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## Haitian Drug Lord Who Turned Politician Lands Before a U.S. Judge

by *George Rodríguez*

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A former mercenary leader who was instrumental in toppling a president, who served as a high police official, who became a major drug trafficker and then managed to win a seat in Haiti's Senate, is now facing justice in the US.

For years, Guy Philippe was wanted by the US under charges of drug trafficking and money laundering, but his seclusion in the mountains of Haiti's southwest, where he had the help of locals, kept him out of the reach of both US and Haitian authorities. In the region of Pestel, his hometown and stronghold, he was seen as a local hero who did the social work that the government has not cared to carry out ([NotiCen, June 2, 2016](#)).

Philippe perhaps thought he could live like that indefinitely, but on Jan. 5—after receiving his credential as a senator-elect, having successfully gone through the November 2015 elections ([NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2017](#)), and four days before being sworn-in—he was detained and immediately extradited to the US.

### *Window of vulnerability*

For authorities, it was the perfect moment: As a senator-elect, he no longer had the immunity of a candidate, and he had not yet acquired that of an actual legislator. That was time enough for Haiti's anti-drug trafficking bureau and the country's judicial police to move in—with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) standing by.

An overconfident Philippe was arrested when he carelessly came into the open to pick up his legislative credentials in Port-au-Prince and decided to also drop by the offices of Radio Scoop FM as the program "Haïti Débat" (Haiti Debate) was being aired. Philippe was interviewed by journalist Gary Pierre Paul Charles, the station's director, and then arrested as he was about to leave the station.

From there, with a brief stop at a police station, Philippe was taken to Toussaint Louverture International Airport and a waiting DEA airplane that would whisk him off to Miami, where he would be brought before the US District Court for the Southern District of Florida.

In Miami, a sealed indictment dating back to Nov. 22, 2005, and containing the charges against him, was unsealed by Judge Barry Garber, who ordered that the defendant be held without bond. Philippe pleaded not guilty during his arraignment on Jan. 13. He faces several counts of drug trafficking and money laundering, according to the indictment.

The day of Philippe's arrest, US Attorney Wifredo Ferrer issued a statement saying, "The passage of time does not thwart the unwavering commitment of [this] office and our local and international law enforcement partners to identify, apprehend, and prosecute narcotics traffickers and money launderers who threaten the global community."

The Miami hearing was attended by several of Philippe's supporters, who demanded the defendant's immediate release. Among them was Sen. Evince Francois, who described Philippe's arrest and deportation as a political move. "We're here to support Sen. Guy Philippe ... to let him know we stand behind him," Francois said. "We all feel he's innocent."

In Haiti, reaction to the capture was mixed. Civil society leaders expressed satisfaction with the police action, but political leaders were divided.

Local human rights activist Pierre Espérance, for example, told reporters: "I'm happy and I'm sad." Espérance explained that his happiness stemmed from seeing "that people like Guy Philippe, who are trying to get immunity" as legislators "won't have a chance to." His sadness, he said answers to the fact that Philippe is not alone, since "there are many others like him—bandits, criminals, drug traffickers—who have been elected deputies and senators."

In Espérance's view, this is a reflection of the weakness of the country's justice system. "They know that there's a report implicating him in the attack against the Les Cayes police station at the start of 2016," he said, and yet, both the justice system—which Espérance described as "sick"—and the electoral council stood idly by and allowed Philippe to run for office and win.

Espérance was referring to a May 16, 2016, attack on a police station in the southwestern coastal city of Les Cayes. The commando-style action by some 50 gunmen claimed the lives of four attackers and one police officer and resulted in several arrests. According to statements by one of the captured commandos, Philippe was responsible for the attack, an allegation denied a week later by Philippe's attorney, Reynold Georges.

As Espérance sees it, Philippe's recent arrest is "a good small step in the battle against corruption and impunity in the country." But on a popular level, the capture sparked street protests and violence against US citizens.

### *Street support*

Shortly after Philippe's arrest, dozens of angry demonstrators gathered outside the police station in Port-au-Prince, where he was briefly held, unsuccessfully demanding his release. And in cities thought the southwestern region—Philippe's turf—hundreds of sympathizers took to the streets, setting fire to barricades hastily built with tires. In the port city of Jérémie, as well as in rural towns including Beaumont and Duchity, police stations were attacked, and many protesters marched carrying posters with Philippe's image.

Violence was quickly focused on US citizens, whose presence in Haiti has increased with the arrival of relief workers and members of humanitarian organizations after Hurricane Matthew ripped through the country's southern region in late October ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#), and [Nov. 10, 2016](#)). In southwestern towns, groups of Philippe sympathizers, angry at the US for their leader's deportation, attacked installations housing NGOs run by US nationals, including missionaries. According to media reports, dozens of persons were rescued and sheltered by the UN and the Red Cross.

Mark Stockeland, executive director of the NGO Haiti Bible Mission, one of the targets of anti-US violence in Jérémie, told *The New York Times* that the drug lord had "won over the people."

Sorel Jacinthe, a senator from Grand'Anse, compared Philippe to other criminals—such as the late Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar—who become benefactors to communities living in poverty. "He is their congressman. They like him," Jacinthe said.

And Evil Lavilette, the mayor of the southwestern city of Pestel, said that Philippe's popularity stemmed from his concern and support of regional communities.

"Guy Philippe is a leader," he said.

By some accounts, Philippe studied law in Ecuador and medicine in Mexico. But according to other versions, while in Ecuador in 1991, when former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was beginning his first interrupted term in office, Philippe received US military training.

In 1995, a year after Philippe's return from Ecuador, Aristide—who by then had been restored to office—disbanded the Army. Philippe then found himself in the newly-created Police Nationale d'Haïti (Haiti National Police, PNH), where he served as local chief in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Delmas (1997-1999) and in the northern coastal city of Cap-Haïtien (1999-2000).

While in Cap-Haïtien, the country's second largest city, he was accused of taking part in a coup conspiracy, which led to his 2000 flight to the neighboring Dominican Republic. He spent four years in exile, and during that time was accused of having orchestrated armed attacks on Haitian police stations ([NotiCen, Jan. 10, 2002](#)).

### *Philippe joins coup against Aristide*

He returned to Haiti in 2004 at the head of a mercenary outfit to join a coup against Aristide. His band quickly took Cap-Haïtien and marched on the capital, Port-au-Prince, shortly after an airplane provided by the US took off with the toppled president on board ([NotiCen, March 4, 2004](#)).

Reaching Port-au-Prince, Philippe declared himself "military chief," but soon the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, MINUSTAH) settled in, and the mercenaries laid down weapons.

Human rights violations were committed during the anti-Aristide rebellion, including extra-judicial executions, according to human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, which mentioned Philippe as responsible for such illegal actions. Philippe has repeatedly dismissed the accusations.

As contradictory as it may seem, Philippe is known for having aided the poverty-stricken community in the southwestern city of Pestel. He was also outspoken against Haiti's endemic poverty.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, as Philippe was overseeing a team of dozens of local young men distributing food aid he had managed to obtain for Pestel, The New York Times quoted him as asking, "How is it possible that 5% of the population holds 95% of the wealth?"

He explained to The Times how he had organized the orderly distribution of food in his community, where he is referred to as "commander."

"I hire the tough guys in the community to do this," he said. "They do a good job, and no one messes with them."

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