



Haiti: Concerns After the Presidential Assassination

Updated July 19, 2021

Armed assailants assassinated Haitian President Jovenel Moïse in his private home in the capital, Port-au-Prince, early on July 7, 2021 (see **Figure 1**). Many details of the attack remain under investigation. Haitian police have [arrested more than 20 people](#), including former Colombian soldiers, two Haitian Americans, and a Haitian with long-standing ties to Florida. A Pentagon spokesperson said the [U.S. military helped train a “small number”](#) of the Colombian suspects in the past.

Protesters and opposition groups had been calling for Moïse to resign since 2019. The assassination’s aftermath, on top of several preexisting crises in Haiti, likely points to a period of major instability, presenting challenges for U.S. policymakers and for congressional oversight of the U.S. response and assistance. The Biden Administration requested \$188 million in U.S. assistance for Haiti in FY2022. Congress has [previously held hearings](#), and the cochair of the House Haiti Caucus [made a statement](#) on July 7 suggesting reexaminations of U.S. policy options on Haiti.

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Figure 1. Haiti



Source: CRS.

Succession. Who will succeed Moïse is unclear, as is the leadership of the Haitian government. In the assassination's immediate aftermath, interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph was in charge, [recognized by U.S. and U.N. officials](#), and said the police and military were [in control](#) of Haitian security. Joseph became interim prime minister in April 2021. The day before the assassination, Moïse named Ariel Henry to be prime minister, but Henry had yet to be sworn in. Under the Haitian Constitution (Article 149), if a president becomes incapacitated or dies, the Council of Ministers under the prime minister should govern until the election of another president within 60-120 days. If, as is the current case, the presidential vacancy occurs in the last two years of a presidential term, the legislature should elect a provisional president to finish out the term. The legislature also should confirm the prime minister. Currently, however, Haiti has no functioning legislature, as most legislators' terms expired on January 13, 2020. Some observers have suggested a role for Supreme Court judges in filling a presidential vacancy, which was so under the 1987 constitution but has not been the case since amendments passed in 2011-2012. On July 9, one-third of the Haitian Senate, acting without a quorum, declared Senate president Joseph Lambert provisional president. A Biden Administration [delegation met with all three claimants](#) to power on July 11 in response to Haiti's request for security and investigative assistance. On July 17, U.S. and U.N. officials changed their position and, along with other diplomats, [expressed support for Henry](#) as prime minister, calling for the formation of a consensus government and the holding of credible elections as soon as possible. Joseph [agreed to step down](#) as prime minister.

Political Background and Recent Unrest. Under the administration of the late President Moïse, who was inaugurated in February 2017, Haiti experienced political and social unrest, high inflation, and resurgent gang violence. Government instability increased after May 2019, when the Superior Court of Auditors delivered a report to the Senate alleging Moïse had embezzled millions of dollars, which Moïse denied. Since that time, periodic mass demonstrations have called for the provision of government services, an end to corruption, and Moïse's resignation; Moïse had said he would not resign.

Political gridlock between the executive and legislative branches led to the government not organizing scheduled October 2019 parliamentary elections. The terms of the entire lower Chamber of Deputies and

two-thirds of the Senate expired in January 2020, as did the terms of all local government posts, without newly elected officials to take their places. Moïse had been ruling by decree since then.

Security Concerns. According to U.N. reports, [gangs](#) challenge the Haitian state's authority. [Violent crime has increased](#): in 2020, kidnappings increased by 200% over 2019, murders increased by 20%, and reported rapes increased by 12%. The Haitian National Police (HNP) force, which became increasingly professional with the support of U.N. peacekeeping forces (2004-2017) and U.S. and other international assistance, has been unable to maintain control. The HNP is underfunded and smaller than international standards for the country's population. According to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti, gangs are [often better armed and better equipped](#) than law-enforcement authorities. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, [gangs operate with the support of some Haitian politicians](#), receiving money, political protection, and firearms in exchange for carrying out attacks designed to create instability and suppress protests over living conditions. Observers also are concerned over human rights abuses committed by police, including [19 extrajudicial killings](#) in 2019. Although President Biden said the United States is ready to [help work for a secure Haiti](#), he also said sending in U.S. troops was [not currently on the agenda](#).

Elections. U.N. and U.S. officials have pressed Haiti to hold overdue legislative and municipal elections as soon as possible. Instead, the Moïse government announced it would hold a referendum on a new constitution and simultaneous legislative and presidential elections on September 19 (and, if necessary, runoff elections on November 21). Moïse generated controversy when he appointed by decree, without broad political consensus, a Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) to organize the referendum and elections. The moves were arguably unconstitutional; all three branches of government are supposed to choose electoral council members (Article 192), two consecutive legislatures are to approve constitutional changes (Articles 282-283), and constitutional amendment by referendum is "strictly forbidden" (Article 284.3). The Biden Administration says it [still expects Haiti to hold elections](#) this year, and its FY2022 request includes \$8 million to strengthen electoral and other institutions, promote political party competitiveness, and protect human rights.

Humanitarian Concerns. Political instability and extreme vulnerability to natural disasters contribute to Haiti being the poorest and one of the most unequal countries in the Western Hemisphere; heightened instability after the assassination could worsen conditions. According to the [World Bank](#), a weak economy, political turmoil, and the COVID-19 pandemic have reversed modest reductions in poverty, leaving almost 60% of Haitians in poverty in 2020. Over 96% of the population is vulnerable to natural disasters. According to the World Bank, "a child born today in Haiti will grow up to be [only 45% as productive as they could be](#) if he or she had enjoyed full education and health." Haiti has not initiated a [COVID-19 vaccine program](#), and its infection rate is rising. The [United States donated 500,000 doses](#) of COVID-19 vaccines that arrived on July 14. Of the Biden Administration's FY2022 foreign assistance request for Haiti, \$51 million is for development assistance.

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