

Canada's NED? Whose Rights? What Sort of Democracy? Haiti

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These are the questions that must be asked of "Rights & Democracy," a Montreal-based political group funded almost entirely by the Canadian government.

This week Rights and Democracy has taken part in a smear campaign against a study released in the Lancet medical journal detailing the terrible human rights situation in the 22 months after Haiti's elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide's ouster. E-mails have been sent to various journalists from Rights and Democracy, in which they claim a co-author of the Lancet report is biased. Additionally, Nicholas Galetti, in charge of the Rights and Democracy Haiti file, was quoted in the Globe and Mail claiming the peer-reviewed study's methodology is flawed. Why are Rights and Democracy working strenuously to discredit a study estimating that 8000 were killed and 35,000 raped in Port au Prince?

A couple of days after René Prével's victory in Haiti's recent presidential elections, the group, which supposedly has a mandate to promote human rights and democracy around the world, issued a statement (re-posted on leftwing website rabble.ca) that said Prével "must... form a government of national reconciliation."

Strange words for a group that made no similar demand of Steven Harper, Canada's Prime Minister. Harper's Conservative Party won a minority government with less than 40 % of the vote in Canada's federal elections in January.

In Haiti, even despite the blatant vote manipulation which probably shaved ten percentage points off of his victory, Prével won more than four times the votes (51% vs. 12%) of his nearest rival... and that after a systematic campaign to disenfranchise the poor who are his strongest supporters.

What does it mean to call for a government of national reconciliation? From the point of view of Haiti's poor majority, it effectively means abandoning democracy. It means maintaining the power of a tiny economic elite to block any reforms that weaken elite control over the hemisphere's poorest country.

It means supporting a process whereby Haiti's poor majority is told to relinquish political power to an elite incapable of winning via the ballot box. It means never confronting the "real problem" of Haiti, which is precisely the power of its tiny elite. It is the political equivalent of flipping a coin and saying: "Heads I win, tails you lose."

The ten years between Jean Bertrand Aristide's return as president in 1994 to his second ouster in 2004 were marked by numerous attempts to block the poor majority's political agenda by forcing their candidates into "power-sharing" agreements. For example, Aristide

was forced to accept the U.S. choice for prime minister when he returned in 1994. Unfortunately Rights & Democracy's call for "national reconciliation"

isn't the first time the group has sided with the Haitian elite.

In a January 27, 2006 letter to Allan Rock, Canada's ambassador to the UN, the group echoed the extreme right's demand for increased repression in the country's largest poor neighborhood, Cité Soleil. A couple of weeks after a business-sector "strike" demanding that UN troops aggressively attack "gangsters" in Cité Soleil, Rights & Democracy questioned the "true motives of the UN mission." The letter - also signed by a group of Canadian-government-funded Quebec NGOs known as the Concertation pour Haïti - questioned whether UN forces were "protecting armed bandits more than restoring order and ending violence."

Criticizing the UN for softness in Cité Soleil flies in the face of evidence of its brutality there, including a murderous attack on a hospital documented by Canadian solidarity activists just prior to the Rights & Democracy letter. Of course, the most stark example of UN repression in Cité Soleil was a raid on July 6, 2005 to kill a "gang" leader. That operation left at least 23 civilians dead. (Kevin Pina's film *Haiti: The Untold Story* documents the chilling brutality of UN forces.)

Statements by Rights & Democracy have followed a pattern that belies the organization's professions of support for either human rights or democracy.

A couple of days before Aristide took office in 2001 after winning an election with over 90% of the vote (it was boycotted by parties of the elite, but a poll by the U.S. State Department confirmed Aristide's overwhelming popularity), Rights & Democracy stated: "Mr. Aristide's election came amidst widespread doubts about his own and the [first] Préval government's commitment to democracy."

Yet when the Canadian-backed, unelected, interim government of Gérard Latortue took power after a coup in March 2004, Rights & Democracy made no such statement. Nor has the group criticized the unconstitutional interim government's terrible human rights record. Yet in an April 2002 press release, Rights & Democracy claimed: "the elected officials of the Lavalas Family [Aristide's party] and representatives of 'popular organizations' close to that party are often implicated in the most flagrant violation of Haitian laws."

A few months prior to the February 29, 2004 coup that overthrew Aristide for the second time, in September 2003, Rights & Democracy released a report that described Haiti's pro-coup Group of 184 as "grassroots" and a "promising civil society movement." The truth is that the Group of 184 was spawned and funded by the International Republican Institute (funded by the U.S. Government) and headed by Haiti's leading sweatshop owner, Andy Apaid. Apaid has been active in right-wing Haitian politics for many years and, like former Group of 184 spokesperson Charles Henry Baker, Apaid's brother in law.

Concurrent with Rights & Democracy's public campaign to undermine governments elected by Haiti's poor majority is the group's more low-key work to use "civil society" to undermine any real democracy. In October 2005, Rights & Democracy began a \$415,000 project - largely funded by the Canadian government through the Canadian International Development Association (CIDA) - to "foster greater civil society participation in Haiti's national political process."

The Haitian coordinator of the project is Danielle Magloire, a member of the “Council of the Wise” that appointed Gérard Latortue as interim prime minister after the coup ousted the elected president. Magloire’s status as a “wise” person, moreover, arose largely out of her positions at EnfoFanm (Women’s info) and the National Coordination for Advocacy on Women’s Rights (CONAP). Both of these organizations are CIDA-funded feminist organizations that would not have grown to prominence without international funding. In particular, CONAP is a virulently anti-Lavalas feminist organization that has shunned the language of class struggle in a country where a tiny percentage of the population owns nearly everything. It is also an organization that has expressed little concern about the dramatic rise in rapes targeting Lavalas sympathizers since the coup.

In mid-July 2005, Magloire issued a statement on behalf of the seven-member “Council of the Wise” saying that any media that gives voice to “bandits” (code for Lavalas supporters) should be shut down. She also asserted that the Lavalas Family should be banned from upcoming elections.

Again, one must ask whose rights and what sort of democracy does Rights & Democracy support, when it effectively aligns itself with fascistic elements in Haiti? But why should anyone care?

While few people are aware of Rights & Democracy or its position on Haiti, it would be a mistake to dismiss the group as inconsequential. A few hundred thousand dollars has significant influence in a country as poor as Haiti.

In addition, Rights & Democracy was formerly headed by Ed Broadbent, a former leader of Canada’s New Democratic Party (NDP). Rights & Democracy has negatively influenced the position of the social democratic NDP regarding events in Haiti. Even more important, Rights & Democracy has worked with a group of CIDA-funded Quebec NGOs (notably Alternatives, Development and Peace, AQOCI and Entraide Missionnaire) to confuse the Quebec left, which should have strongly allied itself with the anti-imperialist sector of Montreal’s large Haitian community, regarding Canada’s intervention in Haiti.

Whose rights? The rights of a wealthy minority to run the world.

What sort of democracy? A democracy that accepts modern imperialism, regardless of the consequences.

Rights & Democracy has revealed itself to be similar to the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute and many more government-funded institutions around the world that work to undermine real democracy. These groups are used to do the work that the CIA or the British Foreign Service or agents of the French government once performed.

It is important to reveal this so that Canadians can learn what is being done around the world in their name.

Yves Engler is the author of two books: Canada in Haiti: Waging War on the Poor Majority (with Anthony Fenton) and Playing Left Wing: From Rink Rat to Student Radical. Both books are published by RED/Fernwood and are available at www.turning.ca.

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