

Haiti's Excluded Majority Opposes Army's Re-Creation

Written by Jeb Sprague

Thursday, 15 November 2012 20:50



The entire version of the shortened article published in the Jamaica Observer is published below.

Following the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010, the country's small right wing has had a political comeback. As with the shocking return of former dictator Jean Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in early-2011 (who remains unaccountable for his crimes), through a controversial and very poorly attended election, musician Michel Martelly, a longtime Duvalierist, was able to woo a small part of the population as an “outsider” candidate.

Since the 2004 coup d'état in Haiti, there has been a clear rollback of the slow but positive reforms that had been undertaken by Haiti's popularly elected governments. Judicial rulings that had held accountable some of the country's most violent criminals were overturned. As we now know through WikiLeaks, 400 paramilitaries were integrated into Haiti's revamped post-coup police force. A UN force has also remained in the country since mid-2004.

The most stunning achievement of Haiti's democratic period, though, has been more difficult to undo: this was the disbandment of Haiti's brutal military and rural section chiefs. The forces had been built up to support the US occupation in the early 20th century and by the 1960s a symbiotic relationship had formed between the forces and a cold war paramilitary apparatus [see t up in the country](#)

The Tonton Macoute paramilitary force, set up under François “Papa Doc” Duvalier (and responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands), eventually would become even more reliant on Haiti's military following the fall of Papa Doc's son, Jean Claude. Working attached to the military throughout the later 1980s, and then again from 1991-1994, paramilitary and army forces would conduct waves of massacres — targeting Haiti's pro-democracy movement.

Haiti's Excluded Majority Opposes Army's Re-Creation

Written by Jeb Sprague

Thursday, 15 November 2012 20:50

Today, with a UN occupation and hard-line right-wing government in power, the victory of Haiti's grass-roots pro-democracy movement in disbanding the military, is being put to the test. In recent months Haiti's government formed a ministry of defence, which has already begun rebuilding the army. Even the ministry's emblem, coloured red and black, reminds one of the red and black flag of the Duvalier dynasty.

Vocal opponents of the army, such as famed Haitian attorney Mario Joseph, have received death threats. Contrary to the press releases of Martelly's administration, Haiti's population is widely opposed to the army's reformation.

Robert Muggah, former research director of the Geneva-based [Small Arms Survey](#), has presented scientific polling data from 2011 showing that: "Between 96 per cent and 97 per cent of the entire (Haitian) population, whether you've been a victim of crime, whether you're living in an IDP camp, or whether you're general population, strongly or very strongly disagree that the Haitian army should be brought back."*

According to Muggah and others behind the research, they are conducting the most scientific polling available in Haiti by routinely surveying close to 3,000 households using a [proportional to population size](#) (PPS) approach.

While these polling numbers do appear high (after more than a year of propaganda by Haiti's government promoting the recreation of the military), Muggah, an hour into a policy talk in Ottawa, added that anti-military sentiment "suggests the legacy of the armed forces has been a fairly long one".

The average age of Haiti's population is only 26. Muggah notes therefore that "most Haitians were teenagers or younger when the armed forces were in existence" but he argues that the poll reveals "both the very strong oral tradition in Haitian families but I think also the very persistent legacy of the armed forces in their lives". As Haitians well know, the country's paramilitary and former military forces working with some of the country's wealthiest families have time and again been used to assault the country's poor majority, long excluded from the country's political arena. Unable to win by free and fair elections, elites have sought to placate or manipulate the country's voters, yet they have still required periodic doses of political violence.

Haiti's Excluded Majority Opposes Army's Re-Creation

Written by Jeb Sprague

Thursday, 15 November 2012 20:50

Muggah fears that with the reforming of Haiti's army now being promoted by some, “there is a danger, that history could very well repeat itself in Haiti”. Whereas France has offered to help rebuild the force, Ecuador and Brazil are reportedly moving forward to help train it. As of now, officials from the Canadian government and US Department of State have said the force would be a waste of resources. However, agencies within these governments often carry out contradictory policies. What is clear is that citizens from all of these countries need to hold their officials accountable for their activities in Haiti.

Jeb Sprague is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara USA, and is the author of the new book [Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy in Haiti](#) .

*To hear more on the polling data showing overwhelmingly the Haitian population's opposition to recreating the ex-army see Muggah's presentation (at around 59 minutes into his talk) [here](#) .