Fragile Foundations and Infant Institutions

The Case of Non-Reform in Haiti

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Haiti has earned the dubious distinction of being one of the poorest nations, on a per capita basis, in the world. Even the country's relatively recent transition from authoritarianism to democratic rule was not enough to spark liberal-market reform and the country's integration into the global economy. The Haitian people have thus been confined to decades of deprivation, under a variety of regimes that span the political spectrum.

Despite the rapid series of regime changes that have occurred in Haiti over the past twenty five years, fundamental shifts in the nature of the state have not materialized. Haiti is essentially a case of economic non-reform; it has failed to undergo neoliberal reforms and become integrated in the global market. As the country moves away from dictatorship and through a series of democratically elected governments, it becomes increasingly evident that the nature of the country's economic program is not dependent on ideology. Neither dictator nor elected president has been able to modernize Haiti's devastatingly backwards economy. Instead, economic programs are designed in a context of pervasive political instability; their character is therefore dictated largely by pragmatism and a need to 'crisis manage'.

Regime type in Haiti is inconsequential; what determines whether neoliberal reform is initiated is regime *stability*. This decisive element is, in turn, dependent on a host of factors, from institutional strength, to the nature and extent of international involvement.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, Haiti has witnessed a rapid succession of political leaders. After Francois Duvalier won the presidency in 1957, his rule quickly degenerated into a brutal dictatorship.

Duvalier and his son would rule Haiti by authoritarian decree for a combined twenty-nine years, their command ending in February 1986. It was only in 1990 that Jean-Bertrand Aristide became Haiti's first democratically elected President, with Rene Preval as his Prime Minister. But even this elected government was only able to serve seven months in office, before being overthrown in a coup and replaced by a military-backed regime that ruled for four years before Aristide was reinstated.¹ The constitution forbids consecutive terms, but allows for reelection.² For this reason, power over the past decade has thus been passed between Aristide, Preval and a number of transitional governments.³ After Aristide failed to serve out his third term, Rene Preval was re-elected on February 7, 2006.

Two characteristics define the Haitian economy. One is its lack of real growth over the past half century; the other is the lack of correlation between the regime in power and the nature of the economic program. Haiti is one of the poorest countries, on a per capita basis, in the Western Hemisphere. While real growth in GDP averaged 5.2% in the years following Duvalier's dictatorship, it fell to 2.9% in 1996, and has since dropped to less than 1%.⁴ The transition from military rule to democratic governance has *not* witnessed a simultaneous growth in the economy; Haiti is poorer in real terms today than it was in

1955, before Duvalier assumed control.⁵ It faces not just stagnation, but actual decline. According to Robert Fatton Jr., “Haiti still hovers on the verge of political catastrophe; it faces economic ruin.”⁶ Moreover, the system of rapidly changing regimes further works against neoliberal reform by preventing any type of coordinated strategy for reform from being implemented.

The (Non)relationship between Regime Type and Economic Strategy

Pervasive economic stagnation, and in some cases real decline, has occurred alongside great oscillations in political character. Manufacturing’s contribution to GDP is now less than half of what it was under the military-backed regime of 1991.⁷ However, this decline in the manufacturing sector did not occur instantaneously when Haiti transitioned to democracy; rather, economic decline in real terms has been a gradual process. Even within the context of democratic rule, GNI per capita has decreased drastically from \$1464 in 2002 to \$400 in 2006.⁸

The modest level of integration into the world economy has at best remained constant over time. Despite its membership in the United Nations, “Haiti has avoided close ties with its neighboring countries... [and has distanced] itself from moves toward Caribbean economic and political integration.”⁹ According to Alonso and Hicks, international trade contributed more to Haiti’s GDP under the military-backed regime of 1991 (18.3%) than it did under Preval in 2000 (14.0%).¹⁰

With respect to the nature of the economic program, there is no apparent correspondence between authoritarianism and state intervention, or alternatively, between democracy and the goal of free-market reform. Jean-Claude Duvalier, the second Duvalier dictator, embraced a “relatively ‘open’ technocratic project.” Unlike his father, he promised “economic revolution;” his limited efforts towards liberalization in the 1970s allowed for modest integration

into the global economy and additionally contributed to a resurgence of civil society.¹¹ In contrast, Aristide, the first president to be elected under free-and-fair elections, released “multiple condemnations [against] imperialist and capitalist exploitation” and denounced [the World Bank and the IMF] “as vile capitalist instruments sucking Haiti’s blood.”¹² Thus, in Haiti, there is no defining relationship between regime type and economic strategy. Rather, the process is astonishingly capricious; leaders have the political autonomy to embrace or reject neoliberal reform according to their own whim.

