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Cultivating Democracy: Community Organizing in Haiti

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Internship Reports

This section contains experiential pieces written by students who have worked in human rights organizations abroad, generally on internship grants from the Harvard Human Rights Program. They are personal reflections rather than legal analyses, and are intended to give the reader insight into the cultural contexts in which human rights activists work.

CULTIVATING DEMOCRACY: *Community Organizing in Haiti*

Riding in a jeep across the mountains of central Haiti, I asked myself whether anything would ever grow in the Haitian countryside again. “*Dèyè mòn gin mòn,*” the Haitians say, “behind the mountains are more mountains,” expressing the depth and complexity of every problem. But each time we reached a crest, the face of the next mountain, like the last, was as barren as the desert. They stand shaven to their grey-brown scalps, stripped of the lush green that covered them for centuries and made Haiti “The Pearl of the Antilles.” The rains come, but instead of bringing growth, they wash away the life-giving topsoil, clogging the rivers and killing the coastal fish, leaving gashes of erosion like open wounds. There are no trees in Haiti, and without trees there are no roots which can reach deeply into the Haitian land and make it secure and fruitful.

Dechouke is the Haitian Creole word meaning “to uproot.” It evokes violent images of trees ripped out of their places, not just cut down, but unearthed to the very ends of their supporting foundations. But the Haitians do not use the word to refer to their vegetation, not in these times. Rather, *dechoukaj* (pronounced “day-shoo-kazh”) is a political activity, the removal from Haitian society of the roots of Duvalierist dictatorship. On February 7, 1986, the Haitians began *dechoukaj* in jubilation as the former dictator, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, fled the country which had risen in revolt against him. Many of his advisers, friends and supporters also escaped into exile or paid for their allegiance with their lives. But somehow the revolution never ran its full course. Before long, the army and Lieutenant General Henri Namphy took over, quelled the disturbances and ended the purging of Duvalierists. The *dechoukaj* remained incomplete, leaving much Duvalierism in the land. For the past three years, opponents of

the military regime have urged the Haitian people to continue to pull up the roots from which Haitian dictators have grown.¹

One such exhortation to action took place last summer on July 23, 1988, the seventy-third anniversary of the United States Marines' invasion of Haiti. In the Catholic church of St. Jean Bosco, in one of the slums of the capital Port-au-Prince, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide addressed a crowd of the faithful with his fiery, moving oratory. I arrived at the church with a friend just as the opening hymn began, and we gradually made our way toward the pulpit. In the crowd of about 2,000, our white skins provoked but one word: *blanc*.² I had grown used to hearing it on the streets, where children called it out after me with laughter. Here, heads turned toward us with curiosity; some smiled, perhaps thinking of the irony of *blancs* attending an "anti-imperialism rally." Others regarded us with suspicion and even—for the first and only time while I was in Haiti—mild hostility. But my friend's notebook and cameras marked her as an unthreatening journalist, while I sought and found the reassuring eyes of some of my colleagues from work. We settled near one of the loudspeakers as Father Aristide's voice quickly brought the audience's undivided attention to the altar.

The reading for the service, taken from the Gospel of St. Mark, described Christ exorcising the unclean spirit which possessed a man in the synagogue. Comparing the man with the people of Haiti, Aristide spoke of the evil spirits in their midst: the oppressors and their lackeys and their corruption of the Haitian soul. He shouted for their removal. Despite my only partial understanding of Creole, the celebrant's eloquence captivated and inspired me. Aristide soon had the crowd on its feet in a dialogue of questions and answers which condemned the military, the *tontons macoutes*³ and, not least of all, the United States government. Fists raised, they cried, "*Ayiti pou ayisyen, pa poubèl meriken!*" Haiti for Haitians, not for American garbage, they repeated again and again, breaking finally into a hymn whose chorus began, "Capitalism is a mortal sin." Though suddenly self-conscious

1. At the time of writing, Haiti was under the military rule of General Prosper Avril, who ousted Lieutenant General Henri Namphy in a coup on September 17, 1988. Human rights abuses, though less severe than under the Duvaliers, remain grave. For a general overview of the current situation, see, e.g., AMERICAS WATCH, NATIONAL COALITION FOR HAITIAN REFUGEES & CARIBBEAN RIGHTS, THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . . HUMAN RIGHTS IN HAITI (1989) [hereinafter THE MORE THINGS CHANGE].

