

HAITI:
History of Current Economic
and Political Instability

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From its beginnings as a former Spanish and French colony, Haiti, the small Caribbean country occupying the western third of the island of Hispaniola,

has endured multiple cycles of turmoil and hardship through the centuries. As Yogi Berra said, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there“. In that light, today we will strive to understand Haiti’s current plight by looking at its historical roots. This will involve a whirlwind overview of Haiti’s past and includes somewhat surprising connections to the worlds of religion and US history as well as the recent 2024 Nobel prizes.

Before European colonization, Hispaniola was inhabited by the Taino people. The Tainos were part of the larger Arawak culture that extended across the Caribbean. They had a rich and complex society with an organized system of governance, agriculture, and spirituality. They were skilled in agriculture, cultivating crops like cassava, maize, and sweet potatoes. They also practiced fishing and hunting, utilizing the abundant natural resources around them. Their belief system was a pantheon of gods, honored through rituals and ceremonies and their spiritual practices were guided by shamans who acted as intermediaries between the gods and the people. At the end of the 15th century, their lives and culture would be forever changed.

Inspired by the travels of Marco Polo, in late 1492 Christopher Columbus embarked on his first voyage across the Atlantic, aiming to find a new route to Asia. After initially landing on San Salvador Island in the Bahamas and then exploring the northern coast of Cuba, Columbus landed on the northern coast of

Hispaniola on December 5 and claimed the land for Spain. On Christmas Day, he received a special present when his flagship, the Santa Maria, ran aground and wrecked on the northern coast of present day Haiti. Using timber from the wreckage, the expedition built La Navidad, the first European settlement to be established in the Americas, and left behind a garrison of 39 men. When he returned the following year, he found the settlement destroyed, and the men left behind killed by the Tainos, who had retaliated against the Spaniards for their cruelty.

Not to be deterred, the Spanish colonists quickly re-established themselves and began exploiting the native people. The encomienda system was introduced, a form of forced labor in which the Spanish settlers were granted control over groups of Tainos and their lands. The Spanish sought gold and other resources, but found little in the way of precious metals in the western part of Hispaniola. But they didn't take without giving. The Spanish introduced European diseases, such as smallpox, measles, and influenza to which the native population had no immunity. These, along with their brutal forced labor, devastated the indigenous population. By the early 16th century, the Taino population was nearly wiped out.

As the meager gold deposits dwindled, and the indigenous labor force died out, the Spanish began shifting their focus to their richer colonies in Mexico and Central and South America. They gradually abandoned the western part of

Hispaniola (Haiti) in favor of the eastern portion of the island (the Dominican Republic), and used the settlements there more for the purposes of trade and resupply of ships going to and from Spain.

As the Spanish presence in the West diminished, English, Dutch and especially French pirates began using the western coast of Hispaniola as a base for their operations, targeting Spanish ships and other settlements in the Caribbean. By the early 17th century, the western part of Hispaniola had become a haven for French buccaneers and French colonization. French settlers established permanent outposts and the beginnings of plantation society. Spanish attempts to expel the French were unsuccessful.

This conflict came to an end in 1697 with the treaty of Ryswick, concluding the Nine Years War between France and the Grand Alliance of England, Spain, and the Habsburg monarchy. Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France, formalizing French control over the region and allowing the French to further develop their colony, referred to as Saint Domingue.

During the 18th century, Saint Domingue became the Crown Jewel of the French colonial Empire due to its highly profitable plantation economy. It was referred to as “the Pearl of the Antilles“. The colony produced vast amounts of sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton. By the late 1700s, Saint Domingue supplied 40% of France’s sugar and 60% of the world’s coffee, making it the richest colony

globally, surpassing the whole of the British colonies. This success was built entirely on the backs of enslaved Africans, whose labor sustained the plantations.

In 1685, King Louis XIV issued the Code Noir or Black Code, a set of laws governing the treatment of enslaved people in French colonies, including Saint Domingue. The Code Noir sought to regulate the conditions of slavery and define the legal status of enslaved Africans and free people of color in the colony. While it nominally granted some protections (such as requiring masters to provide for the basic needs of enslaved people and prohibiting torture), in practice it was rarely enforced, and the conditions for enslaved people remained extremely harsh. The code also reinforced the racial hierarchy, emphasizing the supremacy of whites over both free people of color and enslaved Africans. It required enslaved people to convert to Catholicism and outlined punishments for those who tried to escape or rebel. The Code Noir shaped the structure of Saint Domingue society, contributing to the deep divisions that later fueled unrest and persisted for centuries, even to this day.

