

ARISTIDE FLEES HAITI

New Hope and Familiar Chaos in the Capital

[Port-au-Prince, from Page A1] drive a fire engine away from a firehouse. (They failed.) Looters by the hundreds — from fresh-faced girls who looked no older than 5 to wizened men — pilaged shops and scattered like beetles, stumbling over debris and dropped booty, when police struck at them with rifle butts or metal rods, or fired into the air.

Haitians have a special term for a frenzied, mindless rampage of theft and destruction — *dechouage* — coined to describe the widespread disorders that erupted after the departure of dictator Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in 1986 for exile in France. That they were forced to use the word again Sunday was a bitter pill for many.

“The people are poor, and very illiterate,” said Yves Torchon, 46, a businessman, as he watched scores of boys and men ransacking the two-story police headquarters in Petionville. “They don’t understand what they are doing. They don’t understand that it’s their property and will have to be replaced. But I understand them. They have been tyrannized.”

“Thank you, Aristide!” shouted one young man as he struggled to lug three filthy mattresses out of the Petionville jail. In a country where two-thirds of adults lack jobs and average daily income is less than \$4, the temptation to plunder from a disgraced and fallen government was perhaps understandable, and people could be seen throughout the day in Port-au-Prince carrying propane gas cylinders, car batteries, camouflage uniforms, computers, refrigerators, bouquets of flowers, armfuls of clothing and other presumably pilloined goods.

Riding atop dump trucks and pickups, or running in packs and waving leafy tree branches, Haitians of all ages thronged the streets to fete the ouster of a leader who was once popular, but who many thought evolved into a dangerous and corrupt, yet ineffectual, tyrant.

“I’m here to show I’m happy,” said one demonstrator, Zo Katlens, 25. “I had to leave home and sleep elsewhere at night because the *chimeres* [pro-Aristide thugs] were looking for me.”

On the Champs de Mars in front of Aristide’s former official residence, the white-walled National Palace, some of his supporters angrily struck back by firing into crowds. On the Delmas road, *chimeres* reportedly burned down a supermarket and a bank, and were shooting on passing vehicles. A Texaco station was looted and torched into a smoking ruin. Columns of

dense smoke also rose into the morning sky near the waterfront.

Reporters counted at least four bodies — those of three men and that of a woman who looked to have been about 20 who was struck by a stray bullet when she went to fetch water. The dead men were said by residents to be members of pro-Aristide *chimeres* gangs shot by police, but that could not be verified.

Police inspector general Michael V. Lucius, who said he was assuming operational command of Haiti’s national police force, said he did not know how many people had been killed or wounded Sunday, but that there had been widespread damage. Lucius, who had been the chief of staff for Aristide’s chief of police, said he ordered special units, as well as officers from other towns, into the capital’s streets.

“There are a lot of armed men in Port-au-Prince, and we’re doing all we can so peace will return,” Lucius said. “The number of police is limited, and we’re managing those units that we have.”

Haiti’s police, who had become nearly invisible during the dying days of the Aristide regime, returned in force throughout the day, reoccupying in early afternoon the Petionville station, which by then had been picked clean by looters. A curfew was also declared, and when it went into effect at 6 p.m., a tense calm seemed to have returned to much of Haiti’s seaside capital.

Asked what his hopes were now that Aristide had gone, Jean-Louis Toussaint, 24, of Port-au-Prince said he hoped that the local university would reopen soon so he could resume his economics studies. That Haiti’s president didn’t serve out his constitutionally mandated term of office until 2006 was regrettable, the aspiring businessman said — but he also said Aristide’s departure was good for the country.

“From a moral point of view, it is a bad thing, because the president is elected for five years,” Toussaint said. “On the other hand, we cannot accept a president who is capable of doing anything to stay in power.”

Patrick Brutus, who said he was cheated out of a legislative seat by Aristide’s Lavalas Party in the reputedly fraudulent 2000 elections, spent much of the morning racing around in a BMW convertible imploring fellow Haitians not to pillage.

“Aristide has left, but life continues,” Brutus said. “Anything people now take, even if it’s just a grain of rice, costs the country that much more dearly.”

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Yves Torchon, 46, a businessman in Port-au-Prince



AFTER ARISTIDE: Gunmen loyal to the ousted president roam Port-au-Prince after learning that he was believed to have left the country. Many of the gangs were looting as well as defending the Haitian capital from advancing rebels.

