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# Haiti: We Have Dared To Be Free

A conversation with Camille Chalmers

Notebook no. 1  
The People's Forum

# **Haiti: We Have Dared To Be Free**

**A conversation with Camille Chalmers**

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1804 Books at The People's Forum

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## **Preface**

BY MANU KARUKA

On behalf of 1804 Books

On Jan. 1, 1804, the generals of the Haitian Army, led by Jean Jacques Dessalines, signed the Haitian Declaration of Independence. Swearing to "renounce France forever, and to die rather than live under its dominion," the generals, on behalf of the Haitian people, declared a struggle to purge Haitian society from the imprint of slaveholders and colonizers. "When will we be tired of breathing the same air as they do?" Dessalines asked. "What do we have in common with these executioners?" The French were only the most immediate enemies of the revolution. Before winning their independence, the Haitians would also defeat the forces of Spain and Great Britain. These were Europe's three most powerful empires. With their revolution to overthrow slavery and colonialism, the Haitians had launched the struggle against imperialism.

Imperialism is the capture of resources —the products of land and labor— from one place, for the enrichment of people in another place. Imperialism, at its heart, is a method of class rule. It is how the capitalist class first established its power, and how it has maintained its power over the centuries. In the time of Dessalines, imperialism manifested through colonialism and slavery. In our time, imperialism continues its unrelenting grasping for cheap land and cheap labor. In Haiti, we learn from Camille Chalmers, imperialism now seeks "free economic zones" in textile manufacturing, agriculture, mining, and tourism.

Dessalines warned his fellow Haitians of the dangers of counter-revolution. The imperialists and their agents, he insisted, "are not our brothers... if they find asylum among us, they will again be the instigators of our troubles and our divisions." Slaveholder "refugees" from St. Domingue instead found asylum in the US, initiating the ongoing role of the US as a last refuge of traitors, scoundrels, and war criminals. Some of these "refugees" would number among the wealthiest slaveholders in the US. They sought to persuade the US and French governments to reinvade Haiti, to reestablish slavery, and thereby recover their stolen property. In the time of Dessalines, they fled to Charleston and New Orleans. Today their counterparts live in Miami and New York.

Dessalines urged Haitians "to pursue forever the traitors and the enemies of your independence." The US State Department has announced that Jovenel Moïse's term will last until Feb. 7, 2022, while questioning the clarity of Haiti's 1987 Constitution. It is no accident that amidst talk of a "new Cold War" with China, the US seeks to suspend the Haitian constitution and facilitate a new dictatorship in Haiti, enforced by death squads in a reign of terror. The US asserts that it supports "free and fair elections" in Haiti, but its actions suggest otherwise.

For more than a century, an endless flow of Haitian migrants has supplied cheap labor across the Caribbean, the US, Canada and beyond, while carrying with them the immense spiritual reservoir of Haiti's revolutionary tradition. In this diaspora, imperialism has helped create its own gravediggers. Haiti is located midway between Cuba and Venezuela, both holding fast under barbaric US siege. Amidst its abject failure to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the US instead seeks to quarantine and isolate the revolutionary process itself, to control Haiti in order to assert command over the Caribbean community.

Dessalines argued that the French were the true slaves, having won their freedom, only to lose it. In their revolution against feudalism, the rule of warlords under divine mandate, the French upheld the sanctity of private property, including property in other human beings. By maintaining slavery in St. Domingue, the French fatally poisoned their own revolution. Camille Chalmers explains that the Haitian far-right has a feudal vision of power. In this, they reflect imperialism today, which has produced slave markets in Libya, and the spread of ISIS across Iraq and Syria.

In his novel of the Haitian Revolution, *The Kingdom of This World* (1957), Alejo Carpentier described the kingdom of heaven, where "there is no grandeur to be won" because "there is no possibility of sacrifice." Humanity, he wrote, would not find its fullest measure there, but only in the kingdom of this world, "bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of... misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials." People suffer, hope, and toil, for those they will never know, who in turn, suffer, hope, and toil for unknown others. This, Carpentier wrote, is the greatness of humanity, the greatness we witness in Haiti's revolutionary process.

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On March 29, the International Peoples' Assembly has asked peoples' organizations around the world to stand in solidarity with the Haitian people's struggle. What does it mean to stand in solidarity? In the earliest phases of their revolution, Haitian armies captured slave ships, freed the Africans held as cargo, fed and healed them, and organized them into fighting units. Through this process, enslaved people became revolutionaries, fighting to stay free, and fighting to abolish the system of slavery itself. This history can teach us how to stand in solidarity with the Haitian people today. Free each other from the chains that bind us in place. Arm each other with the weapons of consciousness and organization. Join the battle against our common enemy: imperialism. As the revolutionaries of Haiti declared in 1804, "We have dared to be free, let us dare to be so by ourselves and for ourselves."



