

Preface

Everybody's worried about stopping terrorism. Well, there's a really easy way: stop participating in it.

—Noam Chomsky¹

One of the most striking things about the 2004 coup is the vigorously political role played by ... NGOs, charities and human rights groups [which] so often disguise their political impact behind an ostensibly neutral and principled if not moral façade. If you can't trust a non-governmental charity then what can you trust?

—Peter Hallward²

This book was born in Haiti.

In the closing days of February 2004, Haiti's democratically-elected government was removed in a bloody coup d'état. U.S. Marines forced President Jean-Bertrand Aristide onto a State Department plane and exiled him to the Central African Republic. Elected officials at every level of government associated with Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas—Haiti's most popular political party—were removed from their posts. Over the next two years, a violent, unelected regime ruled Haiti. This episode saw thousands of Haitians killed, and thousands more imprisoned or forced into hiding.*

Haiti had burst onto the headlines in the months preceding the coup, but it disappeared from the media's attention shortly thereafter. U.S., French and Canadian troops were in control of the country as it descended into a nightmare of bloodshed and deepening poverty. But with hardly any questioning of U.S. claims that President Aristide had voluntarily resigned, foreign intervention was absolved of any responsibility for the situation. Journalists wearily described Haiti as experiencing yet another cycle of internecine violence and chaos and the news media quickly lost interest.

* For a detailed account of the events surrounding the February 2004 coup in Haiti, see Peter Hallward's *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*.

In 2003, we knew little about Haiti. But as the coup unfolded, we began to dig deeper, trying to understand what was going on and how Canada was involved. Following events in Haiti during the 2004-2006 period served as a crash course in Haitian politics and introduced us to the dark side of Canadian foreign policy. What we discovered was probably Canada's worst foreign policy crime in the last 50 years. Even more shocking, though, was the role that Canadian development NGOs played in the sordid affair.

Canada's Participation in the Terror Campaign

The Canadian government was deeply involved in every aspect of the coup. Along with the U.S. and the European Union, Canada had cut off aid to the Fanmi Lavalas government while funding its opponents. Even worse, Canada participated in the planning and execution of the toppling of the government and the kidnapping of Aristide. On the night of the coup, 125 Canadian troops were on the ground in Port-au-Prince, securing the airport from which U.S. soldiers would fly Aristide into exile. Canada helped to install the new, unelected regime and provided it with hundreds of millions of aid dollars. Perhaps most shameful of all, Canadian troops and police officers dispatched to Haiti were actively supporting the repression.†

With full diplomatic and financial backing from Canada, the interim regime set about mercilessly persecuting those calling for the return of democracy. Supporters of the government, in particularly those in the strongly pro-Lavalas *quartiers populaires* of Port-au-Prince suffered massacres, summary executions, violent and indiscriminate raids on poor neighborhoods, and arbitrary mass arrests. Police attacked journalists and shot and killed peaceful demonstrators on numerous occasions.

Victims were overwhelmingly residents of the slums, whose votes had twice propelled Aristide to the Presidency. Aristide enjoyed strong support from Haiti's poor majority due to his moves to redistribute wealth, raise minimum wages and increase social spending, but these same policies had angered the country's light-skinned elite—and their foreign business partners, which included major Canadian multinationals. Thanks to its desperately poor population, Haiti was (and still is today) seen as an ideal export platform to the North American market, especially for labour-intensive industries like textiles and apparel manufacturing benefiting

† For a concise critique of Canada's role in the coup, see Yves Engler and Anthony Fenton's *Canada in Haiti*.

from its low-wage workforce. Aristide's mildly reformist agenda, however, frustrated the full implementation of what some Haiti scholars have called the "sweatshop model of development."³

Our Involvement

In the face of this Canada-backed repression, we felt we had to act. Our sentiment at the time was summed up by Noam Chomsky's formulation:

Suppose you're living in a free, democratic society, with lots of privilege, enormous, incomparable freedoms, and the government carries out violent, brutal acts. Are you responsible for it? Yeah, a lot more responsible, because there's a lot that you can do about it. If you share responsibility in criminal acts, you are liable for the consequences.⁴

We became involved in a small but growing Haiti solidarity movement in Canada. In early 2005, we formed Haiti Action Montreal, to fight for the restoration of Haiti's democracy and to stir up opposition to the suffering inflicted by our government's foreign policy. We met up with members of Montreal's Haitian community opposed to the coup and began organizing demonstrations and pickets to draw attention to the situation. We hosted public film screenings, distributed leaflets at public events, and conducted a city-wide sticker campaign calling on the Canadian government to end its support for the regime. We linked up with other solidarity groups across the country and formed the Canada-Haiti Action Network to coordinate our efforts nationwide.