The population of Saint Domingue during the 18th century was highly stratified, consisting of several key groups:

-white Europeans: by the late 18th century, there were around 30,000 whites in the colony. This group included wealthy plantation owners and lower class whites. They held the majority of political and economic power.

-free people of color: around 24,000 free people of color lived in the colony at this time, including people of mixed race and formally enslaved Africans who had gained their freedom. Many of these owned land and surprisingly, even enslaved people themselves. Despite their wealth, they faced, legal, and social discrimination, particularly from whites.

-mixed race population: the growing mulatto population occupied a complex position in colonial society, with some gaining wealth and social standing while still being subjected to racial discrimination.

-enslaved Africans: the largest and most oppressed group, these numbered around 500,000 by the late 1700s, vastly outnumbering the white population. Most were from West and Central Africa, forced to work on the plantations. The grueling labor, frequent beatings and constant presence of disease led to a death rate significantly exceeding the birth rate, resulting in the constant need for new enslaved people from Africa.

-maroons: enslaved Africans who escaped into the mountains and formed their own communities. They located in remote areas and resisted colonial authority and plantation society. They often launched raids against plantations and provided a source of resistance, preserving African traditions and seeking freedom.

By then, Saint Domingue was a deeply divided society, with sharp racial and class inequalities. The enslaved population endured horrific conditions while free people of color were denied equality, despite their economic contributions.

The white population was increasingly nervous about maintaining control over the growing black population.

Around this time, two important events occurred that had great influence in Haiti, the American Revolution and more importantly, the French Revolution. The revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were inspirational to different social groups. As the French revolution progressed, tensions between these racial groups exploded. White settlers sought more autonomy and rights, while free people of color demanded racial equality. Most importantly, enslaved Africans, who made up the overwhelming majority of the population, were inspired by the possibility of freedom and equality. Tensions eventually boiled over, leading to the slave revolt of 1791 and the beginning of the Haitian revolution, a monumental world event. It was the first and only successful slave revolt in history, established Haiti as the first independent black Republic, the first nation in the world to unconditionally abolish slavery, and was only the second independent country in the western hemisphere.

The spark for the Haitian revolution occurred on August 14, 1791, when a group of enslaved Africans held a secret meeting in Bois Caïman, a forest in northern Saint Domingue. During the meeting participants swore an oath invoking their African ancestors and vodou spirits to rise up against their oppressors. This was more than just a religious ceremony – it was a call to arms.

Days later, enslaved Africans in the northern plantations launched a massive rebellion, attacking plantations, killing slaveholders, and destroying property.

A quick digression on Haitian vodou is appropriate at this time. Haitian vodou is a complex, syncretic religion that blends elements of West African spiritual traditions, Catholicism, and indigenous beliefs. It originated from spiritual practices of enslaved Africans from Central and West Africa brought to the island of Hispaniola as part of the slave trade. These practices and spiritual traditions were fused with elements of Catholicism, imposed on them by the French authorities as part of the oppressive conditions of slavery.

Catholic Saints were synchronized with vodou loa (spirits), allowing the enslaved Africans to continue their spiritual practices in secret. For instance, Saint Peter was identified with Papa Leba, the guardian of the spiritual crossroads, while Our Lady of Mount Carmel became associated with Azalie Dour, a loa connected to motherhood and protection. Vodou ceremonies featuring drums, singing, dancing, and spirit possession became acts of both religious devotion and cultural resistance against the brutal colonial system.

More than just a religious belief in Haiti, vodou is a way of life and a vital component of Haitian culture. Vodou priests and priestesses, known as hougans and mambos, hold positions of respect and power in communities, and

provide spiritual guidance, healing, and advice. It also has played a crucial role in Haitian art, literature, and folklore.

Vodou has also been a source of resistance and empowerment for marginalized Haitians and extends into the political realm as well. More on this later. In contemporary Haiti, while vodou is often stigmatized or misunderstood by the elites, it remains a powerful expression of popular culture and resistance.

