

The Emergence of the Independent Press in Haiti: 1971-1980

In 1971, Jean-Claude Duvalier became President-for-Life of the Republic of Haiti at the death of his father, François Duvalier. The younger Duvalier proclaimed that, whereas his father's regime had accomplished the political revolution, his would realize the economic revolution. He promptly instituted mechanisms for attracting foreign businesses to Haiti, chiefly from the United States, France and Canada. He has stated that he wished to be known in history as the president of Haiti who had irrevocably established democracy in Haiti. His 1971 constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and the right to form political parties. Critics of the regime would state that the democratic stance was a necessary ploy to support the Government's policy of attracting foreign entrepreneurs, claiming that capitalism had traditionally flourished in a democratic society. They would further state that the old structures of repression remained in place. In any event, Jean-Claudism, an evolved phase of Duvalierism, had been launched.

The independent press, which had been silenced through a campaign of terror and repression under François Duvalier, began, very haltingly, to republish, being careful to confine itself to belles lettres. But by 1980, the decade had seen the rise of at least thirteen new unaligned periodicals in Port-au-Prince alone, as well as several provincial and pro-Government magazines, and the independent press spoke openly of politics and economics.

The situation was completely reversed in the last days of November when the Port-au-Prince Chief of Police, Jean Valmé, announced the arrests of "national and international agitators of Communist loyalties connected with the media." The arrests of "contestataires" and independent journalists in Haiti had, in fact, been gaining momentum through October and November. On October 8, Compè Philo (Anthony Pascal) and a colleague at Radio Haiti-Inter were arrested as they walked home from work in the early morning hours. After several hours of harassment, they were released. On October 16, Yvens Paul was arrested as he stepped down from a plane arriving from New York. He was released on October 25, his back covered with lacerations, bruises and, according to some

reports, broken bones, from the approximately 80 blows he had received during the first day of his arrest. On or about October 28, Marie France Claude, daughter of Sylvio Claude and Vice-President of the Haitian Christian Democratic Party, was arrested. On or about November 27, Luvis Joinvil, a colleague of Yvens Paul at Radio Cacique, was arrested.

On Friday, November 28, 1980, the arrests began in earnest. The police rounded up Jean Robert Hérad and Pierre Clitandre of Le Petit Samedi Soir, Michèle Montas, Anthony Pascal, Liliane Pierre-Paul and Richard Brisson of Radio Haiti Inter, Kern Grand-Pierre and the entire staff of Inter-Jeunes, two journalists from Regard, Nicole Magloire, Constant Pognon of Le Coquérico, Gregoire Eugène of the Social Christian Party of Haiti and Fraternité, Marcus of Radio Metropole, Mme Sylvio Claude and a second daughter, of the Haitian Christian Democratic Party and La Conviction, and Jean-Claude Carrié of Radio Cacique. Radio Cacique was smashed. Radio Haiti Inter was occupied by armed guards. Jean Dominique, owner of Radio Haiti Inter, sought refuge in the embassy of a South American country and Yvens Paul, by some reports, has been arrested and by others, is in hiding.

Thus, in spite of President Duvalier's professed goals of "liberalization and democratization," the independent press, one of the cornerstones of a democratic society, has, for now at least, been effectively dismantled. Haitians in exile have called this action the most significant since the "hard years" of 1963-1964, under François Duvalier. There can be no doubt that these wholesale arrests, on charges which run counter to all available evidence, very seriously affect the destiny of freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and the very concept of human rights in Haiti. In order to see more clearly why the organs of the press mentioned above have been singled out for attack, we must go back over the last decade and trace the development of that press as an independent voice in the Haiti of the younger Duvalier.

