

Papa Doc's Feint: the misled opposition and the consolidation of Duvalier's rule in Haiti*

A finta de Papa Doc: a oposição desnorçada e a consolidação do poder de Duvalier no Haiti

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ABSTRACT This paper presents the case of the coming to and consolidation of power by François Duvalier's authoritarian regime in Haiti in the late 50s and early 60s. The rise of Duvalierism appears to be in part due to a sequence of strategic interactions among Duvalier and his opponents: even though opponents remained stronger than the incumbent, the latter managed to overcome their frequent attacks by *feinting* to be weaker than he was and preventing them to unite and coordinate their fight against him. These opponents, who were in general members of the traditional economic and political elite of Haiti, expected to gain control over the government and had an incentive not to coordinate against Duvalier in order to monopolize such control. This strategic sequence, analytically and descriptively summarized, appears to have been at the origin of the consolidation of Duvalier's rule in Haiti.

KEYWORDS: Haiti; Haitian politics; Authoritarianism; Rational choice.

RESUMO *Este artigo apresenta o caso da chegada ao poder e da consolidação do regime autoritário de François Duvalier no Haiti no fim dos anos 1950 e início dos anos 1960. A ascensão do duvalierismo se deu, em parte, por uma sequência de interações estratégicas entre Duvalier e seus opositores: por mais que estes fossem mais poderosos do que aquele, Duvalier superou os frequentes ataques contra ele ao pretender ser mais fraco do que realmente era e prevenir que a oposição se unisse e se coordenasse contra ele. Os opositores, em geral membros da elite econômica e política tradicional do Haiti, almejavam alcançar o poder por seus próprios meios e não tinham um incentivo para não se coordenar contra Duvalier para monopolizar o poder. A sequência estratégica, descrita analítica e descritivamente, contribui para entender a consolidação do poder de Duvalier no Haiti.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Haiti; Política haitiana; Autoritarismo; Escolha racional.

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The 1961 presidential election symbolizes the power consolidation of François Duvalier in Haiti. Duvalier, also known as Papa Doc, governed Haiti from 1957 to 1971, when he died and let the power to his son. In the first years of rule, he faced constant attacks from powerful opposers, such as previous presidents and local elites. General strikes, coups, and military attacks against him were unsuccessful, and he was able to exterminate his opposers. On April 30, 1961, Papa Doc was reelected; he faced no opposition. Ballots were printed up in advance with his sole name, and he received more votes than the estimated one million Haitians eligible to vote. As *The New York Times* put it, on May 13 of the same year: “Latin America has seen many rigged elections in its history, but none more outrageous than the proceedings in Haiti.” Three years later, Duvalier self-proclaimed himself president for life.

When Duvalier took office, the basic power structure of Haiti was not ideal for establishing strong and stable central governments. During the American occupation (1915-1934), the marines invested in strengthening the central-government bureaucracy. They prevented military takeovers, and invested in establishing the institutional grounds for a stable democratic system. They reorganized the army, believing that a professionalized military force would refrain to take part of state affairs. The American strategy failed (Peschanski, 2006). From 1934 to 1957, army groups staged at least eleven coups, and managed to overthrow three presidents. Elites – with influence over the army – ruled autonomously from the central government the Northwestern, the Southern and Eastern regions. They prevented the control of Port-au-Prince officials over these regions. The army and local elites reacted against attempts to undermine their power from 1934 to 1957.

How did Duvalier establish a centralized presidency in a context in which such kind of government seemed unlikely? Pierre-Charles (1973) claims that Papa Doc’s “success” rested upon changes in the patterns of international relations and of the Haitian system of social relationships. According to him, the depreciation of coffee and sugar cane in the global market impacted the social structure of Haiti, causing a reshaping of the production model. Duvalier’s rule, from his perspective, was a necessary transition regime from a feudal to a new system of production, that a growing national bourgeoisie supposedly supported. Pierre Charles says that the direct influence of the United States, therein concerned to prevent the spread of Communism in the Caribbean, contributed to explain the way Duvalier ruled – his regime was one of the most violent of the 20th century. According

to official estimates, at least 30,000 people were killed for political reasons during his rule. Such figure is ten times larger than the killings under the extremely repressive Chilean dictatorship, that lasted as long as Duvalier’s rule. Rotberg (1971) claims that Haitians had been chronically unable to govern themselves, and that Papa Doc was the apogee of such inability, the “culmination of the politics of squalor.” From his perspective, Duvalier’s regime was a consequence of cultural and psychoanalytic traits of Haitians, that supposedly make them more inclined to authoritarianism. In this piece, I present an alternative explanation to the consolidation of Duvalier’s rule.

