

Haiti's descent into hell

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The lynching happened in broad daylight, and it was widely cheered.

On the morning of 24 April, police detained a busload of passengers in the Port-au-Prince neighbourhood of Canapé Vert, rounding them up as suspected gang members. The men were reportedly face down on the ground when ordinary citizens, sick in every way from years of violence, terror and powerlessness, began to murder them. According to a witness, they beat and stoned the suspects, before burning them alive.

In its gruesomeness and horror, this episode of mob justice (13 men were killed) is of a piece with Haiti's new normal, and inspired vigilante killings across the country. Insecurity was already at life-threatening, economy-shrinking levels before July 2021, when President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated in his bedroom. Almost two years later the situation has, impossibly, worsened. Gangs originally sponsored by Haiti's business and political elite have closed in on Port-au-Prince and are spreading throughout the country. This time they have their own agendas. The police are outgunned; according to a recent estimate, only 3,500 officers are on duty at any one time in the whole country. Amid inaction and often worse, and a policy of lethal passivity among its international "friends", Haiti's people have passed their breaking point.

"It's more than insecurity, it's more than a crisis," one activist in Port-au-Prince told me; like others living in Haiti, they requested anonymity for fear of becoming a target for violence or kidnapping. "For most Haitians, it's a state of terror – a state of siege." On the day of the Canapé Vert killings, the UN secretary-general, António Guterres, warned that insecurity in Haiti had "reached levels comparable to countries in armed conflict" and called for the deployment of an international force. The UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs had counted almost 70 people killed the week before.

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"Kidnappers burst into a Catholic church to kidnap a parishioner," read a headline in the 18 April edition of *Le Nouvelliste*, Haiti's leading newspaper. Two days earlier, the article reported, a popular television producer had been kidnapped near his house. Two days later, it was Harold Marzouka Jr, a businessman with diplomatic ties to St Kitts and Nevis, along

with two companions. Their cars were set on fire. Another article described a series of killings in the northern port of Cap-Haïtien, motive unknown, with one of the victims stoned to death.

It is hard to overstate the desperateness of the situation. Haitians at every level of society have been living in daily fear – of being kidnapped, killed, raped or caught in cross-fire. Those with savings worry about going bankrupt, forced to pay ransoms for themselves or loved ones. Bricks-and-mortar businesses have shuttered – including restaurants, shops and bank branches – and the once bustling informal economy stands stock-still with terror.

The humanitarian costs are incalculable. As the expense and risks of transport have soared, so has the cost of food. According to the UN, some 4.9 million people, almost half the population, are currently going hungry. Hospitals and schools have closed. Cholera has returned, with nearly 40,000 suspected cases since October 2022.

The acting prime minister, Ariel Henry, is deeply out of touch, which may be the nicest thing you can say about him. In late April, as gangs took control of two beach resorts on the Côte des Arcadins, north of Port-au-Prince, he opined that the way forward was for Haiti to invest in tourism. Henry has no constitutional mandate and, having presided over the country's tailspin, is widely reviled. Arguably, his most important backers are in the international community, particularly the US. The country has supported Henry's Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (PHTK) since before its official founding in 2012, despite a number of serious democratic challenges to its legitimacy. The government, such as it is – there are zero elected officials in the entire country – is now going through the motions of setting up elections. But few in Haiti trust it to organise fair ones.

Many Haitians are hoping instead for an armed international intervention, even knowing that it would prop up Henry's regime, and even though they have experienced the predations of past actions. (At least 10,000 Haitians died from the importation of cholera by the last UN peacekeeping mission, which cost member states \$7bn between 2004 and 2017.) It is a contradiction born of the need for survival and of political powerlessness: Haiti's citizens have no way of challenging a leader who is not subject to democratic process.

"*Ayiti pap peri*" – "Haiti will not perish" – became a slogan in 2010, after an earthquake levelled the capital and killed tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands. A popular graffiti artist, Jerry Rosembert Moïse, used the phrase in his work that year. But Rosembert left Haiti in 2021, hoping to return if things stabilise.

It's a big if. Today, the Kreyòl phrases you're more likely to hear are, "*Pa gen Ayiti anko*," or, "*Peyi a fini*." There is no more Haiti. The country is finished.