The influence of vodou has extended well beyond Haiti, particularly through the Haitian diaspora to the United States. These practices have migrated to cities such as New York, Miami, and particularly New Orleans, where they have blended with local customs and spiritual traditions. While New Orleans voodoo shares similarities with Haitian vodou – such as the veneration of spirits, ancestor worship, and rituals involving drumming, singing, and spirit possession – it also incorporates elements of southern hoodoo, Catholicism, and even Native American spirituality. In the US, voodoo also became a symbol of resistance against slavery and white supremacy. For enslaved Africans in the American South, voodoo provided a means of preserving African spiritual traditions in the face of forced conversion to Christianity. Much like in Haiti, voodoo rituals were acts of cultural survival, and its practice was a way for enslaved people to reclaim power over their lives, resist oppression, and find community and spiritual solace. Voodoo continues to be actively practiced in various parts of the world. It has also been subject to significant misrepresentation in popular culture, often

portrayed as sinister or malevolent in movies and media. This overlooks the significant spiritual, cultural, and historical significance of the practice.

The Haitian uprising spread rapidly, and within weeks, large parts of the colony were consumed by violence. The revolt was fueled by both the desire for personal freedom and long-standing grievances over the brutal conditions of slavery.

Toussaint Louverture, a former enslaved man and skilled military leader, emerged as one of the central figures of the revolution. He was educated and had a deep understanding of both European military tactics and African leadership traditions. After joining the rebellion in 1793, he quickly rose to prominence due to his strategic brilliance. His leadership transformed the Haitian revolution from a chaotic uprising into an organized military campaign. He initially fought alongside the Spanish (who controlled the eastern part of Hispaniola) against the French, but switched sides in 1794 when the French republic abolished slavery in its colonies. He believed that allying with revolutionary France could ensure the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Saint Domingue. By 1801, he had consolidated control over most of the colony and even invaded the Spanish held eastern part of the island. He declared himself governor for life, established a constitution, and abolished slavery permanently, but stopped short of declaring independence from France.

These actions did not sit so well back at the home office. Napoleon Bonaparte was determined to reassert control over the colony and reinstate slavery, which was seen as essential to France's economic interests. In the past the colony had delivered tremendous amounts of wealth to France, something very important to Bonaparte for his military aspirations. In 1802, a huge expeditionary force of 32,000 soldiers was sent to reestablish French rule and subdue Louverture. Initially, the French had some success. Louverture was captured and deported to France where he died in prison in 1803. However, the French underestimated the resilience and determination of the former slave population, many of whom refused to go back to the brutal conditions of slavery. Perhaps as importantly, tropical diseases, particularly yellow fever, decimated the French troops.

Leadership of the Revolutionary forces passed on to Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of Louverture's top generals. Dessalines, formerly enslaved himself, was a fierce and determined leader who resolved to drive the French out of the colony entirely. By late 1803 after intense fighting, disease, and widespread defections (particularly by the Polish), the French forces were defeated. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the independence of Haiti, making it the first independent black republic in the world, and the first nation to abolish slavery completely. The name Haiti was chosen, reviving the Taino word for the island, "Ayiti", meaning "land of high mountains".

After independence, Dessalines sought to eliminate the threat of future French intervention. In early 1804, he ordered the massacre of the remaining French settlers in Haiti, resulting in the deaths of several thousand French men, women, and children. One of the most notorious perpetrators was Jean Zombi, who was known for his brutality and became the prototype of the zombie in Haitian vodou tradition. The massacre was brutal and motivated by a combination of revenge for decades of oppression and the desire to ensure that French colonization would never return.

The Haitian revolution sent shockwaves across the world, including mixed reactions of both fear and hope in the United States based on the country's divide over slavery. In the South, slave owners were alarmed by the successful revolt of enslaved Africans. Haiti's revolution became a cautionary tale for American slave owners, who feared that the uprising might inspire similar rebellions in the South. Reports of the violence, upheaval and post-revolution massacre in Haiti led to heightened fears of slave insurrections. Slaveholders imposed stricter control measures to prevent rebellion. This included harsher slave codes, more vigilant surveillance of enslaved populations, and a clampdown on any ideas of emancipation.

In the North, where abolition was beginning to gain momentum, the Haitian revolution was seen as a beacon of hope for the end of slavery.

Abolitionists celebrated the success of the revolution, pointing to Haiti as proof that enslaved people could successfully fight for and win their freedom. The idea of a black republic in the Caribbean, born out of a successful slave revolt, emboldened the abolitionist cause and contributed to the growing discourse on human rights and liberty.