Detail of The Battle of Vertières, 1803

## Introduction

*On February 15th, 2021, The People's Forum hosted a conversation with Mamryah Dougé-Prosper, Camille Chalmers and Sabine Lamour, all Haitian activists and organizers who provided analysis of Haiti's current context, the implications of US imperialism for democracy, and the state of popular struggles. From that conversation, we share the remarks made by Camille Chalmers, a dear comrade of many internationalist battles and key leader of the Haitian left. He is a founding member of the socialist party Rasin Kan Pèp La. In 2019, along with other democratic and progressive forces, Rasin Kan Pèp La initiated the People's Patriotic Front to mobilize against the Jovenel Moïse regime.*

These days, the international press has begun to pay attention to what is happening in Haiti. But all too often, the international press shows a very limited and exaggerated vision of the events in Haiti. Many in the mainstream media refer to a conflict between Jovenel Moïse of the Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (PHTK) and the opposition. In reality, the Haitian crisis is much more profound.

It is not just a simple power struggle. It is a real fight for a greater project for the nation, for a different vision. It's an essential battle for the future of the Haitian people. It's a fight that has broader regional implications because the historic relations between Haiti and the United States have been at the core of the relations between the United States and the entire Caribbean region.

From this standpoint, we begin by saying that Haiti is currently going through a profound institutional and political crisis. It is essential to briefly analyze certain elements that can help us understand this crisis.



General revolt of the Blacks. Massacre of the Whites, circa 1815

## **Revolution and Counter-Revolution**

First, we need to highlight the nature of the Haitian Revolution that triumphed in 1804. This revolution introduced a fundamental break with the dominant world order, while posing a set of still-unsolved questions concerning the social and economic relations between people.

The Haitian Revolution introduced an essential criticism of the domination by European empires over countries like ours. It introduced a whole set of new dynamics that allow us to call it both an anti-colonialist and anti-slavery revolution, at a time when slavery was a dominant mode of accumulation at a global level. It was an anti-racist revolution. It was also a revolution against the economic model of the plantation system which has been imposed in the Caribbean in the previous two centuries. From the basis of this revolution, there are a series of misunderstandings about Haiti's relationship with the rest of the world. The empires of today continue to isolate Haiti, in a form of quarantine, to hide the example of its revolution from the world.

It is a kind of silent conspiracy. Many people are unaware of the Haitian revolution and when it is mentioned, the purpose is to demonize Haiti. Our country is presented as a land of black magic, witchcraft, and perpetual criminality to prevent others from understanding what took place here. In order to justify the military occupation of Haiti in 2004, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1542 (2004), which authorized the infamous United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) with the statement that Haiti was “a threat to international peace and security in the region”. This phrase reminds us of the dominant discourse against Haiti in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Days before, the Haitian President Guillaume Sam – whose government was expanding commercial relations with the United States – ordered the execution of 167 political prisoners, to which the population responded with revolt. Sam was deposed and later executed. US President Woodrow Wilson ordered the US Marines to occupy Haiti and suppress popular insurrections. Between 1915 to 1934, the US Army occupied Haiti and developed a neocolonial relationship, reorganizing its military and rewriting the constitution in order to allow foreign ownership of land. This would ensure that for decades to come Haiti would remain at the service of the American corporations.

A formal excuse of the US occupation of Haiti was that it was aimed at opposing the powerful German and French influence in Haiti at that time. And then rapidly, the US shifted its investments away from Haiti. Instead, the US invested in modernizing the large sugar industries and its plantations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Fundamental to the development of this industry was the forced migration of Haitian workers.

From then on, Haiti was appointed supplier of cheap labor for the capitalist industry in the region. They also generated a social and economic situation inside Haiti through the displacement of peasants from their lands, which aimed at creating and reproducing poverty and deprivation. This then created an endless flow of migrant workers to feed regional industries (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the western Caribbean, the United States, Canada, and Europe).

From 1915-1934, the United States seized political control of the country and installed a president of their choice. The President was a kind of governor who represented the interests of US imperialism and the American industries. Smedley Butler, a former US Brigadier General, wrote a confession in his book *War is a Racket* (1935): "I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service, and during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in."

