Haitian politics remained turbulent in 2009. Following a vote of no confidence by the parliament, Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis was forced from her post in October after only a year in office. President Rene Preval named planning minister Jean-Max Bellerive as her replacement, and the appointment was quickly ratified by the parliament.

Since gaining independence from France in 1804 following a slave revolt, the Republic of Haiti has endured a history of poverty, violence, instability, and dictatorship. A 1986 military coup ended 29 years of rule by the Duvalier family, and the army held power for most of the next eight years. Under international pressure, the military in 1987 permitted the implementation of a French-style constitution, which remains in place today.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a popular former priest, was first elected president in 1990. He was deposed and exiled by a military triumvirate after only eight months in office. While paramilitary thugs terrorized the populace, the ruling junta engaged in blatant narcotics trafficking. The United States and the United Nations imposed a trade and oil embargo, and in 1994 the United Nations authorized a multinational force to restore the legitimate Haitian authorities. In September 1994, facing an imminent U.S. invasion, the military rulers stepped down. U.S. troops took control of the country, and Aristide was reinstated. He dismantled the military before the June 1995 parliamentary elections, but his support began to fracture when international observers questioned the legitimacy of the balloting. Aristide retained the backing of the more radical Lavalas Family (FL) party, which won an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

The FL nominated Rene Preval, who had been Aristide’s prime minister in 1991, as its next presidential candidate, despite the fact that he was not a party member. Preval won the 1995 election and took office in February 1996. The United Nations had planned to withdraw its troops by the end of the month, but the new U.S.-trained Haitian National Police (HNP) lacked the competence to fill the void. The UN force extended its stay at Preval’s urging, but cut its presence to 1,300 troops by June; the U.S. combat force had withdrawn two months earlier.
Aristide was voted back into the presidency in November 2000. The election was boycotted by all major opposition parties and held amid widespread civil unrest and voter intimidation. Aristide ran on a populist platform of economic revitalization; opponents claimed that he was bent on establishing a one-party state. His win with nearly 92 percent of the ballots followed similar results in that year’s parliamentary elections, which gave his supporters 80 percent of the seats in the lower house and all but one seat in the upper house.

Despite the electoral victory, Aristide’s second term as president was undermined by business elites and opposition groups who banded together to oppose him. Furthermore, foreign donors had cut their aid programs in 2000 when a standoff between Aristide and his opponents delayed the elections, and poverty had worsened. An armed revolt, led by a combination of political gangs and former army officers, threatened the president’s hold on power in February 2004. The United States and France declined to send peacekeepers in the absence of a political settlement between Aristide and opposition groups. Faced with the possibility of a violent ouster, Aristide was spirited out of the country in a plane chartered by the United States and deposited in the Central African Republic. He denounced the circumstances of his departure, but eventually accepted exile in South Africa.

Aristide’s sudden resignation was quickly papered over by a constitutional transition that elevated Boniface Alexandre, head of the Supreme Court, to the position of president. Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, an Aristide ally, agreed to remain in office to help the transition process, but was later jailed by the interim government. Political decay continued throughout the rest of the country. In March 2004, Gerard Latortue, a former foreign minister and longtime UN official, was named interim prime minister. Meanwhile, the UN peacekeeping force gradually expanded beyond the capital and was renewed with troop contributions from Brazil and other Latin American countries. The force eventually reached 9,000 troops and civilian police, and the United Nations extended its mandate several times.

Haitian electoral authorities held presidential and legislative elections in February 2006, with a second round of parliamentary elections in April. Despite initial turbulence when some polling stations opened late, the voting was deemed the cleanest and fairest in Haitian history, and turnout surpassed 50 percent. The elections yielded evidence of both political consensus and continued fragmentation. Former president Preval won a second term with 51 percent of the vote, triumphing over at least 33 other contenders, but his newly organized Lespwa party failed to win a majority in either house of parliament. Lespwa captured just over a third of the Senate seats and a quarter of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In December 2006, municipal elections were held successfully, along with a final round of voting to decide a handful of unresolved parliamentary races. Security improved the following year after UN forces cracked down on gangs in the capital.
Haiti entered a period of turmoil when the parliament forced out Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis amid rising food prices in April 2008 and then rejected the president’s two initial nominees to replace him. Michele Pierre-Louis was finally approved as a compromise candidate in September, but she was dismissed by parliament in October 2009 following a contentious debate over allegations that hurricane recovery funds had been misspent, though the charge was never proven. Despite fears that Pierre-Louis’s removal would spark new instability, the nomination and confirmation of her replacement, former planning minister Jean-Max Bellerive, occurred within two weeks, marking a succession that was surprisingly orderly. Elections to replace one third of the Haitian Senate were held in April, with a run-off in June, amid widespread disinterest and low voter turnout; Lespwa won five of the eleven seats contested in the run-off, thereby maintaining a legislative plurality in the parliament’s upper chamber.