The United States government's response was cautious. While the US had sympathies for France due to their mutual revolutionary history, the US was hesitant to fully support Haiti's independence due to the threat it posed to the institution of slavery within its own borders. President Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder himself, was particularly wary of recognizing Haiti for fear that doing so might encourage similar uprisings in the American South. For prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Haiti became a symbol of black empowerment and the struggle for liberation.

The successful revolution in Haiti had major repercussions for Napoleon Bonaparte's ambitions in the Americas. Saint Domingue had been France's most valuable colony and its loss crippled Napoleon's plans to re-establish a French empire in the New World. Without Haiti as a base of operations, and facing mounting military and financial pressures from ongoing wars in Europe, Napoleon decided to abandon his ambitions in North America. This led directly to his decision to sell the vast Louisiana territory to the United States in 1803 for \$15 million, effectively doubling the size of the US, opening up enormous areas

for westward expansion, and cementing the US as a major power in the North American continent.

The ripples from the Haitian revolution had serious impact in the United States. The fear it sparked among slaveholders in the American South contributed to the entrenchment of slavery at the time and increased tensions between the north and south. Even after the Civil War, the Haitian revolution had long-term consequences on race relations and the fight for civil rights in America, issues that America struggles with to this very day.

Jean-Jacque Dessalines declared himself emperor of Haiti. Looking to re-establish the agricultural economy, he reinstated the plantation system, although now for wages. He subsequently lost his popular support, the rebel movement splintered, and two years later, he was assassinated. After his death, the country split into two, with the kingdom of Haiti in the north led by Henri Christophe and a republic in the south led by Alexandre Pétion. This division persisted for 14 years until Haiti was reunited under Jean Pierre Boyer. In 1821, the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo in the east declared its independence from Spain. There was internal instability and lack of leadership in Santo Domingo and Boyer saw an opportunity to unify the island. In 1822 he led a successful invasion which unified the island for the next 22 years. Boyer also sought to repatriate free African-Americans in the early 1820s by inviting them to settle in Haiti as a land of freedom and opportunity. However, many of the settlers

struggled with the environment, economy, and language barriers, and the movement waned after just a few years.

Another key issue Boyer tried to resolve was the matter of French recognition of Haiti. After its declaration of independence, France refused to recognize Haiti, threatening sanctions and military action. To secure diplomatic recognition and prevent an invasion, Boyer agreed to pay an indemnity of Fr.150 million, later reduced to Fr.90 million, to compensate France for the loss of property, including enslaved people. This may be one of the only circumstances in history where reparations were paid by the winner of a war to the loser.

The consequences were devastating. The debt crippled the economy, forcing the government to take out high interest loans and impose heavy taxes on the population. This left Haiti in a state of chronic economic hardship with much of the budget devoted to servicing the debt to France. The long-term reparation payments crippled Haiti for generations, contributing to continued poverty, and were not paid off until 1947.

By the early 1840s, Boyer face growing opposition to his policies and authoritarian rule. He was overthrown in 1843, with a rapid succession of multiple leaders until 1847. In addition, the eastern part of the island successfully declared their independence from Haiti in February of 1844.

In 1847, Faustin Soulouque became president of Haiti. He quickly

consolidated power and established a dictatorial regime, including a secret police force. In 1849, he crowned himself emperor Faustin I. He sought to reunify the island of Hispaniola and launched multiple military campaigns to attempt this, all unsuccessful. In 1855, France and several other countries formally recognized the independence of the Dominican Republic, signaling the end of any realistic hope for reunification. By 1859, he was forced to abdicate and was replaced by Fabre Geffrard and a return to republican rule.

Haiti experienced chronic political instability throughout the late 19th and early 20th century. Haiti's internal political landscape remained volatile, with deep divisions between the black majority and the lighter-skinned mulatto elite. Political power often shifted between these groups, leading to frequent coups, assassinations, and uprisings. The reparation payments to France were a significant burden as well. To meet the payments, Haiti was forced to take out loans from French banks at high interest rates, effectively trapping the country in a cycle of debt, a kind of "financial sharecropping". This hindered the country's economic development and its ability to invest in infrastructure, education, and economic growth. Between 1908 and 1914, Haiti had a succession of six presidencies, most of whom were overthrown or resigned under pressure as various factions vied for power.