I look at the strategic interactions between Duvalier and the opposition from 1957 to 1961. Throughout this period, opposers attempted several times, and failed, to overthrow Duvalier, when he indicated he would make constitutional reforms to centralize power. The opposition had an interest in preserving the *status quo* – weak central government and regionalized politics. From its perspective, a strong central government would necessarily make claims to redistribute access to resources that the army and local elites controlled, basically the outcomes from the exploitation of rural workers. Yet, factions within the opposition had no incentive to unite against weak governments. Coordination among them was costly, and they might only do it against strong incumbents. Without coordination, the faction which was successful in overthrowing the government could use the state apparatus for its own benefit (i.e., negotiating advantageous commercial treaties with foreigners, repress adversaries). Such logic had been the rule of politics in Haiti before and after the American occupation. Opposition factions organized against Duvalier as if he were the head of a weak government.

The opposition took mistakenly Duvalier as a weak head of state. He sent signals that misled challengers. As soon as he was sworn in as president, he adopted a reformist attitude, instead of charging with full force against his opposers and trying to change the political regime through violence. The full charge against the opposition would have rendered visible, and less uncertain, his armed support and might have led opposition factions to coordinate themselves against the regime. Duvalier believed he was strong enough to rule out the opposition; as he pointed out to a political ally in 1957: “I have a plan to disappear with 20,000 men in twenty-four hours” (Néré, 1988: 32). Yet, I am not sure his political organization, *Les Griots*, could have been successful against a coordinated opposition, which had direct influence over the army, at least without major costs, that might have jeopardized the ability to govern stably. From the standpoint of the

opposition factions, projects of reforms might have been an evidence of the government's inability to employ coercion to strengthen its rule, an evidence of weakness. Such evidence relied on two elements: (1) the reformist strategy signaled to the opposition that the government had no other means of advancing its interests but the institutional terrain; and (2) the traditional elites and the army officials knew that, in the recent past, every time a president had attempted to increase his power through reforms, opposition factions had been successful in overthrowing the government. From 1957 to 1961, opposition factions attacked Papa Doc as if he was a weak type of government.

Yet, Papa Doc's reform projects were a *feint*; through this strategy he managed to exterminate the opposition. They were minor changes in the state compared to his actual agenda: the extermination of the opposition. Hence, his government was a strong type. He had the support of branches of the army, and *Les Griots* had armed groups that repressed the opposition movements and protected the president. Duvalier's strength was unknown to the traditional political elites, because *Les Griots* had been an outsider to the institutional political arena in Haiti. Duvalier defeated faction after faction of the opposition. To some extent, he might have known his strategy had paid off after defeating the first faction, in 1958; then, he did not hide what sad future he had predestined to Haiti – his rule:

I have mastered the country. I have mastered power. I am the New Haiti. To seek to destroy me is to seek to destroy Haiti herself. [...] No earthly power can prevent me from accomplishing my historic mission because it is God and Destiny who have chosen me [...] (Duvalier, 1958 *apud* Heintz and Heintz, 1996: 575-6).

Parts of my paper are twofold. First, I present a formal model – an extensive game with imperfect information – that illustrates my claims on the strategic interactions between Duvalier and the opposition. Such game takes into account the sequential aspect of and the uncertainty around these interactions. The formal model is necessarily a minimal understanding of the complex sets of relationships between Duvalier and the opposition, yet it serves as a simple roadmap to the political history of Haiti. Moreover, the model remains a more general depiction of possible interactions between incumbents and challengers. Second, I present the political history of Haiti from 1957 to 1961, focusing on the sets of relations between Duvalier and the opposition factions. I rely on secondary sources in this part of the paper. This

two-part piece presents a new understanding of the consolidation of Duvalier's regime.

A Formal Model

I depict the sequence of interactions between Duvalier and the opposition as a signaling game,¹ a form of extensive game with imperfect information and chance moves. I call the game *Papa Doc's Feint*. This game does not intend to prove a general theory of political behavior, nor does it aim to lead to sophisticated mathematical results. Its goal is mostly to depict in a clearer way the overall insight for making sense of the specific case of the rise of Duvalierism – thus being to some extent a use of game theory that one could call “sociological” (Swedberg, 2001). In any case, the model might be of interest for political, historical comparative studies.

The set of players includes chance (C), which has the first move, Duvalier (D) and the opposition (O). The terminal histories of the game are (weak, reform, attack), (weak, reform, coordinate), (weak, no reform, attack), (weak, no reform, coordinate), (strong, reform, attack), (strong, reform, coordinate), (strong, no reform, attack) and (strong, no reform, coordinate), where (A) is attack as a faction, (C) is coordination of the opposition and (not) is no reform. I define faction as an autonomous political group that has a leader and an agenda, and that is part or could be part of a larger entity. From this perspective, that relies on works such as Gandhi (2010) and Laver and Schofield (1990), an opposition is a collection of factions that negotiate their tie. Factionalism remains a situation of no tie among opposition groups, whereas coordination is the opposite: the forming of an agreement to maximize benefits. The decision of playing (not) by Duvalier means that he relies on other ways (*i.e.*, direct and immediate violence) to centralize power, his aim in the game. ‘Weak’ and ‘strong’ are possible types of Duvalier's government. The player function is:

