

In Haiti, 'gang warfare' is a cover for imperialist intervention

written by Gary Grass, Babette Grunow and Robert Roth

June 18, 2023



In Haiti as in U.S. hoods, gang warfare is imposed by outside forces to divide and conquer the people.

Interview by Gary Grass and Babette Grunow of Grass is Greener WXRW

River West Radio.com 104.1 FM Milwaukee with Robert Roth, Haiti Action Committee

Listen to the entire interview here: https://soundcloud.com/user-240416425/202305-16-2000-grass-is-greener-roth-in-haiti-walker-on-cuba?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing. In the transcription that follows, some edits have been made for clarity.

Robert Roth: Haiti is in a deep crisis right now. If you read the mainstream media, it's projected as being a crisis of gang warfare. Really it's a crisis of imperialist intervention, foreign occupation, and the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Haiti over the past decades.

The crisis that now exists in Haiti has its roots all the way back to the 2004 coup d'etat that the U.S. orchestrated that overthrew the democratically elected government of Jean Bertrand Aristide and his Lavalas administration. Lavalas is a Kreyol word for flash flood - the flood of the people where it starts as a trickle down the mountains, gathers force as people join it, and eventually is unstoppable.

The Lavalas movement is the movement that put President Aristide into power both in an election in 1990 that led to him becoming president in 1991 - with the U.S. overthrowing him in September 1991 - and then when he was elected again in 2000. His administration was overthrown again in 2004, so these were two coup d'etats against the most progressive governments in Haitian history.

The result of that has been the real decimation of Haitian society, where at this point, the conditions are worse than they have ever been for Haitians. The insecurity has been horrific. There's been a wave of kidnappings that have affected all sectors of the population; there's a new cholera epidemic that has gone on now for months. Food insecurity impacts over 5 million people in a country of 12 million.

And so you have a country where you can see the after-effects of the destruction of democracy and the end result of foreign occupation. After these coup d'etats, it's been the United States, the UN, and a grouping of countries called the Core Group that effectively govern Haiti. And so all of the conditions that we are now seeing in Haiti are the direct result of foreign occupation and the attempt to destroy a very vibrant popular movement.

Grass Is Greener: *When you said it's not really a matter of gang warfare, in some sense, it is. There's groups in Haiti that you could call gangs. And moreover, the term isn't evenly applied. If you look at the imperialist forces, you could call them gangs too.*

Robert: That's absolutely true, and of course there are gangs in Haiti. That's true. But the notion that these gangs are operating independently of the elite in Haiti or of the government in Haiti is false. We look at them as paramilitary death squads that have been unleashed on the popular movement with a series of massacres that have been directed at opposition neighborhoods.

For example, at La Saline in 2018 where it was a combination of police and paramilitary "gangs" that attacked a Lavalas stronghold killing well over 100 people with total impunity. And so in a situation where you have these paramilitary forces operating in concert with government actors, they also have the impunity to do whatever else they want, like kidnapping people on the roads or taking over certain fuel depots, whatever it is.

But just like the death squads in El Salvador were not independent from the Salvadoran military, these gangs are not independent of a strategy of repression and terror that's being directed by the government. And it's a government that is supported wholly and consistently by the U.S..

Grass Is Greener: *Yes, the death squad model works because the death squads in*

El Salvador worked hand in hand with the government and military, but they did have a quasi-independence, right? They had their own leadership, and there was sometimes in-fighting between the death squads and the military. It wasn't this complete absolute control, but they were a creation of the state, and they were allied with the state, but they also had just enough independent action to make it kind of deniable.

Robert: But they couldn't have existed without the complicity of the military. And the same thing is true in Haiti. In other words, these gangs have a function that is not just independent of the government. They have a function within an overall structure of repression.

The danger of looking at the violence in Haiti as internecine gang warfare and just simplifying it as that is that then the solution becomes more money to the police, more heavy armament to the police, and also more foreign intervention. Troops on the ground in Haiti, which is what the UN is calling for, what Canada and the U.S. have been debating over the last number of months.

What we say is we want no more funding for the Haitian police, which is a repressive force in Haiti that's been used to attack the Haitian people. And we want no further foreign intervention. In fact, we want the Core Group to leave; we want the U.S. State Department to keep its hands off Haiti.

The current Haitian government has no legitimacy. There are no elected officials in Haiti anymore. There's no Parliament, there are no elected mayors. This is a government that was imposed by the U.S. and its Core Group. It is the source of the crisis in Haiti. Until that government is removed and until there's really a popular united front government that emerges in Haiti based among the people, this crisis is going to continue.