This political instability and chaos led to undue foreign influence, especially from Germany. German businessmen had established a strong

presence in Haiti, controlling much of the country's commercial sector and exerting influence over Haitian politics. The US, concerned about Germany's growing power in the Caribbean, viewed this as a potential threat, particularly with World War I brewing in Europe. The US wanted to prevent Germany from using Haiti as a base to challenge American interests in the region, particularly the Panama Canal, which opened in August, 1914.

Things came to head in 1915 when Haitian president Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, who came to power through a coup, faced intense opposition. In an effort to crush his opponents, Sam ordered the execution of 167 political prisoners. This brutal act sparked widespread outrage and Sam was lynched by a mob in Port-au-Prince on July 28, 1915. Fearing that this chaos could destabilize the region, President Woodrow Wilson ordered the deployment of US Marines to Haiti on the same day, ostensibly to restore order and protect American interests.

Once the US had established control, it sought to reform Haiti's political and economic systems. This included drafting a new constitution in 1918, done under the guidance of then under-secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt. This included provisions allowing foreign land ownership, something explicitly prohibited in Haiti since independence in 1804. While the US occupation was largely repressive and exploitative, it did bring improvements to the infrastructure, including construction of roads, bridges, hospitals and schools. Reforms to the financial sector were also implemented, though many of these reforms were

designed to benefit American economic interests rather than the people of Haiti. Haitian laborers were often forced to work on infrastructure projects under harsh conditions. Much of the wealth flowed into the hands of US and other foreign companies and Haitian elites aligned with the Americans.

In addition, the US occupation forces brought their own racial prejudices with them. American officials and soldiers often treated Haitians as inferior, despite the fact that Haitians had a proud tradition of being the world's first black republic. These racial dynamics were a constant source of tension. Haitian peasants known as Cacos protested, organizing armed rebellions repeatedly. The US military responded brutally, killing thousands of Haitians and imprisoning even more. One of the leaders, Charlemagne Peralte, was captured and killed in 1919 with his body put on public display to intimidate others.

During the Great Depression, US political priorities changed. The occupation became increasingly unpopular both in Haiti and the US. In 1930, a commission to investigate the situation in Haiti recommended the occupation be gradually phased out. When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, he pursued the principle of non-intervention in Latin America known as the Good Neighbor Policy. The US withdrew its forces by 1934. However, the US continued to exert significant economic and political influence through control of the national bank and other key institutions until 1947, when Haiti made its final reparation payment to France.

The period following the end of the US occupation of Haiti was one of political turbulence, economic challenges, and national rebuilding. Between 1934 and 1957, Haiti, experienced multiple presidencies, coups, regional tensions, but also the beginning of direct elections. Sténio Vincent served as president from 1930 to 1941 and astonishingly, peacefully transitioned power to his successor Élie Lescot. He was overthrown by a military coup in 1946 and replaced by Dumarsais Estimé, who was overthrown by military coup in 1950. In 1950, though controlling who could run and who could govern, the military allowed the country's first direct elections and resulted in the presidency of Paul Magloire. His government collapsed in 1956 under persistent economic strife and political and racial instability. Haiti's social structure remained deeply divided, with lighter-skinned mulatto elites controlling much of the economy and political power, while the black majority remained marginalized. This became a central issue in the 1957 elections.

François "Papa Doc" Duvalier was a physician who initially gained prominence through work in public health (he spent a year studying this at the University of Michigan), particularly in fighting tropical diseases such as yaws and typhus. He was seen as an honest and unassuming leader without a strong ideological agenda. He also supported Noirisme, a black nationalist ideology promoting political empowerment of Haiti's black majority. In 1957, he ran and won the presidency on a platform promising to lift the poor out of poverty, end the

domination of the mulatto elite, and empower the black majority. Once in power, Duvalier quickly consolidated his rule, using the military and a brutal, secret police force to eliminate his opponents and suppress opposition. The Tonton Macoutes, named after a mythical Haitian figure who kidnaps children at night, became infamous for their brutality. They operated outside the law, terrorizing the population, killing political opponents, and extorting money from businesses. Thousands of Haitians were killed and fear became a constant in everyday life.

Duvalier also promoted a cult of personality, portraying himself as a semi-divine figure. He tapped into vodou beliefs to strengthen his hold on power, presenting himself as a spiritual leader with mystical powers. He often appeared in public dressed in black, evoking images of Baron Samedi, the vodou spirit of death. He exploited the religious beliefs of the rural population, blending vodou symbolism with political propaganda to create an aura of invincibility.

