

Anatomy of a coup d'état

Peter Hallward looks at how Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forcibly removed from office in 2004 in a U.S.-orchestrated act of 'neo-imperial sabotage'

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Someone once told me that if you spend a week in Haiti, you could write an article, if you spend a month, you could write a book and if you spend any longer than that, things will become so blurred, you won't be able to write a thing.

Peter Hallward, by his own admission, is no Haiti expert, nor does he have any personal ties to the tiny, impoverished Caribbean nation. A philosopher and literary critic, he has been to the country only twice, which may explain how he was able to write such a well-documented, clear account of the years leading up to the ouster in 2004 of the country's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Aristide, a priest educated at the Université de Montréal, and his grass-roots, popular Fanmi Lavalas party came to power in 1990, but was overthrown by the army a year later. He returned from U.S. exile in 1994 under then-U.S. president Bill Clinton, did away with the army and handily won the 2000 election. None of this sat well with Haiti's privileged few, whose wealth and status depend on the exploitation and violent oppression of the impoverished millions.

Aristide's forced removal in 2004, essentially a coup d'état orchestrated by the United States and backed by France and Canada, was "perhaps the most successful exercise of neo-imperial sabotage since the toppling of Nicaragua's Sandinistas in 1990," Hallward argues.

In the middle of the night of Feb. 29, 2004, after it became clear that a group of U.S.-backed rebels descending on the capital was no match for the masses, U.S. marines scooped up Aristide and flew him out of the country, dropping him in the Central African Republic.

The Americans, of course, claim they did it for Aristide's own safety and that the president left willingly - an explanation that Hallward deftly reveals for the lie it is.

Hallward in no way paints Aristide as a saint, pointing out the errors both he and his party made. But he claims that from 1990 to 2006, "and no doubt beyond, there is no other politician who had anything like Aristide's capacity to mobilize the poor (and to antagonize the rich)."

His party, whose name means flood or avalanche (thus the play on words in the book's title), was the first in Haiti to involve the poor; its leader, the first to recognize all Haitians as equal.



CREDIT: DANIEL AGUILAR, REUTERS FILE PHOTO

U.S. Marines patrol the grounds of the Presidential Palace in Port au Prince, March 1, 2004.

With four years between the 2004 coup and the publication of his book, Hallward has had the luxury of time to painstakingly sift through government documents, media reports and analyses by non-governmental organizations to piece together what really happened in the years and chaotic months leading up to the coup.

Readers will be horrified, and perhaps a little depressed, as they wade through this well-written and tremendously researched book to realize to what lengths an elite population, backed by international interests, will go to maintain the status quo.

Through a well-controlled disinformation campaign and paying off a small group of progressive Haitian activists, the Americans, with their French and Canadian allies, managed to demonize Aristide, branding him as a drug lord and his government as corrupt, authoritarian and undemocratic.

Between 1994 and 2002, USAID, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the International Republican Institute doled out about \$70 million to "anyone and anything that might criticize and undermine the elected government."

But Hallward debunks the criticisms, which over time had become fact in the mainstream media. He points out that Aristide co-operated fully with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration officials and "there can be little doubt that if the U.S. had any proof that Aristide or his leading ministers were complicit ... they would already be sitting in a Miami jail."

As for the lawsuit filed in 2005 in a U.S. court accusing Aristide of stealing tens of millions of dollars, it was never served on its defendants. It was quietly withdrawn in 2006, "once the Chicago-based lawyers hired to prosecute the case had come to the conclusion that they were wasting their time."

Hallward's book ends with a fascinating interview with an articulate and obviously intelligent Aristide, who now lives in exile in South Africa. With his ally René Préval, elected president of Haiti in 2006, Aristide is ready to return to his country - not as a politician, he says, but to teach.

It will be interesting to see what kind of reception he can expect.

Sue Montgomery spent three weeks in Haiti in February and March 2004, covering the coup for The Gazette.

Peter Hallward's book is entitled "DAMMING THE FLOOD: HAITI, ARISTIDE, AND THE POLITICS OF CONTAINMENT" Verso, 442 pages, \$37.50