

## Haiti Overview

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## Environment

The Republic of Haiti occupies the western third of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the [Dominican Republic](#) (DR). Haiti is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south by the Caribbean Sea, and on the west by the Windward Passage. On the east a 360 km border separates it from the Dominican Republic. Haiti also possesses a number of smaller islands including La Gonâve, La Tortue (Tortuga), Les Cayemites, Île de Anacaona and La Grande Caye. The total area of the country is 27,750 sq km.

## Peoples

Main languages: Creole, French

Main religions: Christianity (Roman Catholic), syncretic African religions (voodoo)

The overwhelming majority of the population (95 per cent)<sup>[1]</sup> of Haiti is predominantly of African descent.

The rest of the population is mostly of mixed European-African ancestry (mulatto). There are a few people of Syrian and Lebanese origin. There is also a community of Europeans of Polish origin and a small minority of people from the Dominican Republic. Most of the country's population is concentrated in the rural coastal plains, and valleys and in the urban areas.

A small light-skinned wealthy business and professional elite located in the capital city controls most of Haiti's economy and decision-making. The mulatto population makes up half of this elite. Most Dominicans are prosperous and are active in business, as are many Syrian and Lebanese who are involved with trading.

The large black majority is excluded from all formal political and economic participation. Most of them live in rural areas and have little contact with the capital city. Most farm small low-yielding subsistence agricultural plots or grow cash crops like coffee, most of which is for export. The bulk of good farmland is devoted to large plantations of sugar cane, sisal, cotton and rice. The urban portion of the majority Haitian population is mainly involved in the informal economy or, if formally employed, then mostly in manufacturing, the service industries and tourism.

Haiti's official languages are French and Kreyòl Ayisyen (Haitian Creole). Nearly all Haitians speak Kreyòl Ayisyen, with French being spoken by the small group of educated people. Many Haitians also speak English and Spanish, particularly due to the proximity of the Dominican Republic and Cuba and the extent of travel and trade between the nations.

Catholicism is the formal state religion and there is a considerable Protestant minority. The largely African-based religious system known as Voudon is recognized as an official religion and is practised by a majority of the population. Voudon incorporates African, Taíno-Arawak ancestors and those of the Catholic saints in a syncretistic spiritual structure. Due to centuries of demonization by formal churches and stereotyping and ridicule by the secular world, most of the population prefers to conceal their simultaneous adherence to this faith.

## **History**

### **Pre-Columbian**

The original inhabitants of the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti/DR) were the indigenous Taíno, an Arawak-speaking people who began arriving from the Yucatan peninsula as early as 4000 BCE.

Joined later by successive additional waves of indigenous groups from the Orinoco/Amazon region of South America (present-day Venezuela) the Taíno settled all across the Caribbean and became known as the Island Arawaks.

The name Haiti is derived from the indigenous Taíno-Arawak name for the entire island of Hispaniola, which they called Ay-ti 'land of mountains'.

It was Christopher Columbus who renamed it La Isla Española ('The Spanish Island') when he arrived in 1492. This later evolved into the name Hispaniola.

### **Spanish colonial settlement**

The Spanish were slow to settle the island. The Taíno-Arawak destroyed the first Spanish settlement and Spanish attempts to obtain gold using Taíno labour after 1502 proved unprofitable. There was continued indigenous resistance and Taíno-Arawak who were not killed disappeared into the remote mountains.

Spanish establishment of sugar plantations did not meet with long-term success. The Spanish introduced sugar cane from the Canary Islands after 1516 and the need for forced labour on the plantations led to a sharp increase in the importation of West Africans. It also led to the first major slave revolt in the Americas in 1522.

Enslaved West Africans (Wolof Muslims) led an uprising on the sugar plantation owned by Diego Colón, the son of Christopher Columbus. Many of the insurgents escaped to the mountains and formed the first independent African Maroon community in the New World. Thereafter, increasing numbers of imported Africans kept escaping into the island's interior and linked up with residual pockets of indigenous Taíno-Arawaks, creating expanding communities of African Maroons. By the 1530s, Maroon bands had become so dangerously pervasive that large armed groups were required for travel outside the fledgling Spanish plantations.

This led to a severe restriction on Spanish movement, which allowed British and French buccaneers and their indigenous guides to begin using the nearby island of La Tortue (Tortuga) and the western portion

of the island for hunting wild pigs and other animals to produce *bucan* (dried meat) for sale to passing ships.

France established direct control over Tortuga in the early 1600s and from there expanded to the north coast of Hispaniola.

### **French colonial settlement**

French settlement on Hispaniola began in 1625. In 1664 France formally claimed the western portion of the island, which they called Saint-Domingue. The French established large sugar and coffee plantations and over the years brought in millions of enslaved Africans to provide forced labour. These highly profitable operations soon made it the richest colony in the Western hemisphere.