¹ “In a general two-player ‘signaling game,’ a sender is informed about a variable relevant to both her and a receiver (or set of receivers), who is uninformed. The sender takes an action observed by the receiver, who then takes an action that affects them both. Depending on the way in which the message and the receiver's action affect the parties, the sender may want to limit or distort the information her signal conveys. Such a situation may be modeled as an extensive game in which the sender has several possible ‘types,’ each corresponding to a value of the variable about which she is informed. The value she observes, and thus her type, are determined by chance. The receiver does not observe the sender's type, but sees an action she takes, and then herself takes an action” (Osborne, 2006: 332).

$$\begin{aligned}
 P(\emptyset | \emptyset) &= \text{chance} \\
 P(\text{weak}) &= P(\text{strong}) = D \\
 P(\text{weak}, A) &= P(\text{weak}, C) = P(\text{strong}, A) = P(\text{strong}, C) = O
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{1}$$

The preferences over lotteries over terminal histories are represented by the expected value of the Bernoulli payoffs given in Figure 1. For every move made by chance, there is a probability distribution over actions as follow:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Pr(\text{weak} | \emptyset) &= q \\
 Pr(\text{strong} | \emptyset) &= (1-q)
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{2}$$

For each player, there is an information partition over the set of histories assigned to this player, so that: for D the set of histories is partitioned into two sets, {(weak),(strong)}; for O the set of histories is partitioned into one set {(weak,A),(weak,C),(strong,A),(strong,C)}. I represent the elements of *Papa Doc's Feint* in Figure 1.

Based on this model, I claim that there is a Bayesian Nash equilibrium (BNE) such that: D pools in reform in both types, and O plays A if reform. Off the equilibrium path, any outcome is a best response. Such claim entails for O that:

$$u_0(A | \sigma_1) \geq u_0(C | \sigma_1)
 \tag{3}$$

where σ_1 is D's strategy (pooling in reform) and $u_0(\cdot | \sigma_1)$ is O's expected utility function (with von-Neumann-Morgenstern preferences). Such claim needs to take into account the Bernoulli payoffs assigned to each terminal history. I expect payoffs such that: (a) $y_2 > y_4$, to the extent that the costs to coordinate against a weak government are high; and (b) $1 > x_2$, since the payoff to attack a weak government is higher than the payoff to attack a strong government. The payoff (0,1) indicates the situation in which D loses it all and O wins; hence, expected payoffs are within the interval [0,1]. By construction, D has no incentive to deviate in state weak, when his

strategy is σ_1 ; by hypothesis, D might not have an incentive to deviate in type strong, when his strategy is σ_1 . Such hypothesis holds when, off the equilibrium path, O plays the pure strategy C if "not". I expect $x_1 > y_5$, the payoff of facing a factionalized opposition is higher than the payoff of facing a coordinated opposition, if strong; hence, I expect the hypothesis to hold. Therefore, there might be some probability of O to play A when D plays σ_1 – that I call p – such that claim (3) is true. The value of p is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 (p)(x_2) + (1-p)(1) &\geq (p)(y_2) + (1-p)(y_4) \\
 (1 - y_4) / (1 - x_2 + y_2 - y_4) &\geq p
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{4}$$

Taking into account the expected payoffs laid out above, there might be some p such that claim (3) holds.

Without lack of generality, I test the hypothesis that when the opposition attacks in a factionalized manner a strong Duvalier the payoffs are (1,0), the incumbent wins it all. Based on this hypothesis, which I do not verify in real terms, since the incumbent might never reach the 1-level payoff, $(x_1, x_2) = (x_3, x_4) = (1, 0)$. When I plot these values in inequality (4), I get: $(1 - y_4) / (1 + y_2 - y_4) \geq p$. To the extent that $y_2 > y_4$, then inequality (4) holds. Furthermore, the higher the payoff of the opposition's acting in a coordinated matter against a strong Duvalier, which might come down to the higher the level of coordination among the opposition factions, the smaller p is.

In the formal model, the idea of *strategic feint* relates to the kind of pure strategy that D adopts: the pooling equilibrium. As Osborne (2006: 334) puts it, in a pooling equilibrium: "All types of the sender choose the same action [...], so that the sender's action gives the receiver no clue to the sender's type [...]," where Duvalier is the sender and the opposition is the receiver. A pooling strategy in "reform" in *Papa Doc's Feint* increases the level of uncertainty of the game, and occults the type of the first player. I use this game as a background model to make sense of the first years of Duvalier's rule in Haiti.

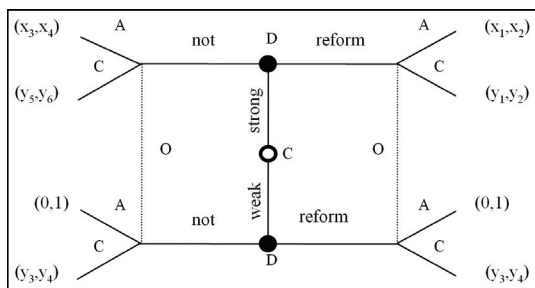


Figure 1. *Papa Doc's Feint* as an extensive game with imperfect information.

