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FEATURED Q&A

Do Deadly Protests Threaten Moïse's Gov't in Haiti?



Haitian President Jovenel Moïse has faced harsh criticism and violent protests against his government in recent days. // File Photo: Haitian Government.

Q At least 10 people were killed in recent days in violent anti-government protests in Haiti. Opponents have criticized President Jovenel Moïse as inexperienced and incompetent, and demonstrators have aired grievances about government corruption and their country's economic malaise. To what extent does Moïse deserve the criticism, and do the protests threaten his government? What are the biggest problems facing Moïse's government, and how should he address them? What is at the root of Haiti's longstanding economic problems?

A Raymond Joseph, former ambassador of Haiti to the United States: "On Oct. 17 and Nov. 18, Haitians, mostly those under 30, staged mammoth nationwide protests against the government, especially targeting President Jovenel Moïse for covering up for high-level government officials, past and present, who embezzled more than \$3 billion from the Petrocaribe fund from 2008 to 2016. Derived from the local sale of Venezuelan petroleum products, the money was intended for development projects. Citizens demanded, 'Where is the Petrocaribe money?' Eight deaths were reported in the October demonstrations, but it was bloodier in November. The 'Popular Democratic Sector' group reported 11 killed, 47 wounded and 75 arrested, contradicting the police report of six dead, five wounded and 23 arrests. The increased casualties reflect the introduction of foreign sharpshooters in a special 'police' unit armed with weapons of war under the control of the president. In a tweet, National Police chief Jean-Michel Gédéon denied knowing anything about that new unit. Following the protests,

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Colombia's Duque Seeks Ban on Cash in Campaigns

Colombian President Iván Duque said the country's electoral reforms must include a ban on using cash to finance political campaigns. He said campaign contributions should be made through bank drafts.

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ECONOMIC

Argentine Central Bank Removes Interest Rate Floor

The move paves the way for policymakers to lower rates that are among the world's highest.

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POLITICAL

Mexico City's First Female Elected Mayor Sworn in

Claudia Sheinbaum took office as the first woman to be elected mayor of Mexico City. In her inaugural address, Sheinbaum vowed to dissolve the city's riot police and also fight corruption and improve public transportation, among other agenda items.

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Sheinbaum // File Photo: @Claudiashein via Twitter.

POLITICAL NEWS

Mexico City's First Female Elected Mayor Takes Office

Claudia Sheinbaum took office Wednesday as Mexico City's first female elected mayor, El Universal reported. The Mexican capital had previously had one other woman serving as mayor, when Rosario Robles was appointed in 1999 to succeed Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas who stepped down to run for president. After

“The police are there to protect the people, and we don't need a police force to repress them.”

— Claudia Sheinbaum

being sworn in, Sheinbaum announced that she would dissolve the city's riot police, the Associated Press reported. “The police are there to protect the people, and we don't need a police force to repress them,” she said. Sheinbaum also vowed to improve public transportation in the city and construct cable cars to improve access for impoverished slums. Additionally, she said the city would build new housing for residents whose homes were destroyed in the country's 2017 earthquakes. The previous city government had offered loans to help residents rebuild, but many who lost their homes wanted the government to pay for the new housing. Sheinbaum also said she would work to combat corruption. “We are beginning a new era of honesty and eradicating the privileges long enjoyed by top officials,” she said, Agence France-Presse reported. “The first thing we will do is put an end to abuses. As of now, we are re-establishing democracy and political freedom.” A long-time associate of Mexico's new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Sheinbaum has a doctorate in environmental engineering, the AP reported. She also has done post-doctoral research at Lawrence

Berkeley National Laboratory in California and formerly served on the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. During her campaign, Sheinbaum also promised to work to fight crime in Mexico City and enforce zoning laws. Developers in the city have routinely constructed larger buildings than regulations allow. Sheinbaum, who comes from a family of Jewish scientists, served as López Obrador's environment minister after he was elected mayor of Mexico City in 2000, AFP reported. Sheinbaum also previously served as the district mayor of Mexico City's Tlalpan neighborhood. She faced controversy after a private elementary school in her district collapsed as a result of the earthquake that struck the city on Sept. 19, 2017. Nineteen children and seven adults were killed. It was later reported that the school's owner, who is now evading law enforcement, had improperly received contracts from the local government. Some of the victims' families want Sheinbaum to be investigated in connection with the case. Sheinbaum denies wrongdoing and has accused her political opponents of exploiting the catastrophe for political gain, AFP reported.

