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### False and Unequal Promises: The Causes of the Haitian Revolution

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## False and Unequal Promises: The Causes of the Haitian Revolution

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The publication of the *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen*—the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen—in August of 1789 marked a turning point in the trajectory of the French Revolution and all territories that were deemed a part of this empire. Soon after, the inhabitants of St. Domingue (now referred to as Haiti) started their own revolution and, in 1804, eventually won the freedom for all people of color on Haitian soil. In direct contrast, France fought vigorously for over a decade against attempts for enslaved peoples to attain freedom. This essay will explore how France was able to justify their proclamations for the universal freedom of man, while repeatedly undermining these same ideals through supporting the institution of slavery. This analysis will explore the actions taken in response to the further injustice by freed and enslaved Black populations of St. Domingue and how the progression of both revolutions affected the inhabitants of St. Domingue as a whole. Finally, this essay touches on the ways in which their history, as a former French colony and as the first island in the Western Hemisphere composed of freed people of color, affected Haiti's own foundational documents.

Even prior to the true eruption of either revolution, Haiti was experiencing a lot of political upheaval as a result of a crop failure, the government's decision to merge the Conseil Supérieur du Cap Français and the court in Port-au-Prince, the exclusion of Haitian peoples from being able to elect deputies to serve as representatives in the 1788 Estates General, and the continuance of the *exclusif* (which banned direct trade between St. Domingue and the United States).

Within the mainland of Europe, the French monarchy was struggling to appease the general population, keep their economy afloat, and maintain legitimacy. The power that had once been solely possessed by King Louis XVI was disseminated to members of the National Assembly, who were responsible for the creation of the *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen*. Among the rights that were affirmed in this document were that of equality and freedom upon the moment of birth, the freedom to resist oppression and assemble in groups towards that end, the freedom of action with “no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights.”, the freedom of inaction (unless action is required and specified by law), the freedom of thought, and the affirmation of one’s right to property.<sup>i</sup>

Though noble in theory, many of these aforementioned freedoms were inherently written with exceptional provisions that permitted the continuance of slavery. For instance, though men are born free and equal, *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme* allows for social distinctions that support “the general good”.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, men possess a freedom from punishment, except if that admonishment has been “legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated”.<sup>iii</sup> Article 6 supports the equality of citizens under the law “without distinction except that of their virtues and talents”—virtues and talents which would’ve been subjective and assessed by racist and closed-minded politicians.<sup>iv</sup>

*La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme* possesses a great concern for the social order, the maintenance of the status quo of society, and the good of all—directly mentioning these in articles 4, 10, and 12. This diction does not inspire revolution of equality in other spheres of discrimination (besides class) because those of society that were granted the power of shaping the national consciousness and leading the revolution were neither women nor people of color.

In a similar exclusionary vein, the National Assembly stressed the authority and sovereignty which is socially granted to the government; mentioning the word « loi » or “law” eleven times in just 16 articles, often as a provision to provide an exception to a freedom that had just been affirmed. This created a formula where, within the same clause, a right was granted and affirmed for wealthy property-owning white men and then a law allowed it to be revoked for women and (particularly relevant to this analysis) people of color.

French historian François Hincker provides an analysis of *La Déclaration Les Droits de L'homme* where he posits that the distinction between man and citizen was crucial in the justification of the continuation of slavery. “The two syntagms, man and citizen, make the French declarations of the revolution original (no other, before or after, reproduces this) and the complexity of its implications.”<sup>v</sup> This then leaves readers of the document free to create their own definitions and interpretations of both “man” and “citizen”.

The word “man” becomes problematic, with the immediate gendered exclusion of women. Many at this time would also suggest that African American men (and certainly African American women) were removed from this classification—as slavery creates a social hierarchy in which those at the bottom are rendered less human; thus this divide required “the radicalization of the slave, the creation of a separate legal sphere, and the erection of hard political boundaries between the colonies and the nation.”<sup>vi</sup> Similarly, the word citizen possesses its own complications, as one must decide if the distinction between man and citizens is disjunctive or aggregative. This could be examined through Locke’s social contract in which society is a collection of individuals or, alternatively, in Rousseau’s social contract where a man must sacrifice his individual rights to obtain citizenship.<sup>vii</sup> If an individual or potential representative of the government were to read *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme* with the

disjunctive approach (even if they were to consider women and people of color in the category of “men”) then it leaves room for non-citizens to be excluded from representation, freedom of ideas and opinions, the responsibility to pay taxes, and ability to determine the allocation of those funds: rights which were granted specifically to citizens—not men—that are outlined in articles 6, 11, 13, and 14.