Interactions Between Duvalier and the Opposition (1957-1961)

When Duvalier was sworn in as president in 1957, he was not an unknown political figure in Haiti. He had had a leading role in *Les Griots*, an intellectual movement that the work of the ethnologist Jean-Price Mars on the need to return to the African cultural heritage inspired. Mars had been an important activist against the American occupation, and praised the African-Haitian race (the *Noirs*) against those who aligned with the European style of life, whom he

called *Mulâtres*. A doctor and an ethnologist, Duvalier had his *début* in the political scene as the director of public health of the government of Demarsais Estimé, a *Noir*. Estimé's government faced a harsh opposition from the traditional elites, mostly *Mulâtre*. When the elites finally overthrew Estimé, Duvalier was the head of the Ministry of Labor and Public Health. After the coup, he entered clandestinity from 1954 to 1956.

In 1957, when Duvalier presented himself as a presidential candidate, political analysts thought his election would be unlikely. Nérée (1988) collected political and editorial arguments that doomed Duvalier's candidacy to failure. Some analysts thought he was just a marginal byproduct of the unsuccessful and weak Estimé's administration, and that the political power of the *Noirs* had been exhausted. Other political commentators thought *Les Griots* had been dismantled and no longer had popular support after the repression their members went through after the coup against Estimé, and that the lack of political base made Duvalier's election unfeasible. Some thought the movement of the *Noirs* was irreversibly fractured between the supporters of Duvalier and those who aligned with other leaders of *Les Griots*. Some analysts thought Duvalier did not have the qualities necessary for a political leader, such as personal wealth and easiness in the elitist *milieu*. Duvalier actually used his unusual background for Haitian politicians as a positive symbol; he wrote: "Without money and without the noblesse of a traditional name, I presented myself to the people with my books under my arms." (Duvalier, 1968: xxxv). In 1957, Duvalier might have looked like a weak outsider.

Duvalier faced two candidates in the 1957 presidential election – the traditional *Mulâtre* Louis Déjoie and a *Noir* independent, Clément Jumelle –, and the factors that contributed to his success were at least threefold. Firstly, the depreciation of Haiti's most important agricultural commodities in the global market months before the election led to the weakening of the traditional elite. On one hand, the rule of the traditional landowners over the peasantry, the vast majority of the population, partially collapsed. Social unrest prevailed. Most currents in the literature agree that Duvalier managed to become the candidate of the peasants, even though they disagree on how he managed to do it. Pierre-Charles (1973) and Nérée (1988) look at structural factors to explain the alignment of the peasants with Duvalier. The former mentions a re-structuring of the system of social relationships in Haiti as a consequence of the agricultural crisis, and shows how Duvalier became the proponent of a new model of social relations in the countryside that later failed but that led to

the alignment of the peasants to his candidacy. The latter claims that since 1946 Haiti had gone through a crisis of hegemony, that weakened the domination of the *Mulâtre* elite and opened the way for the rise of a new dominant class, the *Noirs*. The new class re-structured the system of social relationships and established a different form of rule over the peasantry, according to Nérée. Rotberg (1971) and Heintl and Heintl (1996) share a similar perspective to explain the rise of Duvalier among the peasants that emphasizes his ability to manipulate the system of beliefs of the Haitians, especially voodoo, and channel support to his election. Heintl and Heintl (1996: 563) claim that Duvalier's clothes and manners were references to a major entity of voodoo:

As for those conservative black suits and black hat, those unblinking eyes behind heavy spectacles, they were, as any peasant instantly recognized, the very ceremonies and earthly trappings of *Baron Samedi*, that most feared *loa* who kept the gates of the grave².

For one reason or another, Duvalier was successful in attracting the peasant electorate, that granted him 71% the votes against 28% for Déjoie and 1% for Jumelle.³ On the other hand, an increasingly powerful generation of young officers, trained in the military academy that the marines had organized at the end of the occupation, in the 1930s, started challenging the rule of the elite, including high-ranked officers. The young officers were not Duvalierist *per se*, and as soon as Duvalier exterminated the civilian opposition to his regime in 1961 he closed the military academy

² Both perspectives – structuralist and culturalist – have evident flaws. The structuralists do not account for what mechanisms signaled to the peasants that a re-shaping of the land distribution was under way. Moreover, they do not explain why Duvalier and not someone else became the head of the ruling class and why his government took the form -- violent, authoritarian etc. -- it did. The culturalists take for granted the strength of the system of beliefs in Haiti, that supposedly was decisive to Duvalier's election. Yet, voodoo is not a singular creed, but more so a family of creeds, that local histories strongly impact, and the culturalist approach fails to explain how Duvalier managed to centralize those beliefs in such a way that, as Heintl & Heintl put it, "any peasant instantly" identified him with a major entity of the religion. Moreover, the sole focus on supposedly determinant cultural factors denies the importance of political institutions in the Haitian history. Rotberg (1971) claims that Haiti has been the land of the "politics of squalor" and that successful leaders are those who master the supposedly psychoanalytical tendency of the Haitians toward violence; nevertheless, Haiti has had its own equilibrium of institutionalized politics (Plummer, 1988), that foreign interventions have led to collapse (Castor, 1971; Farmer, 1994). Despite the weakness of those perspectives, they seem to be right about Duvalier's ability to attract the sympathy of the peasants.

