

The Background to Haiti's Gang Problem

How Leadership Destroyed Governance



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I'm an anthropologist who works on governance and development problems around the world. Using my experiences I write about how economic processes and human relationships build (or destroy) social systems and the institutions of governance.

I'm thoroughly surprised that so much of today's news refers to Haiti's gang activity as a relatively new phenomenon, often linked to the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse on July 7, 2021.

It may surprise many readers that, for several years before the assassination, Haiti was already overwhelmed by one of the world's highest kidnapping rates and had a rapidly growing gang problem. This deteriorating situation was covered by the very same news outlets and reporters who now seem to have taken powerful amnesia pills. For years, articles covering the relationships between the gangs and powerful and corrupt members of the business and political classes have appeared frequently in the print and online news media. The same expressions of shock and dismay have been used in repeating headlines. It's almost as if readers are being trained to either revert to short term memory or to practice rolling their eyes at every headline.

I'm not saying the news is not dire and getting worse. What I'm saying is that it's been dire and getting worse *for years*. Coverage of kidnappings, assassinations of journalists and judicial officials, grotesque human rights abuses, and corruption have been in print and online media for years before the assassination of President Moïse. Yet too much of the coverage presents the problem with little or no historical depth, as if that horrible assassination was what unleashed today's horrors.

It's easy to write about social issues and poverty as roots of gang crime, but that doesn't excuse the cut & paste journalism we see in so much of the reporting about Haiti. It may be time for a quick historical overview for news consumers who wish to read more than the typical cut & paste article, and for the committed.

Haiti's gang phenomenon originated with serious governance problems that have never been resolved and have been made more complex by corruption at the highest levels and greed in every sector. It is a sad fact that Haiti's phenomenon of armed non-state groups has a long history closely tied to politics, business and class issues and the weaknesses of state institutions. The intent of this essay is to point out the link between the corrupt way that many of Haiti's presidents have risen to power and the ensuing need they subsequently have felt to protect their status. Compounding that problem is the lack of institutional safeguards designed to protect the integrity of the Office of the Presidency from abuses of power that are perpetrated by the very occupants of that office.

Heads of state who assumed power illegally or under dubious circumstances were generally very concerned about their vulnerability to being deposed. To preserve their positions they often circumvented the rule of law and took advantage of the absence of an independent judiciary in order to exploit weaknesses in the structures of governance, especially where citizen oversight was weak. That, in a nutshell, is the story of what has happened to Haiti.

Like in Jamaica and Trinidad, Haiti's current gang phenomenon grew out of two tendencies: one having to do with crime and the other having to do with politics. Both are manifestations of weaknesses in the Rule of Law and the judicial sector in particular.

As a political phenomenon, armed paramilitary groups began soon after Haiti's independence. And as a criminal phenomenon, many of Haiti's gangs first appeared as tightly knit neighborhood solidarity groups and "popular organizations" dating from the late 1970s when rural youths migrated into urban areas in response to poorly planned and badly managed economic policies. One of those urban areas is Cité Soleil, which started out as "Cité Simone", a housing district built in the late sixties and named after Haiti's First Lady, Simone Duvalier. It later housed laborers for a nearby Export Processing Zone that attracted migrations from the countryside in the 1970s. The district was called Cité Soleil after the overthrow of the Duvalier family in 1986.

Faustin Elie Soulouque became Haiti's President in March 1847. He had been selected to serve as interim president by the elite groups that controlled the Senate at the time, and who needed a puppet in the chair of the presidency after the unexpected death of his predecessor President Jean-Baptiste Riché. Driven by social class divisions inherited from the colonial era, these elites were able to manipulate the country's weak institutional safeguards and lack of a judiciary to quickly select Soulouque to serve as president.

Once in power, noting the ease with which he was made president, Soulouque proclaimed himself Emperor Faustin I in 1852 and created the *Zinglens* (from the Haitian Creole for sharp pieces of glass) as a private paramilitary force to bolster his position. In this way, from this early date, the lack of a judicial system and limited Rule of Law provided the institutional environment for what would become a history of Heads of State abusing power by creating paramilitary structures.

In spite of his efforts to remain in power, Soulouque was overthrown in 1859. He was the last Haitian head of state to have participated in the Haitian

Revolution, the last to have been born prior to independence, and the last ex-slave to serve as Head of State. Soulouque had given a strong position to the vaudou sector in his paramilitary. That would inspire François Duvalier to give it an important role in his own paramilitary, the *Tonton Macoutes*, over a century later.

Soulouque's successor, President Geffrard, became President in 1859 when he overthrew Soulouque, until he himself was overthrown by Sylvain Salnave in June 1867. Geffrard created his own presidential guards called *Les Tirailleurs de la Garde*, who he personally trained and commanded.

Almost a century later, after an attempted coup in 1958, President François Duvalier purged the army and law enforcement agencies, executed numerous officers he perceived as a threat to his regime, and created his own paramilitary force in 1959 called the *Cagouards* ("Hooded Men"). They were then renamed to *Milice Civile* (*Civilian Militia*), and were popularly known as *Tonton Macoutes*, a somewhat intimidating character from Haitian folklore associated with vaudou, as inspired by Soulouque. Using predatory methods to raise money and intimidate, the volunteer nature of the Tonton Macoutes, which outnumbered the military and police, was a new twist to the paramilitary model. The Tonton Macoutes were renamed the *Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale* (*VSN*) by François Duvalier's son and successor, Jean-Claude Duvalier.