2. The word *blanc*, meaning "white," is used to refer to any foreigner in Haiti, and foreigners are usually assumed to be from the United States.

3. Also known as the *Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale* ("VSN"), the *tontons macoutes* are the brutally repressive independent security forces established by François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. See R. HEINL & N. HEINL, WRITTEN IN BLOOD: THE STORY OF THE HAITIAN PEOPLE, 1492-1971, at 596 (1978) [hereinafter WRITTEN IN BLOOD]. Though now officially disbanded, the *tontons macoutes* are still very active. See THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, *supra* note 1.

of my nationality, I could not help feeling physically intoxicated by the collective energy of the crowd.

In the slums of Port-au-Prince, the Haitians I had seen appeared resigned to their poverty. However, as the congregation sang, I saw a raw spirit which called to mind Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slave turned general who liberated Haiti from the French in 1803.⁴ Beneath their seeming passivity, the men and women of the slums keep alive the desire for freedom that repulsed Napoleon and more recently cast off Duvalier. Anger and passion lie simmering within them, waiting for release. I thought, the Haitians in St. Jean Bosco need only a catalyst to turn their destitute acquiescence into revolutionary fervor, like dancers in traditional Haitian *vodoun* rituals waiting for a *loa* to take and transform them.⁵ Perhaps Aristide would be the man to spark the continuation of *dechoukaj*.⁶

But that idea made me apprehensive. In the power of the people's desire for vengeance I saw potential for destruction and bloody violence. When at last completed, the *dechoukaj* would rip the dictatorship out of the ground, ridding society of its exploitative institutions of governance. What then would replace them? To be sure, before the Haitian people can be free, the current structures must be overturned. But when they are, something better must be ready to rise in their place, or else the unending parade of dictators will continue. "Behind the mountains are more mountains," I thought again.

Upon reflection, I gained a new realization of the role of human rights activism in Haiti, a more complete understanding of what needs to be done. I came to Haiti thinking that human rights work meant counting violations and reporting them internationally. Monitoring human rights abuses does serve a purpose; it helps bring attention and support to the work of indigenous activists and can help expose the illegitimacy of an abusive regime. But as I realized in the weeks following the rally at St. Jean Bosco, these activities are only instrumental to a larger end, that of remaking political life. I understood

4. Unfortunately, L'Ouverture also became the first of Haiti's dictators. See WRITTEN IN BLOOD, *supra* note 3, at 62-118.

5. *Vodoun* is the polytheistic religion of the majority of Haitians which is often practiced concurrently with Catholicism. During *vodoun* ceremonies *loas*, or gods, are said to take possession of people. See H. COURLANDER, THE DRUM AND THE HOE: LIFE AND LORE OF THE HAITIAN PEOPLE 19-30 (1960).

6. Unfortunately, this thought had not occurred to me alone. Several times in the past, Aristide was the target of assassination attempts, and even during the celebration I attended, trucks full of soldiers rumbled ominously along the street outside the church. On September 11, less than two weeks after I left Haiti, there was another gathering in St. Jean Bosco for Sunday mass. This time, a number of men armed with guns and machetes burst into the church. The crowd surged forward to protect Father Aristide, who escaped unharmed, but 12 people were massacred and almost 80 wounded in the attack which left the building ablaze. THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, *supra* note 1, at 53-57.

that the broader goal of human rights work is to help the growth of new, just and democratic organizations for tomorrow's society—something more than simply fomenting today's revolution. Human rights work must not only denounce and decry the abuses of power, but also nurture an alternative to them.