³ Jumelle vehemently claimed that the 1957 elections were fraudulent. Many evidences prove him right, yet they do not determine whether or not the actual outcome of the votes – Duvalier's election – would have changed. He might have won with a lower margin.

(Laguerre, 1993). They played a fundamental role in 1957: they ensured the power transmission, preventing a preemptive coup. They could have tried to take over the power themselves, yet the American government did not want a military regime in Haiti at this point and blocked any such attempt from the young officers (Plummer, 1992). In a context in which the traditional elites were weakened, the peasant vote and the mobilization of young officers were fundamental for Duvalier's success.

The influence of a clandestine civilian network of support to Duvalier was a second factor that contributed to the 1957 electoral results. After the coup against Estimé, Duvalier had brought together political figures to support his candidacy, such as Jean-Price Mars himself and the Communist poet René Depestre. The army and the clergy also had a cell of Duvalierist. Yet, despite what part of the literature claims (cf. Laguerre, 1993), Duvalierists did not control the army at the time of the election; the evidences of that are threefold. Firstly, it is true that the army did not prevent Duvalier's election and did not align with the traditional elites, nor took a clear side; nevertheless, when the opposition attacked the government, the army did not intervene. Secondly, from 1959 onward, Duvalier changed most of the high-rank officers and re-structured the army, indicating that he believed the army heads not to be reliable. Lastly, a growing military elite – the new generation of young officers – believed that Duvalier would be easy to manipulate. As one of them reported (Nérée, 1988: 20),

We supported Duvalier not because of his personal qualities and even less because of his political experience or his devotion to social-justice ideas, but because of his *bon garçonisme* [of him being a well-behaved kid]. [...] We hoped to make him a weather vane that one could direct according to one's own interest.

The most important Duvalierist cadres remained clandestine:

Temistocles Fuentes-Rivera, a Cuban terrorist and explosives technician; Fritz 'Toto' Cinéas and Charles Lahens, confederates of Fuentes; and the Dominican Johnny Abbes-García, who slipped effortlessly in and out of Port-au-Prince on orders from Ciudad Trujillo." (Heinl and Heinl, 1996: 564).

These men were in charge of organizing and training secret cells of Duvalier supporters, the *Cagouards* (the hooded men), that at first worked for his election and then became groups of repression. The secret network did not take part initially of the

National Unity Party (PUN), Duvalier's party. There is no study of the real impact of these civilian cells on the 1957 election – the literature emphasizes the role of these cells to disband the opposition groups –; nonetheless, they appear to have influenced to some degree the electoral turnout.

Lastly, the intervention of the United States appears to have decisively determined the 1957 electoral outcome. In frequent memos on Haiti, Washington indicated the country needed a ruler that could stabilize its society, consolidate the institutions and block military interventions. In a scholar manner and a decade later, Huntington (1968) appears to make sense of Washington's documents. According to him, modernization processes – that combine social mobilization and economic growth – destabilize societies, to the extent that they impact norms and popular expectations, and may lead to disseminated social unrest. He claims that social unrest becomes dysfunctional for a country when there is no match between increasing social mobilization and political participation and the development of new political institutions. The remedy, so he writes, is to have a government that can limit social mobilization and political participation, making a smooth transition to a more institutionalized political regime that can be modern without being unstable. In a reference to Haiti, Huntington (1968: 229) said the country needed a strong leader, that could make the transition from the traditional rule to modern institutions:

In the 1960s, an Iran or Ethiopia could use a Stolypin, and in Latin America there was perhaps room for a Nasser in Haiti, Paraguay, Nicaragua, or even the Dominican Republic.

