

Watchnight for Slavery should be every night

Feature Address by Sir Ronald Sanders
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to the United States of America and the Organization of American States
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I am honoured to have been asked by the Reparations Support Commission to participate in this Watchnight gathering, and to do so with particular emphasis on the Historical and contemporary experience of Haiti.

Rebellions by the enslaved in the Caribbean were not unique to Haiti, nor was the desire to overthrow those who held them in captivity and to take control of the country an especial feature of slaves in Haiti.

Throughout the Caribbean and the Guianas, for two centuries, the African enslaved fought and died for the thing most precious to all mankind – freedom.

In Antigua, as early as 1680, slaves were rebelling for their freedom, many establishing a haven in the as yet uncleared interior in the Southern Hills, or, as they were called, "The Shekerley Mountains". Seven years later in 1687, the Legislature acknowledged that the slaves were hatching a plot to revolt, having attracted many more who fled for their freedom. On March 7th of that year, investigators appointed by the Governor and the legislature, reported that some of the fugitives in the maroon camp were armed with guns and planned to make themselves "masters of the country".

For the next two centuries in the Guianas and the Caribbean, there were uprisings by the enslaved, determined to win their freedom and to assume control of the countries in which they lived.

Many almost succeeded. The Rebellion of 1763 in what was then Dutch controlled Berbice and is now part of Guyana, is a case in point. Guyana's first national hero – Cuffy and his band of followers – were determined to govern their own affairs.

Twenty-seven years earlier in 1736, on Antigua, a slave called Court – later named Prince Klaas - and his partners, principally another slave named Tomboy, planned a general uprising for the night of October 11th when an annual ball commemorating the coronation of King George 11 was planned to be held in St John's.

The plan was foiled, and eventually 88 slaves were executed, among them Court – now Antigua's first national hero – and Tomboy.

Five of them were broken at the wheel; six gibbeted and 77 burned alive.

The enslaved who plotted and rebelled – plotted and rebelled for their freedom; achieving that freedom meant taking control of the country and removing from their necks the yolk of oppression that they had been made to endure for centuries.

They gave their lives for that freedom.

It is in Haiti that slave rebellion succeeded where everywhere else in the Caribbean and the Guianas, the uprisings of others had failed.

From August 21st, 1791, and for 16 months thereafter, the enslaved on Haiti – then called San Domingo - waged war on their French oppressors, issuing a Constitution on January 1st, 1801, declaring themselves self-governing.

Toussaint Louverture, a former slave coachman turned victorious general, told the Directorate of France:

“Do the planters think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew.”

And he added with fearsome determination:

“We have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it”.

All of this was to come to pass.

Napoleon Bonaparte, then self-styled Emperor of France, with great ambition to restore a global French Empire, and incensed by the gumption of black people to declare slavery abolished for all time and pronounce themselves self-governing, despatched a formidable expedition to depose Toussaint, disarm the former enslaved and restore slavery.

In the course of the invasion, Toussaint was captured by treachery and was forced onto a warship, in appalling conditions, to be taken to the Alps in France where he was made to endure the unaccustomed bitter cold of winter in semi-starvation.

He was found dead In April 1803, his toes eaten off by rats.

But, on the way to France, held in chains aboard the French warship, Toussaint issued a prophecy that haunted France and mobilised his fellow free people on San Domingo.

“In overthrowing me”, he said, “you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep”.

His successors Dessalines and Christophe continued the bitter and deadly struggle to keep alive that tree of liberty. In that struggle, fifty thousand Frenchmen perished in San Domingo and the French troops were expelled.

On January 1st, 1804, at the very place on which Toussaint was treacherously captured, Dessalines read out the declaration of independence of the new Republic, and Haiti was born, giving to enslaved black people everywhere the prospect of their own freedom and reigniting a fire of resolve in the bellies of the enslaved.

Haitians created a black Caribbean identity and a black state that claimed a place among the free nations of the world, inspiring enslaved and colonised people the world over.

That is the debt that the peoples of the Caribbean owe to Haiti and to the men and women for whom freedom was worth every pain, including their own death however terrible the circumstances of it.

In the words of Thomas Jefferson, one of the drafters of the American Declaration of Independence who became President in 1801, Haiti had established an “unstoppable wave”, sweeping the globe.

Haitians brought more than the abolition of slavery into the world, they brought, for the first time, the reality that the oppressed in a country could successfully overthrow their oppressors and be free.

As the West Indian writer and philosopher CLR James observed:

“When Latin Americans saw that little insignificant Haiti could win and keep independence, they began to think that they ought to be able to do the same”.

It should never be forgotten that, in December of 1816, it was Haiti that gave Simon Bolivar refuge from the Spanish after his early failed efforts to liberate Venezuela. It was with Haitian money, arms and 300 Haitian soldiers that Bolivar set out on his campaign that ended in the freedom from Spain of Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia.

