

# The prey: citizens of Haiti

They call it the predatory state, a term that evokes images of a vulture ripping flesh from bone, oblivious to the suffering of its prey, intent only on its own survival.

BY RENE BRUEMMER, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 27, 2010

Sadly, in the case of Haiti, the image is apt and always has been. Since Christopher Columbus stumbled upon it more than 500 years ago, Haiti has existed to feed the needs of an avaricious few, to the detriment of the vast majority of its population. This began in its inception as a slave state and continued even after the slaves overthrew their colonial masters in 1804, as a small elite sprang up to control the reins of power and make sure their wealth and privilege would be protected.

What evolved was a governing system that exists to this day and is at the root of Haiti's perpetual misery -a ruling elite that seeks to control whichever government is in office and extract wealth from the state as quickly as possible before it is overthrown. Actual governance -putting in place institutions like a ministry of education so the children will be literate and employable, for instance, or promoting business or agriculture so the masses will have jobs and food -was never developed, and constant political instability means the government is still incapable of governing today.

This pattern of predatory governance is not exclusive to Haiti -leading economists note the majority of the world's nations work in a similar fashion, with a relatively small elite controlling power and most of the country's wealth. But the wealth is generally distributed back into the nation in some form of investment, and a civil service ensures basic needs like clean drinking water, roads and hospitals are provided and maintained, even as political parties come and go.

In Haiti, however, there is little to invest in, little local production to support, so money siphoned from the system is sent abroad. True governance is ignored or left to a disorganized hodgepodge of nongovernmental organizations, some that are effective, many run by corrupt members of Haiti's elite, none of them capable of forming a cohesive administration that can meet the needs of 9 million people.

What results is chaotic mass of political instability that permeates all aspects of Haitian life: Large corporations feel unfairly taxed or too frightened to invest; legitimate small and medium-sized businesses face competition from an informal sector that pays no taxes at all; the poorest citizens have lost faith in the government, or their own power to create change.

On the eve of tomorrow's national elections, considered by many to be the most important in a quarter-century, there is a deep fear the simmering rage and despair of the impoverished majority, long used to watching the venal nature of their elite and ineffectiveness of their government manifest itself in the slow starvation of their children, will erupt. A population now living amid a growing cholera epidemic and in the aftermath of the Jan. 12 earthquake that killed 230,000 and has forced 1.3 million to live in tents.

"If you know Haitian politics, protests are often groups of people paid to go out and make trouble," said Haitian-born Robert Fatton, a political-science professor at the University of Virginia and author of Haiti's Predatory Republic. "But there is a real popular frustration with the Haitian government and the international community for their inability to change current conditions that are really absolutely miserable for the vast majority of Haitians.

"The state is extremely fragile right now. There is resentment that could explode at any time ... and I don't know who will be able to control that."

Alongside the fear is resignation among many that regardless of the results, tomorrow's vote will do little to change the endless misery of Haitian life.

There is a popular depiction of Haiti as

a land of perpetual sorrow, fated to be the victim of tragedy after tragedy sent by bad luck, cruel Mother Nature or wrathful God. Not so, says author Mark Danner, who has written extensively on Haiti since 1986.

"There is nothing mystical in Haiti's pain, no inescapable curse that haunts the land," Danner wrote in The New York Times. "From independence and before, Haiti's harms have been caused by men, not demons. ... The earthquake was able to kill so many because of the corruption and weakness of the Haitian state, a state built for predation and plunder."

The predation began under European colonialists, with hundreds of thousands Africans imported to work themselves to death harvesting coffee and sugar from its rich soil. Perhaps even more cruelly, the exploitation continued once those slaves rose up and won independence from France in 1804 after a bloody 10-year rebellion. Independence for most of the population of half a million former slaves would not mean true freedom, as a small class of roughly 30,000 to 40,000 of the elite of society would take control. Most were mulattoes, the mixed-race progeny of colonialists and slaves who were given greater privileges, such as education, wealth and social status. Many were officers in the military. Originally rebellion leader Toussaint Louverture and other members of the elite would suggest maintaining the slave plantation system, an idea that did not sit well with the slaves who had battled for independence. Instead, over a period of decades, large landholdings were broken up into small farms for them to own.

"Unable to replace the whites in their plantation manors, Haiti's new elite moved from controlling the land to fighting to control the one institution that could tax its products: the government," Danner wrote.

"While the freed slaves worked their small fields, the powerful drew off the fruits of their labour through taxes. In this disfigured form the colonial philosophy endured: ruling had to do not with building or developing the country but with extracting its wealth. 'Pluck the chicken,' proclaimed revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines, now Emperor Jacques I, 'but don't make it scream.' "

Raised in a culture of violence and predation, the elites would maintain tradition, fighting one another for control, establishing power and taking as much as possible before the inevitable coup. As Terry

Buss notes in his book *Haiti in the Balance*, the nation has had 55 "presidents" since 1804: Thirtyone held office for two years or less, 23 were overthrown in military or paramilitary coups, only nine completed full presidential terms.

Haiti's deprivation was increased by economic blockades by countries like the United States and Germany, and crippling debts imposed by France to cover for the revenue the country lost because their slaves were no longer working for them. More recently, foreign interference and misguided trade policies also played a part.

In addition to profiting from taxes on goods exported from the country, and, to a lesser extent, taxes on imports, a new form of revenue started arriving in the 1940s -international aid. By the '90s, foreign governments and aid groups that wanted to avoid the corruption of the Haitian government started donating directly to non-governmental organizations, notes professor Fatton. In Haiti, where residents are renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit, members of the elite who once used government to line their pockets quickly learned to adapt to a

new model: They created their own NGOs and took the wages, vehicles, housing and money that flowed in.