In a Huntingtonian way *avant la lettre*, the American government looked at Duvalier as the strongman to stabilize Haiti. Before his election, Washington had been critical to the way the traditional elites ruled Haiti, especially because of the political instability of the country. In a context of raising Communism in the Caribbean, Americans considered social unrest as a threat to their hegemonic order in the region – Haiti is around 90 miles away from the Eastern region of Cuba, the epicenter of the Communist guerrilla that overthrew a pro-American government in 1959. They considered Duvalier as a new type of actor, the spokesman of a new and modern elite, mostly *Noire*, that challenged the traditional institutions of the *Mulâtres* (Plummer, 1992) and that could stabilize Haiti. The American government maneuvered to make sure Duvalier would be elected. Washington took part of the kidnapping of Daniel Figiolé, a *Noir* leader, at that time more influential within *Les Griots*

than Duvalier. In May, 1957, Figolé managed to overthrow a traditional government, led by Franck Sylvain, and attempted to consolidate his power. He was popular with the urban poor and had strong connections with the Haitian Communist Party. In a profile essay in *Life*, on June 10, 1957, he was called the man who “puts the mob’s wishes into effect.” Under the supervision of American marines, a group of Haitian military officers kidnapped and sent him to exile to Miami. Figolé did not come back to Haiti until 1986. Furthermore, the Americans attempted to strengthen the connections among Duvalier and the Dominican and Cuban presidents, Rafael Trujillo and Fulgencio Batista, in order to prevent the spread of Communist groups in the Caribbean. The Americans directly and openly supported Duvalier, and they negotiated with him before the election projects of modernization and ways of institutionalizing politics.

As soon as he was sworn in as president, in October, 1957, Duvalier presented changes in the design of political institutions and raised discontentment among opposition groups. He presented political reforms through decrees that were later reinforced in a new constitution, released in December. The constitution was a contradictory document. On one hand, it complied with the interest of the opposition: it made no changes in economic and social policies that could modify the regional rule of the traditional elites; it fixed a date for new elections, in 1963. Opposers believed Duvalier would try to end electoral competition and remain in power after the end of his mandate, and the fixing of new elections indicated that he would comply with the current institutions. In 1961, he did end electoral competition – prohibiting the existence of other parties than his own party –, and two years later he did decide to remain in power for life. In 1957, nevertheless, Duvalier’s motivations were not clear: in most of his public appearances, he guaranteed to the opposition the right to organize. He made that clear in his first pronouncement as a president: “My government will guarantee the exercise of liberty to all Haitians and will always give them the necessary protection in that exercise. [...] My government of national unity will evenhandedly seek to reconcile the Nation with itself.” On the other hand, he put forward at least two institutional changes, initially through decree and later in the constitution, against which he faced immediate opposition: a reform on the mechanisms to appoint the head of the general staff of the army, and the creation of a new military position – an Executive military force – with autonomy from the army staff.

The head of the general staff of the army remained a key position in the Haitian military hierarchy, and

Duvalier’s move aimed to put the position under his control. His new law stated that the president would from now on appoint the head of the general staff of the army and that the person that he chose would have the position for a six-year mandate. The old rule stated that the army colonels decided themselves who would hold the position, and the mandate lasted for two years. Before Duvalier, the chief of the military often served as a guardian of the traditional elites’ interests against attempts of the government to centralize power. The frequent changes of the head of the army were a means of preventing the alignment of the military chief with the government. In general, the person who held the position was loyal to the traditional elites. The heads of the general staff of the army played an important role during coups to overthrow presidents that did not comply with the *Mulâtre* elite’s interests from 1934 to 1957. They commanded the presidential guard and, during the coups, they either used it to overthrow the president – as in the case of Estimé – or stopped it to act against politicians who were taking over the government. Duvalier claimed that the change in the mechanisms to appoint the head of the army intended to avoid “instability and vulnerability in the regime” (Laguerre, 1993), that is, to prevent the traditional elites to use the position against the government.

The creation of an Executive military force signaled challenges to two domains of influence of the traditional elites. Firstly, the members of the force became a liaison between the government and international powers, whereas these relations had been mostly exclusivity of the traditional elites. Ambassadors and the diplomatic staff were members of the *Mulâtre* elite, and enjoyed autonomy from the central government. They worked to establish commercial agreements that would benefit the region where they were from. Duvalier sent military attachés to the Haitian embassies in France, Cuba, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Venezuela, England, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Germany and Belgium with the goal of supervising diplomatic affairs. Secondly, the members of the force – *Noirs* to a man and chosen among the most loyal cadres of the Duvalierist movement – organized a “parallel” presidential guard that responded directly to the head of state. The official presidential guard, that the army ruled and that had been involved in most of the coups from 1934 to 1957, was not dismantled at first. Duvalier’s men became the official presidential guard two years later, when they outnumbered any other regiment of the military. The creation of a Duvalierist armed force also undermined the influence of the army over the central government; the army did not react against the creation of the Duvalierist guard, mostly

because of the influence of the United States, which worked to avoid military coups and even sent a marine mission to help Duvalier, and because the government had initiated a strategy to break apart the military hierarchy by paying low-rank officers to serve as spies and to enlarge the ranks of military supporters to the government. Duvalier kept a close control over these officers; for instance, he prohibited them to marry into non-Duvalierist families. The political reforms that Duvalier promoted – the change in the way of appointing of the head of the general staff of the army and the creation of an Executive military force – threatened the rule of the traditional elites, and they reacted against them.