In contrast to the missions of the majority of human rights groups in Haiti, such nurturing is the aim of the organization with which I worked during my internship in Haiti, the League of Former Haitian Political Prisoners (*Ligue des Anciens Prisonniers Politiques Haitiens*, "LAPPH," the "League"). Its President, Bobby Duval, is a former businessman who was imprisoned in 1976 for more than twenty months by Baby Doc Duvalier. While incarcerated, Bobby and several other political prisoners vowed that if they were to leave prison alive, they would work together for a new Haiti. Released in 1977, thanks to Carter Administration pressure on Duvalier, the small group of former detainees continued to meet quietly until Duvalier fell in 1986. A week later, they publicly established the League, and quickly began making contact with former prisoners and with families and friends of the disappeared all over Haiti, many of whom were eager to join the organization. By the time I arrived for my internship almost two and one-half years later, LAPPH had one thousand members and eight offices around the country, some barely under way and others very active. Their story is an impressive example of the organizing that Bobby claims lies at the heart of the League's work; "fight, organize, fight" is his manifesto.

It is not always clear, however, what Bobby means by "organize." Our friendship taught me that he is a charismatic man who often leads with vision, but not with details; he will speak in inspiring and impressive generalities but often leave the specifics to others. So, when he asked me to spend the summer helping the League establish a "legal department," he left it to me not only to work out the details of what that meant, but also to make broad policy and strategy decisions. I spent several days simply going around Port-au-Prince talking to as many different people as possible—lawyers, human rights workers and church leaders—trying to get a sense of what role "legal assistance" could play in Bobby's transformative vision of Haiti. However, I still did not understand what role the legal department would play in the League's project of organizing.

To help me understand how organizing can work, Bobby took me and three other *blanc* visitors to the little village of Cazale, just an hour's drive north of the capital. After a slow ride inland over an obstacle course of ditches, eroded roadbeds and mud holes, we finally arrived at the banks of a swift, broad stream. A villager climbed into our jeep there and instructed us how best to ford the river. On the

other side, we met an escort of Haitian children who followed us with shouts and laughter into the center of a cluster of houses, each brightly painted and covered with a straw roof. Among the houses stood a small blue building, open on three sides, with one table and several chairs under its roof. It was an unremarkable sight except for the big white sign on the outside. Few knew how to read it—illiteracy in Cazale is at least as high as the eighty-five percent national average—but everyone knew that the shackled hands clutching the bars of a figurative jail adjacent to the bold letters, “L.A.P.P.H.,” referred to the League.

For the next few hours, I sat at the table with Bobby, the other guests and the local leaders of LAPPH. It seemed as if the whole village had come to meet us, for there were dozens of faces crowded around the building, the old ones lined with the cares of long years working the land, the younger with eyes alive and curious. To explain to us the origin and development of this office, its founders began to recount their personal histories with ceremonial gravity.

In Haiti, everyone has been touched in some way by the terror and violence. Whether they had suffered imprisonment for days or years, had a close relative disappear or witnessed the beatings and shootings that had periodically occurred here, all were painfully aware of the military barracks just a few hundred yards down the road. In 1969, Papa Doc's soldiers massacred more than thirty peasants in Cazale who, while asserting their right to use the local river for irrigation, had raised the traditional blue and red flag of Haiti in place of the black and red flag of the Duvaliers.⁷ One of the first things LAPPH did in Cazale was erect a monument to the dead. The victims' names are inscribed on a grim slab of stone from which a flagpole rises and now freely flies the traditional Haitian flag. It is a symbol of defiance, especially located as it is, within a stone's throw—or a bullet's range—of the military barracks.

Touching as their narratives were, these stories of oppression were not as moving as the courage and ultimate success these peasants had achieved in coming together to protect one another. Theirs is the organizing of which Bobby spoke, an organizing which educates individuals in the ideals of human rights and enables communities to resist abuses of power by local military commanders.