Le Petit Samedi Soir made its début in Port-au-Prince in 1972 as a modest, thirty-two page mimeographed literary magazine. The first twenty issues were concerned exclusively with literature. Gradually, the focus widened, embracing the issue of Creole, its use and teaching, then the issue of literacy. By its third year,

the magazine had widened its interests to include all cultural and social activities, international as well as national, and a new note of commitment is sounded. An editorial in the December 24-31, 1977 issue (No. 222) states in part:

We are not in the service of the government of the Republic. Even less so are we a voice in opposition to the Duvalier regime. Le Petit Samedi Soir has always defined itself as an independent and national magazine, in the service of progress for the collectivity and respect for the Haitian man. In the great political, economic and social debates which for some time have moved the nation, Le Petit Samedi Soir has always stood on the side of right, reason, justice and truth. (p. 4)

Le Petit Samedi Soir had indeed for some time been careful to define itself as "independent," and its subtitle of seven years-- "Magazine of Haitian Cultural Current Events"--was significantly changed, in the May 27-June 2, 1978 issue to "Independent Magazine of Haitian Cultural Current Events."

Although the ^{founder}, Dieudonné Fardin, a man in his early forties, continues to publish the magazine, editorials have recently been the responsibility of two young men in their mid twenties: Pierre Clitandre and Jean Robert Hérad. Clitandre is thoughtful, quiet and caring. Although his words are not strident, he leaves no doubt as to his position on issues. His novel, Cathedral of the Month of August (1980), will probably prove to be the most significant literary event of the year. Jean Robert Hérad is dynamic, enthusiastic, and possesses the journalist's love of fast-moving events and his way with words.

The election of Jimmy Carter as President of the United States of America in November 1976 introduced an unexpected dimension into the Haitian situation. Carter's human rights policy was received by the Haitian regime, dependent on the United States for foreign aid and hoping to rebuild its economy in the private sector by sub-contracts with American businessmen, with some degree of seriousness, and the press began testing in earnest.

Serious setbacks have nonetheless occurred, most notably in the assassination of Gasner Raymond, reporter for Le Petit Samedi Soir, found dead at the age of twenty-five on the roadside outside

of Port-au-Prince on June 1, 1976. It is believed that his death is connected with a series of articles he had been writing on the conditions of work at the Ciment d'Haiti (Haitian Cement Works). Another setback occurred after the Baptist minister, Luc Nérée, published an article entitled "Volunteers of National Security maintain a climate of insecurity in provincial cities" in the December 8-15, 1977 issue of Jeune Presse, which he and his son had edited since 1976. In the article, Nérée criticized the practice by undisciplined militiamen (commonly known as tontons macoutes and officially known as Volunteers of National Security) of terrorizing the populations, and the lack of concern by the Government. Pastor Nérée openly questioned whether Haiti was experiencing a return to "the explosive period 1961-1970," and called on the Government to live up to its promise to "create the conditions for an authentic renewal" of Haiti. Five days after the article appeared, two men pulled Nérée from his car and beat him, then tried unsuccessfully to push him into their car. The two men were later identified as militiamen--tontons macoutes.

Compared with the previous decade however, the Haitian press and Haitian letters generally seemed to enter a period of rebirth. The years 1978-1980 witnessed a resurgence of the popular theatre, publication of increasing numbers of small volumes of poetry, news-casts and commentary on independent radio stations, and the emergence of at least ten/^{independent} general interest or cultural magazines. The same period also saw the rise of the Social Christian Party of Haiti, the Haitian Christian Democratic Party, and the Haitian League of Human Rights. In 1979, several professional and cultural associations were also formed.

It must be emphasized that all the independent magazines of the period 1978-1980 do not follow the pattern established by Le Petit Samedi Soir. Some, beginning as purely literary journals, remain so. But others, such as Le Fil d'Ariane, Inter-Jeunes, Regard and Coquérico, go even further than Le Petit Samedi Soir in voicing editorial opinions and in testing the "dégel" (thaw) which the Government seemed to be permitting. The magazines more and more openly criticized the government, holding its words up to scrutiny against its acts.

