

U.S. Habit of Backing Strongman Allies Fed Turmoil in Haiti

Washington dismissed warnings that democracy was unraveling under President Jovenel Moïse, leaving a gaping leadership void after his assassination.



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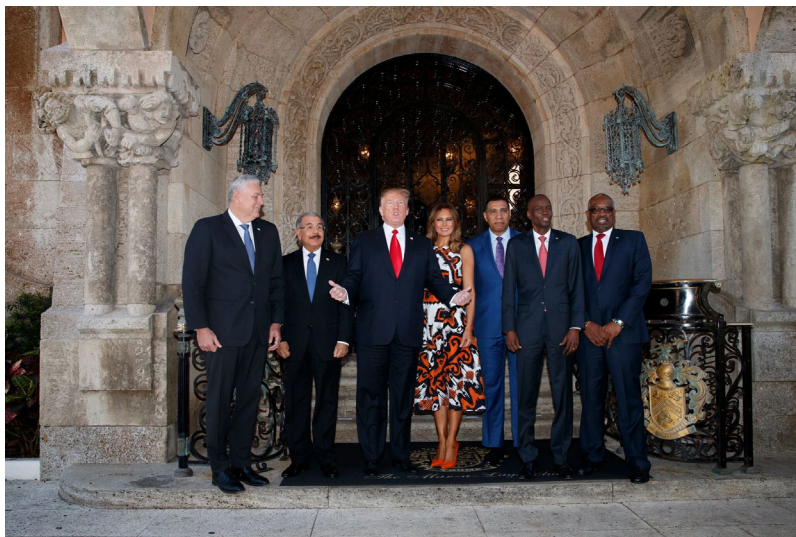
As protesters hurled rocks outside Haiti's national palace and set fires on the streets to demand President Jovenel Moïse's resignation, President Trump invited him to Mar-a-Lago in 2019, posing cheerfully with him in one of the club's ornate entryways.

After members of Congress warned that Mr. Moïse's "anti-democratic abuses" reminded them of the run-up to the dictatorship that terrorized Haiti in decades past, the Biden administration publicly threw its weight behind Mr. Moïse's claim on power.

And when American officials urged the Biden administration to change course, alarmed that Haiti's democratic institutions were being stripped away, they say their pleas went unheeded — and sometimes never earned a response at all.

Through Mr. Moïse's time in office, the United States backed his increasingly autocratic rule, viewing it as the easiest way of maintaining stability in a troubled country that barely figured into the priorities of successive administrations in Washington, current and former officials say.

Even as Haiti spiraled into violence and political upheaval, they say, few in the Trump administration took seriously Mr. Moïse's repeated warnings that he faced plots against his life. And as warnings of his authoritarianism intensified, the Biden administration kept up its public support for Mr. Moïse's claim to power, even after Haiti's Parliament emptied out in the absence of elections and Mr. Moïse ruled by decree.



President Donald Trump welcomed Mr. Moïse and other Caribbean leaders to his Mar-a-Lago resort in March 2019. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

When Mr. Moïse was assassinated this month, it left a gaping leadership void that set off a scramble for power with the few elected officials remaining. The United States, which has held enormous sway in Haiti since invading the country more than 100 years ago, was suddenly urged to send in troops and help fix the mess.

But in interviews with more than a dozen current and former officials, a common refrain emerged: Washington bore part of the blame, after brushing off or paying little attention to clear warnings that Haiti was lurching toward mayhem, and possibly making things worse by publicly supporting Mr. Moïse.

“It was predictable that something would happen,” said Senator Patrick Leahy, of Vermont. “The message that we send by standing alongside these people is that we think they are legitimate representatives of the Haitian people. They’re not.”

Critics say the American approach to Mr. Moïse followed a playbook the United States has used around the world for decades, often with major consequences for democracy and human rights: reflexively siding with or tolerating leaders accused of authoritarian rule because they advance American interests, or because officials fear instability in their absence.

