Aristide (1953-), Jean-Bertrand

Born into the rural petty bourgeoisie of Port-Salut, in the Southwest of the country, Jean-Bertrand Aristide studied in religious schools, attended a seminary and was ordained as a priest in 1982. He was a Salesian priest, close to Liberation Theology, and his sermons denounced the poverty of the people and accused the Duvalier [1] regime, as well as the economic elites of the country, of being responsible for it. Targeted by the conservative sectors of society and Duvalier’s supporters, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on September 11, 1988, in his parish of Saint-Jean Bosco. His reputation as a champion of the poor and the oppressed grew in all sectors of society. He presented his social thinking and philosophy in several books, including Tout homme est un homme (1992) and Dignité (1994). He became the opposition candidate in the 1990 election and was elected President on December 16, 1990 with 65% of the vote (according to an estimate by the Organization of American States (OAS) observation mission; this is the only data available, since the electoral officials failed to count all the votes). The army overthrew him on September 30, 1991 and installed a regime of terror that triggered an international embargo. In exile, President Aristide continued to enjoy massive popular support and was reinstated in October 1994 after international and domestic pressure led US President Clinton, supported by the United Nations and the OAS, to intervene militarily in Haiti. Before his mandate expired, Aristide officially disbanded the Haitian army and replaced it with the Haitian National Police. Prevented by the Constitution from running again for a second consecutive mandate, Aristide endorsed his closest personal ally, René Garcia Préval, who was elected President in December 1995. Jean-Bertrand Aristide re-conquered the presidency in the controversial December 2000 election. He then had to face an international aid embargo following the irregularities of the May 2000 senatorial elections. The country was then confronted with a deteriorating economic situation. About 20,000 people, mainly from the middle class, migrated to Canada during the first three years of Aristide’s second mandate. An increase in crime and delinquency were linked to the “de-institutionalization of the State” by the State (Hurbon, 2001). He was accused of instrumentalizing and arming the Chimè [2], who created fear in the population and among political opponents. From 2002, Aristide faced opposition, not only from the middle sectors of society, but this time also from the underprivileged, especially peasants from the central Plateau and students who regularly demonstrated in the streets of Port-au-Prince. On December 5, 2003, groups of Chimè attacked the campus of the Humanities College (Faculté des Sciences Humaines), wounding students and faculty members. In January 2004, an armed insurrection began in Gonaives; it was composed of former Chimè from Raboteau (“the Cannibal Army”), former army soldiers and former chiefs of police, and spread throughout the country. US and French diplomats pressured Aristide to go into exile, which he did on February 28, 2004. Many of his international backers had already withdrawn their support, except among sectors of the US left which still saw him as a champion of the “masses” (in contrast, the French intellectual left approved -- or even influenced -- the position of the French government with regard to President Aristide.) His departure into exile was subject to controversy, his supporters and himself asserting that he had actually been kidnapped by the US government.

The sociologist Alex Dupuy’s 2007 book examines the life and political trajectory of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in detail.

More