Le Fil 'Ariane began publication in 1978, the last issue (the

(the eighth) appearing in March 1979. The magazine's slick format and expensive layout was unusual for the milieu, as was the magazine's editor, Nadine Magloire, ^{the sister of Nicole Magloire.} / Mme Magloire's two novels, Sickness of Life (1967) and The Mythical Sex (1975), had caused a stir in Haiti because of their bold treatment of sexual relationships. Her magazine featured aspects of culture and society, with heavy emphasis on the arts. Magloire's presence was everywhere in the magazine, and her editorials were outspoken. The seventh issue (January-February 1979) carries editorials by her which are headlined: "An illiterate and miserable under-proletariat creates a situation which can become explosive," and "It is not the demagogue who loves the people." This latter editorial ends with the thought:

I wish to live in a world where more justice prevails. Socialism does not bother me; I have no need to possess. But I find irritating the attitude of those who wish in no way to change the system because they intend to profit from it, but who, by demagogery, attack certain capitalists (knowing that they risk nothing, naturally), when, logically, it is the system that they should be attacking. (p. 4)

Inter-Jeunes began publishing in February 1979. As its name implies, it is a magazine written by youth for youth. The average age of its staff is twenty; most are students. The founder and editor, Kern Grand-Pierre, is a willowy youth, quick and perceptive, incisive and dreamy. Jean Gardy Ady, his constant companion and co-worker, is searching for answers (as his shifting signature--from Jean Gardy Ady to Ady Jean Gardy to Adyjeangardy to Adjega--would indicate). Ady's perceptive literary criticism, his ambitious studies in Haitian history ("The Opposition in the era of Boyer"), if somewhat rushed, show the promise of brilliance.

Inter-Jeunes published intermittently through 1979, but became a weekly with an improved format in 1980. The quality of the journalism also rapidly improved, and what had been, in the early issues in many instances, undirected adolescent rebellion, became legitimate criticism. Although the magazine never outgrew its cliquism, Inter-Jeunes was the voice of a troubled youth, wounded in spirit and claiming its right to say so. The October-November 1979 issue (Nos. 10-11), carries an editorial captioned "The Right to Say":

From Jean Jacques DESSALINES to Jean Claude DUVALIER we have woven myths, raveled out illusions and fondled immense dreams which, today still, crumble to dust in our hands, and which condemn us to die, our eyes blindfolded, on the archaic walls of resignation.(p.4)

The first issue of the weekly magazine Regard appeared in the Spring of 1979. The magazine was ordered to stop publishing by the Government after the first issue. Several months intervened before the second issue was published. Regard was vocal in its criticism, but less personal than Le Fil d'Ariane and more issue-oriented than Inter-Jeunes. It stressed economics, stating that the Haitian economy was a dependent economy, and that dependent countries were tied to magnet commercial cities of the West. Some discussion of culture, especially the popular theatre, appeared, as did retrospective analyses of recent events, and series on certain agribusinesses and conditions in factories.

Le Coquerico made its appearance on September 29, 1979. Its publisher, Constant Pognon, an educator who appears to be in his forties, declared in the premier editorial:

Those who have already thrown themselves into the arena are numerous, and for the most part, continue to work diligently. If yesterday still, we were only observers, readers or listeners, today, conscious of the task and of our share of responsibility ... we call to the attention of the public our firm will, henceforth, to labor side by side with those who precede us in the struggle ... (p. 3)

Intended as a bimonthly, six issues were published through February 16, 1980. A long silence ensued, and the editorial of the seventh issue, published August 7, 1980, speaks of a "forced silence of more than five months." The fifth issue, however, that of December 22, 1979-January 4, 1980, had noted progress:

It /the independent press/ was the catalyst of the whole intense combat of the year /1979/. The barometer telling the political temperature. The thermometer telling the social fever. The photographer. It was courageous, objective, nationalist. In this struggle for Haitian democracy and liberty. ("The Road to Liberty" p. 13)

The experiment in "dégel" was interrupted in 1979 by a hardening of the Government's position. Censorship was established over the theatre, a stricter press law was passed, commando raids were carried out against a public meeting called by the Haitian League of Human Rights and the headquarters of the Haitian Democratic Christian Party, a warrant was issued against the head of the Social Christian Party of Haiti, journalists were harassed and their lives threatened. The situation worsened through 1980. But as the Coquerico article suggests, the independent press rallied, finding an even greater sense of its role as the agent most likely to bring to Haiti the reality of "liberalization and democratization."

Haiti has a high rate of illiteracy. For those who cannot read, or who cannot read French, there was, paralleling the development of the written press, what, in Haiti is called "the spoken press"--the radio. Side by side with the Government-run Radio Nationale and the church-sponsored stations, several independent stations have broadcast the news.