Paul Ratje / AFP

When these photos of U.S. border patrol agents whipping Haitians with their horse reins came out in September 2021, the Biden administration told the agents to stop “whipping” the Black asylum-seekers because it evoked images of slavery, but the policy of refusing Haitians entry to the U.S. and deporting them continued. Photo: Paul Ratje, AFP

Grass Is Greener: *I believe the current government was put in after the president was killed.*

Robert: Yes. The president who was killed was Jovenel Moise. He was assassinated in 2021. We look at that assassination as a falling out among thieves. Moise was a dictator in Haiti whose election was protested for months and months by hundreds of thousands of people in the country who called it a stolen election, an electoral coup d'etat.

When he was assassinated, the Core Group, in a tweet, named Ariel Henry - the

current de facto ruler of Haiti – and said he should be the new leader of Haiti. And then he refused to leave office when the term of Jovenel Moise expired. Now the U.S. is saying that his government should supervise the next round of elections, which Haitians view as a total farce and an invitation to more fraud, more dictatorship, and more neo-colonial rule.

Grass Is Greener: *Would he be running in the next election?*

Robert: Who knows? If the U.S. selects him, I'm sure he will. If they believe he has no legitimacy, they will pick another person and make sure that they come into power through another fraudulent election. That's why the broad popular movement in Haiti, including Fanmi Lavalas – the party of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide – has been calling for a transitional government, called Sali Piblik by Lavalas.

This would be a broad government representing civil society, popular organizations, grassroots groups that could lead a transition toward free and fair elections. You would be hard-pressed to find someone in Haiti who believes that this current government – which is a creature of the Core Group – could ever lead to free and fair elections that would be legitimate for the people of Haiti.

Grass Is Greener: *The model is a really familiar one. I think we've seen it in country after country. We first create total chaos and then we say, "Oh look, you've got total chaos and we need to come in and fix the chaos." You've got all these violent extremists and then we fund the violent extremists. It's all just a plot to get what we want.*

What is valuable in Haiti? What do we want to take in Haiti?

Robert: That's a very interesting question because you could ask that question about every U.S. intervention, right? What did they really want in El Salvador? What

do they want in Nicaragua? Why was Cuba such a defeat for them?

Grass Is Greener: *In Syria, at least, we want the oil.*

Robert: On that level, Haiti is an incredibly rich country. It's been made poor by plunder, foreign domination, the control of a very tiny elite. But it is rich in mineral resources: It has gold, it has silver, it has copper, it has limestone, marble, and bauxite.

Right now, under this government, they are digging up Haiti to try to find all the mineral wealth. Plus, it has a labor force that the U.S. and other foreign powers and companies look at as a cheap labor source that they can pay slave wages to.

One of the things that happened after the 2010 earthquake, which killed over 300,000 people in Haiti, was that it was the perfect set-up for what's been called the shock doctrine where Hillary Clinton could go in there at the time and say, "Wow this is an opportunity. Haiti is now open for business. We can rebuild better." And what she meant was that we can create new free trade zones, build huge garment centers in both the north of Haiti and in Port au Prince where U.S. and other companies can come in and make super profits.

So that's on the one hand. The other thing about Haiti is that the movement in Haiti is a "bad example" that the U.S. wants to crush. When you have a progressive movement like the Lavalas movement that led to President Aristide's two terms, and you have a movement that is determined to do land reform, to spend more money on health care than police, that recognized Cuba for the first time after the U.S. under the Duvalier regimes had worked with Duvalier to isolate Cuba. They taxed the rich for the first time in Haitian history, calling out the names on the radio of those who hadn't paid their taxes.

So you have this progressive government in the Caribbean, and the U.S. has never

allowed that to happen – whether in Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, or Venezuela. Wherever those examples exist, the U.S. feels that its business interests and its hegemony is threatened.

So that's why Haiti is important. We think the Haitian popular movement is an example that should be studied much more thoroughly by the U.S. left, and we think one of the reasons that it's not is the white supremacist notions of Haiti that have been imbued in our society ever since Haitians rose up and became the first people to end their own enslavement and become a free nation. Ever since then, Haiti has been demonized and has been marginalized, and attacked.

We think it's time for people who are in the progressive and left movements to take a serious look at the importance of Haiti and the importance of solidarity with Haiti.

Grass Is Greener: *One thing that bodes poorly for Haiti is that the U.S. seems to have its power in decline; its power is waning throughout the world. I think for a country with 12 million people that's so close to the U.S., that's not a good thing because it means that we're going to have fewer opportunities to attack Russia and China and Iran and great big countries with significant power. So that means more intervention in those little countries nearby that we can more easily dominate.*

Robert: Yes, and it's the 2023 version of the Monroe Doctrine, which just had its 200th anniversary. This is the Americas, and the U.S. still demands hegemony, and here's this Black nation with a radical tradition that's rising up, and so they are suppressing it.