We lobbied and pressured politicians responsible for the Haiti dossier. We pressed them to publicly acknowledge what was going on, in an attempt to build up political pressure that might force them to reverse course. We met with then-Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew in February 2005 at his constituency office and presented him a human rights report from University of Miami Law School documenting the repression occurring in Haiti. When journalists later asked about human rights abuses in Haiti, Pettigrew scornfully dismissed the report—whose findings were corroborated by multiple sources—as “propaganda which is absolutely not interesting.”⁵

We also began to develop links with those in Haiti resisting the coup, as members of our network traveled to Haiti, at times informally and at times as part of organized delegations. In December 2004, our colleague and Haiti Action Montreal co-founder Yves Engler visited Port-au-Prince

and nearby cities. He traveled to the Petionville Women's Prison where, among others, he spoke with Annette "So Ann" Auguste, a folk singer and political activist jailed for her support of Fanmi Lavalas. During the coup, the prison system was packed with hundreds—if not thousands—of political prisoners like Auguste, including Lavalas presidential candidate Father Gerard Jean-Juste. Both were jailed for their political activities by the Canada-backed regime and subsequently named "prisoners of conscience" by Amnesty International.

While Auguste and other Haitians fighting for democracy languished in jail, Prime Minister Paul Martin flatly denied their existence, declaring during a November 2004 trip that there were no political prisoners in Haiti. Denis Coderre, Liberal MP and Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on Haiti, was particularly hypocritical on the matter of political prisoners, claiming that "Canada would not get involved in Haiti's justice system." In fact, Canada was already deeply involved in the functioning of Haiti's justice system. Deputy Justice Minister Philippe Vixamar, for instance, was a direct employee of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Canadian government's official aid agency. Although officially a political appointee of the unelected regime, Vixamar told human rights investigators that he had been assigned to his position by the Agency, with his salary paid by Canadian tax dollars.⁶

Yves also met with Jeremy, a Haitian youth who had worked with a children's radio station set up by Fanmi Lavalas. Jeremy spoke of how his aunt was killed by police officers. His story was far from unique. Under the direction of the Canada-backed regime, police and paramilitary thugs had unleashed a wave of violence not seen since the dark days of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986).⁷ In one of the few detailed accounts to find its way into the corporate press, the *Miami Herald* wrote:

The police carried assault rifles and wore black masks. The gang they accompanied had brand-new machetes. According to witnesses and UN investigators, they stormed into a soccer match during halftime, ordered everyone to lie on the ground and began shooting and hacking people to death in broad daylight as several thousand spectators fled for their lives. ... Some were handcuffed and shot in the head by police, witnesses said. Others were hacked to death.⁸

The officers carrying out these atrocities were likely trained by RCMP officers, who "monitored, mentored, trained and vetted" personnel for the

regime's overhauled police force, one of the most significant perpetrators of violence in the post-coup period.⁹

NGOs Back the Coup

One of our main goals was to counter the media blackout and government denials by getting accurate information to the public. With Canada's complicity in Haiti's human rights cataclysm all but ignored by the corporate media, much of our time and energy went into researching, writing and publishing articles about Canada's negative role in the independent media. Following his trip to Haiti, Yves submitted an article about *So Ann* and Jeremy's stories to the *Journal d'Alternatives*, a widely-circulated monthly newspaper produced by Alternatives, a Montreal-based NGO. Yves' article was accepted, and even translated into French, but was never published. What Alternatives did publish was shocking.