Radio Cacique, headed by Jean-Claude Carrié, has been perhaps the most courageous, broadcasting the radical political message of Sylvio Claude, head of the Haitian Christian Democratic Party, until his arrest in September 1979. It has also broadcast the hour-long daily/program of Yvens Paul (Kompè Plum). Paul is noted for his resolutely independent stance, his willingness to voice opinions on controversial subjects. His wit, kindness and sociability have earned him a large following among the popular classes.

Even more popular has been the daily/^{Creole}newscast of Anthony Pascal (Kompè Philo) on Radio Haiti-Inter. Kompè Philo has won listeners with his ability to interpret current events and to draw parallels and inferences for the Haitian condition, and for his gentle concern with widening the horizons of his listeners. Radio Haiti-Inter, in effect, has become the most popular station in Haiti, with French-language newscasts which are often the first to break news stories in Haiti. Their report of a scheme by New Jersey businessmen to contract with the Haitian Government for dumpsites for nuclear wastes in the Northwestern provinces was picked up by all the other media in Haiti, forcing a public refusal by the Government and diplomatic intervention by the U.S. Embassy. The professional delivery of such news by reporters such as Michèle

scholarly

Montas (also editor of the/magazine Conjonction) and Liliane Pierre-Paul makes the news more supportable, if not more palatable. But the star attraction of Radio Haiti-Inter is the owner, Jean Dominique, whose Sunday journal, elegantly written and delivered, is a model of insightful commentary, newsworthy items and double entendre.

Radio Métropole has a commitment to newscasting, as is evidenced by its elaborately appointed newsroom and the professional competence of its well-known news editor, Marcus. Radio Métropole regularly sends reporters into the provinces for on-the-spot coverage.

Still newer periodicals appeared by mid-1979. And some were no longer magazines of general interest, but organs of political parties. The Christian Democratic Party of June 27 (later called the Social Christian Party of Haiti) was headed by Gregoire Eugène. Its organ, Fraternité, began publishing in the Summer of 1979, shortly after Eugène had published the pamphlet Plea in Favor of Political Parties arguing in favor of a multi-party system in Haiti, based on issues and platforms, rather than on individual personalities. His magazine continued to stress such issues. In the May 1980 issue, for example, Eugène published an article which called into question the legality of the younger Duvalier's claim to the presidency for life.

The Haitian Christian Democratic Party, headed by Sylvio Claude, claimed to have been formed clandestinely in late 1978. It surfaced at about the same time as Eugène's Christian Democratic Party, but continued harrassment and incarcerations of the Party leadership delayed publication of an organ. When it did appear, Verite sou tanbou was much more popular in orientation than was Fraternité, the work of the law professor, Gregoire Eugène. It was not long before the Government ordered Verite sou tanbou to cease publication because of infraction of press laws. Claude defied the order, and while continuing to publish Verite sou tanbou, brought out a second journal, La Conviction. When La Conviction published a picture of Jean Claude Duvalier, flanked by his guard and with a pistol in hand, and surrounded by smaller pictures of dead and deposed former heads of states such as Anastasio Somoza, Idi Amin Dada, the Shah of Iran, Claude was arrested. The photographs of the former dictators had the letter "x" traced over their faces, while a question mark appeared beside Duvalier.

Since the wave of arrests began in late November, several journalists have been deported by the Haitian Government to the United States. Others are still in hiding in Haiti. Still others are in prison. According to some/unconfirmed reports, some of those released from prison to go home and pack to leave the country have disappeared. The journalist Pierre Clitandre arrived in exile severely beaten about the head, so much so that his appearance was altered.

The first decade of the rule of the younger Duvalier thus ends as did his father's reign, with the effective silencing of the independent press. With facilities destroyed and the most vocal elements shipped out of the country or in hiding, there appears little possibility that the press will soon function as openly and as freely as it had as recently as a month ago. All those in the international community concerned with freedom of expression will view these arrests with alarm. This massive action quite clearly marks a turning point in the history of independent journalism in Haiti. The arrests may, in fact, mark the end of an era.

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