Colombia's Duque Seeks Ban on Cash in Political Campaigns

Colombian President Iván Duque on Wednesday said the country's electoral reforms must include a ban on financing political campaigns with cash, national news agency Colprensa reported. “It's important that in the reforms, we guarantee the end of cash management to finance campaigns,” Duque said at an event commemorating the 70-year anniversary of the National Registry. “All contributions should be made through bank drafts and with electronic billing.” Duque added that cash is sometimes donated “under the table” to cover the traceability of the payment. In recent weeks, a video showing current Senator and former presidential candidate Gustavo Petro receiving 20 million Colombian pesos, roughly \$6,300, in cash to reportedly finance his political activities 14 years ago, El Universal reported. Petro, who

NEWS BRIEFS

Colombia Sees Steep Rise in Casualties Caused by Landmines

The number of people killed or injured by landmines in Colombia more than tripled this year, up to 180 from 56 last year, a landmine monitoring group said Wednesday, Reuters reported. A report by the Colombian Campaign Against Landmines said most casualties occurred in areas formerly controlled by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels. Most victims were civilians, whereas in previous years they had been primarily military personnel. Colombia has pledged to remove landmines by 2021, a promise the report said the government is unlikely to keep.

Interpol Rejects Ecuador's Request to Seek Arrest of Former President Correa

Interpol has rejected Ecuador's request to issue an international call for the arrest of former President Rafael Correa, who is under investigation for allegedly ordering the kidnapping of opposition leader Fernando Balda in 2012, officials said Wednesday, the Associated Press reported. Correa, who now lives in Belgium, has denied the accusations and says they amount to a political campaign by Ecuador's current government to discredit him and his leftist movement.

Brazil's Bolsonaro May Revise Petrobras' Investment Plan: Report

Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro may revise the investment plans that state oil company Petrobras announced on Wednesday, O Estado de S.Paulo reported. The company said it would invest \$84.1 billion between 2019 and 2023, Reuters reported. That figure is above the \$74.5 billion that it had planned to invest in its plan for 2018-2022.

faced Duque in a runoff in June, has denied wrongdoing and responded by explaining that the payment was in cash because the contributor, Colombian architect Simón Vélez, “hates the financial system.” In an interview with local radio station Caracol, Vélez denied having made any personal contributions to Petro. Interior Minister Nancy Gutiérrez has said Duque’s government will present legislation to overhaul the country’s electoral system in Congress next March, Colprensa reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

López Obrador Seeks More Work Visas for Central Americans

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Wednesday proposed offering more work visas for Central American migrants and told reporters he would ask the United States to do the same, La Jornada reported. In one of his first acts as Mexico’s president, López Obrador signed an agreement with officials from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras for a development program designed to curb Central American migration north, including establishing a fund to create jobs in the region. The president said he would be discussing the plan with U.S. President Donald Trump via phone in the coming days. “We are proposing investment in productive projects and in job creation, and not only that, also work visas for Mexico and for the United States,” López Obrador said, Reuters reported. He added that the plan would increase investment in southern Mexico and Central America and that he would give more details soon, Reuters reported. Thousands of migrants who for weeks had trekked toward the United States arrived in the border city of Tijuana several weeks ago, prompting Trump to mobilize members of the U.S. Army and reduce the number of asylum applications accepted per day. Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard last week signaled that the country is willing to house the more than 5,000 migrants camped out in Tijuana while they apply for

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the president remained silent. However, on Nov. 21, U.S. diplomat Kenneth Merten gave an interview in Creole over the Voice of America, saying U.S. favors change ‘through elections,’ further inflaming Haitians. Mr. Merten, deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs and

“**The most important issue in Haiti now is government corruption, the root cause of the country’s impoverishment.**”

— Raymond Joseph

Haiti special coordinator, was ambassador to Haiti between 2009 and 2012. Following Mr. Merten, that same evening, in a six-minute televised address, President Moïse said he wouldn’t allow ‘any disorder during his five-year mandate.’ However, he didn’t mention the cause of the protests. Two days later, Prime Minister Jean-Henry Céant acknowledged the people’s grievances. In a 17-minute message on Facebook, he asserted, ‘We will find the Petrocaribe money.’ All of a sudden, the prime minister is seen in a new light, because the most important issue in Haiti now is government corruption, the root cause of the country’s impoverishment.

asylum in the United States, the Associated Press reported.