Mr. Moïse’s grip on power tightened notably under Mr. Trump, who spoke admiringly of a range of foreign autocrats. Mr. Trump was also bent on keeping Haitian migrants out of the United States (they “all have AIDS,” American officials recounted him saying). To the extent that Trump officials focused on Haitian politics at all, officials say, it was mainly to enlist the country in Mr. Trump’s campaign to oust his nemesis in the region: Venezuela’s leader, Nicolás Maduro.



President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela in Caracas in 2018. Miraflores Palace, via Reuters

The Biden administration arrived in January consumed by the pandemic and a surge of migrants at the border with Mexico, leaving little bandwidth for the tumult convulsing Haiti, officials say. It publicly continued the Trump administration policy that Mr. Moïse was the legitimate leader, infuriating some members of Congress with a stance that one senior Biden official now calls a mistake.

“Moïse is pursuing an increasingly authoritarian course of action,” Rep. Gregory Meeks, now the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a joint statement with two other Democrats in late December, warning of a repeat of the “anti-democratic abuses the Haitian people have endured” in the past.

“We will not stand idly by while Haiti devolves into chaos,” they said.

In a February letter to Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, they and other lawmakers called on the United States to “unambiguously reject” the push by Mr. Moïse, who had already ruled by decree for a year, to stay in power. They urged the Biden administration to push for “a legitimate transitional government” to help Haitians determine their own future and emerge from “a cascade of economic, public health, and political crises.”

But Mr. Biden’s top adviser on Latin America, Juan Gonzalez, said that at the time, the administration did not want to appear to be dictating how the turmoil should be resolved.



Rep. Gregory Meeks during a hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs after testimony from Secretary of State Antony Blinken in March. Pool photo by Ken Cedeno

“Tipping our finger on the scale in that way could send a country that was already in a very unstable situation into crisis,” Mr. Gonzalez said.

Past American political and military interventions into Haiti have done little to solve the country’s problems, and have sometimes created or aggravated them. “The solution to Haiti’s problems are not in Washington; they are in Port-au-Prince,” Haiti’s capital, Mr. Gonzalez said, so the Biden administration called for elections to take place before Mr. Moïse left office.

“The calculus we made was the best decision was to focus on elections to try to use that as a way to push for greater freedom,” he added.

In reality, critics say, the Biden administration was already tipping the scales by publicly supporting Mr. Moïse’s contention that he had another year in office, enabling him to preside over the drafting of a new Constitution that could significantly enhance the president’s powers.

Mr. Moïse was certainly not the first leader accused of autocracy to enjoy Washington’s backing; he was not even the first in Haiti. Two generations of brutal Haitian dictators from the Duvalier family were among a long list of strongmen around the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and elsewhere who received resolute American support, particularly as allies against Communism.

“He may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch,” President Franklin Delano Roosevelt supposedly said of one of them (though accounts vary about whether the president was referring to American-backed dictators in Nicaragua or in the Dominican Republic).



Supporters of the former dictators held photos of Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier during a court hearing in Port-au-Prince in 2013. Dieu Nalio Chery/Associated Press

The debate has continued in both Democratic and Republican administrations about how hard to push authoritarian allies for democratic reforms. Once the threat of Communist expansionism faded, American administrations worried more about instability creating crises for the United States, like a surge of migrants streaming toward its shores or the rise of violent extremism.

Elliott Abrams, a foreign policy official in multiple Republican administrations and a special representative on Venezuela in the Trump administration, argued that Washington should support democracy when possible but sometimes has few alternatives to working with strongmen.

“In Haiti, no one has developed a good formula for building a stable democracy, and the U.S. has been trying since the Marines landed there a hundred years ago,” he said.

Early on in the Trump administration, Omarosa Manigault Newman, a former co-star on “The Apprentice” and new adviser to the president, began pressing Mr. Trump and his aides to engage with Haiti and support Mr. Moïse.

Officials were wary. Haiti supported Venezuela at two meetings of the Organization of American States in 2017, turning Mr. Moïse into what one official called an enemy of the United States and scuttling her efforts to arrange a state visit by him.

