



Getting Haiti out of the Crisis, with former Haitian Minister of Social Affairs Victor Benoît (*Batailles électorales et crises politiques en Haïti*) and Chamber of Deputies representative Jerry Tardieu (*L'enfer du Parlement*). Moderator: Dr. Rose Bleus, Sosyete Koukouy of Miami. In Haitian Creole, with English transcript. Sunday, November 21, 2021, available on demand at 12pm on <http://www.sosyetekoukouy.org/koukouy-tv>

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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(00:47:54) Victor Benoît:

Thank you. My name is Victor Benoît, and I am very happy to be a speaker at this conference organized by Sosyete Koukouy. This is a great opportunity for me to remain connected with the Haitian community living outside of Haiti.

(00:48:27) The topic of my presentation is “How to Get Haiti Out of the Crisis.” Since we are limited in time, I would like to start by providing some clarification on the term *crisis*. What exactly is a crisis? A crisis, according to the dictionary, is an anomaly in the lifecycle of an institution, an individual, or a society in general. Let us take a heart attack as an example: the problem started way before the disease manifested; on the day we realize that we have a heart problem, it becomes obvious that our heart was struggling for quite some time before we discovered the problem. Then suddenly, we’re in crisis.

(00:50:09) This was an example from a medical point of view. We could also analyze this concept from a historical or political point of view. A revolution that disrupts society, with a people demanding change, is defined as a crisis. Some individuals organize peaceful demonstrations; others use violence to reach their goals: their actions are qualified as the outbreak of the crisis—an abnormality changes the order of things and affects everyday life. A situation of chaos and insecurity ensue from the violent protests and shootings and put the daily activities on hold—this is what characterizes a crisis in its political or historical dimension.

(00:51:01) In addition to providing a definition of the term *crisis*, I must add that, globally, there are different types and levels of crises. There is a kind of crisis that is conjunctural, and another that is structural. What do we mean by a conjunctural crisis? A conjunctural crisis is circumstantial and happens in the now; a structural crisis affects different layers of society and has its roots from factors that took place one, ten, twenty, thirty, or even a hundred years ago, depending on the society. There

are therefore two types of crises: conjunctural and structural. The conjunctural crisis is transient; it does not have a long lifecycle. On the other hand, the structural crisis is long lasting; it exists not only in the present but might last well into the future if problems do not get resolved. Having explained the differences between the types of crises, let us now address the main subject.

(00:52:56) Let's answer the following question: What is going on in Haiti? After all, the topic of our conversation today is how to get Haiti out of the crisis. What is the current state of crisis in Haiti? Is this a conjunctural or a structural crisis? First, I would like to discuss the conjunctural crisis, without underestimating the structural crisis. The conjunctural crisis is what we are presently experiencing. Every citizen, whether rich, poor or a member of the middle class, whether in Haiti or in the diaspora, uses the same term to define the situation that is prevailing in Haiti: crisis.

(00:54:13) I will not dwell on all the details of the crisis, but I will highlight some current and important facts. On July 7, 2021, citizens woke up to the news that an armed commando assassinated President Jovenel Moïse, in the presence of his wife and in his own home. This is a rare occurrence in society; the last time it happened in Haiti was 106 years ago, with the assassination of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, and it had not happened ever since. We did not expect this surprising event. This assassination created a political void at the highest level of state—the executive power. The country has no president or head of state. Even though Mr. Jovenel Moïse had become a de facto president whose constitutional mandate had ended in February 2021, he was still in function. His assassination left the country without a head of state and with a void that has not been filled either constitutionally or institutionally. The constitutional article provided for this purpose has not been applied. In other words, the article that mandates a decision from the Parliament or, according to the Constitution of 1987, a decision from the Court of Cassation has not been applied. The opposition has not come to a consensus nor has anyone agreed on the choice of a president; therefore, a void persists at the executive level.