*La Déclaration Des Droits de L’homme* as a document, and the justification for much of the action taken by individuals over the course of the French Revolution, was viewed as radical because it (in theory and depending on interpretation) is supportive of universal rights. Paradoxically, the institution of slavery operates as the highest form of exclusion, by dehumanizing a significant portion of the population. By opposing this exclusion, the Haitian Revolution embraced (according to modern interpretations of the document) the intended French ideal of universalism. Thus, scholars such as Nick Nesbitt have argued “that the Haitian Revolution ‘exceeded [the French Revolution] in its commitment to human rights.’”<sup>viii</sup> If examined in this modern rights-based context, or even simply within the context of *La Déclaration Des Droits de L’homme* itself which highlights the “right to insurrection, specifically the ultimate right to resisting oppression of Lockian origin”<sup>ix</sup>, Haitians had the obligation to one another and future generations to rebel and create a government conducive to social and political equality.

The benefits of *La Déclaration Des Droits de L’homme* in France were immediate, in that it created “an ‘*espace public*’, that is to say, in particular, the possibility to go beyond narrow bourgeois interests”.<sup>x</sup> This direct association remains relatively uncontroversial because discussions of revolution remain both in the same location and same time period as this intellectual revolution. However, the correlation or causation debate, which surrounds the *La*

*Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme*, is more hotly debated as it relates to the Haitian Revolution.

Historians such as Lynn Hunt and Robin Blackburn suggest a consequentialist interpretation, where Haiti took direct inspiration from the French Revolution. They argue this because the Haitian Revolution occurred soon after *La Déclaration des Droits de L'homme* was published and it was based in the same “‘inner logic’ [whose] abstract and metaphysical nature allows for subaltern actors to claim them as their own and force their expansion.”<sup>xi</sup> The introduction and popularization of the ideas of equality into the public consciousness, as well as the exhibition of models for how to manifest these changes, “enabled a radicalization of the rights of man, which left a political legacy that could then be appropriated by future claimants of human rights.”<sup>xii</sup> Drawing this conclusion based on the historical linear trajectory—in which rights were put into the forefront of discussions and then subsequently actualized by those involved—does provide a strong argument. However, it must be acknowledged that, long before they were officially recognized by distant politicians across the Atlantic Ocean, Black men and women already desired their freedom and were conscious of the fact that they were deserving of rights.

Samuel Moyn points this out in his argument, when he suggests that actions taken in the vein of anti-slavery and anti-colonialism “cannot be explained vis-a-vis history of subaltern appropriation and expansion.”<sup>xiii</sup> The inspiration that led to the Haitian Revolution came from multiple sites, with Blackburn reminding her audience that “‘alongside Jacobinism, ‘African values and concepts animated the liberation wars,’ citing as an example the common Kreyol saying *you moun se moun* (everyone is a person).”<sup>xiv</sup>

The consequentialist argument gives too much credit to France. Their approach ignores the fact that it was French enslavement of St. Domingue that resulted in the need for the rebellion. By claiming that ideas—which originated in France—were the sole reason for the rebellion, they are simplifying and whitewashing complex history. Consequentialism awards too high an honor for Europeans and minimizes ideas that had already been circulating around black populations. Thus, this approach contributes to the European pathology of self-redemption. It glosses over the fact that, though *La Déclaration des Droits de L'homme* is now interpreted with a universalist approach, it was once an exclusionary document that was not seen as inherently contradictory to the institution of slavery. The contributions that France had in the progression of the Haitian Revolution cannot be ignored, but Europe must be decentralized from the existing narrative. French ideals are not entirely responsible for the formation of the first island of free Black peoples in the Atlantic.

Though the critique above must be acknowledged, it remains true that, after the publication of *La Déclaration des Droits de L'homme*, revolution amongst black inhabitants of St. Domingue was quick to follow. One can see this connection in action, where “the first slave insurgents to be caught by French soldiers carried pamphlets outlining the rights of man.”<sup>xv</sup> Crucially, however, revolutionary attitudes were not possessed universally across all black inhabitants; the catalysts of the Haitian Revolution were specifically the *gens de couleur*, free people of color who sought the affirmation of their own political right to equality. Much like the white French populations, their efforts towards equality, though, cannot be interpreted through a monolithic approach; “(even) when free people of color turned to violence, ... their demands had nothing to do with the abolition of slavery. Many free people of color owned slaves themselves and were anything but ardent abolitionists.”<sup>xvi</sup> Conflicting goals and social distinctions thus

separated the Haitian Revolution into three groups: whites who wanted to affirm their perceived superiority and the suppression of all people of color, enslaved peoples who desired their own freedom along with the abolition of slavery, and free people of color who sought their own political equality and the simultaneous maintenance of the institution of slavery.

