
Global History/Haiti

Commemorate the 25th anniversary of the September 30, 1991 coup that continues to inform the present struggle of Haiti's people for democracy and justice.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER SEPTEMBER 30, 1991?

It is a battle of memory against forgetfulness, because we think that we cannot build the democracy we want for this country if we continue to erase what happened. It is impossible. – Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine

September 30th marks the 25th anniversary of the coup that overthrew Haiti's first democratically-elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was the candidate of Haiti's popular movement Lavalas in the 1990 presidential election. He won with 67% of the vote.

Aristide's Feb. 7, 1991 inauguration marked a huge victory for Haiti's poor majority after decades living under the Duvalier family dictatorship and military rule. The inauguration signaled the participation of the poor in a new social order. This radical change was represented by Aristide's first act as President when he invited several hundred street children and homeless to join him for the inaugural breakfast at the National Palace.

A brave young democracy set out to reverse centuries of exclusion of Haiti's poor majority in the country's political, economic and social life against a backdrop of right wing death squads and a corrupt Haitian military tied to former dictators and Haiti's wealthy elite. Just four days before the inauguration, an orphanage founded by Aristide - *Lafanmi Selavi* - was torched, killing four street children.

The new administration began to implement programs in adult literacy, health care, and land redistribution; lobbied for a minimum wage hike; proposed new roads and infrastructure to create jobs. Aristide renounced his \$10,000 a month salary. He enforced taxes on the wealthy, dissolved the rural section chief infrastructure that empowered the *Ton Ton Macoute*. He denounced the treatment (akin to slavery) of Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic, and called for improved working conditions.

After the September 30th coup, Lavalas supporters turned out by the hundreds of thousands to defend the constitutional government. They were brutally suppressed, starting on the eve of Sept 30th when National Police Chief Lt. Col. Michel Francois led busloads of soldiers to the Champs de Mars where they machine gunned hundreds of protesters gathered in front of the National Palace. Francois would later be convicted *in absentia* for the 1993 murder of Antoine Izemery, a prominent businessman and supporter of Aristide who was dragged from a church in broad daylight and executed. Aristide's Justice Minister Guy Malary was murdered one month later.

Between the years 1991-1994, during the military regime headed by General Raoul Cedras, four to seven thousand supporters and activists of Lavalas would be killed; others savagely tortured; rape as a political weapon was widespread; thousands fled or were driven into hiding. Poor neighborhoods were particularly targeted, as was the *Ti Legliz* (little church) – an important sector

of the grassroots movement. Anti-coup journalists and radio stations were attacked. Haitian elites and the coup regime, with the support of US intelligence agencies, backed the formation of a violent paramilitary organization known as FRAPH, which emerged in August 1993. FRAPH operated as a death squad, and was responsible for thousands of deaths and human rights violations. Its leaders like Louis-Jodel Chamblain, associate of Guy Philippe, still operate freely in Haiti.

No commemoration of September 30th would be complete without remembering Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, a psychologist and leading Lavalas spokesperson who was kidnapped and disappeared in Port-au-Prince in 2007. Lovinsky founded the *Fondasyon Trant Septanm* organization dedicated to justice for the victims of the September 30th coup and the release of political prisoners. He remains forever present at the forefront of Haiti's struggle for justice and democracy.

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