(00:57:31) Another element of the crisis concerns the appointment of the Prime Minister by President Jovenel Moïse two days before his assassination. The Prime Minister now has extensive powers, something not provided for in the Haitian constitution. In fact, the constitution sets limits on the powers of the Prime Minister and even on the powers of the President. This is an unprecedented situation. Mr. Ariel Henry is Prime Minister, but he is not the chief of state. He took advantage of Article 149 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the Council of Ministers must replace the president, and [so he did] since he is the chair of the Council of Ministers. Unconstitutionally, he plays both the role of President and that of Prime Minister at the same time, with very extensive powers. He leads the executive power, which allows him to issue decrees and orders and influence the judicial branch.

(00:59:09) The situation has a negative impact on the different layers of the social and political lives of the citizens of Haiti. The citizens are constantly on strike. The constant insecurity paralyzes all activities, and armed bandits have erected barricades on the roads between Port-au-Prince and the

south to block the passage of everyone in the area. Public transportation is obstructed; the citizens without a car must travel by motorbike, a means of transportation that used to cost 50 gourdes (\$0.51) and now costs 150 gourdes (\$1.53). The cost of living and the cost for necessities have also increased drastically, including the price of everyday consumer goods such as rice, peas, and cooking oil. Drinking water is becoming scarce: three water bags used to cost five gourdes (\$0.051); now you can only afford one water bag for the same price. In addition, for the past few days, there has been a scarcity of drinking water throughout the country. School is disrupted; in fact, since the beginning of the school year, the pupils have been unable to attend a full week of classes without disruption. Case in point, last week, they only had two days of classes. The same chaos also exists in the hospitals. The fact that armed bandits prevent the delivery of gas to the gas stations causes gas shortage and serious problems in hospitals.

(01:01:41) Among other chaotic situations that should be noted, there's the fact that the government institutions are not operational. For example, there are currently no representatives of the House in the Parliament because President Jovenel Moïse did not renew their mandates. The Senate only has ten members out of thirty. The Justice system is sluggish; I have even heard some lawyers say that they are basically unemployed, because they have filed cases with the judges, and the judges have been unable to do their work. There is no consensus on the type of power to be established: should it be a one-branch power as the Prime Minister wishes, or should it be a two-branch power as provided for in the Constitution?

(01:02:54) How does the population react to all these problems? Presently, the population is confused, barely able to survive and stay safe. Many try to migrate to other countries, and the phenomenon known as “boat people” has resurfaced. Some pass through the Dominican Republic to arrive in Latin America and continue the journey on foot to reach the United States. Resourcefulness is the word that sums up the evolution of the situation in Haiti on a daily basis. Haitians are trying their best to simply exist—not really live—but mostly to survive as human beings, to make ends meet: to eat, to find healthcare, and to assume their daily responsibilities.

(01:04:06) In summary, these are the elements of the conjunctural crisis. However, when we talk about getting out of the crisis, it goes beyond the conjunctural aspect; there is also the structural aspect. As a history teacher, I can attest that this situation persists because the basic problems have not been solved for the past 200 years, since we've proclaimed our independence. The non-resolution of the basic problems causes the cyclical return of economic, social and political problems that affect the stability of the country. This point leads us to talk about the structural crisis and to briefly analyze some of its elements.

(01:05:20) What characterizes the structural crisis? I will not make a diagnosis of the Haitian society, but rather a summary of the current problems. The economy has collapsed—an economy based on agriculture, which is insufficient to feed the population. Even rice, which is a staple food, has to be imported from Asia, Vietnam, Miami and elsewhere. Even lemon and coconut that are widely used in

Haitian cuisine are imported products from the Dominican Republic. We don't have a domestic processing industry that could transform agricultural products into the financial concept of added value. However, the subcontracting industry is managed by a few Haitian executives, allowing Haiti's cheap labor force to manufacture products such as spare parts that will be assembled in the United States. The workers are underpaid with a meager wage, but it is their only chance to eat and feed their families.

