

## REVIEWS

# The Fanmi Lavalas Political Project

by Jeb Sprague

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**THE PROPHET AND POWER: JEAN-BERTRAND ARISTIDE, THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, AND HAITI** by Alex Dupuy, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006, 258 pp., \$30.95

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**AN UNBROKEN AGONY: FROM REVOLUTION TO THE KIDNAPPING OF A PRESIDENT** by Randal Robinson, Basic Civitas Books, 2007, 304 pp., \$16.95

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**DAMMING THE FLOOD: HAITI, ARISTIDE, AND THE POLITICS OF CONTAINMENT** by Peter Hallward, Verso, 2008, 442 pp., \$29.95

FOUR YEARS AFTER THE SECOND OUSTER of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically elected president, three books exploring the 2004 coup have appeared, ranging widely in their interpretations of events. Aristide rose to power in 1991 with a popular movement called Lavalas (the Flood), formed after the collapse of Jean-Claude Duvalier's dictatorship in the late 1980s. As president, Aristide worked closely with Lavalas, instituting programs to promote literacy, improve health care, and include the country's poor in national politics. But after eight months in office, Haiti's military overthrew him. A military junta ruled until 1994, when the Clinton administration intervened. Unable to ignore Aristide's legitimacy, globalizing elites—from the United States and elsewhere—worked to manage a political transi-

tion from a military to a civilian government, a transition in line with the neoliberal doctrines of the day.

Once returned to office, Aristide was able to serve out only his short remaining time. Although he was forced to drop the state tariffs that offered some protection for Haitian agriculture, he was able to disband Haiti's military and refuse the privatization program pressed upon his administration by international financial institutions. Soon out of office, Aristide returned to office in 2000 after a successful presidential campaign, this time with a more militant and grassroots movement called Fanmi Lavalas (Lavalas Family). The movement, which promoted the political mobilization of Haiti's urban and rural poor, became the bane of much of the country's elite and middle class. Many of the professionals and elites who had once seen Aristide and the original Lavalas movement as a vehicle for their own political longevity now saw in its new incarnation a class threat to be opposed at all costs. In Aristide's second term, his Fanmi Lavalas government clashed with both national and transnational elites seeking to regain power over the Haitian state. He was finally overthrown again, in February 2004, but in a much more complex and covert manner.

Alex Dupuy's *The Prophet and Power*, one of the first books on the 2004 coup to appear, is a historical narrative based mostly on secondary sources. Dupuy argues that Aristide, a onetime icon of democracy, had by 2004 become "discredited, corrupted, and increasingly authoritarian." Dupuy, a professor of sociology at Wesleyan University, faults not only

Aristide and the Fanmi Lavalas movement for Haiti's downward spiral, but also the Group 184, an opposition organization composed of the Haitian bourgeoisie and backed by its foreign allies. But the book is skimpy on primary-source research or any direct perspective from Haiti's poor, the base of Aristide's support to this day; instead, it relies heavily on the perspectives of NGOs and journalists who are mostly anti-Aristide.

Dupuy offers little evidence to support his bold claim that Aristide had transformed into a power-hungry, messianic figure complicit in violence and comparable to his dictatorial predecessors. "Aristide made the situation worse for himself by unleashing the *chimes* [young men from slums] who went on a rampage in the days preceding his departure," Dupuy writes, "thereby reinforcing his enemies' claims that the country would be plunged into a bloodbath unless Aristide was removed." To back up this statement, he cites a 39-page Amnesty International report that focuses almost exclusively on violence perpetrated by anti-Aristide forces and includes only one paragraph on abuses by Aristide supporters. Moreover, Dupuy uses the word *chimes* to describe young slum dwellers, some of them members of street gangs, who came to the defense of the beleaguered government; the term is frequently used as a slur by elites to demonize and disparage Aristide supporters.

The effects of a U.S.-, Canadian-, and French-led embargo on foreign aid (upon which the Haitian state is almost completely dependent) during Aristide's second administration get short shrift in Dupuy's historical

survey, as do Aristide's social-investment programs, which provided literacy and health care programs for Haiti's poor for the first time in the country's history. And he largely ignores the post-coup wave of violence against Lavalas supporters, which he could have described using sources such as the November 2004 Miami University Human Rights Report authored by U.S. immigration attorney Thomas Griffin. While it is true that Lavalas partisans committed acts of violence, they were far fewer than those of the anti-Aristide ex-military rebels or the police and UN troops during the interim government. Yet Dupuy's discussion emphasizes Lavalas violence and culpability throughout.

This is quite a contrast to Randal Robinson's *An Unbroken Agony*. Founder of TransAfrica and the Free South Africa Movement, Robinson has been a strong force in the U.S. peace and justice movement for many years, producing such works as *Quitting America* and *The Debt*. His newest book combines a passionate defense of Aristide, a discussion of Haiti's rebellious history, and an investigation into the events surrounding Aristide's second ouster.

As a close family friend to Aristide and his wife, Robinson makes no apologies for his defense of the ousted president. He describes the popular support that the Aristide government had as it attempted to improve quality of life for the poor, even as it was destabilized and attacked from all sides. The author acknowledges that he became personally involved, attempting to call Aristide and his wife, Mildred, on the night of the ouster—working to arrange an interview for NPR's Tavis Smiley. He recounts U.S. officials' arm-twisting interventionism, his astonishment at the manipulative reporting of a corporate journalist covering a La-

valas demonstration, and many of the murky aspects surrounding Aristide's departure.

But the author's lack of any critique of the Aristide government, especially its disorganized response to the ex-military rebels, is problematic. Instead of training a dedicated cadre of supporters who might have acted in tandem with the elite police corps to fight the few hundred ex-military rebels, the government relied on small bands of untrained supporters and police who met the anti-Aristide fighters in piecemeal skirmishes. Pro-government forces in the center and north of the country were overcome one at a time by the ex-military, which kept its forces together, and the U.S. Army Special Forces, backed by powerful foreign embassies in Port-au-Prince, finally removed Aristide from power.

In *Damming the Flood* Peter Hallward argues that the government's supporters, who made up the majority of the population and had democratically elected their president, deserved a more vigorous and coordinated armed response. Hallward, a philosophy professor at the U.K.'s Middlesex University, provides a trenchant work of political philosophy backed by secondary sources along with primary-source findings from a wide variety of interviews and readings. Supportive though sometimes critical of the Lavalas political project—whose mobilization he calls “the decisive event of contemporary Haitian politics”—Hallward depicts in great detail how a loose coalition of elites, foreign states, and donor-civil society groups worked in tandem to demonize the movement, leading to the 2004 ouster. As he points out, this broad and long-term campaign distinguished the coup, in many ways, from past U.S.-sponsored overthrows in the region. Although he never uses the terminology, it could be described as a project of transnational

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hegemony. The destabilization campaign was not the result of one autonomous nation-state's policy taking aim at Haiti, but was a synchronized effort by cooperating states and institutions bolstered by a global elite's consensus against popular democracy.

Hallward also seeks to project ways in which the populist Lavalas and its leftist allies might well succeed in the future—Haiti's next presidential election is in 2010—while acknowledging the movement's successes, such as its mass mobilization of the poor, and failures, for example, that some corrupt officials and enemies penetrated its highest circles. His book is clearly ahead of the pack in its political deliberation and inquiry.

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