Apart from giving their lives, the price that Haiti and the Haitians would pay for their freedom was huge and prolonged.

The black republic was an affront to the European nations – a living symbol of their failure to keep black people enslaved for the development and consolidation of European power, and, as they saw it, their superiority in racial and other terms. The European nations isolated Haiti, and significantly, so too did the United States which only 28 years before Haiti had fought and won its own battle of Independence.

Slavery was still alive and well in the Southern States of the United States, the backbone of their economies and wealth. Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, adopted a hostile stance toward Haiti.

In 1825, the French King, Charles X, issued a decree that France would recognize Haitian Independence but only at the cost of 150 million francs to indemnify the former colonists. On July 11, 1825, the Haitian President, Jean Pierre Boyer, signed a fatal debt instrument, forced into borrowing money to pay France's demands, or face the continued isolation of Haiti.

The debt instrument was originally held by three nations France, Germany and the US. It amounted to 80% of Haiti's annual revenues and was worth, in today's money, twenty-one billion US dollars.

It was a crippling and debilitating burden, extracted based on racism and a desire to continue to repress and exploit black people.

The sanction was a signal to all non-whites who would aspire to be equal in the global society, that they would be severely punished for their daring ambitions to be free... and equal.

That crippling debt that took 122 years to repay, with the final payment not made until 1947, consigning Haiti to poverty and harsh underdevelopment that endures until today. It explains, in part, why the courageous and determined black people of Haiti, who forebears gave their lives for liberty, remain mired in distressing poverty with all its attendant ills.

Of course, the experience of the enslaved in Antigua and Barbuda and the rest of the Caribbean had similar, though not as exacting, patterns.

When slavery was abolished by the British in 1834, not one cent was paid in compensation to the enslaved people whose labour had been exploited and who had been brutalised for over two centuries. Instead, it was their former owners who were compensated to the tune of billions of dollars, leaving behind debilitated people with little or no means of rising out of their poverty and deprivation.

Colonialism and exploitation continued for another 128 years in Antigua and the Caribbean, until 1962 when Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago became the first two countries, since Haiti, to become independent from European powers.

In those 128 years, slavery was officially ended, but exploitation of labour based on racism and imposed power continued, denying the Guianas and the Caribbean the opportunities to develop and grow, thereby placing them in their present uncompetitive disadvantage with countries in Europe, North America and parts of Asia and Latin America.

That is why today's efforts to get reparations for slavery is a just cause. It is not only grounded in morality; it is rooted in justice. It is a battle from which there should never be a retreat or a surrender, however, daunting it may appear. Irreparable damage was done, and the Caribbean's voice must never be stilled from demanding compensation.

Returning to Haiti, assassination of its leaders did not start on July 7th this year when the life of Jovenel Moise was taken in his bedroom in the early hours of the morning, in a plot that is not yet fully revealed. In 1915, an unpopular and brutal President, Jean Sam, was assassinated, introducing a new era of foreign occupation in Haiti – this time by the United States.

On the pretext of restoring order after Sam's killing, US President Woodrow Wilson sent Marines into Haiti. The US remained the occupying power in Haiti for almost 20 years, during which it imposed draconian conditions on the country, including moving all of Haiti's financial reserves to the National City Bank of New York. The Marines took custody of Haiti's gold worth \$13 million in today's money, thus controlling the Haitian Government.

Over the course of its occupation, the US installed three Presidents of Haiti, all pro-American. The last of these presidents, as like Jovenel Moise over the last two years, got rid of the legislature. The country was run as a virtual dictatorship for 12 years.

A US civil rights activist, James Weldon Johnson, investigated conditions in Haiti and in 1920, he published his findings, decrying "the economic corruption, forced labour, press censorship, racial segregation, and wanton violence introduced to Haiti by the U.S. occupation".

When the US departed in 1934, Haiti was in a worse condition than when the US Marines and occupiers arrived.

The subsequent plundering of Haiti by successive autocratic leaders especially Francois Papa Doc Duvalier and his son, Jean Claude 'baby doc', Duvalier are well known. The deep corruption, which they started, remains a feature of Haitian government.

Underlying all considerations about Haiti must be an acknowledgement that Haiti is the poorest country in our Hemisphere. With a population of more than 11 million, only 500,000 persons enjoy some form of permanent employment. Ten and half million people, larger than the populations of all the other CARICOM countries, are formally unemployed.

No centre that is based on such febrile and fragile circumstances can hold. This situation lies at the heart of social discontent in Haiti.

The Haitian people have been living on the cusp of hope for decades, and, without exaggeration, they live the reality of seeing that hope slip away every day.

The people of the bottom of the society – and that is most of them- live in a culture of the lottery ticket. The lottery ticket offers the best hope, as they see it, to escape the poverty in which they exist and the chance to live better.

Two things need to be understood about the present circumstances of Haiti.