Notoriously brutal plantation conditions ensured a short life-span for slaves, which resulted in regular replacement with fresh African captives and constant maroonage.

Thousands of Africans escaped into the remote mountain areas, established free Maroon settlements and interacted with communities of indigenous Taíno-Arawaks that existed well beyond French or Spanish control.

By 1790 (a year before the revolution) the colony's population totaled more than 500,000 enslaved African workers; 28,000 free '*gens de couleur*' (mostly Euro/African mixture) functioning as an intermediate class and about 30,000 Europeans (French), who held all political and economic control.

### **Haitian revolution**

In August 1791, enslaved Africans in the north rose in rebellion. The revolution spread quickly, eventually coming under the leadership of locally born Toussaint L'Ouverture who soon formed alliances with the free *gens de couleur* and the African Maroons.

By 1794 forces under Toussaint L'Ouverture had succeeded in overcoming the French colonial army, resisting invasions by British and Spanish forces, and had liberated the entire colony from French control. As a result of these unprecedented upheavals, Napoleon Bonaparte sent a contingent of French troops in 1801 to subdue the colony and reinforce slavery.

Toussaint L'Ouverture was captured and taken to France where he died in prison the next year. This caused the other revolutionary leaders Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Sabès Pétion and Henri Christophe, to resume the liberation war. The French forces were decimated and on 1 January 1804 the new nation declared independence. It became the second independent republic in the New World after the US and was called Haiti in recognition of the old Taíno-Arawak name.

In 1806 Dessalines was assassinated and, for the next decade, the northern part of Haiti was ruled by Christophe while the southern part was under the control of Alexandre Pétion.

Seeking to make Haiti an internationally respected black nation, Christophe revived sugar production using an unrelenting military system. This brought production back to up to two-thirds of pre-revolutionary levels, however it alienated his officers who mutinied causing Christophe to take his own life rather than face the rebellious generals.

Following Christophe's death in 1820 the northern and southern regions were reunited as the Republic of

Haiti under Jean-Pierre Boyer. When the Spanish-controlled western portion of the island sought to gain its own independence in 1821, Haitian forces invaded that colony and united the entire island of Hispaniola for the next 22 years (see [Dominican Republic](#))

## **Superpower sanctions**

The Haitian Revolution was a stunning development in the world of the nineteenth century, representing an inspiration for some and causing great trepidation in others. In an era convinced of black inferiority and highly dependent on slave labour, the stunning success of the revolution was seen by some as an unforgivable affront to European pre-eminence and prompted widespread calls for punitive measures.

Besides helping to inspire numerous slave revolts in the Caribbean and United States, the new republic was instrumental in hastening the eventual abolition of slavery. It widely supported the regional abolitionist cause. Among other actions, Haiti provided sanctuary and financing for Simón Bolívar and the ultimately successful Latin American revolution, on condition that he put an end to slavery in that region (see [Venezuela](#)).

Prompted by fears of the rapid spread of slave rebellions to other territories, all the slaveholding superpowers imposed a total blockade on Haiti, effectively isolating the new nation from participation in the international world.

France refused to recognize Haiti's independence for three decades, until it agreed to pay 150 million francs compensation for the French plantation owners' losses. The Vatican withdrew its priests and did not return them until 1860, when Santo Domingo relinquished its own independence to Spain (see [Dominican Republic](#)).

The reparations to France in 1833 plunged the government of Haiti deeply into debt and permanently crippled the country's economy. In 1844 the eastern two-thirds of the island became emboldened enough to declare its independence, becoming the Republic of Santo Domingo (today, the Dominican Republic).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Haiti was ruled by a series of short duration presidents reflecting an ongoing struggle for political pre-eminence between the mixed race mulatto urban minority and the large black rural majority with whom they did not identify. Moreover, under the ever-present burden of debt, the country's economy gradually came to be dominated by foreigners, particularly from Germany.

## **US involvement**

During the First World War (1915) the United States - then already in control of the Dominican Republic - invaded and occupied Haiti over concerns about the extent of German influence in the region. This initiated an era of direct US involvement in Haiti's affairs.

Under US occupation, infrastructure was built up, administrative systems introduced and government and industry centralized. However, this power shift from the provinces to the capital helped to usher in the destruction of the traditional African-based self-reliant socio-economic fabric of the country. Moreover it prompted an exodus from the countryside.

A war of resistance against these reforms initiated by Nationalist rebels (Cacos) in 1920 prompted the US-controlled government to create a National Guard that later became the infamous Armée d'Haiti (Haitian Army).

