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## Army Parades Back in, but Haitian Opposition Worries About Its Potential New Role

by George Rodríguez

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The Haitian Army paraded down Cap Haïtien's main street last November as the country marked the 214th anniversary of the military victory that led Haiti to become the second independent country in the Americas after the US. The march, staged by the revamped Forces Armées d'Haïti (Armed Forces of Haiti, FAd'H), served to formalize the return of the country's military, 20 years after it was disbanded ([NotiCen, Aug. 24, 2017](#)).

The Battle of Vertières, which took place on Nov. 18, 1803, was a decisive confrontation between the Army of France—the colonial power then ruling over Saint Domingue, as the island of Hispaniola was then called—and the rebel force made up of black slaves. From then on, the Haitian military grew to become a strong player on the Haitian stage, one that in the process would amass a record of human rights violations, as well as more than 20 government coups.

By in the end of the 1950s, though, the FAd'H would be overshadowed by a greater power: the merciless and corrupt dictatorial dynasty of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude "Bébé Doc" Duvalier.

### *Tontons Macoutes take over*

As president for life, François Duvalier, a physician and believer in voodoo, ruled Haiti between 1957 and 1971 by creating a state terror thanks to his own paramilitary security squad, the Tontons Macoutes, which he formed in 1959.

Named after the Haitian mythological character Tonton Macoute ("uncle bogeyman") who kidnaps and eats children, the force sidelined the FAd'H after Duvalier managed to foil a conspiracy by the armed forces to overthrow him. Duvalier had himself risen to power in a coup.

The younger Duvalier (1971-1986) ([NotiCen, Jan. 16, 2014](#), and [Nov. 6, 2014](#)), who inherited the president-for-life mantle at the age of 19, added a new component to the regime's terror machine, the Corps des Léopards (Leopards' Corps).

Both the Macoutes and the Léopards have been held responsible for massive human rights violations, with military and police forces in a backup capacity.

Having been sidelined for decades, the FAd'H first regained stature in 1986, after Jean-Claude Duvalier was toppled by a popular uprising. The FAd'H subsequently clung to power through a string of coups. The last president to be deposed was Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former Catholic priest, who was elected president in 1990 and 2000 but was unable to complete either term ([NotiCen, Feb. 12, 2004](#)).

In 1995, Aristide decided to move the military out of the picture and issued a decree eliminating the FAd'H. It was a halfway measure, however, because he did not move to institutionalize the change in the Haitian Constitution.

According to the Constitution, the specific duties of the FAd'H include "defending the country in case of war" as well as protecting it "against exterior threats" and "securing the land, maritime, and air borders." It must also "lend support, upon request from the executive, to the police in case the latter cannot perform its task."

With the military decreed away, the brunt of the nation's security was placed on the Police Nationale d'Haïti (National Police of Haiti, PNd'H), described in Article 269 of the Constitution as "an armed corps" that operates within the structure of the Justice Ministry, with the main duty of guaranteeing public order and protecting citizens' lives and property.

### *Martelly reverses course*

Aristide's decree held until Michel Martelly (2011-2016) assumed the presidency and began the process of reversing Aristide's anti-Army action. The process was completed when Jovenel Moïse—Martelly's hand-picked candidate to replace him—was sworn in on Feb. 7, 2017, and gave the pro-military initiative its decisive push.

Along with Hervé Denis, his defense minister, Moïse stationed 100 Haitian troops at an old military base close to the town of Gressier, 20 km east of Port-au-Prince, the country's capital ([NotiCen, Aug. 24, 2017](#)).

"The Army I am reinstating ... is a professional one, it is a necessity for our country," Moïse told a press conference after the November parade in Cap Haïtien. "It will not be an Army of repression ... it will be, instead, an Army that will help out when a hurricane strikes our country, it will help repair roads."

But voices opposed to the military's resurfacing, which had been heard since Martelly began the process, have grown louder.

Six days before the November parade, hundreds of public high school students began a series of street protests in Cap Haïtien.

Chanting "We don't want an Army, we want education!" they condemned the fact that the government has earmarked 512 million gourdes (US\$7.8 million) for this year's military budget, while teachers' salaries have gone unpaid for some months.

In statements to local and international media, opponents of the military's comeback have expressed concern about the FAd'H, fearing that it once again will involve itself in politics and in repression of dissent.

"I don't believe the Moïse regime really wants to reinstate the Army, but instead set up a political militia to persecute political opponents," said opposition leader André Michel.

"There's good reason to be nervous," Geoff Burt, director of the Canadian think tank Centre for Security Governance, told the Voice of America (VOA) just three days before the military parade. "The big problem isn't with the Army per se. It's the connection to the political process" and the potential that it could take on a role in Haiti's politics.

"That's what everyone would like to avoid," Burt said.

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