Grass Is Greener: *We're not going to be able to keep China out of Mexico or Brazil but maybe we can keep it out of smaller Caribbean countries.*

Robert: And maybe we can keep progressive social and radical change out of the Caribbean. So the reality is that Haiti is very important to U.S. imperialism, as

evidenced by the fact that they have orchestrated two coups over one generation to oust progressive governments in Haiti. So they think it's important.

Grass Is Greener: *The going in of the UN is not a positive thing either.*

Robert: That's right. The UN has headed the occupation of Haiti since 2004 - and is still a major force in determining policy around Haiti.

Grass Is Greener: *That's really sad because the UN is sometimes good, sometimes bad. I'm not quite sure what to say about the UN. What countries were involved in the UN forces in Haiti?*

Robert: First of all, the UN in Haiti has been horrific. It committed massacres, it brought the cholera epidemic to Haiti through some of its soldiers defecating in rivers, and then it never accepted responsibility or agreed to pay reparations even after 10,000 plus Haitians were killed. And it has overseen one illegitimate government after another in Haiti.

The countries that led the UN occupation? Brazil, under Lula, the last time Lula was in power, was at the forefront of the occupation of Haiti. Argentina, Chile, Jordan. Jordanian troops committed massacres in Cite Soleil. The Chileans were in the north. Brazil controlled large sections of Port au Prince.

And you know, these were the militaries of these countries, and they treated Haitians as colonial subjects. There was massive sexual abuse of women and children by UN soldiers that was exposed over and over again. And the occupation was a classic foreign occupation that treated the country's citizens as second class. It was a totally racist occupation. So in terms of Haiti, the U.S. organized their "coalition of the willing" like Bush did around Iraq. Large numbers of countries both in the Americas and outside, paid off their debts to the U.S. by doing service in Haiti. Nepal was in Haiti, Sri Lanka was in Haiti. It has been a major worldwide

occupation.

Grass Is Greener: *We just had a show on Palestine, and one of the points that was made there that I think needs to be made for Haiti, too, is that there is a little bit of a tendency to see Haitians as just perpetual victims when in fact there is so much strong active resistance and so much resolve and activity on the part of the Haitians. It needs to be acknowledged that they are actors and not just subjects.*

Robert: Well, that's right. That's why understanding the popular movement, understanding the Lavalas movement, and understanding the accomplishments of the Aristide administration is so important. You know, there's a new Haiti that will be built by this popular movement - right now in the midst of all this repression and paramilitary violence.

For example, when the Aristides came back to Haiti in 2011 from forced exile in South Africa, they pledged to reopen a university that had been shuttered by the coup. It's called UNIFA, the University of the Dr. Aristide Foundation. At this point, it has over 5,000 students coming from all walks of life in Haiti, including the poorest communities. They have a medical school; they have a school of dentistry; they have a law school, an architecture school, an agriculture school. And they are now opening a world-class teaching hospital.

And all of this has been accomplished in the midst of this incredibly repressive situation, and it's just like a microcosm, a vision of what Haitians will and can build. In terms of the Haiti Action Committee, we've been building solidarity with this movement for 30-plus years, and we've never seen it stop. Even dealing with two coups, dealing with thousands of people killed, exiled, disappeared.

This movement still continues today and is demanding the end of the Ariel Henry regime and a transition government led by popular organizations. So it is very important to pay attention. One of the most vibrant movements in the world today is

in Haiti.

Grass Is Greener: *Obviously, they face a lot of threats. What are some of those, both foreign and domestic?*

Robert: The biggest foreign threat is the U.S., Canada, and France. That triumvirate is behind the 2004 coup and has deep interests in keeping Haiti under neocolonial control.

One of the things that the Aristide administration did right before it was overthrown was it went to the International Court demanding restitution from France. France, in the 1800s, tried to reinvoke Haiti after the Haitian Revolution, and it demanded the equivalent of \$21.7 billion in today's money from Haiti as reparations to France for Haiti freeing itself from slavery. And the Haitian government had to pay that up until the 1940s, and it's what put Haiti in huge debt.

So, the Aristide government said we're the only people in the world that had to pay our enslavers for freeing ourselves from slavery, and we demand restitution. Within a year, he was overthrown by the U.S., France and Canada.

So the international elite is determined to crush this popular movement and they have their allies within Haiti. There's a small elite in Haiti that has been in control in Haiti forever and is extremely rich and extremely determined to not have any kind of labor, peasants or other popular organizations have any power. So it's that alliance between the foreign powers and the elite in Haiti that represents the greatest danger to the Haitian people.

