

8-24-2017

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George Rodríguez

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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez, George. "Haiti's Military Resurfaces After Two Decades Out of View." (2017). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10459>

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Haiti's Military Resurfaces After Two Decades Out of View

by *George Rodríguez*

Category/Department: Haiti

Published: 2017-08-24

A lengthy record of human rights violations as well as involvement in politics led two decades ago to the decision to disband Haiti's military.

The measure was taken in 1995 when then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—the military's latest victim—decided it was time to end uniformed bullying. The Police Nationale d'Haïti (Haiti National Police), created that year by the legislature, was tasked with both internal security and protection of national sovereignty.

The military class was put aside, but the Constitution was not amended to formally abolish the armed forces (Forces Armées d'Haïti, FAd'H). Describing the measure as a restructuring, the Aristide administration's decree of Jan. 6, 1995, created a commission to complete the task, but it never got to actually work.

The armed forces' origin dates back to the Haitian Revolution, through which Haiti liberated itself from French rule and became, in 1804, the world's first independent nation founded by former slaves. Strong enough to defeat France, Haiti's military profited from the weakness of the new country's emerging civilian institutions, gaining power and performing government responsibilities.

Tontons Macoutes

But last century, during the ruthless and corrupt dictatorship of François Duvalier, Haiti's president for life (1957-1971), and his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971-1986), the military lost power to the Duvaliers' own security force, the Tontons Macoutes, which became a key element in their terror apparatus. The squad took its name from the Haitian mythological character Tonton Macoute ("uncle bogeyman" in Haitian Creole), who kidnaps—and later eats—children that he catches with a burlap bag ([NotiCen, Aug. 30, 2012](#)).

The Tontons Macoutes were created in 1959 by François Duvalier, a physician and believer in voodoo, as a result of an attempted military coup in 1958, at the start of his 14-year reign. The attempted coup led Duvalier, who originally reached power through a coup of his own, to fear a military apparatus that could eventually try to topple him again.

His paramilitary henchmen have been held responsible for the capture, disappearance, torture, and execution of thousands of Haitians, and specifically for the 1964 massacre of hundreds of people in the city of Jérémie, the capital of the southern Grand'Anse department.

Before he died, François Duvalier appointed his son, Jean-Claude, who was 19 at the time, to succeed him, also as president for life. The younger Duvalier ruled between 1971 and 1986 ([NotiCen, Jan. 27, 2011, Jan. 16, 2014, Nov. 6, 2014](#)). The heir was as creative as the father, and by 1973 had assembled the Corps des Léopards as his personal security structure.

Although the military did not hold a leading role within the Duvaliers' power structure, the dictators' repression apparatus consisted of a web of police and military forces along with a key

paramilitary component. It also included installations where human rights violations, including torture and illegal confinement, were carried out by members of the terror security network.

Military coups

With the Duvaliers out of the way—the first died in power, the second fled to France in the midst of a popular uprising in 1986—the military again took center stage. A series of coups and counter-coups ensued, with caretaker civilian governments set up as easily as they were brought down.

Aristide was elected president in 1990. But he, too, would learn first-hand what uniformed conspiracy could do. Aristide assumed power on Feb. 7, 1991 and held office until he was overthrown by a coup on Sept. 29, 1991. In 1994, after a great deal of international pressure, the military allowed Aristide to return from exile to finish his fragmented first presidential term (1991-1996). US troops were deployed to Haiti at that time, and it was then that Aristide decided to neutralize the Haitian military.

Re-elected in 2000, Aristide began his second presidential term on Feb. 7, 2001, and immediately became the object of a violent and quickly escalating campaign by extreme rightist paramilitary groups ([NotiCen, Dec. 7, 2000](#), and [Jan. 25, 2001](#)). The campaign was headed by the Armée Cannibale (Cannibal Army), which later changed its name to the Front pour la Libération et la Reconstruction Nationales (Front for National Liberation and Reconstruction, FLRN).

On Feb. 29, 2004, in the midst of spiraling violence, Aristide was again flown to exile ([NotiCen, March 4, 2004](#)). Shortly after, the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, MINUSTAH) arrived in Haiti, with 2,300 soldiers and 2,200 police officers ([NotiCen, March 29, 2012](#)).

But when Michel Martelly began his five-year term (2011-2016), he immediately began the process of reactivating the country's military ([NotiCen, April 28, 2011](#)), something he had promised during his campaign. On Oct. 9, 2015, four months before ending his term in office, the Conseil de Ministres (Council of Ministers) issued a decree officially re-mobilizing the FAd'H.

According to the decree, the decision was designed to ensure security nationwide after MINUSTAH's departure (now scheduled for October) and its replacement by the smaller, Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Appui à la Justice en Haïti (UN Mission for Justice Support in Haiti, MINUJUSTH) ([NotiCen, June 22, 2017](#)).

The Martelly administration's decree also set up the Ministère de la Défense (Defense Ministry), in charge, among other duties, of reactivating the armed forces.

Now, with Jovenel Moïse—Martelly's pick as successor—in office since February, the FAd'H reactivation process has taken on new force ([NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2017](#)). Two months after the start of the Moïse administration, 100 Haitian soldiers who received military training for several months in Ecuador to become an engineering corps returned to Haiti and were stationed at an abandoned military base outside the southern town of Gressier.

The group's commander, Lt. Ted Tesnor Wolsby, assured journalists, "We're proud Haitians, and we want to make the nation stronger."

And on July 5, Defense Minister Hervé Denis was quoted by Reuters as saying that the new soldiers' task would include border patrolling as well as repairing and rebuilding infrastructure.

"I was planning to recruit 500 in the first recruitment, but now, because of budget problems, we have to reduce the numbers," Denis said. In earlier statements, Denis had told reporters, "We want a new armed force, an armed force oriented toward development [because] this is what we need to regain national sovereignty."

According to the minister, the idea is for the new soldiers to be trained by former FAd'H officers, whose past record will be checked.

But opponents to the military's comeback say that the FAd'H is not needed.

"Haiti doesn't need an army," said human rights attorney Mario Joseph, a member of Aristide's legal team. In Joseph's view, this impoverished country must spend its scarce funds rationally. "Haiti cannot even take care of the police with the national budget," he said.

Robert Fatton, a University of Virginia political science professor who is an expert in Haitian politics, warned against the threat of renewed military involvement in politics.

"There's the possibility that it becomes a weapon in the hands of whoever is the president or the prime minister," he said. "There's a danger ... that it might follow in the path of the previous military."

And former soccer star Bobby Duval, who was tortured when he was a political prisoner in 1976, during the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, said he was against a revived FAd'H.

"It's not a good idea," he said. "That's for sure."

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