In June 2005, Alternatives staff member François L'Écuyer wrote an article for the *Journal d'Alternatives* that did not once mention the political repression against Lavalas supporters. Instead, the article demonized the residents of impoverished neighbourhoods targeted for repression by the installed government. In particular, L'Écuyer denounced community activists Ronald St. Jean and Samba Boukman as "notorious criminals."¹⁰ We had met Ronald St. Jean in March 2005 when he came to Montreal to speak at Concordia University. St. Jean was head of the *Comité de Défense du Peuple Haïtien* (CDPH—Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Haitian People), which worked to defend the rights of political prisoners. Other members of the Canada-Haiti Action Network had met with Samba Boukman, a dedicated community activist from Bel-Air, one of the strongly pro-Lavalas neighborhoods of the capital victimized by the Haitian police. Both men were dedicated to non-violent resistance to the coup and were outspoken critics of the human rights violations that followed. Neither had a criminal record. At the time of L'Écuyer's writing, activists were regularly being killed and posthumously labeled "bandits." In the article, there was an unmistakable echo of the position of the Canadian government.

The article threw our assumptions about NGOs into question. Before the coup, we had expected Alternatives and other like-minded NGOs to be allies, given their involvement in the anti-globalization movement of the late 1990s. Alternatives described itself as working for "democratic rights and human dignity," and seeking to bring about a world where "solidarity, cooperation, respect for the environment, participatory

democracy and peace are truly valued.”¹¹ Alternatives had been endorsed by Noam Chomsky, a strong critic of the coup d'état in Haiti, as well as prominent Canadian and Québécois political and cultural figures, such as Margaret Atwood, Judy Rebick, Naomi Klein and Amir Khadir. Although Alternatives printed numerous articles about Haiti during the coup years, not once did these articles criticize Canada's role.

In August 2005, members of Haiti Action Montreal attended the Alternatives conference “Haiti: A democracy to construct,” with the intent of raising the issue of Canada's role in the country. The invited panelists avoided almost any concrete references the political situation in Haiti, and did not mention the coup d'état or the ongoing bloodshed, never mind Canada's support for both. When we raised the issue of systemic political repression during question period, Alternatives Executive Director at the time Pierre Beaudet flatly denied that supporters of the government were being persecuted, dismissing examples given as exceptional cases. Another panelist sneered that we had been “intoxicated by propaganda.” Again, the echo of the government's position was hard to miss.

We initiated a letter-writing campaign calling on Alternatives to acknowledge the well-documented campaign of repression. We were supported by a number of former Alternatives *stagiaires* (volunteers), as well as author and journalist Naomi Klein, who withdrew her support for Alternatives in protest of their position on Haiti. Throughout the grim years that followed the coup, however, Alternatives remained silent on the murders and human rights abuses committed by the unelected regime and its RCMP-trained police force.

The position of Alternatives was not idiosyncratic. All of the major Canadian NGOs working in Haiti were either silent on the situation or openly hostile to Haitians seeking the return of the democratic government. None criticized the interim regime's bloody war on the slums or the support given to this endeavour by Canada. Many positively cheered the toppling of a democratically elected government and the accompanying bloody repression. Our opponents in the struggle turned out to be the same organizations we had first looked to for support.

It was a shocking realization to make. How could so many groups support a coup against an elected government despite their stated commitments to democracy? Why did they deny or whitewash the serious human rights abuses committed by the interim government? Why did they totally ignore Canada's key role in orchestrating the coup and the violence that followed?

A glimmer of understanding came when we learned that CIDA had awarded Alternatives part of a \$5 million contract for media work in Haiti. Once again, Alternatives was not alone; the overthrow of Haiti's government had produced a gusher of CIDA contracts for Canadian NGOs. Development NGOs working in Haiti received substantial funding from the Canadian government, and in the years leading up to the coup, many Canadian NGOs had served as conduits for channeling resources to opponents of the Aristide government. CIDA funding for NGO work increased substantially after the coup.

This raised a series of new, different questions: how common are these kinds of funding ties between government agencies like CIDA and development NGOs? And what impact do they have on what NGOs do abroad and say at home? Questions such as these led us to write this book.