In this sense, it is evident that our entire modern political system in Haiti is built on the foundations created by the US State Department and the other imperialist powers, who carry strategic leverage for decision-making. Consequently, from 1957-1986, we had the dictatorship of François Duvalier and his son, which caused a deepening of the crisis that started in 1915. Duvalier's mission was to destroy the popular resistance movement because the Americans had found fierce resistance in several wars of the *Cacos* – the armed resistance groups that emerged out of earlier enslaved people's rebellions.

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We have a political system dominated by an economic policy that comes from the United States and that reproduces a whole set of mechanisms. These mechanisms of domination were implemented after the Haitian American Convention of September 1915, which states that even if the Haitian Parliament ratifies a decision, it cannot be enforced without the approval of the US Embassy. This form of dependence on the US State accelerated the imperialist looting and devastation of our country's resources. For example, during the American occupation, Haiti lost between 25% and 30% of its forest reserves. All of this led to the major crisis of the 1980s.



The U.S. Occupation of Haiti, on July 28, 1915

## **People's Rebellion and Foreign Intervention**

In 1986, there was a vast popular movement aimed at putting an end to the crisis; not only did we want to stop living under a dictatorship, but we also wanted to transform the state. The popular movement's program advocated two main objectives: 1) To put an end to the dictatorship and 2) transform the state. We wanted a new state model that would not be at the service of the oligarchy – not a violent state, not a state with the systematic exclusion of the popular sectors, not a vassal state obeying the American orders. The 1986 uprising saw the popular sectors claim back their role as key players in the political process.

However, from 1986 to 2020, all administrations have failed to develop a policy that would match the scale of the demands made during the 1986 popular uprising. These governments managed to make some minor reforms with some progress in certain areas. Still, there was no structural change – neither from an economic nor political perspective – to ensure the viability of the Haitian people's dream, manifested through the radical break of the 1986 movement.

It should be noted that, since 1986, the dominant forces – both the Haitian oligarchy and imperialist forces – have tried everything to crush the people's movements and to re-establish the oligarchic state. To succeed in destroying the people's movements, they established paramilitary groups and death squads (under the nicknames of "attachés," "zenglando" and currently "G9") to carry out various coup d'états. The pinnacle of this strategy was seen in the 1991 coup d'état, which put an end to Jean-Bertrand Aristide's progressive regime, elected less than a year before with a base in the popular masses. The goal was to exclude the popular sector from the political process because US imperialism and the Haitian elite had built an exclusive political system without the people's participation.

The coup d'état enabled the exclusion of the people from the political arena, which they accomplished with the establishment of military occupations. The military occupation by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), between 2004 to 2015, is extremely important to highlight because it was part of an imperialist militarization project in the Caribbean basin, within the context of geopolitical challenges and competitions between the United States and other world powers.

It is crucial to recognize that the setting up of MINUSTAH responds to multiple concerns. Firstly, to definitively subdue the popular movements which claimed its central place on the political spectrum. Secondly, to respond to a new element of the American security doctrine, which states that the main threat to the strategic interests of the Empire are no longer peasant uprisings, but the slums and impoverished masses of the cities.

Accordingly, if we look at the MINUSTAH deployment map, we will see that the main goal was to put an end to the resistance of the urban slums. For example, there was a series of massacres and attacks against Cité-Soleil, the largest slum of Port-au-Prince. One got the impression that it was a kind of experiment to create a double mechanism of control and repression: military repression against slums and social control through non-profits that claimed to work in favor of development and humanitarian aid.

Many from the Brazilian military on their return considered that the MINUSTAH experience in Haiti served as training in methods of repression and social control that they could later apply in the slums of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It is not by chance that Jair Bolsonaro's administration has appointed former MINUSTAH soldiers in important government positions, such as ministers. For example, Augusto Heleno, former Commander of MINUSTAH during 2004-2005, is currently the Secretary of Institutional Security and plays a key role in Bolsonaro's administration.

During the 13 years of military occupation, the MINUSTAH worsened the structural crisis of the Haitian society while committing serious crimes against the Haitian people, including the mass rape of women, with tens of thousands of documented victims (although the figures are probably even higher than that) and leaving a significant number of orphaned children.

One of the other crimes committed against the Haitian people was the outbreak of cholera in 2010, a previously non-existent disease in Haiti, with a death toll of at least 10,000 people. It has infected at least 800,000 people and caused remarkable economic damage to the country.

