

When the Editorial Board gets it wrong

The New York Times Editorial Board's byline states its views are informed by expertise. In the case of its February 10 article "Haiti Needs Help. This Is What the U.S. Sends Instead." it got so many things wrong it left an informed reader's head spinning.

This week, Haiti experienced an insurrection. A group planned and carried out an attempt to assassinate the democratically elected president of Haiti. This capped off a week of small but violent rallies encouraged by politicians promoting false theories about removing the president from office. We want the world to focus on what's happening in Haiti, but we also want accuracy, especially from the New York Times.

Sunday of this week was not "the last day in office" for President Jovenel Moise, as the Editorial Board asserts. Our constitution is very clear on presidential terms: presidents in Haiti serve 5-year terms and Moise was inaugurated in February 2017, which means his term ends in February 2022. Just like in America, and everywhere, a presidential term begins on inauguration day. Yet America's paper of record states as fact a theory which emerged just months ago from a handful of Haitian politicians to rejig the timeline. Your article admits that the U.S. State Department, United Nations, and Organization of American States all concur that Moise's term ends next year but, evidently, confirmation from informed, objective parties is not persuasive to the Editorial Board.

The Editorial Board offers a shocking alternative to self-rule for the world's first Black republic: they suggest that the U.S., Europe, and others could install a "transitional" government of their choosing. Naturally, this would require an ouster of the democratically elected government Haiti has today. In which century are we reading such a proposal on the pages of the New York Times? Who signed off on that going to print?

The Editorial Board describes Moise, definitively, as "despised". Like many countries including the Board's own, Haiti is a deeply polarized environment with tense partisan politics. In a recent poll, 57% of respondents reported unfavorable views of the President's party. But the Times might want to apply standards more evenly – the same perspective applied to US politics can be applied to other countries, even poor Black ones. Moise's polling, despite being done amid current tension, puts him in similar territory as several American presidents: Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter's average approval rating were both 45%. Barack Obama's average was just under 48% and at times was as low as 38%. Polling everywhere has its flaws, but I don't expect the Times would characterize Obama in a single word: "despised". Even Donald Trump, who averaged 41%, would not be described in such sweeping terms by the Times. It's clear the Editorial Board despises Moise, but at some point, facts matter. They are superimposing their own views on the Haitian public.

The Editorial Board accuses Moise of "rampant plunder and mismanagement", a big allegation bolstered by no specifics. Corruption is endemic in Haiti – this has been the case for decades and no one, including me, will seek to deny it. But Moise has done more than most to attack it, drawing sharp criticism and personal risk, including disrupting longtime monopolies in the energy industry – for the first time establishing competitive and transparent bidding in the notoriously corrupt and politically connected sector.

The Editorial Board exhibited a deep misunderstanding of why our legislature has been missing in action since last year – appearing to claim this was an act of usurpation by the President.

That's demonstrably false. Under the 1987 constitution, Haiti's branches of power are woefully imbalanced and are marked by dysfunctional decision-making processes. Just a few legislators can block essential proceedings, including movement for elections. Last year, the legislature failed to hold a vote on the budget needed to conduct legislative elections when the process was obstructed by a few fringe members. In Haiti, the president – very limited in authority – has no ability to interfere, so legislative elections were postponed and the body's term expired without newly elected members, leaving the President to govern by executive order without parliamentary oversight. This has happened to five successive presidents since 1987 for the same reason. That means there are fundamental flaws to our governing system. These problems are the very reason President Moïse moved to reform the constitution, an effort supported by nearly 90% of Haitians alongside the UN, OAS and other international partners.

The new constitution was drafted by an independent commission with wide-ranging consultation and will be put to a national referendum for the voters' approval in April. The new constitution strengthens our weak, unstable democratic structure and creates considerably more accountability – laying the groundwork for Haiti to have a functioning representative democracy, finally. The referendum will be followed by local, state and national elections in which President Moïse will not be a candidate, and for each of these we have actively sought and recruited international support and on-ground observation to help ensure transparency, security and credibility of results.

The Editorial Board is right that Haiti has deep, urgent crises: immense poverty, lack of infrastructure and opportunity, utter loss of faith in our politics. To make it possible for the next administration and those thereafter to govern effectively and deliver the positive change for which the people of our country have waited and suffered for far too long, we have to fix our faulty foundation. We have to prevent the same cycle from occurring again: political deadlock, chaos, instability, repeat. Before leaving office next February, President Moïse is working to deliver constitutional change, and it will mean something. It will give our country a chance. That's the reality.

-His Excellency Bocchit Edmond is the Haitian Ambassador to the United States.

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