When President Jean-Claude Duvalier fell from power and left the country in 1986, the VSN was a large and powerful paramilitary structure that was larger than the police and army combined. While the previous armed groups had historically focused entirely on the preservation of the President's political control, the structure that Duvalier left behind had developed extractive and abusive methods that were not only engaged in preserving the power of the President but also in their own self-enrichment and the enrichment of the President's allies. The traditional model of a paramilitary force put in place to keep the head of state in power had now become a predatory, largely self-financing volunteer force under Duvalier. *This was an important step in the evolution of armed non-state groups.*

The period after Jean-Claude Duvalier fell from power and went into exile in 1986 shows what can happen to criminalized paramilitary forces that usurp state power when their leadership is removed and when the judiciary and citizen oversight are weak. The period after 1986 saw a breakdown of law and order and heightened citizen insecurity during which disenfranchised VSN joined disaffected police to create a paramilitary/criminal phenomenon known as the *zinglendos* (note the term's throwback to Soulouque's *zinglens*). The *zinglendos* were a group of opportunistic paramilitary agents, reinforced by criminals recruited from marginal social strata in working-class districts like Cité Soleil. Having little political direction and no financial support, the *zinglendos* generally acted with no political motive, committing crimes against persons and property at night in civilian clothes with official weapons.

The model of a volunteer and predatory paramilitary force developed by the elder Duvalier evolved further with the fusion of the paramilitary and criminal groups upon the younger Duvalier's departure.

Subsequent to Duvalier's fall, Jean Bertrand Aristide was elected to the Presidency in 1990 with 67% of the vote in what is generally recognized as the first honest election in Haitian history. During the waning years of the Duvalier dictatorship democracy activities, Aristide had promoted political youth activism in popular neighborhoods. In September 1991, just a few months after his election, Aristide was ousted by a military coup and went into exile. The military government pursued the neighborhood democracy activists that had been strong allies of Aristide, which caused many of those groups to arm themselves. Many of them developed relationships with corrupt business and political groups and adopted tactics that had been developed by the *zinglendos*. Some of the earliest kidnappings took place during this time and were seen as intimidation tactics sponsored by certain business elites to intimidate their opponents.

A paramilitary phenomenon that had been created by vulnerable presidents to protect themselves from governance weaknesses had adopted criminal elements

rackets and was now deteriorating into dangerously powerful, politically linked criminal gangs.

On 31 July 1994 the United Nations Security Council authorized Resolution 940 which called for military action to remove the military junta. The action, entitled Operation Uphold Democracy, was launched by the United States 19 September 1994 and lasted until to 31 March 1995, during which time President Aristide was returned to Haiti in October 1994 after 3 years of exile, to serve out his term.

Upon his return from exile President Aristide disbanded the Haitian army and created an independent civilian police force under the Ministry of Justice. As civilian law enforcement had traditionally been provided by a small contingent within its armed forces, disbanding the army without first creating a police force was akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water. *This was another event that would be important in the development of Haiti's gang problem.*

As the Haitian Constitution does not allow for consecutive presidential terms, Aristide was prevented from running for reelection in the fall of 1995. He therefore left the presidency on February 7, 1996 and was succeeded by his Prime Minister, René Préal. Aristide successfully ran again for the Haitian presidency in the fall of 2000, but his second term in this office, which began on February 7, 2001, was marred by reports of autocratic tendencies, growing use of armed violence by his supporters, and increasing arrests of several of his political associates for international drug trafficking. A broad-based civic opposition accused Aristide of corruption and political intimidation and of ruining the economy, and called for his resignation. An insurgency comprising ex-army paramilitary groups coalesced in the Dominican Republic, entered Haiti at the northern border, and took over police stations as it marched toward the capital.

Aristide resigned and left the country for a second exile, which lasted for seven years, until 2011.

With Aristide's resignation and departure in 2004, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) was established in June 2004 by Security Council resolution 1542 to take over from the Operation Uphold Democracy military forces, establish a secure and stable environment in which the country's constitutional and political processes could take place; to strengthen Haiti's Government institutions and rule-of-law-structures; and to promote and protect human rights. Much of MINUSTAH's effort was to reduce the growing criminal gang problem in the popular neighborhoods. MINUSTAH continued its operations through the presidency of Michel Martelly (May 14, 2011 – February 7, 2016), closing its operations in October 2017.

MINUSTAH's role is significant for understanding today's citizen security situation because the expansion and training of Haiti's fledgling police force and the conduct of gang suppression operations were important parts of MINUSTAH operations, and also several police officers including the leader of today's gang federation G9, are reputed to be former police officers.

The presence of rogue police officers in several gangs was another major development in the evolution of today's gang scene.

Armed paramilitary groups and gang crime have continued to grow since MINUSTAH withdrew from Haiti.

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