First, the role of external forces in retarding the growth of the country is legion. In this regard, both France and the United States bear special responsibilities. Their policies were rooted in racism; in the value of slavery to their economic circumstances; and the importance to them, at various times, not to let a black Republic survive, let alone become their equal among the free and sovereign states of the world.

Second, support for dictatorships in Haiti in the 20th and 21st Century contributed significantly to the failure of Haiti to rise out of its circumstances. The kleptocracy of several of the Haitian ruling regimes and the subsequent enrichment of a few, in whom wealth and political power were concentrated at the expense of the many, doomed Haiti to be a failed state.

Witness by comparison, the experience of the English-Speaking Caribbean whose first two countries only became sovereign states over the last 59 years. In that time, five of those 12 states became 'high income countries' including Antigua and Barbuda; all of the others became middle-income countries.

The reasons for the growth and development of the English-Speaking Caribbean countries, in comparison to Haiti, might be identified as follows:

- These countries inherited solid institutions of democracy which, with the very occasional deviation, they maintained. These include free and fair elections, representative democracy, tolerance for political dissent, a free press, and an independent judicial system.
- The educational system had a sound base in primary and secondary education, and over the last almost 6 decades, access to tertiary education became available to all; as well as the building of high-quality University education in the University of the West Indies. It is significant that the average rate of literacy in Haiti – which is described as the ability read and write - is officially 60 per cent; by comparison on the same criteria, the average in Latin America and the Caribbean is over 90 percent.
- Land and other property ownership in the 12 English-Speaking Caribbean countries and Suriname, on a per capita basis, is very much higher than in Haiti.
- Hundreds of millions of dollars have been donated to Haiti over the last five decades with little resulting improvement.
- It is significant that Haiti receives more grants and soft loans from several international sources than all the other 13 CARICOM countries combined. Yet it remains abjectly poor and gravely underdeveloped.

Today, Haiti is confronting a political, constitutional and humanitarian crisis that existed before Jovenel Moise was assassinated and to which he contributed by his decision to rule by decree since January 2020.

Right now, the institutions of democracy do not exist in Haiti. The country is plagued by marauding, well-armed gangs who are more powerful than the Police. They rape, murder, kidnap and plunder at will. The political parties are hostile to each other, and efforts to bridge their divide have failed.

Ariel Henry who has now assumed the Office of Prime Minister may have missed an opportunity to fashion an interim broad-based government until elections can be held. He departed from the terms of a "National Memorandum of Understanding" signed on July 9th, by many political parties and civil society actors, of which he was a part, calling for a Government of National Accord to be formed. Instead, Ariel Henry has announced a government which comprises 4 members from the Jovenel Moise administration. Other Ministers are drawn from political parties that were not as hostile to Moise and his policies as others.

The political parties that were not included in the government and who were signatories with Henry to the abandoned July 9th accord, will have little or no confidence in Henry's government as presently constituted. In the absence of genuine talks with those parties and a real effort to reach a consensus, governing will be a real challenge.

Any attempt to hold presidential, legislative and municipal elections by September of this year, would command no confidence. The electoral machinery was handpicked and established by unilateral decree by Moise, and it is unclear what percentage of the electorate is registered to vote. There are therefore serious questions of credibility and transparency surrounding the elections system. Fixing this problem with the broadest participation and consultation is essential to acceptance of any elections and their result.

The best solution to the Haitian political crisis is a Haitian one; not one imposed by outside. Having said that, it is also clear that talks between the stakeholders in Haiti have to be facilitated and mediated. Who would be the best facilitators and mediators in all this is a big question.

This brings me to the role of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) of which Haiti is a member state. CARICOM has registered its deep concern over the grave political, constitutional, security and humanitarian crisis in which Haiti finds itself. Heads of CARICOM governments offered CARICOM's good offices to the Government of Haiti on several occasions over the past two years. To date, the Government of Haiti has not accepted the offer. However, the offer remains on the table.

Despite all this, the countries of the Caribbean, owe the people of Haiti an enormous debt. Had Haiti not overthrown slavery and established itself as the first black Republic in this hemisphere, slavery might have continued for many more decades than it did, with worse repercussions than still exists, and with many more hurdles to jump than the CARICOM region has done.

A CARICOM role is not easily identifiable, in part, because successive political directorates in Haiti, continue to have an affinity to France and a predilection to the United States; they do not encourage the depth of engagement with CARICOM countries that could help to strengthen their own bargaining position in the global community.

We in CARICOM also have to remain vigilant for ourselves about the various modern-day forms of enslavement which include imposition of economic and financial conditions on our countries that deny our sovereignty and independence, and which benefit only those who impose these conditions upon us. We can liberate ourselves better if we pool our Caribbean resources to do so.

We should not have thrown off physical bondage only to allow ourselves and our countries to be caught in a net of international impositions that enslave us economically.

That is why this watch night should be every night in the interest of the people of our One Caribbean, including the people of Haiti.

Thank you.