



Haiti: Concerns After the Presidential Assassination

July 8, 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 Ambassador to the United States Bocchit Edmond said the attackers were “foreign mercenaries” posing as U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents; the Biden Administration [denied any U.S. government involvement](#). On July 8, Haitian officials said [six suspects were arrested](#), including one (and possibly two) U.S. citizen; four other suspects were killed. First Lady Martine Moïse was wounded in the attack and [later airlifted to Florida for treatment](#). 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 co-chair of the House Haiti Caucus [made a statement](#) July 7 suggesting reexaminations of U.S. policy options on Haiti.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11699

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 and said [the police and military were in control](#) of Haitian security. The government declared a two-week state of emergency. Joseph became interim minister on April 14, 2021, after then-Prime Minister Joseph Jouthe resigned. The day before the assassination, Moïse named Ariel Henry to be prime minister, but Henry has 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. 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.

Before becoming interim prime minister, Joseph was Haiti's foreign minister. Henry, a neurosurgeon, coordinated Haiti's response to the cholera epidemic in 2010 and [served as minister of the Interior in a government of consensus](#) under President Michel Martelly in 2015.

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 Haitian Senate alleging that 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 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. Haiti thus has no functioning legislature, and Moïse had been ruling by decree since January 2020.

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's is underfunded and smaller than international standards for the country's population. According to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti, ["Entire areas are controlled by armed gangs](#), which 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. After the assassination, [President Biden said](#) the United States stands "ready to assist as we continue to work for a safe and secure Haiti."

Elections. U.N. and U.S. officials have been pressing 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 a Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) by decree to organize the referendum and elections, without broad political consensus backing that decision. 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. Haiti has not initiated a [COVID-19 vaccine program](#), and its infection rate is rising. 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." Of the Biden Administration's FY2022 foreign assistance request for Haiti, \$51 million is for development assistance.

Author Information

Maureen Taft-Morales
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.