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Bring Back Aristide

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Bring Back Aristide

Abstract

My friend Annie recently had her trip to Haiti postponed because of the political instability surrounding the November elections. Annie totes modest sums of cash, medicine, and clothing collected from sympathetic friends and has a resolute willingness to help. Together with the partner organizations she is working with, she is hiring Haitians to build an orphanage. Another colleague of mine, Tonya, traveled to the country very soon after the earthquake. She described her experience in *The Nation*, lamenting that the major US airlines, which had agreed to waive baggage fees for relief aid to Haiti, did not do so for individuals like Tonya who were not associated with a major relief agency.

Keywords

Human rights, Haiti, Natural disasters, Elections, Humanitarian aid, United Nations, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Sovereignty

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Bring Back Aristide

by Louis Edgar Esparza

My friend Annie recently had her trip to Haiti postponed because of the political instability surrounding the November elections. Annie totes modest sums of cash, medicine, and clothing collected from sympathetic friends and has a resolute willingness to help. Together with the partner organizations she is working with, she is hiring Haitians to build an orphanage. Another colleague of mine, Tonya, traveled to the country very soon after the earthquake. She described her experience in [The Nation](#), lamenting that the major US airlines, which had agreed to waive baggage fees for relief aid to Haiti, did not do so for individuals like Tonya who were not associated with a major relief agency.

Annie, Tonya, and thousands of others from all over the world are traveling to the country to lend their expertise and their good will. Their stories point to some of the slower recovery efforts that have typified larger agencies and the UN. Many of these groups have priorities that dovetail with the wishes of many Haitians. The [Institute for Justice and Democracy](#) in Haiti warned that stationing UN forces (known as MINUSTAH and largely viewed as an occupying force among Haitians) at polling locations during the country's November elections would be more likely to create violence than to prevent it. Indeed, election observers wrote in [NACLA Reports](#) that MINUSTAH's presence made the country seem "under siege." [Several presidential candidates](#), analysts such as [Haitian economist Camille Chalmers](#), organizations including the [Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti](#), journalists [Kevin Pina and Nicole Phillips](#), and other "social agencies" had been pleading with the Organization of American States (OAS), delegates from the United States, France, United Nations, and international agencies to postpone the election to resolve outstanding logistical issues. The pleading went unheeded, and instead the elections resulted in [widespread fraud](#), [violence](#), and [voter discontent](#).

[Paul Farmer](#), United Nations Deputy Special Envoy to Haiti and founder of [Partners in Health](#) has suggested that former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide is by far the most popular and trusted Haitian political figure. There is no lack of Haitian leadership. Rather, the networks of international agencies, the United States, and France have exerted powerful influence over domestic Haitian affairs. Those who care about the welfare of Haiti should advocate for the return of Aristide to Haitian politics. Both the African Union and the Caribbean Community have called for an inquiry into the coup that ousted the democratically elected Aristide.

But the US will not entertain this idea and has worked against Aristide and his political supporters. President Rene Preval hand-picked the members of the Election Council that certified candidates. Although this is unconstitutional, since Haitian law mandates that the Election Council be an independent body, the US was quick to demand that the constitution be upheld by lobbying for elections to take place this past November. The Council, unsurprisingly, banned Aristide's Lavalas Party, the largest in the country, from running in the elections. This move was criticized by dozens of members of the US Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, as completely undemocratic. Even the OAS admitted that at least fifty-nine polling locations experienced "failure" on election day. This is in stark contrast to the election that put Aristide in power, which boasted a voting participation rate of over fifty percent.

Thousands of Haitians took to the streets in December of 2009 to demand the return of Aristide. Thousands protested again just last month, decrying the elections that have been so riddled with fraud that the Institute for Economic Affairs has called the election a "sham" and President Aristide referred to them as a "selection." Asking Haitians to accept the results of an election while banning major parties would be like asking a US citizen to accept an election without the Democratic Party. In his Second Treatise of Government, John Locke argued that one of the central assumptions of government is that those entrusted to lead the people should not transfer their lawmaking authority to others. Such an instance would make the State of Nature preferable. For Haitian elections to reflect the interests of Haitians, they first need to become free of the strong foreign influences which have derailed their development.

But bringing Aristide back into the fold is not only the right thing for Haitian development and democracy; it is also the best US policy option. The Latin American and Caribbean region is already distancing itself from US foreign policy. And now, with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) having come into effect on December 1, the region is developing the infrastructure to carve its own collective political and economic path.

Annie concluded her most recent email to me with, "There are so many beautifully simple Haitian proverbs. One of my favorites is, 'Deye mon gen mon.' Translated it means, literally, 'Behind mountains, there are more mountains.' As in, 'There is more than meets the eye,' or 'If it's not one thing, it's another.' The spirit is not one of defeat, but of acknowledgment of the struggles while striving towards the solution."

Haitian civil society is mobilized. In the past year, Haitians have marched to restore Aristide; they have marched against the elections; they have marched against the spread of cholera they believe came from the UN. During my fieldwork in the sugarcane valley of rural Colombia, which, after the US and Haiti, has the next largest African diaspora, I witnessed firsthand how the legacy of colonialism is still patterning social and economic relationships. It is not simply that individuals cannot or will not help themselves, even if there exist acute instances in which others indeed need assistance. It is that now, just as then, when others struggle to improve their own lives, foreign powers often intervene to stymie development, to exploit labor, or to extract resources. Recent events in Haiti illustrate this sad ontological reality of global relations that people around the world are working every day to subvert.

Louis Edgar Esparza is Lecturer in Human Rights at the University of Denver, Josef Korbel School of International Studies. His work appears in Societies Without Borders, Qualitative Sociology and Sociological Forum. Dr. Esparza is writing a book on grassroots human rights movements in Colombia, where he completed ethnographic fieldwork in 2008. His research has attracted grants and awards from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Latin American Studies Association and Oxfam America.