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Therefore, it is extremely important to understand the functions and objectives of MINUSTAH in relation to the crisis of the Haitian society and how it represents a kind of precedent that can be used in other crises. Its so-called "success" – as described by former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon – could be invoked to confront other crises that will arise within the context of the efforts made to regain imperialist control over the Caribbean. For example, US imperialism is faced with many difficulties concerning their project to re-colonize the Caribbean, particularly with Cuba and Venezuela, which prevent them from having total control of the region.



People's Rebellion in Haiti, 1986

## **Haitian Right-Wing Politics and American Corporate Interests**

Haiti experienced a terrible shock with the earthquake of January 12, 2010, which caused 300,000 deaths and millions of victims. The occupying forces took advantage of this natural disaster to devise a much more radical response to the crisis with the creation of the Haitian Party Tèt Kale (PHTK). The PHTK is an extreme right-wing party that closely resembles the growing shift to far-right, conservative politics emerging in Latin America as part of the attempt to regain control over the continent. Similar examples include Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Lenin Moreno in Ecuador, Mario Abdo Benítez in Paraguay, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, etc.

If you make a typology of these political leaders, you will see a remarkable resemblance between former Haitian President Michel Martelly (2011-2016), Donald Trump, and Jair Bolsonaro. They all created a new formula of "gangsterism" political management, effective in initiating a process of destruction of popular democratic institutions to install an oligarchical and imperialist reign of absolute control.

The fundamental mission of the PHTK, through the leadership of Michel Martelly and Jovenel Moïse, is precisely to end the emergence of popular movements, eradicate any democratic or social remnants accomplished by the 1986 uprising and people's movement, and to re-establish an authoritarian power.

Why do they want an authoritarian power? They need it to definitively subdue the people's movement and remove it from the political process. The United States wants to accomplish the unfinished business of its 1915 occupation: to fully transform the Haitian economy into an appendix of the interests of American multinational companies.

For this purpose, they developed a set of strategies that define four areas of growth for the country. Mr. Paul Collier, a British neoliberal economist, specialized in low-income countries, was sent to Haiti by the United Nations to define a new economic strategy.

In his 2009 report to the UN Secretary-General, Collier wrote that Haiti's development must be based on free economic zones in four areas:

1. Textile manufacture outsourcing, exporting textile products to the United States.
2. Agricultural and agro-industrial exports.
3. Free-mining zones, developed through a speculation process undertaken in the North of the country.
4. Free zones for tourism, such as *Ile-a-Vache*.

However, to succeed in implementing the four free-zone strategy, there was a significant obstacle: there was land that still belonged to poor peasants who were the basis of a national family-based economy. Even if there are many hidden *latifundia* in Haiti, there is still a large mass of peasants who occupy the land needed to create free economic zones. This is what underpins the recent right-wing political shifts. They need a strong power to impose these projects and subdue any resistance that peasants may pose to the transfer of ownership to multinational companies.



Peasants at a rice cooperative in Northern Haiti, 2017

## **Unconstitutional Contentions and the People's Demands**

Many fierce critics have been pushing for an overhaul of the 1987 Constitution in order to politically resolve the question of land ownership. These critics claim that the single and main problem of the country has been the 1987 Constitution. Behind these claims is an attempt to change the Constitution to concentrate and centralize power in the President of the Republic. They want to reduce the Parliament's power and competence. They want to eliminate the spaces for participation in the local communities and reduce all regulatory institutions representing checks and balances for the executive power.

This has been the main project since Jovenel Moïse came to power in 2017, which has led to our current situation. It is quite telling that the two successive administrations of Martelly and Moïse have never called for a single election in the country. This is not by pure coincidence, but because national elections do not match their agendas. If elections are indeed the expression of the people themselves, for these elites, politics and the people's expression do not go hand-in-hand. They have a feudal vision of power. Jovenel Moïse has installed a dictatorship where he alone makes all the decisions.

Since January 2020, they have managed to eliminate the powers of the Parliament. From January 2020 to date, they have issued 45 decrees, all of which are freedom-destroying, all in flagrant contradiction with the spirit and the letter of the 1987 Constitution. These decrees have enabled the arbitrary establishment of police and military repression, which resulted in the criminalization of social protests and people's movements in general.

This is the current situation in the country. Now, Jovenel Moïse has set up a team of five people working almost clandestinely at the National Palace to draft a constitutional text without any consultation with the people. In normal circumstances, the referendum should have two stages: There should have been a first stage to ask the population whether they want to change the Constitution, and a second stage to suggest a new constitution.

