

A new Haiti is possible: some elements of reflection to build a new system

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Returning from a trip to Haiti in early August, I was able to witness the deterioration of the political, social and economic conditions in the country, especially after the events of July 6 and 7. These events surprised more than one by their violence and their magnitude, but appeared to others as a hard awakening in the face of the unsustainable situation in which lives the vast majority of the country's citizens.

So much has been said, and so much has been written about this situation, and none of these words leave no citizen or observer unconcerned, whether Haitian or foreigner. It is therefore not necessary to dwell on the subject. A summary is sufficient to describe the scene: a poverty that is gaining more and more grounds, social inequalities that continue to grow (based on the Gini index, Haiti is one of the most unequal countries in the world), a nation on the verge of collapsing, a corruption erected as a way of life, an impunity demonstrating the absence of justice in this society, a simplistic and improvised philosophy of governance, social ties that send us back to the Middle Ages, the erosion of the fundamental human values of living together, and so on. All this brings even the most lucid minds in the country to question the capacity of our form of democracy to provide effective remedies to these great illnesses that affect Haiti.

A BROKEN SYSTEM THAT CALLS FOR ANOTHER

One must not be afraid of words and call a cat a cat; what happened early last July has all the attributes of an insurrection. Some say it was spontaneous and others argue it was programmed. Regardless of the option chosen to explain these events, it must be recognized that something serious has happened in the country, which strangely resembles a disconnect in the social bond that unites us, the virulent challenge against the status quo that constantly increases the number of discontented and neglected, the massive rejection of a system that failed to lead to social progress, to a generalized well-being and to economic development of the country. A system that failed to protect the citizens of this country. We are thus facing a system that can no longer be tinkered or disguised to hide its flaws and ugliness. In every layers of this society, voices are shouting to call for a new deal that can guarantee social peace, the rule of law, social justice, the improvement of living conditions, all over the territory and for all citizens.

Without going into self-flagellation, the situation in which the country has evolved, at least over the past 30 years, reinforces the feeling of a collective failure of the concerned generations, even

with so many individual successes both inside and outside the country. This acknowledgment of such failure should force us to humility and to the well known «tèt ansanm» attitude in an attempt to find our way as a nation and to trace a path to a better future for the next generations. Indeed, for two centuries, we have been seeking our way without ever finding it. For so long, millions of compatriots have been left behind and their number is increasing day by day, creating a form of denial of citizenship that calls into question our own motto: «Freedom, equality, fraternity». Indeed, what freedom are we talking about when the vast majority have difficulty satisfying their basic needs (eating, sleeping, drinking, educating, caring, working)? What does the word «equality» mean when the law is not the same for all, when justice is only for the highest bidder, when the holders of political and economic powers conceive and tailor the rules of the game and the laws to their own needs, to enjoy undue privileges? Can we speak of fraternity when a tiny minority confiscates the vast majority of the national wealth without sharing, leaving a growing number of fellow citizens in a subhuman misery, and in defiance of the social solidarity that should serve as the cement of any society?

THE INGREDIENTS TO BUILD A NEW SYSTEM

Building a new system is the task of social architects, builders. Indeed, it takes no less than nation builders to get Haiti out of the difficult situation in which it has been for decades and which has manifested today so blatantly. That's what it's all about: people who can imagine, design, plan, implement a new system of social progress, of well-being for all and inclusive development. Whatever one may say, the country is full of generous and positive initiatives, but so discrete, so silent. These will need to be networked to support them, reinforce them, promote them, and use them as examples to inspire other groups to invest in the good and the beautiful. To also show skeptics that the common good is possible and that fraternity is not a utopia in Haiti. The grounds are there; we will not start from nothing!