CAROLYN COLE Los Angeles Times

The Hope of the Nation’s Poor Became One More Autocrat

Jean-Bertrand Aristide rose to power with promises of dignity for the dispossessed. He wound up emulating the dictators he condemned.

By CAROL J. WILLIAMS
Times Staff Writer

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Jean-Bertrand Aristide tapped his natural intellect and deep sympathy for his desperate countrymen to propel himself out of the abject poverty of this capital’s sprawling slums to the presidential palace.

A devoted man of the people, Aristide became Haiti’s great hope to reverse 200 years of poverty and dashed expectations. But the nation’s first democratically elected president fell victim to the same addiction to power, wealth and repression that marked the dictatorships he had condemned.

Forced from office Sunday by a rebellious populace that once swept him into office, the 50-year-old former priest squandered the potential of a decade in power, leaving 8.5 million Haitians more miserable and disillusioned than when he appeared, as if from nowhere, to lead them.

He also leaves behind a nation that is baffled by his failures, with legions of former allies and admirers still unable to identify when he abandoned the path to greatness or understand why. Most of his harshest critics had walked by his side in the early days of building democracy and had cheered his return on the back of a U.S. military intervention in 1994, three years after a military coup d’etat disrupted his first term.

Exclusionary System

“Aristide’s mistake was his belief that people here didn’t want things to change. For all his intelligence, he never understood that he was supported because poor Haitians thought he could change life for the better,” Haitian novelist Lyonel Trouillot said. “The reason this society has created monsters like the Duvaliers and Aristide is because it is a power structure based on exclusion and misleading of poor people in the countryside. Aristide never broke away from that.”

Father Joseph Simon, a former seminary teacher who runs a children’s shelter here, accused Aristide of turning his back on the illiterate masses who lifted him up hoping he would give voice to their dreams and end their suffering.

“It’s part of the psychology of people from the lower echelons of society,” said Simon, who taught the teenage Aristide at the Salesian Fathers Seminary in Cap-Haitien. “Once they go up in the world, they forget where they came from.”

Commentator Gary Victor accused Aristide of breaking the last bond he had with the people during a December attack by loyalists against university students demanding his resignation. The gangs swarmed the State University of Haiti, smashed windows and computers and bludgeoned several pro-



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POPULIST DREAM: Jean-Bertrand Aristide became Haiti’s great hope to reverse 200 years of poverty and dashed expectations.

fessors, including the university rector, whose kneecaps were broken.

“People were shocked by this because of the reverence they have for education,” Victor said. “The poorest working parent sacrifices everything to pay for children’s school fees so they can have a chance of a better life. And when they see these lumpen masses destroying schools and attacking teachers, they see it as the destruction of everything they have dreamed of and suffered for.”

Throughout Aristide’s two terms and the intervening five years when ally Rene Preval served as head of state, Haiti held its place among the world’s most corrupt nations in the annual index compiled by Transparency International, a Berlin-based think tank.

About half the population is illiterate. Malnutrition is epidemic. Unemployment afflicts as much as 70% of the work force, and Haiti’s rate of HIV and AIDS is the world’s highest outside sub-Saharan Africa.

Aristide was born July 15, 1953, in Port Salut, and his mother brought him to the capital as a child. His teachers spotted the gifted linguist, musician and speaker, shepherding him to the seminary in Cap-Haitien.

He graduated from Notre Dame college in that city, Haiti’s second-largest. He completed his novitiate studies at another Salesian institution in the Dominican Republic, the nation with which Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola. He earned a graduate degree in theology from the State University of Haiti in Port-au-Prince in 1979 before embarking on overseas studies that took him to Israel, Europe and Canada. Those travels helped him gain fluency in Spanish, English, Italian, Hebrew and German as well as his native French and Creole.

It was upon his return to Haiti in 1985, three years after ordination and during the turbulent twilight of the 30-year dictatorship of the Duvalier family, that Aristide gathered a devoted following among the capital’s poorest residents.

Inspiring Oratory

The Duvaliers’ dynasty had been shored up by the Tontons Macoute secret police, who tortured and killed many of the family’s political opponents. While the Duvaliers flaunted their fabulous wealth looted from the

national treasury — Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s wife had air conditioning installed in the National Palace so she could wear her fur coats — the vast majority of Haitians lived in desperate poverty.