What resulted was a chaotic system of aid organizations, some corrupt, some not, competing for their part of the international aid pie, and robbing legitimate government initiatives of funding. It also allowed relieved government of its obligation to provide services.

"What has changed in Haiti, and this is a big change, is the state is becoming increasingly fragile. ... as the resources are not going to the state," Fatton said. The political system, he said, is poisoned by candidates who run to use the resources of the state to enrich themselves and switch political alliances repeatedly for opportunistic purposes, with the result there is little sustainable government policy.

"There is no co-ordination, the government can't govern, and the international community sits above it all with no clear capacity to deliver what it must deliver," Fatton said.

The results of the predatory state are felt at all levels. At the bottom are the poor for whom there is no welfare system other than family, living hungry in dirt-floored shacks, unable to send their children to school. Functionaries on low salaries raised in a culture of corruption resort to corruption, so in Haiti it is normal to have your electricity or phone line cut on a regular basis, followed by a visit from a functionary charging you to fix it; or to pay extra to pick items up from customs rather than risk a lengthy wait.

For Canadian entrepreneur Tom

Anderson, who has lived 32 years in Haiti, the last 20 as part of a Port-au-Prince firm that employs 130 workers making mattresses and bailing twine, his response to the predatory state is like that of many medium-sized companies in Haiti -try to fly under the radar to avoid the vultures. But he still feels its effects.

A study conducted by an association of local industries determined that most formal sector businesses imported their supplies through the main port in Port-au-Prince and paid the accepted fees of about 24 per cent in duties, taxes and customs. But businesses in the so-called informal sector, which accounts for roughly 80 per cent of employment in Haiti and pays no taxes, were found to be using the provincial ports and paying only 4-per-cent fees. This includes entrepreneurs importing discarded mattresses from the United States to sell directly to Haitians. The government says it lacks the infrastructure to help, but Anderson sees it as more of a political decision by a government afraid to tackle the informal sector, and another example of inertia in an underfinanced civil service.

"At the time we did the study, we estimated the government was leaving \$150 million annually on the table, which was one-third of the total of all local receipts. ... If they just invested the money in enforcement, they would have it back in three months. ... We're not asking for special status, but as taxpayers, we are asking for a level playing ground."

The largest private sector players in Haiti these days are the cellphone companies, with successful industry leaders like Digicel and Voila paying more taxes than any other corporation in the country. Yet sources within the industry accuse the Haitian government of "opportunistic public policy making" akin to African governments who impose surprise taxes on successful resort hotels in their country. In the case of telephony in Haiti, private sector players note the Haitian government, which lacks an independent regulator to oversee the telecommunications industry, appears to give preferential treatment to Teleco, in which the state has a 40-per-cent stake. Preferential treatment could mean offering more lucrative duty-free terms -telecommunications companies import tens of millions of dollars worth of equipment. Players in the industry accuse the government of plucking the feathers of a rare golden goose in the country, a shortsighted money-grab that could hamper further investment of hundreds of millions of dollars, and deter other companies from coming. Digicel has invested \$320 million since it entered Haiti in 2005, and plans to invest another \$150 million.

Organizers fear voter turnout could be as low as 40 per cent tomorrow, which would taint its legitimacy and increase political instability. Why vote? is a typical statement from the man on the street in Haiti - the same powers that have always ruled will continue to do so.

Haitians' lack of trust and cooperation with government initiatives dooms many well-intentioned national development projects. Avoiding payment of taxes is a point of pride for Haitians, one reportedly common among the elite. And entering into the civil service with

the hope of making a difference is considered the move of a crazy person, because nothing will change, and the pay is low.

"You have that erosion of civic aspirations," said Fatton. "People look at every job as a business, and a business is essentially 'How can I make money for myself ?' "

How then, does one change a system so deeply flawed? International bodies, Canadian aid organizations chief among them, have long emphasized improving governance among their aid goals, only to be met with disappointment. Despite roughly \$10 billion in aid money to Haiti over the last 30 years, the standard of living for the average Haitian has dropped.

In a talk given to the University of California, Berkeley, author Danner suggested putting control for rebuilding into the hands of Haitian builders, masons, and electricians -"not just the elite who send the money abroad." Focus on agriculture so the masses can feed themselves. Get Haitians involved at the government level in planning and rebuilding, and ensure that the raw materials needed come from Haiti - build a cement factory there.

"The only way to achieve some kind of non-violent progress is to achieve some kind of alliance with the rising middle class ... some kind of entente with at least some of the powers that be." That should include allowing the followers of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a galvanizing force for Haiti's poor whose Lavalas party is currently excluded from the elections, to be included in the political process, he added.

Make sure the money gets to the middle class so they can start businesses, in the hope that "to spread money around is to spread power around," Danner said.

Professor Fatton emphasized agriculture and food production as a means toward self-sustainment. He was critical of plans for the country's rebirth proposed by the government that focus on the export of textiles, garments, coffee and mangoes, and sound much like the old plan that has failed for decades, he said. Fatton espouses a national debate on the future of its economy.

A clever president might be able to form coalitions with other parties to create a stronger government, Fatton said. But he didn't sound hopeful.

"Every time there was a major crisis in Haiti I used to assume, 'This is it, something is going to change,' and every time I'm disappointed. ... You hope there will be a shock to the system and people will finally realize they really have to change their ways."

When asked for signs of hope, respondents inevitably refer to the resilience of the Haitian people, and of people like Canadian entrepreneur Anderson, a self-professed optimist who married a Haitian, raised children and wants to stay to help make it better. ("I think the pessimists left a long time ago," he said. "The only ones left are the optimists. Whether they're realists or not, I'm not sure.")

But how far can a nation of 9 million go, no matter how resilient or entrepreneurial its people, if the vultures won't let them govern themselves?

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