They did not bother with these stages. There is a new constitutional text that will be presented during the referendum on April 25, 2021. For this purpose, they have appointed a wholly illegal and unconstitutional electoral council, rejected by all sectors of the country and with no legitimacy whatsoever. At the same time, they have entrusted this electoral council to pass a new constitution and hold legislative and presidential elections by the end of 2021.

Confronted with this project, we can say that the Haitian population has stood up vigorously, creatively, and with great dignity for several years. Since the famous demonstration of January 22, 2016, when the people refused to hold a presidential election with a single candidate, we have had a continuous cycle of mobilizations.

For example, between 2017 and 2018, we had the famous mobilizations against the budget. The people rejected a proposed budget that was rightly characterized as a criminal. The Haitian state found itself in a situation of fiscal crisis and, in order to respond to this crisis, they increased taxes considerably. However, following the orders of the international community to increase the retail prices of oil products by approximately 54%, popular mobilizations reached new levels in July 2018. The population engaged in a popular uprising that stalled the country for almost a week.

As a result, throughout 2018 and 2019, there were mass mobilizations where millions of Haitian citizens went out to the streets to say 'NO!' to the return of dictatorship, 'NO!' to this regime. Haitians want to expand the democratic gains of 1986.

A protester at a demonstration in Port-au-Prince, 2019



## **Renewed State Repression and the Re-awakening of International Solidarity**

The Moïse regime has taken advantage of COVID-19 to regain control of the situation, and during this period, it has organized new mechanisms and tools for repression, such as the "G9". The G9 is a federation of gangs aimed at terrifying the population to install a fearful atmosphere. The G9 carried out at least a dozen massacres in working-class neighborhoods between 2018 and 2020, including the infamous Cité-Soleil massacre in November 2018.

This regime asserts itself as nostalgic of the Duvalier regime, seeking to reinstall dictatorship and rule by terror. This is a regime where a single man can decide everything. In this regard, this government received the full support of the Donald Trump administration and of other imperialist countries (Canada and Europe), who all have turned a blind eye to all the abuses, the levels of indecency and immorality shown by Haitian politicians, and the criminal massacres and destruction caused.

Today, we have the likes of US Ambassador Michele J. Sison and the head of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), Helen La Lime. They, in practice, are activists of the PHTK and never miss any opportunity to support Jovenel Moïse. They also use Jovenel Moïse in the regional strategy against the Bolivarian government of Venezuela; Haiti has voted at the Organization of American States to authorize the military intervention by the United States in Venezuela. In addition, Moïse could easily be used as a kind of Trojan Horse to against the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), an organization of fifteen states and dependencies throughout the Caribbean that promotes economic integration and cooperation among its members. The US objective, through Moïse, is to shatter the unity of CARICOM on a set of extremely important issues, in particular the election of the General Manager of the Inter-American Development Bank.

US imperialism intends to regain control over the continent by defeating all efforts of economic integration launched by progressive governments under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Hugo Chávez, whether it is the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

On February 7, a new stage of the crisis began, marked by the fact that according to the Constitution, Jovenel Moïse's term of office ended on February 7, 2021.

This is a constitutional principle that he applied against Parliament in January 2020. Our President is a usurper who has decided to stay in power until February 7, 2022. This is a tactic to accomplish the imperialist agenda to change the 1987 Constitution, bring into office a political team fully committed to extreme right-wing ideas and reinstall a similar dictatorship to the one we experienced for 29 years under the Duvalier regime.

Today, we are undergoing a dire situation where the Haitian people are in danger. Every individual's life is in danger because the repression has become stronger, more intensified, and has reached extraordinary levels, including the arrest, beating-up, and torture of a Supreme Court judge.

It is appalling to realize that we have systematic arbitrary arrests, and that protesting has become criminalized, repressed with as much brutality as possible. Moïse is moving forward with his agenda, which has already restored some clear elements of the Duvalier dictatorship. It also aims to accelerate the looting processes of Haiti's resources for the benefit of American and European companies.

To conclude, we would like to say that we have achieved an essential awakening around solidarity in recent years in terms of popular movements in Latin America. I believe that a lot of movements understand the stakes and the impact of what is happening in Haiti and the importance of being present alongside the Haitian people in these battles; particularly the support of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, which has a strong presence amongst us and has built a Dessalines Solidarity Brigade, that has been working in Haiti since 2009 with peasants in different areas.

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Protest in Port-au-Prince to demand President Jovenel Moïse resign, 2019

**ARTWORK**



© Reynaldo García Pantaleón, "Lutte Éternelle."  
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