

Coup topples priest-president

ARACAS, Venezuela (CNS) — When Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide prepared for his first official trip abroad as Haiti's president, he told members of his fractious military that he was placing his nation's fate in their hands.

The fiery priest-turned-president had reason to be wary. Hard-line remnants of the toppled Duvalier dynasty repeatedly plotted to kill or topple him and attempted a coup to block him from coming to power last January.

But Father Aristide completed his trip safely. He received jubilant welcomes at the United Nations, in Haitian communities in New York and Miami, and back in Port-au-Prince.

On Oct. 1 Father Aristide arrived in Venezuela after he was deposed in a bloody army coup. The priest arrived at Caracas International Airport aboard Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez' official plane, said Jose Consuegra, an official spokesman for the president. The priest was accompanied by personal bodyguards.

Father Aristide, who was expected to go to France, was staying at the French ambassador's residence in the Venezuelan capital. He was met shortly after his arrival by the U.S. and French ambassadors and by a top-ranking Venezuelan government official.

Diplomats said soldiers started the coup by firing on Father Aristide's modest home early Sept. 30, forcing him to flee to the National Palace. But soldiers overwhelmed his supporters, storming the domed building and taking the president prisoner.

The president was allowed to leave his country after requests from a number of foreign governments.

In July, Father Aristide told the French daily Liberation that "enemies want to seize back power at any cost."

Father Aristide, a charismatic 38-year-old who took office Feb. 7, pledged to give a voice to the impoverished masses who swept him from the pulpit to the presidency.

He was the landslide winner in December elections that were the first truly democratic national vote in Haiti's turbulent history.

The president was born poor in Port-Salut in southern Haiti. He studied theology and psychology in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Israel, Egypt, England, Canada and Greece. He speaks six languages, reads eight, and is said to be an accomplished musician.

A proponent of liberation theology — which finds in Scripture the principles and inspiration for working to free people from unjust social patterns and structures —

Father Aristide gained prominence in the mid-1980s with sermons against dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the son and successor of the late Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

The younger Duvalier fled Haiti during a popular revolt Feb. 7, 1986, exactly five years before Aristide's inauguration.

But until the final months of Duvalier rule, Father Aristide led a quiet life in schools and seminaries. He was a popular preacher known for his work with homeless boys in the capital.

Though impassioned in the pulpit, he is quiet and soft-spoken in person, preferring to talk about ideas — such as God and justice — rather than about his own life.

Father Aristide promised economic justice in Haiti and vowed to prosecute corrupt officials and remnants of the Duvalier family dictatorship and its dreaded Tonton Macoute militia.

When he first came to power, some critics regarded him as a hotheaded demagogue who could not be a practical and effective head of state.

But the priest-president won over many of his critics, showing a capacity for conciliation and pragmatism. Even U.S. diplomats, once put off by the fiery anti-American rhetoric that laced his sermons a few years ago, had come to respect him.

Father Aristide said he never sought the



File photo
Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, deposed president of Haiti, arrived in Venezuela Oct. 1 after the army staged a bloody coup.

presidency, entering the race reluctantly at the last minute at the behest of a coalition called the National Front for Change and Democracy.

His activism and populism won him reproach from church superiors, and the Salesian order expelled him in 1988. He remains a priest.

"I don't mind if they don't call me a priest," he said.



AP/Wide World Photos
Judge Ricardo Zamora (center, at rear) reviews documents at the Jesuit murder trial in San Salvador Sept. 26. Three of the eight defendants — (from left) Subsergeant Tomas Zerpate Castillo, Corporal Angel Perez Vasquez and Lieutenant Yushy Rene Mendoza — sit before him. A five-member jury Sept. 28 found Col. Guillermo A. Benavides guilty on all eight counts of murder and Mendoza guilty in the murder of 16-year-old Celina Ramos.

Salvadoran jury convicts officers in Jesuit murders

SAN SALVADOR (CNS) — A five-member civilian jury took just a few hours Sept. 28 to find two army officers guilty in the murder trial of six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter.

But Jesuits observing the trials said investigators of the massacre on the campus of Central American University have not been brought to justice yet.

The jury found Army Col. Guillermo A. Benavides guilty on all eight counts of murder and Lt. Yushy Rene Mendoza guilty in the murder of 16-year-old Celina Ramos, the daughter of the Jesuits' cook.

The jury acquitted another army lieutenant, a non-commissioned officer and five enlisted men.

Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez of San Salvador said in a Sept. 29 homily that the church is "not satisfied" with the verdict.

"It is all too clear that there are intellectual authors of the crimes and that these have not been convicted," he said.

The defendants were in a sense "the victims of the system in which they had been trained," Bishop Rosa Chavez said. "You have to go beyond those eight faces and those uniforms to place on the bench of the accused that mentality, that way of doing things ... the entire society has to stand up and say, 'That is not the way toward peace.'"

Under Salvadoran law, the trial could have lasted as long as 15 days. But jurors came to a quick verdict Sept. 28 after defense and prosecution attorneys rested their case.

Fourth Penal Court Judge Ricardo Zamora has 30 days to hand down a sentence for the two convicted officers. Both men could be sentenced to 20-30 years in prison.

Following the convictions, the Washington-based Jesuit Conference said that while the outcome was hopeful, several questions about the murders remain unanswered.

"Could Col. Benavides and Lt. Mendoza actually have acted independently of their superior officers?" the conference asked in a Sept. 30 statement. "We doubt it."

It also asked whether:

- The officers will receive special treatment after sentencing.
- The case will begin reform of the Salvadoran judiciary.
- The proceedings were a "show trial for international consumption."
- The jurors and their families, who received death threats, are in such danger they will be forced to flee the country.

As the trial was about to begin, media outlets reported leading Jesuits had repeated to reporters their claim that the defendants were not the only military personnel involved in the November, 1989, murders.

Father Miguel Estrada, rector of the Central American University, said the Jesuits could accept a verdict of innocent for the defendants only if they revealed the identity of the individuals who ordered the killings.

"If the accused tell us where the intellectual authors, the inciters, the planners of the murder are, we would be the first to request (an) amnesty and their freedom," Father Estrada told journalists in the halls of El Salvador's Supreme Court on the trial's first day.

But he said he believed singling out the "strategists" behind the murders would be "difficult because all those who hold the key (to solving the murders) do not want to turn it over."

Father Estrada added that a stiff prison term for the defendants is not necessarily "the solution to the problem."

"It is not just a case of having to punish these poor defendants who are victims of the system and the deformation of the military profession," he said.

He said that Zamora should consider an "adequate and medicinal punishment, so that such things do not occur again."

Father Jose Maria Tojeira, provincial general of the Jesuits in Central America, pointed out that the Salvadoran military resented being forced to turn over the defendants and provide evidence that weighed against them. As a result, he said, a not-guilty verdict for all the defendants would have created "a serious institutional problem" and represented a threat for the Cristiani government.

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