Early years of the revolution were characterized by chaos, with all three of the aforementioned factions in constant conflict. The white populations of St. Domingue even rejected the sovereignty of the French National Assembly, by killing Colonel Thomas-Antoine Mauduit, who acted as a representative of colonial authority. The spurning of outside attempts at governance only intensified when, on May 15th, 1791, the National Assembly decided:

to accord citizen rights to free people of color whose parents had been free and legally married. White colonists were outraged both by this concession to the ‘intermediate caste’ that they wanted to keep subjugated and by the realization that if the metropolitan National Assembly could change colonial laws about free people of color, it could equally well claim the power to free the slaves.<sup>xvii</sup>

This decision was initially followed by intense hostility. However, white colonists soon recognized their reliance on French aid in suppressing the other social factions. Soon after, they reluctantly signed a concordat with Pierre Pinchinat (the leader of the free people of color) which accorded both white and already free black populations with legal equality.

Any semblance of unity, however, did not last long as the concordat was almost immediately revised. Outrage from this decision caused the partial destruction of Port-au-Prince. The revision to the concordat was supported by a decision made by the French National Assembly on September 24, 1791: to revoke the May 15th decree of equality. Yet, the ramifications of that first declaration in May could not be forgotten: “(once) ‘free men of color’ were admitted to citizenship in 1791, then the core principle—that Africans were inherently capable of practising active participation in the polity—had been admitted.”<sup>xviii</sup> This made it much



harder for white colonists to provide a rejection of rights to people of color based on historical precedent, because now there was an existing example to serve as evidence of legal equality.

The shifting alliances between free people of color and white populations did not have any effect on curbing the insurrection of enslaved peoples. Their passion for freedom and their acknowledgement of the stakes of failure meant that, though “the numbers of deaths among slaves may have been ten times greater” than that of white colonists by the end of 1791, they pressed on and would continue to do so.<sup>xix</sup> Once this fact was acknowledged, “the French assembly passed a new law, signed by the king on April 4, 1792, granting all free people of color in the colonies the same rights as whites.”<sup>xx</sup> Contrary to the wishes of the pompon rouge faction of white colonists, Governor Blanchelande made an effort to support this second declaration of equality. Ever united and consistent in their desire to preserve the institution of slavery, the Second Civil Commission (which was sent by the Assembly to support the decree and the Governor) reminded the whole island of their commitment to the continuation of slavery, thereby reaffirming divides that insulated enslaved people of color.

The cruel pattern of affirming and then revoking rights to equality for the *gens de couleur* is highlighted in this analysis because it shows another fallacy in the logic used by the French National Assembly—this time more fundamentally in the very logic of rights’ foundations. *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme*, claims to support Rousseau’s idea of natural rights such that “men are born and die free and equal in rights.”<sup>xxi</sup> However, this strategy of repeated contradictory declarations seems more supportive of Burke’s ideas of “historical rights” or, alternatively, rights based on an evolving social consensus.<sup>xxii</sup> The philosophical justification of human rights is still hotly debated, and was done even more so when rights were first entering the public consciousness. Political and philosophical discussions that circulated amongst the

public, and which originally subscribed largely to natural law, were then implemented in the laws of the French empire.<sup>xxiii</sup> This is to say, laws are highly influenced by the context in which they are made. The context that surrounded *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme* was one of confusion. The failure to understand the logic behind human rights violates the “foundational defense of rights... that if we can identify the proper bases of, or articulate the most rational moral justification for, rights, we will establish their legitimacy and solidify their power.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Since the de facto foundations that serve as the basis for *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme* are contradictory to their de jure claims, it only facilitated the repeated violation of the articles.

After a hard-earned victory, the leaders of the Haitian Revolution took the opportunity to write their own foundational documents, which were heavily influenced by those of the French. This paper will examine both the *Constitution du 3 juillet 1801*, written by Toussaint-Louverture, and *La Déclaration d'Indépendance d'Haïti* (1804) by Jean Jacques Dessalines. The former takes the same natural rights approach as *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme*, with the first article stating “all men are born, live, and die free and French” —almost exactly mirroring its French counterpart.<sup>xxv</sup> The documents differ, however, in “a radical departure from legislative language used by metropolitan actors at the time ... the 1801 text sidesteps the disjunction [sic] of ‘man and citizen,’ which has been at the center of theoretical and historical controversy to this day, and instead introduces the ‘inhabitant’ as the subject of rights.”<sup>xxvi</sup> This acknowledgement and alteration of the fundamental flaws of the French Declaration, embraces an increasingly universal interpretation of equality and (at least according to de jure applications) placed Haiti in the forefront of successful rights discourse.

