

4-28-2005

Gerard Jean-juste: Another Aristide Could Head Haiti

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Gerard Jean-juste: Another Aristide Could Head Haiti." (2005). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9301>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Gerard Jean-juste: Another Aristide Could Head Haiti

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Haiti

Published: 2005-04-28

As plans for elections continue to stumble and falter in Haiti, the US faces its worst nightmare with the possibility of a return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president it ousted in February (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). If that does not happen, the specter of another Aristide also looms. Gerard Jean-Juste, like Aristide a fiery Roman Catholic priest, might seek election.

Jean-Juste is called by his supporters Haiti's Martin Luther King, Jr. He is said to electrify the masses with sermons urging social equality and nonviolent protest. The US-installed interim government of Gerard Latortue has accused Jean-Juste of inciting violence and harboring armed Aristide supporters.

In October 2004, the interim government arrested him, but, in an embarrassment for the regime, the priest was on the phone with a journalist at the time, and the whole matter was caught on audiotape. Masked men who turned out to be police burst into the St. Gerard Church as the priest was feeding poor neighborhood children.

During the phone interview with the reporter, the priest asked, "If you can, call the nuncio for me, or the pope, to say that [inaudible] that they are taking one of their priests to jail. I tried to call my bishop, no answer." Jean-Juste was arrested, allegedly for harboring armed people in his church. After seven weeks, with no evidence presented, he was released.

Church wants no more priests in office

An answer of sorts came some months later when, in April 2005, the Haitian Catholic Church announced to its priests that, under penalty of severe sanctions, they could not aspire to public office. The message came just before a proposed filing date for elections. The schedule calls for municipal elections on Oct. 9, legislative elections Nov. 13, and presidential elections Dec. 18.

Citing Canon Law, the Conference Episcopale d'Haiti (CEH) said in its message, "No priest has the right to be a candidate for public or electoral posts. None has the right to involve himself in political matters in the name of the church according to Canon Law." CEH president Louis Quebrot read the message directly to reporters.

Several politicians spoke to the media following delivery of the message, saying that the order from the bishops was an effort to avoid another Aristide. Aristide was one of several priests who were politically involved at the time of his election in 1990. The only priest currently fitting the description is Jean-Juste. Jean-Juste replied to the order in Miami, where he told supporters that the line between priest and politician is a fine one in Haiti, where people die every day from starvation or violence. He said, "The church should be on the side of the oppressed. It's not a matter of being

involved in politics. It's a matter of, as Dr. Martin Luther King would say, if we don't help these people, what is going to happen to them?"

Election dates in question

Meanwhile, the elections that the priest is forbidden to participate in are far from certain. Diplomats and politicians have said there is a lack of funds even to carry out the preliminary work for a national vote. Haitian politicians of all stripes are reportedly frustrated with the UN peacekeeping forces because of their inability to ensure a safe environment for the democratic exercise even now, more than a year after the dismantling of the last elected government.

Said Gerard Blot of the small, independent Tet Ansam party, "One year after the arrival of the UN, security has degraded, socioeconomic conditions have been degraded, and confidence in government has eroded." In tacit acknowledgement of the criticism, during a mid-April UN Security Council delegation visit to Haiti, officials said the mission could be expanded to bring in more police and international observers prior to the elections.

Interim Prime Minister Latortue asked that, in addition, more funds and effort be dedicated to disarming the numerous militias that have sprung up. The leader of the visiting delegation, Brazil's UN Ambassador Ronaldo Mota Sardenberg, said the meeting with Latortue "would have a very good impact for our efforts to adopt a new resolution that would augment or expand the mandate." Interim US Ambassador to the UN Anne Woods Patterson said there might be an increase of the 1,400 mission police, but additions to the 6,200-member military force had not been discussed.

Disarming the groups of Haitian paramilitaries remains problematic. Jean-Juste had a sober view of the meeting and the rhetoric. "I feel very frustrated in these moments. Today is a very sad day for Haiti: President Aristide is not here, and the population is not participating," he said. A week after the delegation had left, Jean-Juste had still not declared his intention to run for president, but he had begun to sound like a candidate. He demanded the resignation of two top US State Department officers accused of supplying arms to the Haitian interim government.

At a press conference in Miami, in Little Haiti, he said, "The Bush administration is secretly and illegally arming the de facto Haitian government." Jean-Juste has strengthened his ties to the Fanmi Lavalas party by reiterating that the interim government is illegitimate as evidenced by the continued refusal of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to recognize it (see NotiCen, 2004-04-01), and by asserting that Aristide never resigned and remains Haiti's legitimate president.

Jean-Juste wants Noriega and Bolton out

The State Department officials Jean-Juste wants removed are Roger Noriega, assistant secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and John Bolton, Bush's embattled nominee for UN ambassador. Ex-officials gathered in Miami at a news conference of the coordinating committee for Fanmi Lavalas. It was the first such conference since the Aristide overthrow in 2004 and can be seen as a boost of support in the US for Jean-Juste. Participants included Angelot Bell, former official of

the interior ministry, Mario Dupoy, former secretary of state, and Maryse Narcisse, former Cabinet president.

Aristide supporters in Miami asked the UN to free political prisoners, restore constitutional order, and return Aristide to power. The Pittsburgh-based Haiti Solidarity Committee was also in attendance. This group has demonstrated at Canadian, French, and Haitian consulates to denounce "massive repression being carried out by the [interim] regime." The group plans to extend its protests to the consulates of Latin American countries participating in the UN mission.

"We decided to go to the consulates because we think there's a conflict between what the United Nations claims it's doing and what it's doing," said HSC member Jack Lieberman. Activism like this from HSC and other groups has been sporadic in the past, but they appear to be gaining momentum now, galvanized by a logical Aristide successor, Jean-Juste, who was formerly a priest in Miami and who organized Veye Yo, a pro-Aristide grassroots group there, now gearing up for political action.

Responding to the pro-Jean-Juste activism in the US, Ralph Latortue, cousin of Gerard Latortue and vice consul in Miami, told reporters the protests do not represent the majority of the Haitian people. Because of the violence, hunger, and general lack of governance and control in the country, it is difficult to know what does represent the majority of the people. But it has been reported that this priest may be better known in Miami than he is in Haiti. He may not yet have the national reputation needed for a presidential run.

Counterproductive opposition to Jean-Juste

That being the case, he can only be helped by the notoriety the interim government has given him by arresting him, holding him captive for seven weeks before dropping charges, and then letting him go free. With the help of international media he is, says the Associated Press, "quickly becoming a prominent presence on Haiti's political scene, wielding considerable influence with loyalists of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and being a thorn in the side of the current US-backed Haitian government." Also helpful to a possible Jean-Juste candidacy is the consequence of the US providing weaponry to the police. The priest warned that Haiti needs food, not bullets, in calling for the ouster of Noriega and Bolton.

On April 27, police opened fire on a crowd of apparently peaceful protesters demanding the release of detainees loyal to Aristide. At least five people were killed, according to UN officials and witnesses. The shooting came as the State Department confirmed it would waive an arms embargo to allow thousands of weapons to flow to the police. Witnesses said the police arrived in pickup trucks wearing masks, just as when they arrested Jean-Juste in October. But this time they fired into the crowd. This is the third time in as many months police have opened fire on pro-Aristide demonstrators.

The Jean-Juste argument is further bolstered by human rights groups, which have accused police of killing hundreds of unarmed civilians in the pro-Aristide slums. The groups have also raised

objections to the US arming the police. The US has so far admitted to having given 2,600 firearms to the force.

-- End --