The Pop Pop Pop of Reagan's Election in Haiti

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because U.S. elections have massive consequences abroad.

Pop, pop, pop go the Champagne corks in Haiti's National Palace. (Probably Dom Perignon; the first lady has extravagant tastes.) It is November 4, 1980, and Haiti's oft-overbearing neighbor to the north has just elected Ronald Reagan as its president. Out with Jimmy Carter and in with the good stuff: President for life Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier and his inner circle are exuberant.

Pop-pop-pop go the guns on the Rue de Quay. Radio Haiti Inter, the station where Michèle Montas-Dominique worked as a journalist, has just called the election for Reagan, and celebratory gunshots are ringing out from the street below. "Human rights are over!" she remembers the armed militia, the Tontons Macoutes, shouting. "The cowboys are back in power!"

To many in Haiti's nascent liberalization movement, Carter's presidency and its emphasis on human rights had proven a boon. At Radio Haiti Inter, Montas and her husband, Jean Dominique, tested the limits of Duvalierism by broadcasting in Creole (the language of the masses), exposing the conditions peasants lived in and criticizing elites. A newspaper, *Le Petit Samedi Soir*, called for elections and the emptying of Fort Dimanche, a prison where one might find oneself locked up for being too powerful or too loud, or for no apparent reason at all. A liberation theology movement was emerging in Catholic churches, where priests delivered brave homilies.

"There was an opening," says University of Virginia political scientist Robert Fatton. "Fear was not acute as it used to be under the father," he says, referring to François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who had governed with brutal oppression. "Things were moving in a different direction."

Fatton, Montas-Dominique and others credited United States support. We "used the conditions imposed by the Carter administration on the dictatorship," says Montas-Dominique. The president had a powerful emissary in Andrew Young, his ambassador to the United Nations. Young made clear that U.S. aid to Haiti depended on improvement in its human rights situation. "When people understand which way the winds are blowing, and if they want to go with those winds, they trim their sails accordingly," he reportedly said during a 1977 visit.

The cheerful ex-Hollywood actor who was soon to take the White House was a different story. "Frankly, Reagan didn't give a damn about Haiti," says Fatton. It was not so much that Reagan disliked human rights, but that he and his advisers cared mainly about the threat of communism. Duvalier knew that he could frame his government, including the repression, as a bulwark against the spread of the red menace throughout Latin America. And that knowledge, says Fatton, unleashed "the worst authoritarian instincts of Jean-Claude's regime." After some celebration, of course. The Champagne bit is unconfirmed, but, says Fatton, something "literally that all Haitians believe."

A week after the election, the government newspaper ran an editorial that functioned as a warning, says Montas-Dominique: "The Party Is Over," it said. Then, on November 28, the police arrested dozens of journalists, activists, students and opposition leaders and threw them in jail. Some were tortured, says Montas-Dominique, who was herself imprisoned. Radio Haiti Inter shut down, and Montas-Dominique and her husband fled into exile, along with many others. *Le Petit Samedi Soir* came under increased police surveillance, Fatton says.

But as Haiti has taught its leaders over and over again, it's hard to put a genie back into a bottle. Having tasted freedom — a more open press, the ability to gather and dissent — Haitians did not take reversion to authoritarianism easily, says Fatton. "The unintended consequence was that people no longer had a safety valve to express themselves," Fatton

says — and they missed it. Confrontations between the newly authoritarian government and civil society worsened, and five years later would bloom into a full-fledged revolt. Jean-Claude Duvalier and his family would fly into their own exile in February 1986 and, in 1990, the country would elect its first democratic leader.

On the night of November 4, 1980, of course, the Duvaliers could not see that they were planting the seeds of their demise. They were just gleeful at the prospect of dispensing with this liberalization/human rights business once and for all, and busy with their Dom.

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