Duvalier positioned himself as a staunch anti-communist, which earned him the support of the United States. Haiti's strategic location in the Caribbean, coupled with the US fears of communism following the Cuban revolution, meant that Washington largely overlooked the brutal repression in Haiti, as long as Duvalier remained a reliable ally against communist influence.

Duvalier's regime was rife with corruption, with the president and his inner circle enriching themselves while the country's economy crumbled. Public funds

were siphoned off, and foreign aid was often misappropriated for personal gain. By the time his reign ended, Haiti had become one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. In addition, the country was made more impoverished by a significant Haitian diaspora among the educated and professional classes. Thousands of Haitians fled the country to escape repression, particularly to the United States and Canada. Many of these people remain politically active from abroad.

In 1971, Papa Doc died of natural causes and through a constitutional amendment he orchestrated, power passed to his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. Jean-Claude was unprepared for leadership and much of the day-to-day governance was handled by his mother Simone. His rule continued the corrupt and repressive practices of his father. His marriage in 1980 to a mulatto woman from Haiti’s wealthy elite symbolized the betrayal of his father’s Noiriste ideology. The \$2-3 million affair further distanced him from the impoverished masses. In a 1983 visit, Pope John Paul II publicly condemned the dire poverty and political repression in the country, stating that “things must change here”. Widespread protests erupted in the mid-1980s. Under intense pressure domestically and internationally, Jean-Claude Duvalier was forced to flee Haiti for exile in France in 1986, marking the end of the Duvalier Dynasty. It is estimated that more than 30,000 people were killed during this period, with thousands more imprisoned, tortured, or forced into exile. The remnants of the Tonton Macoute would play havoc with the country in the years to come.

The period following the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship was marked by political instability, a series of military coups, fragile democratic experiments, and foreign interventions. In 1987, Haiti adopted a new constitution, which aimed to establish a democratic framework, reduce the power of the military, and protect human rights. The first scheduled elections were canceled after violence at the polls. This included the infamous Saint Jean Bosco massacre on September 11, 1988. On that day, pro-Duvalier thugs attacked the church in Port-au-Prince where Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was celebrating mass. Dozens of parishioners were killed, but Aristide, a leader in the liberation theology movement, a vocal critic of the ruling elite, and an advocate of the poor, survived the attack. By 1990, he was a leader in the Fanmi Lavalas (“flood of the masses”) party and won election to the presidency that December. However, his efforts to challenge the elite and re-distribute wealth to the poor, earned him powerful enemies within the military and business sectors. Just eight months after taking office he was overthrown in a military coup and fled into exile in the US. Thousands of his supporters were killed in the subsequent violence. International sanctions were imposed on Haiti, worsening the country’s already dire economic situation.

In October 1994, a US led intervention conditionally restored Aristide to power, with his agreeing to not run for a second term and also to implement certain economic reforms. In 1995, René Preval, a close ally of Aristide, was

elected. His presidency was more subdued, though corruption and poverty remained endemic.

In 2000, Aristide made a political comeback and won the presidential election in a landslide. However, the leadership style of the former Catholic priest grew more authoritarian. He increasingly sidelined opponents, controlled key institutions and faced accusations of human rights abuses. Allegations of corruption, embezzlement, and drug trafficking intensified. One of his most controversial actions at this time was his call for reparations from France. Aristide demanded that France repay Haiti for the indemnity it had been forced to pay in the 19th century following its independence, now estimated to be \$21 billion accounting for inflation. This strained relations with France and added to his growing isolation internationally.

After violent uprisings across the country, Aristide was forced to step down in February 2004 under domestic and international pressure. The UN authorized a multinational interim force to restore order and maintain peace. Elections in 2005 returned René Preval to the presidency in what was viewed as a peaceful and fair electoral process.

The years since then have been marked by severe natural disasters, political instability, and growing violence. Since 2004, Haiti has faced repeated devastation from hurricanes and storms, severely impacting its infrastructure and

economy. The country's vulnerability to natural disasters is compounded by its underlying weak infrastructure and poor government response capabilities. On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti near its capital, Port-au-Prince. This disaster killed an estimated 230,000-300,000 people, injured hundreds of thousands more, and left 1.5 million people homeless. The country was left in ruins. A massive international aid response was hindered by mismanagement, corruption, and lack of coordination. This led to even further erosion of trust in the government.

