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Haiti Opposition Leader’s Arrest Sets Off Concerns That President Martelly's Administration Is Corrupt and Turning Dictatorial

by George Rodríguez
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Amid increasing popular anger against Haitian President Michel "Sweet Mickey" Martelly’s administration—already seen as corruption laden—the recent arrest of opposition leader Rony Timothée, the charges against him, and the harsh conditions he underwent while jailed for almost a month became the basis for warnings that the government is headed toward becoming a dictatorship.

Hundreds of protesters marched on April 28 in response to a call by the Mouvement Patriotique de l’Opposition Démocratique (MOPOD)—which includes major opposition parties, among them the Force Patriotique pour le Respect de la Constitution (FOPARK), headed by Timothée.


The demonstration was called to, among other demands, back the call for Martelly to resign.

Violence erupted and grew, wreaking havoc, a chaotic context in which tire barricades were set on fire, as well as one car, windshields of other vehicles were shattered, bottles and rocks were thrown, and police charged, tear-gassing protesters and firing guns.

On May 1, Justice and Public Safety Minister Jean Renel Sanon issued a press statement strongly condemning the incidents and warning that "democracy's good health, as well as minimum demands of the rule of law, does not tolerate that peaceful citizens be systematically terrorized and their vehicles vandalized by demonstrators who ignore the elementary principles of tolerance and of ideological pluralism."

"The Ministry of Justice and of Public Safety shall for no reason stand idly by at these dishonest doings by these pseudodemocrats, endangering one of the state’s fundamental missions: to guarantee order and public peace," added the official. "Thus, formal instructions were passed on to authorities to put into motion public action against the troublemakers who, in front of worldwide cameras, have nothing less than tarnished the country’s image and violently imposed their erroneous vision of democracy."

On May 14—the third anniversary of Martelly’s swearing-in—Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe said that "a stable and democratic Haiti is the only means through which our country will be able to reach the common goals of reducing poverty, reducing inequality, and creating jobs."

"Our main aim has been to move Haiti’s democracy toward more solid foundations and away from the instability that characterized our political system since the mid-1980s," Lamothe said. "The results of our efforts have received praise from institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank."
"Despite all those positive signs, our progress has been held hostage by the lack of flexibility of certain politicians who, regrettably, are linked to the crisis and chaos of the past and who today resort to anti-democratic actions to block legislative and municipal elections set for October," Lamothe added. He referred to the elections that have been delayed for more than two years and are now supposed to take place this year (NotiCen, April 11, 2013).

"If those politicians reach their goals, the phantom of instability and a return to the times when corruption created opportunities only for politicians, not the people, becomes a real possibility," Lamothe said. "Frequent unconstitutional demonstrations organized by those politicians have encouraged an unconstitutional and premature end to our government. Until now, their actions have done nothing but convey a false image of a chaotic Haiti and discouraged badly needed foreign investment and the possibility of employment growth upon which our economy depends."

**Protests turn violent**

As Lamothe spoke, some 2,000 demonstrators marched through Port-au-Prince, the capital of this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation, demanding Martelly’s resignation, as protesters were holding a similar protest in the city of Cap-Haïtien, on the northern coast.

Violence broke out in both places. In the capital, at least one person received a bullet wound in a gas station, and police intervention prevented angry demonstrators from reaching the National Palace—destroyed by the 2010 earthquake—in front of whose ruins Martelly and other top government officials were hosting a third-anniversary celebration in the presence of a large crowd.

Three days later, the head of the Ministére de la Justice et de la Sécurité Publique issued a new communiqué, condemning what he described as vandalistic violence by demonstrators.

"For some time, movements unleashed by political leaders claiming to be in the ‘democratic’ opposition have become more and more violent," Sanon said, adding that the ministry "particularly condemns the latest acts of sabotage and vandalism orchestrated by those individuals on Wednesday, May 14, as the country celebrated the third year since the ascension to power" by Martelly.

"The behavior, intolerant and anarchistic, to say the least, of those agitators went beyond the limit of what is unacceptable. The peaceful citizens, the business people, and the street vendors cannot be continually held hostage by the terror sowed in broad daylight by democracy’s enemies," added the communiqué. "The minister invites victims to file a complaint before justice, so those troublemakers are prosecuted, tried, and punished according to the law."

**Activist’s arrest called effort to silence opposition**

The same day, in the afternoon, Timothée was picked up in Port-au-Prince by a Police Nationale d’Haïti patrol as he was driving a car near the Toussaint Louverture International Airport. His vehicle was surrounded by police officers brandishing a warrant for his arrest. The FOPARK leader was taken for questioning to the Port-au-Prince prosecutor’s office but, according to local media, he was not interviewed since the government commissioner was not present.

Police Inspector Garry Desrosiers was quoted as saying that an arrest warrant was issued against Timothée for disturbing public order and for burning vehicles, while other police sources said
that the warrant responded to complaints filed by victims of that day’s violence and that witnesses claimed having seen the opposition leader close to the gas station that was set on fire.

Two days after his arrest, and without questioning, Timothée was taken to the prison in Arcahaie, a town in the eastern suburbs of Port-au-Prince.

Meanwhile, opposition parties condemned Timothée’s arrest, saying that it was a move by the government to silence opposition and quell demands for Martelly to quit, and defense attorney André Michel told reporters, "This is a political arrest, an arbitrary act whose sole purpose is to break the popular mobilization across the country."

Michel and other lawyers voiced concern about what they described as an illegal arrest and stressed that no one had actually lodged any legal complaint against the opposition leader.

Timothée’s lawyers—Michel and Newton St-Juste—told reporters that their client's detention without questioning leads to the conclusion that Timothée’s right to defense was violated and the charges made against him are because he is running for Congress in the much delayed elections.

On May 21, a MOPOD delegation that was to visit Timothée in prison was prevented from doing so by a major security operation covering a 100-meter perimeter around the Arcahaie jail.

The delegation, made up of prominent opposition leaders—including former presidential candidate Mirlande Manigat, who lost the 2011 election runoff to Martelly—was stopped by members of the Corps d’Intervention et de Maintien d’Ordre (CIMO) and the Brigade d’Intervention Motorisée (BIM), as well as by blue helmets from the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (MINUSTAH).

Prison warden Jean-Claude Jean told the group, "You have no authorization, you may not enter the prison."

Businessman Eric Jean-Baptiste, a member of the delegation, said he believed "the authorities prevented the delegation from visiting Rony Timothée because he was beaten and subjected to sexual aggression."

MOPOD leaders said the failed visit actually strengthened unity among opposition members, and they called on Haitians to demonstrate for the release of all political prisoners.

Agreeing with that view, Michel, also a member of the delegation, called for the consolidation of what he described as a group aimed at democratically ousting the régime of Tet Kale (bald)—a reference to Martelly’s shaven head.

Three days later, two Haitian senators managed to visit Timothée in prison. After the meeting, Sen. John Joël Joseph told reporters, "I saw him, in person," adding that Timothée "is well, but not too much, because he has a swollen eye, and because he is deprived of his liberty." Joseph also said that the prisoner told him he had not been beaten or sexually abused but requested medical treatment for the pain and swelling in his eye.

Timothée was eventually brought before a judge—Sonel Jean-François—who, in the presence of the prisoner's lawyers as well as relatives and supporters, questioned him for several hours. On June 5, having heard Timothée, the judge ordered the prisoner’s release.
Another demonstration, called for by MOPOD, FOPARK, and several grassroots organizations to demand Martelly's resignation, was held on June 10, with thousands taking part, and, again, police repression ensued.

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