[See also: Made in Cuba]

The causes of Haiti's collapse are many. But a heap of the blame belongs to the country's *soi-disant* friends in the international community. During the Cold War, François Duvalier and then his son Jean-Claude (Papa and Baby Doc) ruled by terror, but the US mostly looked the other way, viewing the dictatorship as a bulwark against Latin American communism. The US twice effectively supported the overthrow of Haiti's democratically elected president, the socialist Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 1991 and 2004. Jake Johnston, author of the forthcoming *Aid State: Elite Panic, Disaster Capitalism, and the Battle to Control Haiti*, told me: "Foreign actors have played a deterministic role in Haiti's politics, and completely distorted any notion of democracy." For Haiti's politicians, he added, foreign interests are often "a more important constituency than the population itself".

Many Haitians trace the roots of the current crisis to 2010, a year that began with the earthquake and ended in the botched first round of a presidential election. The quake had destroyed the homes of 1.5 million people and wiped out government infrastructure. With billions in aid on the line, the Core Group (a multilateral organisation of ambassadors to Haiti including the US, Canada, France and the Organisation of American States, or OAS), was intent on a timely democratic transition – and a new president who would play nice with outside benefactors.

But the 2010 election was a disaster. I was living in Port-au-Prince at the time, working as a reporter, and on election day talked to countless stymied voters. The earthquake had buried people's personal records, meaning many were unable to get new identity cards in time to vote. Polling venues were changed without notice. Would-be voters couldn't find their names on the electoral rolls, but saw the names of their dead neighbours listed there.

At midday on 28 November 2010, a group of presidential candidates led a demonstration through the capital, calling for the election to be rerun on grounds of massive fraud. What followed instead was a mess of diplomacy, threats and back-room deals that resulted in the inclusion of Michel Martelly, a popular singer and proto-Trumpian figure, in the second round. The US and the OAS had put their whopping thumb on the scales for Martelly and his Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (*Tèt Kale*, meaning shaved head, was a reference to Martelly's bald pate.)

[See also: The real problem with Joe Biden's democracy summit]

As president, Martelly declared Haiti open for business and presented himself as someone foreign investors could work with. Meanwhile, according to later audits, he and his cronies misappropriated more than \$2bn in aid from Venezuela's PetroCaribe programme, the oil procurement agreement made between Hugo Chávez and Caribbean member states.

When Martelly's term was up – the constitution limits presidents to two non-consecutive terms – he nominated an obscure agribusinessman, Jovenel Moïse, to lead the PHTK. Martelly seems to have intended Moïse as a seat warmer who would facilitate his own return

to power in 2021. This time there was little faith that the election would be fair: in 2016 only 18 per cent of Haitians voted.

But President Moïse was not the obedient liege Martelly had hoped for. He arrogated power, delayed local elections and tried to ram through a constitutional referendum that would have enabled him to run for a consecutive term. When Moïse eliminated fuel subsidies, a popular movement rose up to demand that the PetroCaribe money be accounted for. Increasingly, Moïse relied on gangs to quell dissent, which began an escalating cycle of violence, kidnappings and even massacres, as the gangs moved beyond the president's control. Jake Johnston told me that at the height of the protests against Moïse, "it would have been hard to find someone in Haiti who didn't think the support of the international community was keeping him in power".

[See also: From the NS archive: Fidel, Mao and Nikita]



A shrine for the late Jovenel Moïse in Cap-Haïtien, July 2021. *Photo by Valerie Baeriswyl / AFP via Getty Images*

After Moïse's assassination there were only ten elected officials, all senators. The house of deputies (Haiti's lower chamber of parliament) sat empty and there were no elected mayors or councillors in the entire country. Moïse had nominated Henry as premier on 5 July, and was killed two days later. The constitution envisaged several paths to succession, but most required approval by the national assembly, which was defunct. Henry was never confirmed, because there was no parliament to confirm him. Recognition from the US has cemented

Henry's hold on power despite his lack of constitutional authority, popular support or apparent competence. A State Department official, speaking on background, told me that the US sees Henry as a "transitional figure", someone to steward Haiti back to the path of democracy. But most Haitians believe that the PHTK will set the rules of any election in its favour.

Since before Moïse's assassination, there has been an alternative political group with seemingly broader support: the Commission for a Haitian Solution to the Crisis. In August 2021 it put forward a plan, the Montana Accord, for a transitional government and a path to elections. Devised by civil society leaders, peasant groups and churches, the accord has almost 1,000 signatories, most representing organisations. But according to members, the Commission has been told by US intermediaries that it must work with Henry. Henry, meanwhile, has little reason to compromise.