(01:07:55) The foreign trade is in deficit, with a negative trade balance. There is no national savings because the country is constantly in debt and surviving on donations, and people rely on wire transfers from their family in the diaspora to carry on with everyday life in the country. However, this practice does not fully meet the needs of the population. The basic economic problems are significant and cannot meet the demands. From a social point of view, there is a vast inequality between the rich—some of whom are millionaires by international standards—and the mass who lives in extreme poverty with less than a dollar per day. It shall be noted that one American dollar is the equivalent of 100 gourdes on the informal market, and most of the population does not have that one dollar.

(01:09:57) In addition to the glaring inequalities, certain social problems and prejudices that were inherited from the colonial era persist today, even after 200 years. Colorism, which is defined by the categorization of people based on their skin complexion, might be less acute than before 1946, but it persists. We inherited machismo from the Spanish settlers (after all, before their arrival on the island, Queen Anacaona was a female chief) as they eradicated the concept of egalitarianism to proclaim the superiority of man. Machismo has thus become part of our customs, and it is rare to meet a Haitian man who recognizes his wife as an equal partner.

(01:11:45) Anti-nationalism, or the prejudice against everything that is native and national, represents another legacy that the colonists imposed on us to justify their domination. Everything that comes from abroad is good, and everything we make is bad. On the social aspect, many problems are intertwined. Schooling and healthcare are not recognized as human rights. The hospitals lack all kinds of supplies, such as drugs and even medical staff. Many students, some of whom have completed rigorous studies in Haiti, or have returned from studying in Cuba on a scholarship, are forced to emigrate because there are no work opportunities in Haiti. The countryside is held in contempt to favor the capital, Port-au-Prince, even though the capital city is unsanitary and should not be seen as a model to follow.

(01:13:42) Structurally, from a political point of view, there is a dichotomy, a difference between the illusion of a modern front and the persistence of old dictatorial traditions. The modern front is an illusion. According to the Haitian constitution of 1987, and even the constitution before it, Haiti is one of the post-modern countries. From a liberal point of view, Haiti is a country where the separation of the three powers prevails: there is an independent judicial system, and there are great jurists who are the pride of the country. Haiti has signed several human rights documents, including the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Protocol on Economic and Social Rights, as

well as on Civil and Political Rights. Haiti has been cited as an example in several debates on political modernism. Nevertheless, all this is only on the surface. If you go deeper, dictatorial traditions persist in politics. For example, elections are not regularly organized. (Although democracy is not just about elections, there is no democracy without regular elections). Case in point: Since 2020, there have not been elections for the House of Representatives, and there is a violation of political freedoms by the leaders. The dictatorship might be less intense, but by nature, the Haitian political system is dictatorial. Dictatorship existed under the government of Magloire; it increased under the Duvalier regime and reached its peak; and despite the fall of the Duvalier regime, the old dictatorial reflexes have not disappeared. For example, some fanatics will encourage people to commit suicide if they disagree with the government. The freedom of morals is not respected in Haiti.

(01:16:57) At the international level, there is an abdication of dignity and national pride in our relationships with foreign countries. We used to follow the lead of France, but since the American occupation of 1915, we receive our orders from the United States. Many politicians expect to receive the resolution of Haiti's problems from the United States. Since normally the States do not have friends, but rather vested interests, they solve our problems by pursuing their own interests, hence our lack of national dignity.

(01:17:58) When analyzing all the country's problems, we wonder which ones are conjunctural, and which ones are structural, as there's not always a glaring difference between them, at least not from a practical point of view. In fact, we'll observe an entanglement of these two types of crises, an imbroglio, a mixture; the problems are intertwined like cooked spaghetti or vermicelli. However, we must be careful not to view the Haitian crisis only from a conjunctural standpoint without also considering the raging structural crisis, and vice versa. We must adopt a complex strategy, one that is not overly complicated, but has enough complexity to take into consideration the entanglement that exists between the different crises. It is also necessary, when analyzing a problem, to make the distinction [between the two types of crises], conjunctural or structural, because a proper categorization can provide an insight to solve the problem.