Economic policy in Haiti is dictated by a need for pragmatism, rather than by ideology. For example, Fatton Jr. argues that despite his radical socialist rhetoric, Aristide committed himself to a fairly moderate economic program. He had few alternatives. Recognizing the need to maintain relations with the ‘nationalist bourgeoisie’, to court international investment, and to coexist with international organizations, “Aristide acquiesced to a program of structural adjustment designed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund ... He espoused strict fiscal austerity, an anticorruption drive, and the modernization of public enterprise. These economic reforms achieved significant success and gained massive international support.”¹³ Thus, limited neoliberal reform was finally embraced in Haiti only because the international and domestic systems demanded it.

The Context: Political and Social Volatility

Stability on the streets has remained tenuous, and violence continues to threaten governability. “Near anarchy... reigned for two years after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in 2004” and the police force essentially collapsed. In 2006, it was expected to take up to three years for a new police force to reach the minimum required strength of 20, 000. President Preval has therefore requested that the UN Peacekeeping mission to Haiti be extended.¹⁴

In 2004, local militia groups took control of provincial capitals, forcing the Organization of American States to call upon the assistance of UN troops.¹⁵ In 2005 and 2006, urban violence in Port-au-Prince interfered with preparations for elections.¹⁶

Amidst this violence, governments are faced with a situation in which they must 'crises manage,' rather than rule. According to Alex Dupuy, the sole task of the provisional government, which took over prior to Preval's reelection in 2006, was "to pacify the country... and this basically meant cracking down on Aristide supporters." Rather than dedicating itself to reform, the administration was limited to pursuing a 'scorched-earth strategy,' which involved rounding up and arbitrarily arresting prominent Aristide party officials.¹⁷ Einsiedel and Malone further assert that this policy of 'crises management' has been reflected in the nature of UN involvement in Haiti; while the UN previously was involved in a broad range of activities, its efforts have subsequently been "reduced to a small international police force aimed at building a domestic police capacity."¹⁸ The UN, subject to the same restrictions as the domestic government, must too limit its role to policing.

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What limits Haiti's capacity to reform the economy is not the type of regime in power, but rather this overwhelming instability. Ruling classes have no vision beyond the day-to-day struggle of maintaining power.

Lacking a coherent ideology and national strategy, their decision-making never includes longer-term considerations. Amidst this "institutionalization of uncertainty," governments can do nothing more than act as policing bodies.¹⁹ According to Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin of the OAS, "the real challenge starts now in terms of maintaining an environment of peace, security, and stability; of encouragement and constructive engagement; and of creating a climate that is conducive to social and economic development and the strengthening and modernization of the state."²⁰

Fragile Foundations

The weakness of political institutions and the lack of an autonomous civil society prevent both governments and non-state organizations from effectively challenging state power. Unable to act as an authoritative counterbalance to state control, these groups are incapable of influencing the policy-making process and spurring the adoption of neoliberal reform.

Haiti's Infant Institutions

Even if effective economic strategies were developed, Haiti's weak institutional foundation would prevent its implementation. According to Robert Fatton Jr., Haiti is plagued by a lingering authoritarian legacy. While democratization eliminated "the most flagrant tyrannical aspects" of the old regime, the current administration is still built upon the foundations of authoritarianism.²¹ As a result, the constitution has produced an immobilism that continues to favor the status quo and act as an obstacle to reform. Thus, weak institutions have made the government incapable of ruling. Importantly, the current institutional weakness is a political remnant of authoritarianism; weak institutions similarly limited economic reform under dictatorship and under democracy.

As well as limiting the government's

capacity to reform, weak institutions allow for the concentration of power in the hands of select political leaders who tend to benefit from, and thus work to sustain, the closed economy. Even half a century after the end of Duvalier's rule, total power remains in the hands of a small executive. Weak institutions allow for self-indulgent leaders who have no interest in nurturing autonomous economic actors. This fact was made evident by President Preval's decision on January 12, 1999 to declare the National Assembly's term in office expired and to rule by decree. According to Fatton Jr., Haiti's institutional system makes the country a victim of *la politique du ventre* (politics of the belly); under this system of governance, "politics[becomes] an entrepreneurial vocation... controlling the state becomes a zero-sum game, a fight to the death to monopolize the sinecures of political power."²²

Since the power of political leaders is unchecked, and since politics has become virtually the only means of material advancement, leaders resist demands to open up the Haitian economy to international pressures. Rather, they work to maintain a closed system which they can more easily exploit.²³ Evidence of rent-seeking behavior is widespread. Consistently high levels of corruption suggest that change will not soon be readily implemented from above. Haiti ranked last on the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Index.²⁴ Weak institutions have allowed decades of interest-maximizing leaders, of both authoritarian and democratic backgrounds, to hold back neoliberal reform.