"They say that they don't choose winners and losers in Haiti," said Monique Clesca, a Haitian journalist and former UN official who is an organiser of the Montana Accord. "But the US has chosen a loser – one who is supporting gangs and corruption. And unfortunately, the US is the major power in Haiti."

The State Department official I spoke to disputed that the US was backing Henry. "We have continually encouraged dialogue. We have met with everyone from the Montana group to Prime Minister Henry."

Still, the official argued that the most basic functions of the US-Haiti relationship, including the protection of American citizens and provision of humanitarian and security support, required a Haitian government counterpart. "So we have to work with the government. Some people would say, well, that's the same as supporting him in the future. That's not our position. But Henry is the prime minister who is in place now, and therefore, we need to work with him."

Clesca likened US recognition of Henry's authority to its cynical backing of François Duvalier (Papa Doc), who ruled Haiti through violent repression between 1959 and 1971. A former US official who has followed Haiti for decades offered a different analogy: "It would be as if there were a democratic movement in Hungary and we required Viktor Orbán to be part of the solution." Any single one of the PHTK's actions – its dismantling of electoral democracy, its empowerment of gangs, its theft of billions from the treasury – should have led to withdrawal of US support, the former official argued.

"If the international community had supported us, we probably would have avoided a lot of deaths, a lot of kidnapping, a lot of loss," said Clesca. "It's on their bloody hands."

[See also: [How do Cubans perceive Che Guevara today?](#)]

Almost everyone in Port-au-Prince knows someone who has been kidnapped. The Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights, based in Haiti, counted 389 kidnappings over the first quarter of 2023, a rise of 72 per cent from the same period the previous year, and of 173 percent on 2021. It attributes the rise to, among other things, those hit by international sanctions using ransoms to make up their losses.

Here are some strategies for avoiding being kidnapped, as shared by friends and contacts who still live in Haiti. Avoid Port-au-Prince if you can. Limit your movements. Don't go out after 6pm. Don't take shortcuts. If you have a car, avoid using it; people in cars are targets and so are the cars themselves. Take a moto, or motorcycle – you can get away faster, and it's less conspicuous. Go by foot. Ride the bus.

You can reduce your risk, but you can't eliminate it. A young man I spoke to was kidnapped last August on a bus with about ten others, including the driver, on the 90km journey from Jacmel to Port-au-Prince. (He and the driver were released on delivery of ransoms, his paid by a friend in the US. He doesn't know what happened to the other passengers, though he remembers the sounds of women struggling, suggestive of sexual assault.)

Don't go to work. Don't send your kids to school, if the school is still open. No place is safe, not even church. No one is safe; not even a popular TV producer, not even a market lady, not even a child.



Protesters run from tear gas in Port-au-Prince, October 2021. *Photo by AP Photo / Matias Delacroix*

Avoid posting on social media. Avoid Zoom meetings. Secure your neighbourhood WhatsApp group so that gang members can't infiltrate it.

Organise your neighbourhood. Collect money for the local commissariat, because the police can no longer afford fuel, food or weapons. Collect money for street lights. Hire private security guards, two at either entrance to the neighbourhood. When gang members disarm one of the guards, build a solid concrete wall at one of the entrances. When gang members kill one of the guards and the security company cancels your neighbourhood's contract, find another security company. When the gang bulldozes the wall one night, their gunshots and revelry keeping everyone awake in terror, replace the wall with a shipping container. Fill the container with rocks and put two half-containers on top. Fill those with rocks, too. Convince the mayor to demolish a nearby bridge so that the gang can no longer bring heavy machinery to your neighbourhood to take the containers away.

But don't focus only on your neighbourhood. Look at the map circulating on social media, the one showing how gangs are pressing in on all sides of Port-au-Prince. Eventually they will reach every neighbourhood.

If you make your living selling merchandise or food on the street, run at the first sign of trouble: don't take time to pack your wares. Get used to eating plain rice every day. Be thankful to have it. Get used to not eating. Get used to not having an appetite. Get used to headaches. Celebrate when five days go by without gunshots.

Take matters into your own hands. Sharpen your machete. Buy a gun – hardly anyone is monitoring the ports. When police stop a bus in Canapé Vert, and their search of the men aboard reveals a trove of heavy calibre weapons, and the men are laid down in the road and burned to death, you find yourself cheering. You know that those men, some of them very young, didn't get justice. They might not have been guilty. You worry there may be reprisals. But the time for such considerations seems to have passed.