Déjoie organized the first attack against Duvalier, with the declared intention of destabilizing and overthrowing the government. Days after the decrees that released the new mechanism to appoint the chief of the army and the creation of a president-ruled military force, he called a general strike, starting in Port-au-Prince. As a piece at *The Guardian*, from February 2, 1998, at the time of his death, put it: “Louis Déjoie was a throwback to a time when a Haitian politician of his high class and colour might reasonably expect to win a presidential election, though it would usually be the count rather than the election itself.” A rich and ambitious *Mulâtre*, he had been an influential politician and had a vast network of supporters, especially among businessmen in Port-au-Prince and landowners in his home region, the South, which was run autonomously from the government.⁴ The general strike’s epicenter was the capital, and such choice remained strategic. Haiti had no police other than the army, and Déjoie had strong connections within the military and expected them not to repress his movement; indeed, the armed forces did not react against the Déjoieist strike. He had organized successfully a general strike that had influenced the overthrowing of a previous *Mulâtre* president, Paul Magloire, so he knew his move could very well be successful. Moreover, he had a strong support in the capital, and Duvalier’s electorate and base appeared to be mostly from the countryside. Déjoie planned a “quick” coup, so that when the news of Duvalier’s overthrowing would reach the countryside it would already be as a *fait accompli*. His plan failed.

The repression against Déjoie’s movement was the first strike of Duvalier against the opposition,

and it was brutal. He relied on the *Cagouleurs*, whose identity and activities had remained secret. Duvalier’s men forced on-strike shopkeepers to open their business, and targeted those who rejected as well as any person suspected of aligning with Déjoie. The government violence spread out:

Within two months, at least a hundred political prisoners were in the penitentiary or [the political prison] Fort Dimanche, an equal number were in hiding, and asylees were beginning to slip into embassies” (Heinl and Heinl, 1996: 566).

All opposition newspapers were shut down. The level of repression surprised the opposition and military. Not only Déjoie but also other important members of the opposition, such as Magloire and Jumelle, went into clandestinity or to exile. Throughout the following months, Duvalier outlawed most of the opposition, imposed a state of exception and established full state censorship over the media. The president had shown he had well-trained and organized supporters who were able to confront opposition groups with no need of the army.

From exile, Magloire orchestrated a coup against the regime, and in July, 1958, he almost succeeded in taking over the government. An ex-president, Magloire was the most powerful adversary of Duvalier among the *Mulâtres*. He had connections within the army and landowners from Cap Haïtien, and had been a close ally of the United States and the Dominican Republican. A group of Magloirists and American mercenaries arrived from Miami in a beach close to Gonaïves in a boat loaded with weapons and ammunition, on July 28.⁵ They headed to the capital and were able to control the main military barracks, where loyal Duvalierists stayed. They announced the coup, and Duvalier prepared an escape to the Colombian embassy. Yet, based on Heinl and Heinl (1996: 569)’s account,

[...] the regime’s men swarmed up from the slums and down from the hills, and milled and ducked and cried out with every burst of fire that came from automatic weapons inside the caserne.

⁴ Cf. Nicholls (1979) for an overview of the autonomous rule in the South. Since the colonial period, that region had been away of the central command of the country as a consequence of the mountainous terrain that prevented road communications. During the U.S. occupation, road communications improved, yet the land owning structure did not change and local elites remained powerful.

⁵ Heinl and Heinl (1996) describe with minute details the coup that the Magloirists attempted. What is especially striking about their account is that the plotters brought weapons and ammunition for 150 men, but only eight took over the barracks. The authors do not explain such discrepancy, and to some extent I believe the army decided at the last minute not to take part of the coup. Just like what had happened with the coup that Déjoie organized, the army did not repress but also did not help the plotters. The lack of action by the army, factionalized and unable to unite against the government, contributed to Duvalier’s regime consolidation.

Hours later, Duvalier and members of his Cabinet led a group of *Cagouards* that took over the barracks, tortured and killed the plotters. The Magloirists were dismembered and dragged around Port-au-Prince. Duvalier openly criticized the United States because of the participation of nationals from that country in the coup. Betting on Duvalier, the U.S. government interrupted its connection with Magloire, who remained unable to try any other major attack against Papa Doc, and negotiated with the Haitian president the deployment of a military mission, comprising 70 officers, to help training the *Cagouards*. After the Magloirist plot, Duvalier re-structured the army, and dismissed “two generals, ten colonels and forty lieutenant-colonels” (Rotberg, 1971: 215). The Haitian armed force was almost fully organized and answerable directly to the president.⁶ The American military support contributed to the consolidation of Duvalier's regime, which grew stronger after the 1958 failed coup.