While promising, the *Constitution du 3 juillet 1801* did not remain the governing document in Haiti for long, with power later shifting from Louverture to Dessalines who wrote

the *Déclaration d'Indépendance d'Haïti*. Though counterintuitive, given the struggles and history of the Haitian peoples, this document completely fails to affirm the internal equality of Haitian peoples. It is written primarily as an anti-French doctrine of external policy rather than an internally pro-Haitian one. The document is Dessalines' vow, which he extends to the rest of the nation: "to posterity, to ourselves to renounce France forever and die rather than live under her domination. To fight until the last breath for the independence of our country."<sup>xxvii</sup> This declaration breaks the precedent set by the American and French models, not only in the fact that it came after the revolution had been won, but in that it does not even attempt to affirm the equality (however false a promise) of its own people.

American philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss "argues that the formation of a 'Black Empire' at the moment of Haiti's independence in 1804 failed to take up the challenge of creating a new model for arranging society and instead reproduced the masculinist and nationalist structures of the European nation-state."<sup>xxviii</sup> The replication of these systems can be seen in Haiti's immediate desire to insulate itself, with Dessalines writing in *La Déclaration d'Indépendance d'Haïti*:

Let our neighbors breathe in peace. Let them live peacefully under the aegis laws that they have made for themselves and let us not be revolutionaries, setting ourselves as legislators of the West Indies, making our glory consistent in disturbing the rest of the islands that are our neighbors.<sup>xxix</sup>

While the replication of existing problematic models may be true, Haiti had enough of a struggle fighting for their independence and should not have been subjected to the prerogative to reconceive the regulations of society. Their revolution was much more organic and reactionary than either the French or American precedents, with enslaved peoples initially limiting their "first set of demands ... to three days from plantation work to cultivate their own gardens and a prohibition of the whip."<sup>xxx</sup> The abolition, much less the independence of St. Domingue, was not

foreseen. Thus, any documents and were established in the moment where they were required. Leaving society unregulated long enough to reinvent societal foundations outside of Western ideals would have resulted in chaos, which the Haitian economy and infrastructure was not equipped to handle.

Further analysis of the ideas discussed in this paper should include a more fixated analysis of how women, particularly African American women who were enslaved, played a role in the Haitian Revolution and the establishment of a new government. Additionally, this analysis could extend to the examination of subsequent versions of the Haitian Constitutions, which have continued to evolve and were updated as recently as 2012. The more modern socio-economic and political situations of Haiti could be drawn back to their history embedded in the rejection of colonial rule and the use of policies that replicated European models. This paper has been incredibly focused on examining both the Haitian and French documents within the modern context of human rights, but a fairer examination would exclusively place both in their historical contexts and gauge how truly revolutionary they were at the time. A similar flaw of this paper was its geographical limitations and failure to examine possible influences outside Haiti or France—either in how they were affected by or themselves served to influence other nations.

The Haitian Revolution exists at the intersection of radical thought and traditional structures: as the first island in the Americas that was home to an entirely free black population, but a place whose recent experience situated their understanding of structures within the European conception of society. Although the oppressive forms were often comprised of the same individuals in power, the key divide remains that the French revolted against feudalism, whereas the Haitian revolutionaries used Jacobian ideals to reject colonial slavery and realize universal proclamations.<sup>xxxii</sup> Haiti proceeded to serve as a model for other islands of enslaved

peoples, and though no other island was as successful in attaining complete independence, it became a location to aspire towards. This occurred both in replication of its model of rebellion or in enslaved peoples relocating and taking advantage of the provisions laid out in future asylum clauses. The Haitian Revolution must be continued to be studied so that modern society can glean an understanding into how we can ensure our own laws, that appear fair on paper, are applied equally in practice.

### Author's Note

When approaching this paper, I acknowledged that there would likely be more source material in French, rather than English, because of the regions that were being studied. The original version of this paper was written in a combination of both languages, where many of my citations came from French language sources. To assist readers, I translated all the French quotes into English, when I was informed this paper would be published. All original French quotes, along with the sources from which they were cited, remain in the endnotes of this paper.