(01:20:05) Let's talk about the two strategic steps to overcome the crisis. The strategy asks for a global approach. The first stage requires the establishment of public policies to overcome the conjunctural crisis. We cannot solve the country's economic problems and increase national production, without solving the conjunctural problems first.

(01:21:01) To tackle the conjunctural crisis, it would take a group of patriots willing to change the political situation. Then, we must regain the trust of the citizens by eradicating the banditries; if the gangsters continue to rule the country, the citizens will not be reassured. We need to ensure public safety; the government will need to be ruled by competent and brave citizens capable of solving the problem of insecurity. The strategy to be used will be that of zero tolerance, without bias or weakness towards the gangs. We must put an end to the reign of criminals and thieves that cause terror, resort to looting and kidnapping, and plunge the population into financial distress by forcing them into debt

to pay ransoms. We need to unroot dictatorship and bandits must be brought to justice. Haitian legislation provides measures against criminals. A consensus must therefore be created between the different political groups to work on major issues, such as the high cost of living, projects for the future, the negotiations between the protagonists—bosses, unions, traders—to find a solution to the high cost of living.

(01:24:13) A single social sector will not be able to cover all the expenses; a collaboration will be necessary between economists, sociologists, and marketing specialists to establish a new policy. A negotiation will be crucial to create a moratorium with the neighboring countries, such as the Dominican Republic and the United States, to slow the flow of deportees. I am not asking them not to guard their borders, but since they are our friends, they can grant us a grace period of one or two years while the crisis is being handled. This would allow the Haitian government enough time to provide housing and improve sanitary conditions for our compatriots who have been repatriated.

(01:25:24) Many measures should be taken to recover the state's debts, especially from citizens who have not repaid their debt to the government, including customs fees. The creation of a social assistance policy for the less fortunate is fundamental: the government should implement an expense account to help them cover their rent costs and tuition fees; there should be a formula not too dissimilar to a welfare system to assist them. Renting a house in Port-au-Prince is extremely expensive, so the population need assistance to cover expenses, at least for a given time.

(01:26:38) The establishment of a credible provisional electoral council composed of citizens representing various segments of the society and from the diaspora will be crucial to oversee the elections. The trial of sensitive cases—such as some of the massacres, or the Petro-Caribe affair—should be set in motion, even if judgment is not rendered during the transition period. The government should fund and provide adequate structures to the judicial system to function properly. These are various determinants essential to the elimination of the conjunctural crisis. The resolution of the crisis will be completed *in fine*, in last resort, by the organization of elections. However, these elections should not be rushed; we must first reassure the population by eliminating banditry and creating new jobs.

(01:28:02) In short, the second step will require the organization of a national, sovereign conference to plan and soon decide on the future of the country. For example, we need to rebuild the national cadaster to regularize territorial distributions and avoid the lawsuit fights for land. We need to work on the regionalization and decentralization of the country. The population should move out of the Republic of Port-au-Prince. Too much depends on Port-au-Prince; rural towns must become self-reliant through a nationally responsible policy.

(01:29:04) An integration policy in favor of women, children, young people, and the diaspora is mandatory. Then there should be the democratic rule of law, along with clear a definition of the country's foreign policy through cooperation with other countries in accordance with Haiti's interests,

without our country having to be subjected to the needs of the foreigners. We must have a realistic approach to the crisis because there will be no miracle, and it is not the donations and the decisions of the foreign countries that will solve the problems. Only Haitian people can improve their condition. Consequently, a new policy is needed, because the current downfall of the country is the result of all the past deficient policies. New conjunctural and structural policies are needed to overcome the problem.

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