Aristide, Jean-Bertrand

Haitian ecclesiastic and politician; became president of Haiti in 1991 but later exiled; re-elected in 1993 but prevented from entering the country by the military; after being restored by the US was president 1994--96; president again from 2001 until forced to leave the country in 2004.

Haitian politician and former Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1953–) was born on July 15, 1953, in a village along Haiti’s southern coast. He served as Haitian president in 1991, 1994 to 1996, and 2001 to 2004. Aristide was orphaned as an infant and raised by the Society of St. Francis de Sales. With the society’s support, he graduated from the State University of Haiti in 1979 and was ordained a priest in 1983. He earned a master's degree in psychology from the University of Montreal. He spoke Kreyol as well as French, Spanish, English, Hebrew, Italian, German, and Portuguese. He was an accomplished poet, composer, musician, and writer.

He became the parish priest in the La Saline slums of Port-au-Prince, acquiring the nickname “Titide” or “little priest.” An exponent of liberation theology, he became a leader of the radical wing of the Haitian Roman Catholic Church and an opponent of the dictatorships of François “Papa Doc” and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. Broadcasting from St. Jean Bosco Church on the national Catholic radio, he condemned their lack of concern for democracy and the poor. His efforts soon focused international attention on human rights violations in Haiti. They also led to persecution of his followers by Duvalier's henchmen known as “tonton macoutes.”

Catholic authorities ordered Aristide to stop his “radical” preaching. Eventually, his efforts forced Baby Doc and his minions to flee Haiti for France. They were succeeded by the military regimes of General Prosper Avril and, later, General Henri Namphy, that did little to alleviate the poverty and corruption in Haiti. Aristide spoke against them too.

In 1988 thugs of the military junta attacked and killed thirteen members of Aristide's congregation. The Salesian authorities defrocked Aristide two weeks later, and the Roman Catholic Church ordered him to Rome. His departure was blocked by thousands of angry Haitians who shut down the airport. He remained in Port-au-Prince operating a medical clinic and halfway house for the homeless.

In 1990 the United States, supported by the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS), persuaded the Haitian military to hold elections. The front runner was Marc Bazin, an

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experienced civil servant. Just before the December elections, Aristide decided to run. The vast majority of voters were voting for the first time in a truly free election. While Aristide received 67.5 percent of the popular vote, his party, the Lavalas or “Avalanche” party, only won a few the seats in the Haitian parliament.

Aristide took office on February 7, 1991. He soon scared the elite commercial and military classes in Haiti by abolishing the military and replacing it with a police force and prosecuting people suspected of being Duvalierists. On September 30, 1991, he was ousted by General Raoul Cedras. Aristide first fled to Venezuela and then to the United States. Following his overthrow, thousands of boat people fled Haiti. The United States denied most of them refugee status. The United States, United Nations, and OAS placed an embargo on Haitian exports and their importation of petroleum and other essential products. These efforts proved only partially successful since the majority of people who suffered were poor.

In 1993, after several failed attempts, President William J. Clinton convinced Cedras and Aristide to meet in New York. Cedras agreed to let Aristide return as president for the final twenty-seven months of his single, nonrenewable term (October 15, 1994–February 1, 1996) and provide amnesty for the military. When Haitian elites reneged on the agreement, Clinton sent 23,000 U.S. troops to Haiti to reinstate Aristide. On December 17, 1995, Haiti held another presidential election, and René Préval succeeded Aristide in February 1996.

In the 1990s Aristide criticized the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for being “a tool of the rich.” In 2000, Aristide's reorganized Lavalas party won control of Haiti's senate. On November 26 Aristide again ran for president, this time against four token candidates. The primary opposition parties accused Aristide's faction of election fraud and boycotted the election. Clinton agreed and pointed to delays in the distribution of voter ID cards as proof that Aristide had rigged the election.

Many Western nations suspended government-to-government aid to Haiti, which had not received help from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank for years. In late January 2004, the Revolutionary Artibonite Resistance Front started a rebellion. On February 29 Aristide left Haiti. While President George W. Bush denied it, Aristide (Trinidad and Tobago agreed) claimed the United States kidnapped him and forced him out. Many Caribbean Community Common Market (CARICOM) states worried that Aristide’s ouster prior to the end of his term was a dangerous precedent regarding external interference in the internal affairs of member states.

On May 31, 2004, Aristide and his family went to Johannesburg, South Africa. In 2006, Préval was elected president of Haiti and said he would consider allowing Aristide to return.

See also Cedras, Raoul; Clinton, William J.; Duvalier, François; Duvalier, Jean-Claude; Haiti, U.S. Intervention under President Clinton, 1994; Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); Liberation Theology; Namphy, General Henri

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


Dupuy, Alex. The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti and the International

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