Grass Is Greener: *And that elite is very very interesting because you have far-right fascist tendencies within the elite, but you also have a kind of liberal veneer over a lot of it. It's a fascinating case study in and of itself.*

Robert: The party that's now in control, the PHTK, is really a neo-fascist party. This

is the extreme right in Haiti that's now come into power with clear backing from the United States. It started with the Martelly government; it went to Jovenel Moise and now Ariel Henry. This is the extreme right that's in power and it's not giving up that power easily.

One of the things that has just happened in Haiti which is portrayed only as vigilante violence is that people in these communities that have been attacked over and over again by paramilitary forces have taken matters into their own hands. And there are horrific images being shown by mainstream media of gang members, paramilitaries being killed in one neighborhood after another. But this is the result of the unconscionable acts that these paramilitaries have committed in one community after another.

And so you have a society that is imploding. And the only way that this will both stop and that progressive change can happen is if a new government emerges out of popular protest and then is able to maintain itself without foreign intervention attempting to destroy it as they've attempted to destroy every progressive change in Haiti. Otherwise all of this will escalate and who knows what will happen.

Grass Is Greener: *I can imagine that a good deal of immigration will happen and people will start to leave.*

Robert: That's a really good point and people have left. Under Biden, 25,000 Haitians have been deported from the U.S. There are thousands of Haitians at the U.S.-Mexican border attempting to get in. It is unlivable for people in Haiti and they've had to flee all this terror, and the U.S. is sending them back.

Grass Is Greener: *Unlike refugees from Ukraine where they're allowed to come in or from Cuba where they set foot on U.S. soil and they're allowed to stay. Unlike that, Haitians are shipped back.*

Robert: Yes, and Haitians are very conscious of that double standard. They're very conscious that they are not welcome while other people are welcome. And you saw the images at the border, right? With Haitians being whipped by border patrol officers. That dynamic still exists. The only change that the Biden administration made was they said, try not to whip people. Try not to be on horses and blatantly attack them but we're still going to deport all of them.

Grass Is Greener: *Try to look a little better.*

Robert: Yes, that was an embarrassing image. It was a slavery image. But the policy has remained unchanged.

Grass Is Greener: *Immigration is an area where the Biden administration doesn't seem to have gotten anywhere different than the Trump administration. Trump was supposed to be the most horrible person we've had on immigration in U.S. history and we've got Biden coming in there with a lot of the policies just continuing or being made even worse.*

Robert: Right, they have used the Covid epidemic and Title 42 which was the Trump plan, so that anyone who came in could be immediately deported without any asylum hearing. Now, as as Title 42 is about to end, the new policy is that, to apply for asylum, you have to be in Haiti, you have to have access to the internet, you have to be able to fill out all these forms, pay money to get on a plane, and then you just might be considered for asylum.

Grass Is Greener: *So if you are part of the elite, if you have money, then you can get asylum.*

Robert: Right. So for the masses of Haitians who are now getting on boats, drowning off the shores of Haiti or wherever they're attempting to go, or have somehow made it to the Mexican border, they're not going to be able to enter.

And on the other hand, it's a message to the professional class, which is needed in Haiti, that you might be able to get out. So if you're a doctor or a lawyer or part of civil society, an educator that Haitians need, maybe you'll be able to get out. So on the one hand, it creates this brain drain. And on the other hand for people being terrorized under this regime, there's no way out. It's a terrible policy.

Grass Is Greener: *It doesn't seem like there's been a huge impact by the solidarity movement to reflect the interests of the Haitian people. I see some of it but I think there could be a lot more of doing what you're doing.*

Robert: Well, you know. This is always an uphill fight. There has been an uphill fight around Palestine; there was an uphill fight around El Salvador and then that movement built. So that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to really help and sustain and build a solidarity movement that is powerful and that does affect U.S. policy.

On May 18, we designated an international day of solidarity on Haitian Flag Day, which is really Haitian sovereignty day, the day that during the Haitian Revolution the Haitians determined that they would break completely free from France. And that's Haitian Flag Day. And we did actions in many cities across the U.S. and in some places internationally in the Caribbean and Europe. People can find out about these by either going to the Haiti Action Committee's Facebook page or our website, which is <http://www.haitisolidarity.net>.

Grass Is Greener: *That ends that segment. Robert also wanted people to know that contributions to Haiti's grassroots movement can be made, if you're interested, at <http://www.haitiemergencyrelief.org>.*

For 31 years, the Haiti Action Committee has worked in solidarity with the anti-colonial grassroots struggle for dignity, democracy and self-determination of the Haitian people! Contact the Haiti Action Committee at PO Box 2040, Berkeley, CA

94702. Learn more at their Website, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

Source: [San Francisco Bay View](#)

