

## Undermining Democracy: Haiti, the Coup and the War on Haiti's Popular Movements

By Alex Goss

On February 22, 2006, Patrick Elie, Former Secretary of State for National Defence for the Haitian government and a founding member of S.O.S. (Sant Obsèvasyon Sitwayen- a citizens' watchdog NGO), visited York University and spoke about the history of popular movements in Haiti and the degradation of democracy following the 2004 coup against Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

His talk was co-hosted by CERLAC and the Toronto Haiti Action Committee. The talk was organized as part of a speaking tour to raise awareness of the second anniversary of the coup d'état of February 28, 2004 that overthrew Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

Elie began his talk by reflecting on his experiences in the overthrow of Haiti's Duvalier dictatorship in the 1980s.

Elie chronicled how popular movements in Haiti were able to connect, build coalitions and become a political force and bring down the dictatorship. He described how this popular resistance challenged the subsequent military coups until the first democratic elections in Haiti that coincided with the first election of Aristide in 1990. He asserted that popular movements in Haiti go through cycles of exerting influence and moving underground to protect the movement- today Elie hopes that

popular movements can again liberate Haiti.

Patrick Elie developed a personal relationship with Aristide prior to his presidency during the military regime that followed the Duvalier dictatorship. As head of security for Aristide, he described in chilling detail, a story of how he helped save the priest Aristide's life.

One day as Aristide was preaching to his congregation, the military broke into his church. Elie rushed Aristide to safety as the military entered his church and began shooting innocent parishioners in an assassination attempt. The military had been concerned that Aristide's rising popularity, as a champion for the poor Haitians, would pose a threat to their control of the country. This proved to be true as the military regime finally relinquished control under popular pressure, and Aristide was elected President of Haiti in 1990.

In 1991, Aristide was removed from power by a successful coup that was led by the Haitian military with the backing of US forces. The popular movements in Haiti were once again driven underground by government oppression and many popular movements fled to the poor neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince to seek refuge, most notably to Cité Soleil. Before the recent election of Preval, the UN had been targeting these neighbourhoods because they were considered by the UN and the

interim government to be harbouring violent forces. Elie emphasized the importance of knowing their history to understand this area. These communities have undergone a history of repression, and many of them see violence as the only alternative to continued repression, and targeting by police.

Elie explained that between 1991 and 1994, the popular movements slowly gained strength. This, in combination with the more sympathetic government of Bill Clinton in the United States, led to Aristide's return to power 1994.

In 1994, Elie was appointed Secretary of State for National Defence for Haiti. To curtail any future military coups, Aristide and Elie made it their priority to dismantle the Haitian army. The army was to be replaced by the newly created Haiti National Police force. Aristide's term as president ended in February of 1996. In agreement with the Haitian constitution, Aristide did not run for a second (consecutive) term, and Preval was elected President of Haiti. In 2001, there was another peaceful transition of power when Aristide was re-elected President. Elie explained that the US government argued that there was electoral fraud and stopped providing aid to the Haitian government under that pretext.

On February 29, 2004, Aristide was once again removed from

government by a coup d'état, this time with the backing of US, Canadian and French military forces.

This time around, Elie described Canada's role in the coup as being more involved and more aggressive. During Jean Chretien's term as Prime Minister of Canada, Elie said that Canada was an ally of Haiti. However under Paul Martin's government he noticed a drastic change in relations between the two countries.

The Martin government did not answer Aristide's calls for help prior to the coup and instead sent 500 troops to Port-au-Prince to fly Aristide out of the country. He said that this change in foreign policy was disturbing but that it is still possible for the Canadian government to change its policy once again.

Elie told the audience that the 2004 coup was the spark that led to the creation of S.O.S. (Sant Obsèvasyon Sitwayen), a citizens' watchdog organization of which he is a founding member. Elie stated that he is dedicated to the work of S.O.S. as it continues to work alongside popular movements to expose injustices being conducted by the Haitian interim government and the Haiti National Police. Elie will continue to work with S.O.S. as long as there are human rights abuses taking place in Haiti.

Elie shared his pleasure with the recent election results in Haiti, in which René Preval (a former President under the Lavalas banner) was elected. Elie argued that had it not been for a large popular outcry in the streets against the elections, calling them fraudulent, that there might have been a different outcome.

Elie argued that the outcry against election fraud was proof of the renewed strength of Haiti's popular movements. Elie labelled the electoral result "the wisdom of the Haitian people"- that they can see through fraud and that they continuously refuse to have false democracy imposed upon them.

At this juncture, Elie argued that Canada still has a positive role to play in Haiti, though he stressed that Canada's continued involvement in interference with the country's democratic processes must stop. He stated that Canada still has a role to play in providing aid and debt relief to the Haitian government and to aid agencies within Haiti.

The important principle in Canada's relations with Haiti, he argued, is that Canada should only undertake actions that the Haitian people want undertaken. Elie said that many people in Haiti feel that Canada needs to "help us- or leave us alone."

Currently, Canada has over a hundred RCMP officers working with the UN mission in Haiti to train the Haiti National Police. When questioned about the UN's role in Haiti, Elie responded that their presence was important in preventing human rights abuses by the Haiti National Police, but their role needs to change to a peacekeeping force, and they must stop conducting raids on Port-au-Prince's poorest neighbourhoods.

Elie argued that the spirit of the Haitian people was best captured in a story of how, during a protest against the recent electoral fraud, a group of a thousand protestors broke off from the main march and went to an expensive hotel in an upper-class area of Port-au-Prince. At this hotel, they broke the gates down, went inside, and began using the hotels facilities- swimming in the

pool and napping in the suites. After a couple of hours the group left the hotel peacefully, and to their credit, not one towel or hotel item was stolen. This action, he argued, was a demonstration that the poor could not be excluded forever, that they could challenge the country's elites, and their will would not be denied a just result.

That day, he argued, was a celebration, symbolic of the desire and spirit of the people to achieve democracy in Haiti. It is this spirit, wisdom and desire for change in the people of Haiti in which Elie has such faith.



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