With isolated strikes, the *Mulâtre* opposition had been unable to destabilize Duvalier's government; in 1959, they attempted a coordinated coup, bringing together supporters of Déjoie, Figolé and Jumelle. The latter died from poisoning in the Cuban embassy, on April 11 of the same year, but members of his organization maintained the alliance with the two other factions, which sustained constant attacks against Duvalier from January to August. During that period, bombings in Port-au-Prince were daily, on average, and reached a peak in June and July, when they destroyed the capital's Casino. Members of Duvalier's Cabinet were targeted, and in June the Interior Minister was almost killed in an ambush. The major attack came from Cuba, where Déjoie and Figolé had gone through military training; coming in a boat, a group, including Cuban revolutionaries, attempted to create a guerrilla in the Massif du Sud. With American advising, Duvalier's troops were able to hunt down the group and, in August 22, the guerrilla attempt was over. And so was any attempt of the opposition to overcome Duvalier.

The coordinated attack from the opposition against Duvalier happened in a period in which Duvalier was

already too strong, and was unable to succeed. Up to 1959, factionalism prevented any coordination from the leading opposers. Heintz and Heintz (1996: 575) come to a similar diagnosis on factionalism:

September 1959 marked the end of two turbulent years in which, virtually at bay as he took office, François Duvalier had, through political judo, managed to survive against internal and external factors by dividing politicians and citizens into opposing factions, by maintaining and exploiting tension, insecurity, fear and suspicion, by knocking opponents off balance, and by disposing of potential rivals. No longer could the question remain as to whether he would survive, but rather what he intended to do with power now he had it.

The account of the interactions between the regime and the opposition shows that Duvalier's strategy to hide his personal force at the beginning, posing as a reformist presidential, nurtured factionalism among the opposition groups, which attempted through their traditional repertoire of action to destabilize the government. Yet, Papa Doc's regime was more resistant to traditional coups than previous rules, and rose strong in 1959, being able to consolidate its power.

The first two years of Duvalier's regime were of survival – a period that *The New York Times* referred to as “the regime's fight for its life,” in an article from August 10, 1959 –; in August 1959, the regime initiated the extermination of actual and potential niches of opposition. *Mulâtre* elites were imprisoned, tortured, killed. The labor movement was infiltrated by Duvalierists, and the president himself arrested the spokesman of the most important union and threatened other union members:

All popular movements will be repressed with utmost rigor. The repression will be total, inflexible, and inexorable [...]. (Duvalier, 1958 *apud* Heintz and Heintz, 1996: 577).

Politicians had to flee away or find refuge in embassies. Society had been put under control and supervision of a civil militia, comprising the former *Cagouards*, who were given full local powers and preemptive amnesty for crimes they might commit. Officially called the Volunteers of the National Security, the members of the militia were soon to be called the *Tontons Macoutes*, the “bogeymen.” They sustained Duvalier's power, and in 1961, when Haiti held presidential elections, Papa Doc had become an omnipotent – and as Pierre-Charles (1973) puts it, a megalomaniac – dictator. He was able to drive the Haitian society at will and had enough local strength to rule without the support of Washington; after the

⁶ According to Laguerre (1993: 108), Duvalier's re-structuring of the army aimed to marginalize it. A decree, in January, 1959, was the keystone of that process: it “re-structured the leadership of the army, undermined the authority of the chief of the general staff, incorporated the heads of the military services [who were loyal to Duvalier] as part of the leadership of the army, maintained administrative centralization and decreased leadership centralization. This decree provided the pivotal basis for weakening the power of the army, created competitive units with which the government could deal on a one-to-one basis with the army, and hindered the ability of the general staff to concoct safely any successful coup d'État.”

1961 fraudulent election, the U.S. government cut diplomatic relations with Haiti for one year, with no impact on Duvalier's stable regime. Papa Doc's terror lasted until 1971, and was followed by the terror of his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, who governed until 1986.

Conclusion

The kind of interaction between Duvalier and the opposition contributed to the success of his political regime. From 1957 to 1959, opposition groups attempted, mostly in separated actions, to overthrow the president, but each time his government survived and grew stronger. The measure of his regime's strength was his control over society. When he came to power, Duvalier sustained a low profile and did not allow for political displays of his supporters, who were building an occult network of social support. The network only became apparent when the first opposition stroke against the government. From that moment and on, the network grew and got more organized, finally supplanting the army as the institution that controlled the use of the force in Haiti. The opposition factions had been unable to understand what the support and strategies of Duvalier were, and they facilitated his way to the centralizing of power.

The formal model and the account of events that I have brought up in this piece hope to contribute to two debates. Firstly, political analyses on Haiti have been driven by extemporaneous arguments, in part due to the difficult access to data. Yet, the taking seriously of Haitian politics, through the understanding of the rational behavior of collective actors in the Haitian system of political relations, contributes to make sense of the recent history of that country. Secondly, one might take out more general lessons from the Haitian case, and analyze the dynamics of interaction among incumbents and challengers in a scenario of lack of institutional mechanisms. Haiti in the 1950s is not an isolated case, a *sui generis* political culture that led to the rise of Papa Doc, but the expression of a far more common situation: the centralizing of power through the extermination of the opposition, through the annihilation of politics, even when it seems an unlikely outcome.

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