From his pulpit at St. Jean Bosco in the La Saline slum, the priest with a gift for oratory inspired the Catholic flock to believe in his power to lift them out of misery and oppression.

It was in La Saline that Aristide tapped into the anger and isolation of the 85% of Haitians who were too poor to even eat regularly, speaking to them in the Creole language shunned by the church and the French-speaking elite. His ministry and message spread through Radio Soleil, the Roman Catholic Church broadcast service that propelled him to prominence.

In the roiling underground democracy movement of the 1980s, opposition leader Mischa Gaillard remembered Aristide as a quiet and dutiful foot soldier in the campaign to depose “Baby Doc” Duvalier.

“He was always very intelligent, but he was held back by the mentality of a street kid. That’s why he couldn’t elevate himself, why he had no vision,” Gaillard said of the activist priest who helped and organize rallies.

After the fall of Duvalier in 1986, Aristide led his parishioners on protest marches against the short-lived military and right-wing regimes that followed. In 1988, he was expelled from the Salesian order for what the church deemed excessive activism. But he had already amassed a huge following among the slum dwellers, who voted him to victory in Haiti’s first democratic elections in 1990, with an overwhelming 67% in a 13-candidate field.

He left the priesthood in 1994, and just before leaving office at the end of his first presidential term in 1996, Aristide married Mildred Trouillot, a Haitian American lawyer. The couple have two young daughters.

It was during the five years between his interrupted first presidency and the 2000 election — the Haitian Constitution forbids successive terms — that Aristide’s Lavalas Party created “popular organizations,” groups that began as campaign teams but later took up arms and evolved into undisciplined terror squads. The gangsters, dubbed *chimeres* — Creole for “mythical monsters” — attacked opposition demonstrators and worked as enforcers for government offi-

cial involved in Haiti’s growing drug transshipment trade.

Human rights groups chronicled Aristide’s embrace of violence and intimidation to stay in power, and former constituents accused him of pocketing a share of billions drug money.

The *chimeres* ensured that Lavalas won the majority of parliamentary seats in the May 2000 elections, which foreign observers deemed to be flawed. The repression prompted a boycott by Aristide’s challengers in the presidential vote six months later. As the only serious candidate on the ballot, Aristide easily won a second five-year term but had set in motion the social confrontation that was to prove his downfall.

In a bow to populist sentiment, Aristide elevated Creole from the tongue of the underclass to share official status with French. He also legalized the voodoo religion practiced by 80% of Haitians but long dismissed as occult and backward by the dominant Catholic Church.

But those moves aimed at inspiring Haitians’ pride in their African origins were quickly eclipsed by the chaos and instability spurred by the political standoff and the cutoff of international aid in response to electoral irregularities.

Polite, soft-spoken and the epitome of sincerity to many who met him, Aristide at a minimum tolerated a corrupt government. According to court testimony in U.S. trials of drug runners, the Haitian government operated a network of payoffs in the transshipment of at least \$9 billion in drugs annually from Colombia and other coca-rich areas to the United States.

Aristide steadfastly denied wrongdoing and nurtured a loyal following abroad among those who knew him in exile and backed his stated intent to transform Haiti into a prosperous and stable democracy. Up to the end, he was supported by prominent members of the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus, who saw his failure to heal his wounded country as the result of opposition perfidy and the withdrawal of foreign aid.

In a last-ditch effort to woo flagging foreign support to his side, Aristide appealed for intervention to halt the armed revolt that began Feb. 5 and spread throughout the country. But his claims of being the target of terrorism rang hollow to those who had tired of unrelenting crises in the 13 years since his election.

It wasn’t a complete surprise, given what happened just over a month earlier.

It was to have been a joyous celebration of 200 years of liberty after the slave revolt that made Haiti the first independent black republic in 1804. Placards decorated the capital, equating Aristide with Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the rebellion that broke French colonial power.

About 15,000 supporters turned out for official ceremonies on the palace lawn early in the day, but opponents marching in protest a few hours later clashed with police and the *chimeres* sent to menace the demonstration. In Gonaives, where Haitian independence was declared so long ago, Aristide and his entourage were driven out of the city by a hail of gunfire.



CAROLYN COLE Los Angeles Times

FREE-FOR-ALL: Looters leave a market with their hands full one block from the National Palace, the presidential residence.