To outline the contours of a new Haiti, we should revisit and provide a more concrete and action driven content to our motto: «Liberty, equality, fraternity». This should begin with the acceptance, in practice (beyond the rule of law), of the principle of equality of all Haitians, regardless of their age, gender, social or geographical origin, place of residence, color of their skin, etc. This would lead us to build a community of shared destinies based on non-discrimination and common citizenship. All of this consists in building a state of law with: the right to justice (fight against impunity),

the right to security, the right to education, the right to health, the right to work. It also means a commitment by everyone – individuals and corporations – to assume their civic responsibilities, such as scrupulously respecting the law and paying their taxes.

This notion of equality must be embodied by a State, defender of the general interest and promoter of the common good. A state that sets an example, that does not steal, that respects public money, that adopts a sober lifestyle, that is fair in the allocation of budgetary resources across the 10 departments of the country and the different sectors of the national economy (a health care budget of 5% of the national budget shows the lack of attention given to human capital by the state). A state that uses as much as possible the social commitment of its citizens both inside and outside the country for certain tasks that the country cannot afford to pay. A State that respects the law by considering that «no one is above the law», which banishes impunity. A State that defends with competence and integrity the interests of the country in its international relations, as long as these interests are well understood. A strategic government that creates favorable conditions for business development, fights against monopolies by promoting free competition, and supports social and economic entrepreneurs who create value and wealth. A state that makes job creation the cornerstone of its action to combat unemployment and enable people to live in dignity. A state that puts itself above special interest groups to play the role of arbitrator and defender of the general interest. A state focused on providing services to the citizens rather than maintaining heavy and expensive structures contributing very little to social progress, to the well-being of all and to development.

It was Alexis de Tocqueville who once said that «Ensuring the well-being of the neighbor on the opposite side is not only good for the soul, it's good for business too. And Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel Prize winner in economics and former chief economist of the World Bank, said: «The rich do not live under vacuum. They need to have around them a society that works to maintain their position.»

This equality we're talking about is not strictly in legal terms. It is also an economic issue in relation to social inequalities. Indeed, according to the International Monetary Fund, the most egalitarian countries have better results: they have stronger growth and are more stable. According to Stiglitz [2], «Nowhere is trust more important than in politics and public life. This is an area where we need to act together. It is easier to take joint action when most of the actors are in similar situations – when we are almost all, if not on the same boat, at least in boats of fairly similar size. «Social cohesion obliges! He notes, therefore, that «The rise of inequality feeds itself by eroding our political system and our democratic mode of government» [3].

THE STAND OF DEMOCRACY IN THE NEW SYSTEM

Referring to this last idea of Stiglitz can help us explain to a large extent the setbacks of democracy in Haiti. A democracy that was reconquered with great struggle after decades of authoritarian regimes that – it must be remembered – had not led to the economic development of the country and the well-being of its population. And these are just euphemisms. Worse still, the situation

we deplore today is a direct consequence of this long period of dictatorship that was neither enlightened nor progressive but left entire sections of the population living in absolute poverty, both in large cities and in rural areas of the country.

The memories I have as a teenager is that of a facade for order based on outrageous repression, the systematic violation of human rights, a system of privileges and rights that destroyed the very principle of equality among citizens, not to mention the numerous murders for political reasons. The law was not one for all. It applied differently depending on whether one was close to the regime or a simple citizen: a real system of “double standards”. Freedom of expression and gathering was a luxury, which the country could not afford, which encouraged young people who loved freedom and idealism to flee the country to flourish better elsewhere. What was a temporary departure from the country to wait for the storm to pass quickly transformed into a brain drain, partly responsible for our troubles today.

Of course, the travesty of democracy we are experiencing today raises several questions as well. Democracy, even if it is well applied, also has its intrinsic limits. In the case of Haiti, the democracy that is practiced leads us to question:

- The abuse of the cherished freedom of speech and action with regard to the law and human rights, the transparency of governance at all levels
- The rationality and transparency in the selection of candidates for elected positions
- The low participation rate in national and local elections
- The accountability of elected representatives in the exercise of power, etc.