The Assassination of Haiti's President

- **An assassination strikes a troubled nation:** The killing of President Jovenel Moïse on July 7 has rocked Haiti, stoking fear and confusion about the future. While there is much we do know about this event, there's still much we don't know.
- **A figure at the center of the plot:** Questions are swirling over the arrest of Dr. Christian Emmanuel Sanon, 63, a doctor with ties to Florida described as playing a central role in the death of the president.
- **More suspects:** Two Americans are among at least 20 people who have been detained thus far. Several of the people under investigation met in the months before the killing to discuss rebuilding the country once the president was out of power, Haitian police said.
- **Years of instability:** The assassination of Mr. Moïse comes after years of instability in the country, which has long suffered lawlessness, violence and natural disasters.

“I believed that a state visit between Mr. Trump and Mr. Moïse would have been a strong show of support for Haiti from the U.S. during a time of civil unrest,” Ms. Newman said, adding in a separate statement: “Jovenel was a dear friend and he was committed to being a change agent for his beloved Haiti.”



Mr. Moïse just after being sworn in as president of Haiti in February 2017. Dieu Nalio Chery/Associated Press

The episode underscored the degree to which some top Trump officials viewed Haiti as just a piece of its strategy toward Venezuela. And in the eyes of some lawmakers, Mr. Trump was not going to feel empathy for Haiti's problems.

"We are all aware of his perception of the nation — in that he spoke about 's-hole' countries," said Rep. Yvette Clarke of New York, a co-chair of the House Haiti Caucus.

By 2019, nationwide protests grew violent in Haiti as demonstrators demanding Mr. Moïse's ouster clashed with the police, burned cars and marched on the national palace. Gang activity became increasingly brazen, and kidnappings spiked to an average of four a week.

Mr. Trump and his aides showed few public signs of concern. In early 2019, Mr. Trump hosted Mr. Moïse at his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, as part of a meeting with Caribbean leaders who had lined up against Mr. Maduro of Venezuela.

By the next year, Mr. Moïse's anti-democratic practices grew serious enough to command the attention of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who publicly warned Mr. Moïse against delaying parliamentary elections.



A Haitian police officer aimed his weapon at protesters who were calling for the resignation of President Moïse in Port-au-Prince in 2019. Rebecca Blackwell/Associated Press

But beyond a few statements, the Trump administration did little to force the issue, officials said.

"No one did anything to address the underlying weaknesses, institutionally and democratically," over the past several years, said Peter Mulrean, who served as the American ambassador to Haiti from 2015 to 2017. "And so we shouldn't really be surprised that the lid blew off again."

After Mr. Biden's election, lawmakers and officials in Washington took up the issue with new urgency. Mr. Moïse, who came to office after a vote marred by low turnout and allegations of fraud, had been ruling by decree for a year because the terms of nearly all members of Parliament had expired and elections to replace them were never held.

Mr. Moïse won a five-year term in 2016, but did not take office until 2017 amid the allegations of fraud, so he argued that he should stay until 2022. Democracy advocates in Haiti and abroad cried foul, but on Feb. 5, the Biden administration weighed in, supporting Mr. Moïse's claim to power for another year. And it was not alone: International bodies like the Organization of American States took the same position.



Port-au-Prince at dusk last week. Federico Rios for The New York Times

Mr. Blinken later criticized Mr. Moïse's rule by decree and called for "genuinely free and fair elections this year." But the Biden administration never withdrew its public position upholding Mr. Moïse's claim to remain in office, a decision that Rep. Andy Levin, a co-chair of the House Haiti Caucus, blamed for helping him retain his grip on the country and continue its anti-democratic slide.

"It's a tragedy that he was able to stay there," Mr. Levin said.

The Biden administration has rebuffed calls by Haitian officials to send troops to help stabilize the country and prevent even more upheaval. A group of American officials recently visited to meet with various factions now vying for power and urge them "to come together, in a broad political dialogue," Mr. Gonzalez said.

The Americans had planned to visit the port to assess its security needs, but decided against it after learning that gangs were occupying the area, blocking the delivery of fuel.

"How can we have elections in Haiti when gang members control 60 percent of the territory?" said Pierre Esperance, executive director of the Haitian National Human Rights Defense Network. "It will be gangs that organize the elections."

David Kirkpatrick contributed reporting.