The US ended its occupation in 1934 leaving the country under the control of the mixed race minority centred in the capital, Port au Prince, with the US trained and equipped Armée d'Haiti ready to serve and protect their interests. It also left a space open for greater involvement in Haitian affairs of the Dominican Republic sugar industry.

Beginning in the late 1920s the first Haitian *braceros* or cane-cutters were taken across the border to work in the US-controlled Dominican sugar industry. By 1935 the census recorded a cross-border Haitian population of 50,000.

With the depression of the 1930s and a precipitous drop in sugar prices, a crisis developed. In response the Dominican dictator, General Rafael Trujillo, ordered the massacre of Haitian migrants by the armed forces of that country, leading to the deaths of between 20,000 and 25,000 Haitians.

Despite the massacre, subsequent Haitian governments signed contracts with the Dominican authorities, notably the State Sugar Council (CEA), allowing the recruitment of Haitian *braceros* in return for a per capita fee.

### **Militarization**

In 1946 following the military ousting of Elie Lescot, who had ruled since 1939, Dumarsais Estime succeeded in becoming the country's first black president since the American occupation. However, his efforts at reform sparked a Dominican Republic-sponsored crisis which led to his eventual resignation in 1950.

The Military Council of Government assumed control while steps were taken to prepare the country for universal suffrage and, in 1957, Dr François Duvalier ('Papa Doc') was elected by popular vote.

Duvalier's regime first attracted international criticism in the 1960s for its human rights violations. This included the harsh treatment of potential political adversaries by the Volunteers for National Security, the secret police organization, also known as the Tonton Macoutes.

Some anti-Duvalier elements chose to go into exile in the neighbouring Dominican Republic and already strained relations between the two countries deteriorated in 1963 when an anti-Duvalier military plot was exposed and crushed. Haitian police invaded the Dominican embassy to seize asylum seeking anti-government plotters, which led to a build-up of Dominican government troops on the Haitian border.

However, none of this stopped the continued recruitment of Haitian *braceros* to work in the Dominican sugar industry or the per capita fees that were paid in return.

Upon his death in 1971, Duvalier was succeeded by his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude Duvalier (nicknamed 'Baby Doc'), who was backed by a shadow cabinet. He was subsequently deposed in 1986 and allowed to go into exile.

### **Governance**

For centuries the effects of the virtual quarantine imposed on Haiti after the 1791 Revolution had been mainly confined to the impoverished and marginalized Haitian majority. Their existence continued to be of little concern to the international community as long as they stayed in territorial isolation. However, the situation began to change drastically following the death of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier.

The political oppression and deepening poverty into which the country slipped during the late 1970s and early 1980s stimulated an unprecedented exodus of Haitian refugees to the Bahamas and the US. It especially drew increased international attention to the country's internal situation.

### **Aristide's arrival**

A popular movement supported by local churches hastened the disintegration of the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime. In a strongly religious country, it was also partially inspired by the 1983 visit of Pope Jean Paul II, during which he forcefully advocated the need for change.

In December 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest, became the first democratically elected president in the history of Haiti. He was swept to power largely with the aid of a network of faith-based popular grassroots organizations. He earned two-thirds of the vote, defeating the internationally favoured rival Marc Bazin, a former World Bank official.

Aristide attempted progressive reforms, reduced corruption and trimmed state bureaucracy. The migrant labour agreement with the Dominican State Sugar Council (CEA) was also ended. The exodus of refugees virtually stopped and human rights violations were reduced to below previous levels,

However, his actions and populist stance seriously alarmed the elite and Aristide was soon deposed by a violent military coup just seven months after taking office.

### **Aristide's departure**

This ushered in three years of harsh military rule, including reprisals against grassroots political activists. The flow of refugees once again rose significantly. Many poured across the border into the Dominican Republic. Others risked their lives in unsafe overcrowded, boats and rough seas, heading directly or indirectly to the United States, Canada and other Caribbean territories.

In a move reminiscent of the nineteenth century, the US administration introduced a containing blockade against Haiti. The US Coast Guard intercepted many refugee boats while others were lost at sea. Of the thousands attempting to flee, more than half were sent back to Haiti.

With the crisis worsening, the United Nations also imposed broad sanctions to get the military to step down. However, this additional economic embargo, which included petroleum products, only increased the level of hardship for the Haitian majority. The number of Haitians fleeing the country in search of political asylum greatly increased, with some 20,000 attempting to reach US shores during 1994.

### **Aristide's return**

The political deadlock in Haiti ended in 1994 with an invasion of US Marines aimed at supporting Aristide's return to power. The Haitian Army generals went into exile as well as the Chief of Police who crossed into the Dominican Republic.