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 Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen* (Élysée), <https://www.elysee.fr/la-presidence/la-declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen>.
- Original Quote :  
« l'exercice des droits naturels de chaque homme n'a de bornes que celles qui assurent aux autres membres de la société la jouissance de ces mêmes droits »
- <sup>ii</sup> *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen* (Élysée).
- Original Quote : « l'utilité commune. »
- <sup>iii</sup> *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen* (Élysée).
- « une loi établie et promulguée antérieurement au délit, et légalement appliquée. »
- <sup>iv</sup> *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen* (Élysée).
- Original Quote : « sans autre distinction que celle de leurs vertus et de leurs talents »
- <sup>v</sup> François Hincker, "Droidloms, Droits de l'homme, Droits de l'homme et du citoyen," *Actuel Marx*, no. 8 (1990): 161.
- Original Quote :  
« Des deux syntagmes, homme et citoyen, fait l'originalité des déclarations françaises de la Révolution (aucune autre, avant ou après, ne la reproduit) et la complexité de ses implications. »
- <sup>vi</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (2016): 824.
- <sup>vii</sup> François Hincker, "Droidloms, Droits de l'homme, Droits de l'homme et du citoyen," *Actuel Marx* : 162.
- <sup>viii</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," *Political Theory*: 825.
- <sup>ix</sup> François Hincker, "Droidloms, Droits de l'homme, Droits de l'homme et du citoyen," 165.
- Original Quote :  
« droit à l'insurrection, spécification ultime du droit à la résistance à l'oppression d'origine lockienne »
- <sup>x</sup> Thierry, De Montrbial, "SUR LA POLITIQUE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME," *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, (1988), 117-121.
- Original Quote :  
« un " *espace public* ", c'est-à-dire, en particulier, la possibilité de dépasser les intérêts étroitement bourgeois »
- <sup>xi</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 825.
- <sup>xii</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 825.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 825.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 825-826.
- <sup>xv</sup> Adom Getachew, "Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 824.
- <sup>xvixvi</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Port-au-Prince and the Collapse of French Imperial Authority, 1789–1793," *French Historical Studies* 44, no.1 (2021): 61.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Port-au-Prince and the Collapse of French Imperial Authority, 1789–1793," *French Historical Studies*: 68.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Peter McPhee, *Liberty and Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pg. 350-351.
- <sup>xix</sup> Peter McPhee, *Liberty and Death*, 145-146.
- <sup>xx</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Port-au-Prince and the Collapse of French Imperial Authority, 1789–1793," 74.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *La Déclaration Des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen* (Élysée).
- Original Quote : « (les) hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. »
- <sup>xxii</sup> François Hincker, "Droidloms, Droits de l'homme, Droits de l'homme et du citoyen," 164.
- Original Quote : « *des droits historiques* »
- <sup>xxiii</sup> François Hincker, "Droidloms, Droits de l'homme, Droits de l'homme et du citoyen," 164.
- Original Quote :  
« (il) faut remarquer que les discours politiques et philosophiques accompagnant la vaste production juridique du Directoire à l'Empire, discours dont les auteurs...s'inscrivent largement dans le droit naturel. »

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Karen Zivi, “Human Rights Claiming as a Performative Practice,” in *Human Rights Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Goodhart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 137-138.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Constitution du 3 juillet 1801* (Digitèque, 2014), <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/constit/ht1801.htm>.

Original Quote :

« (tous) les hommes y naissent, vivent et meurent libres et Français »

<sup>xxvi</sup> Sibylle Fischer, “Inhabiting Rights,” *L'Esprit Créateur* 56, no. 1 (2016) : 52.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *La Déclaration d'Indépendance d'Haïti* (AYIBOPOST, 2018), <https://ayibopost.com/la-declaration-dindependance-dhaiti/>.

Original Quote :

« à la postérité, à nous-mêmes de renoncer à jamais à la France et de mourir plutôt que de vivre sous sa domination. De combattre jusqu'au dernier soupir pour l'indépendance de notre pays. »

<sup>xxviii</sup> Adom Getachew, “Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution,” 827.

<sup>xxix</sup> *La Déclaration d'Indépendance d'Haïti* (AYIBOPOST, 2018).

Original Quote:

« Laissons en paix respirer nos voisins. Qu'ils vivent paisiblement sous l'égide des lois qu'ils se sont faites, et n'allons pas boutes-feu révolutionnaires, nous érigeant en législateurs des Antilles, faire consister notre gloire à troubler le repos des Isles qui nous avoisinent. »

<sup>xxx</sup> Adom Getachew, “Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution,” 831.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Adom Getachew, “Universalism After the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution,” 824.



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<https://ayibopost.com/la-declaration-dindependance-dhaiti/>.

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