In order to ensure the country’s stability in the short-term, the UN Security Council extended the peacekeeping force’s mandate until October 2010.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Haiti is an electoral democracy. In 2006, citizens changed their government in the most credible elections since 1990. The country’s 1987 constitution provides for a president elected for a five-year term, a National Assembly composed of the 30-member Senate and the 99-member Chamber of Deputies, and a prime minister appointed by the president. Senators are elected for six-year terms, with one-third coming up for election every two years, and deputies for four-year terms. There are no legislative term limits, but the president cannot serve consecutive terms. Many lawmakers remain sorely short of financial and administrative resources, and the parliament itself has played a largely reactive role in government, either opposing or accepting initiatives from the executive branch.

The legislature is currently divided among several small parties, with no single faction holding a majority. Most parties are driven by personality or support from a particular region. President Rene Preval’s first-round election victory in 2006 helped to sweep many candidates from his untested Lespwa party into the parliament, although the party’s grassroots support was not very substantial.

Endemic corruption continues to hobble Haiti’s political and economic development. A number of lawmakers elected in 2006 have reportedly been involved in criminal activities, and they sought parliament seats primarily to obtain immunity from prosecution. Preval identified the fight against corruption as a major priority, demanding full disclosure of financial records for top government officials. Haiti was ranked 168 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of the press has been constrained by the absence of a viable judicial system and widespread insecurity, and violence against journalists remains a problem. Media outlets tend to practice self-censorship to avoid violent retribution...
for critical reporting. Haiti has two main newspapers, *Le Nouvelliste* and *Le Matin*, each with print runs of about 15,000. About five people are estimated to read each copy, which brings their total readership to about 75,000, including both Haitians and expatriates living in Haiti. The country also has three weekly news bulletins: the middle-of-the road *Haiti en Marche*, the left-wing *Haiti Progres*, and the conservative *Haiti Observateur*. More than 90 percent of Haitians have access to radio, and more than 290 stations operate without a license on FM bandwidth. There are more than 70 community radio stations, often linked with political groups or parties. Television stations, by contrast, are far less common, with about 20 in Port-au-Prince and another 15 in the provinces. Several television stations have been established in recent years by radio station and newspaper owners seeking to increase their influence, but the total television audience in Haiti is below 10 percent due to lack of electricity and resources.

The government generally respects religious and academic freedoms. However, the absence of an effective police force means that there is little protection for those who are persecuted for their views.

 Freedoms of assembly and association, including labor rights, are not respected in practice. Haiti has rich civil society traditions at the local level, but many of its formally organized civil society groupings have been co-opted by political and economic elites. Unions are too weak to engage in collective bargaining, and their organizing efforts are undermined by the country’s high unemployment rate. In 2009, parliament ratified new labor regulations, including a stratified minimum wage system for the commercial and industrial sectors and minimum health and safety standards. Still, the minimum wage increases applied to only a small segment of the population, and enforcement of standards remained weak.

The judicial system continues to be corrupt, inefficient, and dysfunctional. It is burdened by a large backlog of cases, outdated legal codes, and poor facilities. Moreover, official business is conducted in French rather than Creole. Prison conditions are harsh, and the ponderous legal system guarantees lengthy pretrial detentions. In 2009, Amnesty International estimated that Haitian authorities are holding thousands of people without charge, mainly due to poor judicial functioning.

Haiti’s police force virtually collapsed during the 2004 uprising and is only slowly evolving into a cohesive organization. Hundreds of police officers suspected of corruption have been purged from the HNP, and new recruitment and training expanded the total police force from 5,700 officers in 2006 to more than 11,000 in 2009, though the force was still far short of its target of 15,000 officers. Haiti’s current police chief is well respected and has made important strides in purging corrupt officers and training new recruits. The UN peacekeeping force has helped to establish a minimum level of security in some parts of the country, but the HNP remains unprepared to take over in the peacekeepers’ absence.
The trafficking of drugs and people remained a serious problem in 2009. There is widespread violence against women and children in Haiti. Up to 300,000 children serve in restavec ("live with," in Creole), a form of unpaid domestic labor with a long history in the country.

*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click here for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*