Argentine Central Bank Removes 60% Floor on Interest Rate

Argentina’s central bank on Wednesday eliminated the 60 percent floor it has maintained on its key interest rate, Reuters reported. The move will allow policymakers to reduce interest

Unless that is dealt with speedily, the future of Haiti and that of President Moïse’s term are uncertain.”

A **Georges Fauriol, senior associate in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:** “Haiti

is in trouble, and the international community should be worried. The violent July disturbances paved the way for October protests on a more national scale, and in turn, the more recent eruption of public anger in November essentially paralyzed the country. Fueling all of this is a feeling that the government lacks competence and that corruption permeates all sectors of public governance. Exhibit A is the misuse of somewhere between \$2 billion and \$3 billion over the past decade sourced through Venezuela’s Petrocaribe discounted oil initiative. Exhibit B is the illicit commercial trafficking that characterizes the Haiti-Dominican Republic border and provides a granular and recently violent window on the lawlessness that permeates Haiti’s administrative machinery. This further erosion of state capacity is framed by several factors: 1.) the inexperience of the Jovenel Moïse presidency and undependability of many of his close advisors; 2.) a tenuous relationship between Moïse and his prime minister, Jean-Henry Céant, nominated in the wake of the July protests. A growing friction has led

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rates in Argentina, which has among the world’s highest borrowing rates. An unnamed central bank source told the wire service that the bank will still maintain caution to protect against volatility in the peso. “A couple of months of volatility have passed, and we want to reinforce that the elimination of the rate floor does not mean that we are going to lower our guard,” the source said. In August, the central bank hiked its benchmark rate to 60 percent after a steep devaluation in the country’s currency. The peso has lost about half of its value against the U.S. dollar this year.

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to threats of resignation by Céant, and he is increasingly viewed as a political competitor; 3.) the re-emergence of a perennial problem with Haiti's law enforcement apparatus with the appearance on the streets of heavily armed tactical units, raising questions regarding the chain of command; 4.) an overall economic situation that is getting worse—the average price of food is up, and factories were closed during the recent riots. Moïse's messages to the nation after the recent disturbance have been unconvincing, leading the streets to demand more—and a general sense of panic that this presidency may not last. There are critical issues to attend to where the international community can play a helpful role: mediating the unproductive Moïse-Céant political relationship, keeping in mind that the 2019 political calendar includes parliamentary elections, which hedge on the delayed reforms of the electoral machinery. The international community can also help to ensure a productive outcome to the parliamentary review of the Petrocaribe scandal. Without such a review, the current government has no credibility."

A James Morrell, executive director of the Haiti Democracy Project: "For the pickle that Haiti finds itself in, there is enough blame to go around: to Jovenel Moïse, the man in the driver's seat, to violent presidential rivals who won't take the voters' no for an answer, to the international community, whose attention has wandered. Moïse has proved to be stubborn but not shrewd, careless in imposing budget-driven price and tax hikes that showed indifference to the plight of the poor. He was apparently surprised by the backlash. He waited until he became president to unveil an almost Aristidean

willfulness, the same 'je veux et je peux' even to the point of clearing the locals out of terrain he wanted for a helipad. He's kept on too many corruptionists from the Martelly days. Of Petrocaribe's \$1.2 billion, perhaps

“Moïse has proved to be stubborn but not shrewd.”

— James Morrell

\$200 million was siphoned off to individual Haitians and Venezuelans during the Préval, Martelly, Privert and Moïse administrations. Martelly even bragged to one member of the wealthy elite, 'I'll be richer than you by the time I am done.' As a result, President Moïse has forfeited his popular support and will at best be a lame duck for the rest of his term. At worst, he will be forced out or overthrown, even violently. The loss here is not to one man, but rather to Haiti's institutions and stability. That instability keeps tourists from getting off their cruise ships, factory owners from risking expansion and farmers from keeping livestock. The United States needs to protect its multi-decade investment in Haiti's institutions, particularly elections and the presidency, with carefully targeted aid to keep them going until Haitians elect someone worthy of the job."

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