The *chef de section*, as such local military commanders are called, wields great authority in rural areas like Cazale. The villagers may remain relatively unaffected by shifting political currents in the capital, but they always feel the weight of the local strongman's arbitrary

7. During the revolution of 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first president of independent Haiti, created the Haitian flag by tearing the white out of the French tricolor.

will. While this isolation is in some ways the very source of their troubles, at the same time it allows the peasants to stand up more effectively to their immediate oppressors. The *chef de section*, confronted not by a lone individual, but by an organized group demanding justice—a group like LAPPH known to have nation-wide links—risks drawing national attention and provoking opposition to abusive actions much more formidable than he might wish. Unified action raises the stakes for him, often to unacceptable levels. After several of the villagers were detained without charge, the League in Cazale successfully secured their release.⁸ The people of Cazale told us how they were able to build on such unified effort and prevent local officials from extorting an exorbitant tax from peasants for their use of the marketplace. Through organizing, with the help of LAPPH, villagers in Cazale increased their ability to assert their rights.⁹

Inspired by the villagers' experience and equipped with a fuller understanding of the type of organizing Bobby had in mind, I suggested that the legal department concentrate first on Cazale and two other villages which had achieved similar success. Knowing the ineffectiveness of the courts in Haiti, we had no illusions of bringing successful petitions of habeas corpus or defending land titles against expropriation. Rather, in keeping with LAPPH's strategy to educate and empower, we sought to make Haitians conscious of their rights and aware of when they are violated. We also sought to help them develop ways to prevent such violations.

To foster Haitians' awareness of their rights, LAPPH workers translated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into Creole and discuss and publicize its provisions in the League's monthly bulletin.¹⁰ Local leaders of the organization invite professors and lawyers to conduct educational seminars on human rights, including international law and the inter-American human rights instruments and institutions. Some of these seminars are videotaped for further use. Similar educational efforts continue with civil rights and criminal law.

We also began to institute procedures for making complaints about the actions of government or military officials, keeping updated files on allegations of human rights violations and gathering evidence in their support. These procedures were meant to assist the different

8. Villagers told us that when they asked the *chef de section* why he had detained the group, he stated that they had prevented the rains from coming.

9. Naturally, the military's monopoly on the use of force still limits the capacity of the people to protest abuses of power by the *chef de section*. The peasants walk a fine line, joining their voices enough to be heard, yet being careful not to provoke large-scale repression.

10. The translation alone is an enormous gain in universalizing knowledge of human rights; 90% of the population does not speak French, the country's official language, making law and the legal system inaccessible and incomprehensible to most.

offices' efforts to respond to abuses against their members and their communities. Several students from the Law and Sociology Departments of the university in Port-au-Prince volunteered their time as paralegals. They visit the regional offices to help write affidavits or find witnesses and to help the members of those offices decide which complaints are legitimate and which are minor or beyond their concern. When the complaints seem serious, they discuss possible solutions together and decide how to proceed, where to publicize the problem, how to put pressure on officials or whether to try to use the courts.

The long-term aim of this dual strategy is to establish norms and procedures that will help Haiti develop its own democratic institutions, not simply the formalities of Western democracy superimposed on a history and current reality of injustice, but indigenous and self-made changes from the bottom up. Teaching the principles of international human rights doctrine or using the established judicial system can be important starting points for education. However, in isolation these approaches would be useless, and perhaps counterproductive for grass-roots development, without the Haitians' adaptation of these ideas to their own situation. For example, an abstract concept like the "right to life" only acquires concrete meaning for Haitians when they ask themselves what it should entail in their society, given their beliefs and values, and in light of their history and present conditions. By provoking ongoing discussion and communication of what "rights" mean in the context and narrative of Haitian society, LAPPH's efforts could ultimately lead to a uniquely Haitian "bill of rights" in a post-*dechoukaj* society.

Ruling themselves, Haitians can develop an alternative to quiet compliance with the rule of kleptocratic Haitian officials. Submission, instead, is best left for the country's mythical zombies who, in *vodoun* belief, are persons dug up from the grave, stripped of their souls and made to work in the fields for an evildoer.¹¹ I could not help but be struck by the parallels between that myth and the reality of Haitian society: plundered, made barren and kept in a stupor to serve its corrupt masters. But legend has it that salt will wake a zombie. When the salt of *dechoukaj* rouses the Haitians, and they cast off the curse that makes them toil for their oppressors, groups like LAPPH will be there to show them that they can tend their own fields. Human rights work will simply give water to the seeds of the new democracy.

Paolo G. Carozza

11. See generally W. DAVIS, *PASSAGE OF DARKNESS: THE ETHNOBIOLOGY OF THE HAITIAN ZOMBIE* (1988).

