the authoritarian state brutally suppressed dissent and provided no channels for the population to address these grievances. Furthermore, in forcing much of the peasantry into Port-au-Prince in search of work, the "spatial isolation of the peasantry" (Farmer, 1994, 81) evaporated as previously secluded popular classes come into stark and provocative contact with the inequalities of Haitian society and the scandalous decadence of the urban elite, particularly the Duvalier family itself. Trouillot, documenting the rapid politicization of the dispersed former peasant communities notes that Haiti had "become a truly 'national space'... Words and images meant to impress certain segments of the population now reached unintended audiences. In the streets of the provincial towns, despair turned into anger, and anger into defiance" (Trouillot, 1990: 218-219 cited in Robinson, 1996: 272). The anti-Duvalier, and later the Lavalas movement developed out of this picture, and in such a way that it was almost entirely detached from the state system and operating outside of conventional political channels; colonizing civil society against a totalitarian state that was widely seen as intolerable, self-aggrandising and subservient to foreign power and its own narrow commercial-military elite.

What also developed out of this picture (and a much broader international picture) was a recognition in Washington that the authoritarianism of Duvalier, and of other client regimes in parts of the Third World was becoming a liability (FOOTNOTE), and adding to the threat that a popular revolution might undo the social structure with which Washington has for so long been connected and aligned. Ultimately the popular rebellion could not be suppressed, and Haiti found itself on the brink of revolution. This popular dkhokaj (or uprooting) of Duvalierism, in combination with pressure from the United States (who could see the writing on the wall and had already withdrawn aid), forced Duvalier out of the country. This took place without an alternative unified political leadership representing the masses to assume power; and so what followed in the short term was a chaotic and violent military run transition period lasting almost five years - ' Duvalierism without Duvalier' as many have dubbed it - until free elections in Haiti were finally allowed to take place for the first time in 1990.

This period, while under military administration also housed one of the most important developments in modern Haitian history; as out of the mass based contingent of the opposition that expelled Duvalier, an extraordinary range of ti legliz (Creole for ' little church') local church group movements, trade unions, grassroots peasant associations, community councils, youth groups, women's groups, and various other organisations populaires sprang up in loose and informal association with one another, and became the vehicle for the mobilization of Haiti's poor majority. Much of this activity found its inspiration and ideological underpinning in liberation theology's ' preferential option for the poor' - an ecclesiastical affirmation of the right of the poor to

defend their own interests, and a reorganisation of popular discourse around “ questions of agency in suffering” (Farmer 2006, 58), extending as it did into “ a critique of the wealth, corruption and brutality of the elite” (Hallward 2010, 16-17). Incrementally, many of these popular organisations began to appropriate the functions of the state in the local communities, or rather fill the vacuum left by a government that had not performed many of these functions in the first place:

“ peasants now had the freedom to engage in group self-help activities such as pig marketing cooperatives, collective work teams, and farm implement distribution systems... almost every city neighbourhood had a committee that cleaned up the streets, burned trash, elected leaders, and sought to communicate the neighbourhood’s demands for change to the government. Many of them engaged in small scale civic projects ranging from human rights investigations to adult education and road construction... organised [and politicised] literacy campaigns sprouting in every part of the country”, as did independent radio, articulating popular concerns, with its correspondents in the provinces (Levin 1995, 424-426)

Many of these local and regional groups had banded together to form broader coalitions, such as the national Congress of Democratic Movements (KONAKOM) and the Group of 57, and the National Popular Assembly (APN), coalesced into a national movement that became known as Lavalas (the Creole word for ‘ avalanche’ or ‘ flood’); with outspoken priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide as the symbolic voice for change at the forefront of the movement. As Levin notes, “ a much longer account would be necessary to do justice to the richness and diversity of this popular sector” (ibid, 427); yet what is

important for this paper is that these organisations populaires became a highly representative driving force for democratisation and popular empowerment in Haiti, and one might reasonably have expected any external power interested in promoting in Haiti to have devoted resources in support of their efforts (Robinson, 1996: 284).

Instead while millions of dollars of US aid poured into the country during this interlude in variations on democracy enhancement programmes, (including think tanks, human rights groups, and political parties (FOOTNOTE)) all of this bypassed the hundreds of popular organisations and was funnelled primarily towards the electoral campaigns of elite candidates; “[NED] judiciously funded and cultivated an elite alternative to Duvalier style authoritarianism, which would provide the basis for the 1991 coup” (Arthur and Dash 1999, 233), indeed these very constitutions would before long emerge as major opponents of Aristide and financial backers of the military coup that would remove him. Former World Bank official and later coup-government Prime Minister Marc Bazin (also a former Finance Minister for a brief spell under Duvalier) was marked out as a favourite among other centrist US supported politicians, and received NED campaign contributions of well over \$12million (Griffin 1992, 669; although another source claims the contribution figure to total as much as \$36 million, see Levin 1995, 430). Indeed the pro-market centrist Bazin was regarded as a safe bet as winner for an election that was expected to yield a miserably low turnout.

Aristide was for a long time reluctant to take part in the 1990 electi