After years of delayed and contested elections, Jovenel Moïse was elected president of Haiti in November, 2016. He quickly faced accusations of corruption with widespread opposition and unrest. Moïse decided to rule by decree after dissolution of the parliament in January 2020. This sparked further protests and political instability. On July 7, 2021 he was assassinated in his private residence by a group of heavily armed assailants, including foreign mercenaries. The assassination left a significant void and further destabilized Haiti's political landscape. Making matters worse, the country suffered another devastating earthquake on August 14, 2021, killing thousands of people and further destroying homes, hospitals, schools, and critical infrastructure. The economic impact was severe, and was further compounded by the Covid pandemic.

The power vacuum brought about by Moises's assassination reinforced

problems going back to the end of the Duvalier Dynasty as well as the dissolution of the Haitian military in the 1990s by Aristide. Many leaders of these paramilitary groups evolved into powerful criminal organizations and gangs. The lack of effective state control allowed gangs to operate with increasing impunity, particularly after Aristide's exile in 2004. More than 150 armed groups control large swaths of territory, particularly in Port-au-Prince, but now extending throughout the country. These gangs are involved in common criminal activity, such as drug trafficking, robbery, and extortion, as well as political violence, particularly during elections, where politicians have corroborated with gangs to intimidate opponents or incite violence for their own gain. Kidnappings for ransom have become common place, with over 1000 kidnappings reported in 2021 alone. This has created a widespread sense of insecurity and further crippled the economy by driving away investment and deepening poverty by preventing access to food, clean water, and healthcare.

The Haitian government is understaffed, underfunded, and often outgunned by the heavily armed gangs. Corruption exists within the police force as well, as collusion between some officers and gang leaders often occurs, further undermining efforts to combat the violence. Farmers unable to access their land due to gang blockades contribute to worsening food insecurity in a country where nearly half the population faces hunger.

International and United Nations efforts have attempted to help stabilize

Haiti. A multinational force led by Kenya was authorized by the UN in 2023. Serious questions remain about the effectiveness of such interventions, particularly given substantial language barriers. In addition, the deployment of foreign troops has historically been met with mixed reactions in Haiti due to the country's long history of occupation and external meddling.

The rise of powerful criminal organizations, and gangs, fueled by a long history of political instability, poverty, and weak governance, has created a crisis that threatens to plunge the country into further chaos. While the international community has begun to respond, the road to restoring peace and stability in Haiti will require a coordinated effort, addressing not only the immediate security concerns, but also the deep rooted, social and economic inequalities that have allowed gang violence to thrive. Without sustained intervention, Haiti will persist as a failed state where lawlessness, violence, and human suffering continue to define daily life.

FOOTNOTE:

On October 14, 2024, the Nobel prize on economics was awarded to Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, and Simon Johnson for their research into the topic of why nations fail, clearly applicable to the destitute nation of Haiti. To summarize it in two words, institutions matter. Inclusive institutions create incentives for investment, innovation, and economic growth by allowing people to

make decisions that affect their own lives and participate in economic opportunities. They provide checks and balances on political power, protection of property rights, and a broad distribution of opportunities. In contrast, extractive institutions are designed to consolidate power and wealth in the hands of a few, usually at the cost of the majority. They concentrate political and economic power in the hands of a small elite with few incentives for the majority.

In the case of Haiti, its foundations in the French colonial system were based on extreme extraction, using enslaved labor to produce wealth for the French colonizers, leading to extreme inequality and a highly exploitative structure. While the Haitian revolution was a triumph for human rights and freedom, the new leaders did not dismantle these institutions, but merely replaced the French elite with a new Haitian elite. The political system remained centralized and exploitative with leaders using the state for personal gain. Burdensome reparations further crippled the economy and reinforced its extractive institutions.

The country has been chronically plagued by political instability, corruption, and violence, which are characteristic of extractive regimes. The state remains weak with little ability to provide basic services or security, and much of the economy remains informal and underdeveloped. This has created a vicious cycle of poverty, instability, and violence, as the population has little stake in the political and economic system, leading to widespread disillusionment and unrest.

This violence is both a symptom and a cause of Haiti's ongoing institutional failure. Without a functioning state and inclusive institutions, there is little hope for stability or development. These exploitative policies, established during its colonial period and repeatedly reinforced during its many years of independence, have trapped Haiti in a cycle of poverty and violence. Until the government and institutions are successful in developing more inclusive policies, the future of Haiti looks grim, bleak and forlorn.

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