Despite these shortcomings, democracy, as the ideal of social organization to achieve, remains the least worst of systems, and one that would more certainly allow us to realize the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity that constitutes our slogan. What remains to be done is to define together the form of democracy that best suits our sociological and political culture, then to embody it in institutions capable of implementing it.

Many intellectuals have addressed the issue of democracy and the distribution of power. In this regard, the Scottish mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, Nobel Prize of Literature, wrote this [4]: “the essential theory of democracy is the diffusion of power among the people, so that the evils produced by one man's possession of great power shall be obviated. But the diffusion of power through democracy is only effective when the voters take an interest in the question involved”. Russell also warned against the tyranny of the majority that has very little interest for the aspirations of minority groups, such as these populations with specific aspirations that are geographically concentrated in rural areas. It is on the basis of this thought that he has made a strong case for decentralization and local governments: “It is of the utmost importance that on issues about which the uniformity of point of views is not absolutely necessary, the majority abstains from imposing its will” [5].

SO, WHICH TYPE OF DEMOCRACY ?

These reflections lead us to believe that the new system should be based on a functional, decentralized democracy, based on robust institutions and a certain number of social consensus that makes the country governable over the long term. A democracy that is not limited to holding periodic elections, often not free or fair. But a true functional democracy, based on the choice and replacement of the government by free and fair elections, the active participation of citizens in the political and civil life, the indiscriminate protection of human rights, the rule of law in which laws and procedures apply to all citizens. A democracy that makes it possible to exercise the liberty to emerge from poverty. A democracy that concretizes equality by law and serves as a basis for the fight against social, political and economic inequalities. A democracy that promotes equity and equality of opportunities. A democracy that respects the rule of law and promotes free enterprise, in compliance with the law and in the absolute protection of the right to property.

NO SOLID BUILDINGS WITHOUT GOOD MATERIAL

Building a new system, building a new nation, achieving a new Haiti, requires a clear and shared vision of what this new national structure should be. Above all, it takes a good plan. But, however extraordinary this plan may be, it will not give rise to a structure that resists time and bad weather if it is built with bad materials, non-resistant, unreliable, unsustainable. For a nation, the main material remains the citizens who must embody the ideals, values, aspirations and institutions of the republic. Have we not always said that it is with democrats that we make democracy? Indeed, it is with well-constituted citizens, loving liberty, justice and humanity that we can form a nation of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". It is with honest citizens, in love with justice and fairness, that we can create a justice system to lead to the rule of law. It is with citizens who have a sense of honor and respect for the word given that we can build an economic and social system based on trust and creator of inclusive prosperity.

To achieve this, we must act on our educational system and on our culture, which are the molds generally used to forge the citizens of a society. We need an educational system that instills new values of civic responsibility and personal integrity, promoting an ethical justification that the end does not justify the means. An ethics of the means that opposes that of the "degaje pa peche". A public ethic that condemns success when it is at the expense of others and against established rules. An ethics of success that punishes those who want to pretend to be "smart" by using fraud to achieve their goal. A civic ethic that teaches to respect the established rules rather than trying to circumvent them at all costs to achieve its ends.

At a time when the public opinion is talking more and more about constitutional reform, the issues that have just been raised are of paramount importance. Indeed, is it because our constitutions are bad that they are violated? or because we have a culture of violation of established rules that we have violated all our constitutions? The answer lies in our instrument that forges citizens for the nation: our education system and our culture. Let's get on with the task of finding the way to a better future for present and future generations, a motto that has always guided and still guides the action of the GRAHN (Group of reflection and action for a new Haiti)! ■

REMERCIEMENTS

I thank James Féthière, V-P communications and services to members at GRAHN-Monde for the English translation of the original text entitled: «Une Haïti nouvelle est possible: Quelques éléments de réflexion».

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- 2 *Ibid.*, page 126.
- 3 *Ibid.*, page 133.
- 4 *Ibid.*, page 153.
- 5 B. Russell, *Idéaux politiques*, Éditions Écosociété, Montréal, 2016, page 66.
- 6 *Ibid.*, page 67.



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