[See also: Brazil's stance on Russia is worrying the West]

It is difficult to reconcile the Port-au-Prince of today with the one I knew a decade ago. It was peaceful when I lived there, from 2007 to 2011, in a quiet neighbourhood within walking distance of Canapé Vert. Back then, I took the same precautions I had as a single woman in New York, avoiding certain areas at night, and it was more than enough. I was never threatened. When my car overheated – which was often: the radiator had a congenital leak – strangers would help me find water to pour into it.

After returning to the US, I visited as a reporter and to see friends, especially a woman I'll call N and her family. "We're waiting for you," N would say whenever more than a year had passed. In November 2018, two years overdue a visit, I booked a ticket to Haiti. The flight was cancelled minutes before boarding. Protesters had taken over the runway at Cap-

Haitien, demonstrating against corruption and Moïse's recent reduction in fuel subsidies. Some called for the president's resignation, and he responded with a heavy hand. My flight was cancelled the next day, and the next.

"Not yet," N began to say. "Wait until it's safe again."

From there, the country spiralled: there were general strikes; the gangs gained power; an exodus gathered pace. Last year N's brother-in-law was kidnapped. N used to sell secondhand shoes on the street, but it is too dangerous now. At some point she stopped telling me to wait for peace and began asking for help getting out.

The best defence against getting kidnapped is, of course, to leave. In January the Biden administration unveiled a humanitarian parole programme that permits migrants from Haiti (and from Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua) to stay in the US for two years, if they can wrangle a passport and a stateside sponsor. Neither task is easy. The diaspora in the US is already stretched thin, having sent remittances to loved ones in Haiti through many years of insecurity. On the other hand, resettling in the US might cost a family less than a ransom. This is a consideration.

Getting the necessary documentation means risking danger and indignity. After the announcement of the "Pwogram Biden", Haiti's passport offices were inundated. The price of a passport, with new fees charged by people N calls "racketeers", quintupled and is now the equivalent of \$300 – a sum that is out of reach for the most vulnerable. N recently procured her passport after braving days of long lines under the hot sun, shooting episodes and dispersal by tear gas. She is waiting for the racketeers to release her husband's passport, nervous about the fees they may demand. Neither N nor her spouse speaks English. Their tentative plan is to get a distant cousin in south Florida to sponsor them.

The Biden programme has been a success for the White House. Illegal crossings at the border have plummeted. The press has fewer opportunities to document horrifying scenes of white supremacist violence, such as that which occurred at Del Rio, Texas, in 2021, when border control agents on horseback chased Haitian asylum-seekers with whips.

But for Haiti, it has hastened a brain drain. The Haitian news website AyiboPost reports that doctors are leaving the country en masse. A friend at a non-profit organisation estimates the hit to his staff is at least 10 per cent.

"People are fleeing," says H, an architect who is determined to stay in Port-au-Prince. "You can't rebuild a nation if everyone is fleeing. And you can't blame people for wanting a better life." H thinks the Biden programme "is such a disservice. It's a terrible thing for this county to be losing more of its human resources. If someone really wanted to help, they would help Haitians stay in Haiti."

Late last year, Henry signed a new accord, the National Consensus for an Inclusive Transition and Transparent Elections, which envisages general elections in 2023, and the inauguration of a new president in February 2024. There is almost no faith, either in Haiti or abroad, that elections will run to such a timetable. Few in Haiti support Henry's so-called consensus – but the bigger issue now is terror. Elections cannot be free or fair when daily life has become so dangerous. “It will be difficult to move forward without effectively addressing rampant insecurity,” said the new UN special representative for Haiti, María Isabel Salvador, on 26 April.

Re-establishing security will require significant support for the Haitian National Police, but no country has offered to lead on this. American hopes that Canada might do so were ended late in March this year. “Outside intervention, as we’ve done in the past, hasn’t worked to create long-term stability for Haiti,” said Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#). The US cannot be counted on; the Biden [White House](#) has yet to nominate an ambassador to Haiti.

But according to Monique Clesca, the issue of armed intervention is secondary to a more fundamental question of governance and justice: “The issue is the way the government of the past 11 years has been functioning like an ogre, eating up its people. And then you say, let’s bring an army to support them.” Clesca acknowledged that Haiti’s police need backing, but argued that intervention without a wider political compact will exacerbate long-term problems.

H, the architect determined to stay in Haiti, likened that attitude to insisting on setting the table before feeding a starving man. To him, Haiti is in a life-or-death situation and there is no time for politics. Many on the left agree. These are Haitians who have long abhorred foreign interference and arrogance. Now they are praying for it.

[See also: [How the empire degraded Britain](#)]

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