A third consequence of weak institutional structure is that it has made the political costs of economic reform too high for political leaders, regardless of their ideology or intention. According to Kapur and Naim, neoliberal reform and structural adjustment "may require policy changes with enormous short-term political costs."²⁵ Haiti has failed to institutionalize "political society as a means

to help mediate conflict and help minimize political deadlock." Thus, these grave short-term political costs, rather than being tolerated, will more likely lead to the overthrow of the regime which tried to enact them.²⁶ Structural adjustment proves to be a large source of urban discontent and polarization. Under these conditions of uncertainty and instability, new governments will be likely to retreat completely from the process of economic reform. Fearful for their own political stability, leaders will reject reform despite inflationary pressures.²⁷

An unstable governmental structure permits political infighting to yield not compromise, but stagnation. The clearest example of this political stagnation is the 1997 leadership succession conflict. In 1997, Prime Minister Rosny Smarth resigned in protest over the outcomes of the senatorial elections. Following his recognition, the parliament refused to approve any of Preval's appointments for a successor and the country was left with no Prime Minister for two years. Preval was forced to rule by decree and to implement only the most basic policies.²⁸ Political stalemate ensued because state authorities were incapable of forming a functioning government. In the context of an institutional system that does not guarantee a working political body, internal conflicts render governments unable to enact meaningful, long-term reform.

Haiti's weak party structure, marked by intense party conflict and loosely bound coalitions, has created a political environment in which parties are focused desperately on consolidating power; the cause of neoliberal reform is thus marginalized. Political parties were outlawed in the first six years of the Duvalier dictatorship. Though the number of parties has blossomed since the transition to democracy, the parties have failed to become an influential political force.²⁹ "Dramatic *voltesface* reflecting very sudden changes of allegiance are common among the political class."³⁰ This lack of party allegiance creates

problems for governability; the government is limited in its capacity to enact any type of reform, much less destabilizing neoliberal reforms. Moreover, due to the extensive concentration of power in the hands of the executive, as permitted by the 1987 constitution, the opposition is reduced to a broad-based, loosely bound coalition of parties which seek not to compromise, but to block any and all reform proposed by the party in power. For example, the opposition to Aristide united under the politically fragmented Democratic Convergence (DC), and remained unwilling to negotiate any solution to Haiti's economic problems.³¹ Thus, democratization has not facilitated the emergence of powerful political actors committed to economic reform.

Haiti's Bounded Civil Society

Economic scarcity has yielded a fragile working class base which is unable to mobilize on the grounds of self-interest and push for economic reform from below. According to Fatton Jr., "Material scarcity had certain perverse advantages for the continuity of dictatorship."³² Democratization has not led to the formation of a strong working class; instead, extremely high levels of poverty have "produced a bourgeoisie and a working class that are both, at best, utterly small, embryonic, and fragile." Currently, the working class represents only 9 percent of the labor force, and this number was consistently lower in the past.³³ The absence of a strong working class eases the pressure on the government to enact the neoliberal reforms which are so crucial to Haiti's long-term economic growth. Fatton Jr. warns that unless civil society can generate an effective political strategy from below, a process of "redictatorialization" may occur.³⁴

Institutional weakness is finally evident in the business community's lack of autonomous power. In Haiti, the business community has been tied organically to the state since the Duvalier dictatorship. As a result of the executive's power, "if it wants to

continue to do business and/or move into new ventures, the possessing class, more often than not, has to buy 'protection' from the ruling class."³⁵ Under a persisting system of crony-capitalism, favors are doled out by the government to preferred businesses and the stability of the business community is inextricably linked to government interests. Unity between the government and the business class "is rooted in an opportunistic convergence of interests."³⁶ This organic link to the state prevents the business community from taking action to bring about neoliberal reform; its interests are more effectively served by acquiescing to the wishes of the government in power. Moreover, the system of crony capitalism works to advance friends of the political elite, not the best interest of the national economy.³⁷

Persisting social instability suggests that Haiti will not have the necessary institutional foundation to pursue neoliberal reform in the near future. Von Einsiedel and Malone argue that a fundamental challenge to the construction of strong, democratic institutions is Haiti's lack of human capital. Eighty percent of Haitians with college degrees live out of the country and "the lack of skilled Haitians to build up state institutions presents a severe development challenge."³⁸ According to Alex Dupuy, President Rene Preval faces "the classic contradictions of the populist politician. In a country in which 80 percent of the population is unemployed and annual per capita income is less than US\$400, Preval realizes that the people who voted for him expect him to prioritize their need for access to jobs, food, health care, housing, education, and security."³⁹ The need for neoliberal reform will thus continue to appear secondary.