Aristide's return raised hopes for peace but not necessarily for economic improvement. The majority of the Haitian population continued to see their best hopes and prospects in continued economic emigration.

Much of Haiti's already limited infrastructure - including bridges, roads and port facilities - had deteriorated during the military regime. Moreover the international embargo had crippled an already

weak economy, driving it close to collapse.

The Armée d'Haiti was disbanded and elections held in 1995, in which René Préval, a former prime minister, was elected. However, social and political tensions remained and the imposed blockades continued in other ways.

The United States, which is Haiti's largest funder, froze economic aid, citing delays by Aristide's government in implementing economic reforms. These reforms involved the privatization of key state-owned companies such as banks, the electricity and telephone utilities, and the country's main port.

In 2001, despite weakened civil society aspirations, Aristide managed to be popularly re-elected and to hang on to office in the face of intense external pressure for reform.

Citing undemocratic behaviour, in 2003 the US government vetoed the delivery of US \$500 million in approved Inter-American Development Bank aid loans to Haiti. These social sector funds were earmarked specifically for improving education, health and clean water supply, all of which were aimed at the poor and marginalized Haitian majority.

### **Aristide's exit**

In February 2004, the Aristide government was once again impatiently ousted by rebels. Having already disbanded the army, the coup was undertaken by well-equipped urban gangs and demobilized soldiers of the former Armée d'Haiti, who began their invasion from a staging area very close to the Dominican border.

In the ensuing turmoil, Aristide was forced into exile under US escort. In the bicentennial anniversary year of Haiti's declaration of independence the United States once again sent in Marines to the territory. A multinational peacekeeping body eventually replaced US forces.

In February 2006 René Préval was re-elected, and he took office in May 2006.

## **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

### **Regional minority**

Even though it is numerically dominant, it can be argued that the position of the large African-descended population of Haiti is that of a 'beleaguered majority.'

Despite the triumph of the 1791 Haitian Revolution, the class and colour tensions, and disparaging stereotypes of Africans and their culture which originated during the period of colonial forced labour plantations have survived into the present.

The internal national socio-political environment has also served to make Haitians an exiled beleaguered minority group at the collective regional Caribbean level as well as internationally resulting in mass violations of Haitians' human rights through forced deportation under extreme and inhumane conditions, and discriminatory laws on immigration in receiving countries such as the US.

The United States has been accused of exercising racist and 'apartheid-like' immigration control measures which discriminate against Haitians by refusing to grant Temporary Protected Status to Haitian Refugees (TPS). TPS waives immigration restrictions on the victims of natural disasters and

political upheaval, both of which Haiti has experienced in the past two years. In contrast, observers point to the treatment meted out to Cuban refugees, who are generally allowed to stay in the country and apply for green cards after a year. The US Assistant Commissioner for Refugees, Asylum and Parole at the Immigration and Naturalization Service during the first Bush Administration recently admitted that US policies single out Haitians for 'undeniably harsher treatment'.

According to a report published by the *Chicago Tribune* (17 May 2007), in recent years US authorities have deported some 2,000 criminals of Haitian descent under a controversial policy that some Haitian officials have claimed is helping fuel a wave of kidnappings and other violent crimes in Haiti. The US has threatened to impose an aid embargo on Haiti if the government refuses to accept criminal deportees.

In the Dominican Republic, Haitians also continue to face serious violations of their human rights as refugees, with a recorded total of at least 20,000 arbitrary and mass deportations occurring in 2005 (see [Dominican Republic](#)).

### **Remittances**

During the past 20-year period of turmoil, thousands of economic and political refugees poured out of Haiti in any way they could. Ironically, as a result of this exodus it is calculated that most of the foreign reserves that now flow into Haiti's beleaguered economy come primarily from remittances repatriated by the sizeable expatriate community. This revenue includes local taxes on all the incoming phone calls they make to relatives back home.

### **In exile**

Exiled Haitians have now become significant and very visible minorities in several countries in the Western hemisphere, some in recognizable communities. Where permitted they have also increasingly become an integral part of their adopted countries. In 2006 Haitian-born journalist the Honorable Michelle Jean became the governor-general of Canada. Other widely respected figures of Haitian origin include the artists from the famous American rap group The Fugees - Wyclef Jean and Lauryn Hill, who through their music and politically fired lyrics have aimed to highlight the meaning of being a Haitian refugee or a person of African descent in the US on a daily basis.

Wyclef Jean has been active in his support of his native country and created the foundation Yéle Haïti to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to Haiti. He describes Yéle as a non-political organization which intends to empower the people of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora to rebuild their nation, and restore pride and reason to hope for the whole country. In January 2007, he became a roving ambassador for Haiti, to help improve its image abroad.

[1] CIA (2003).