The Guiding Hand: Foreign Influence and Involvement

According to Fatton Jr., Haiti is shaped by a myriad of external forces, which confine the country to complete dependence.⁴⁰ "External factors remain decisive and in some

instances determine the shape of Haitian politics, for the country's material well-being is utterly dependent on the whims of the world economy and the demands of foreign financial organizations."⁴¹ Because of the country's material dependence, Haiti's economic program is in large part dictated by the extent and character of international, and specifically American, involvement. International structural conditions remove Haiti's economic agency.

United States policy is responsible for the modest opening up that has occurred in Haiti in the past few decades; this American policy is independent of the specific regime in power in Haiti. The United States continues to push for liberal-market societies within its 'zone of influence.' In limited cases, this concerted American effort has led to modest progress in the move towards neoliberalism.⁴² American involvement with the Duvalier dictatorship illustrates clearly how Haitian economic strategy is entangled with that of the United States. In mid-1977, Duvalier began to yield to American pressure to ameliorate certain aspects of its economic policy. In November 1979, in return for increased American aid and under pressure from President Jimmy Carter, Duvalier ordered a series of ministerial and budgetary reforms and hesitantly accepted limited economic liberalization.⁴³

American involvement with Aristide mirrored its involvement under Duvalier. The U.S. presence in Haiti acted in opposition to the Haitian administration, in an attempt to liberalize the economy. American influence over Aristide would yield two main results. First, "once in power, Aristide... was forced to adopt extremely pragmatic economic policies that never went beyond the World Bank's vision of 'basic needs.'" Thus, American influence dictated the nature and extent of economic reform. Second, "the American intervention opened up a limited political space to struggle for a more equitable pattern of economic development."⁴⁴ American involvement thus forced the Haitian administration to open up

at least minimally to pressure from below. American goals for Haiti have remained steadfast over time, as has the unwillingness of Haitian governments to enact neoliberal reform from above. Thus, the effect of this American involvement has remained consistently modest. Furthermore, the ideology driving American efforts has little to do with the specifics of the regime in power in Haiti and more to do with domestic factors within the United States. As Smith argues, American "domestic politics became the driving force behind U.S. policy."⁴⁵ Thus, international structural conditions, which allow for the primacy of American interests, have largely dictated levels of neoliberal reform.

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Despite some limited success in opening the Haitian economy, international involvement has had some unintended negative consequences, one of which is the weakening of the Haitian state. This weakening is brought about first by international pressure from global superpowers. According to Fatton Jr., increasing international pressure means that "Preval seems condemned to adopt a structural adjustment program even if it may generate more inequalities and popular discontent."⁴⁶ Thus, when superpower interests contrast those of the Haitian state, the Haitian state is subjugated and weakened. Second, the weakening is brought about by international donor agencies. According to Kapur and Naim, "size matters!" In very poor

countries like Haiti, law-based democratic governance faces many obstacles. When the IMP becomes involved, its dominance vis-à-vis Haiti is asymmetric; the Haitian government is thus marginalized in the process of policy formation.⁴⁷ This weakening of the state could perversely affect the very neoliberal reform which the international community seeks to bring about.

Secondly, a reliance on foreign aid sources short-circuits the process of neoliberal reform. International organizations have transformed Haiti into “the *Republique des Organisations Nongouvernementales (ONGs)*”, or, the Republic of NGOs.⁴⁸ Reliance on aid has prevented governments from facing economic crisis; thus, governments have not been forced to diversify the economy and to encourage export-oriented growth. Much of the annual budget is still derived from foreign aid.⁴⁹ However, this economic security, dependent so heavily on the sentiments of international agencies, is fragile. Furthermore, short-term aid may directly crowd out long-term business investment or, indirectly prevent the creation of viable financial institutions through which investment could be channeled. Currently Haiti’s dependence on aid shows no sign of

being severed by the international community; on July 25, 2006, at a conference in Port-au-Prince, donor nations pledged approximately \$750 million in new aid for Haiti.⁵⁰

Conclusion

According to Kurt Weyland, Latin American countries have been able to successfully enact neoliberalism “when they faced dramatic crises, and the population was therefore prepared to swallow the bitter pill of tough stabilization.”⁵¹ However, this argument fails in Haiti, where ‘dramatic crises’ and inflationary pressures have neither encouraged the populace to, at least tacitly, accept the short-term costs of reform, nor provoked governments to open the Haitian economy. Rather, the past decades of instability have created an environment of permanent crisis. In this context, ideology is rendered irrelevant and economic strategy remains independent of the type of regime in power. Political instability, weak institutions and an omnipotent international presence have ultimately prevented both authoritarian and democratic regimes from successfully implementing neoliberalism.

Endnotes

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