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Looter or hero: the two faces of Aristide

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THE former president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide — now a refugee in SA and reportedly the target of an extradition order — is the topic of an investigative documentary which opened in Manhattan last week.

Aristide and the Endless Revolution portrays Aristide as hero of Haiti, twice elected freely as president before falling victim to a US conspiracy that overturned the will of the people.

Village Voice reviewer Joshua Land says Aristide emerges from the documentary "as an unproblematic symbol of democracy at work". TVGuide.com says director Nicolas Rossier "briefly traces the events that took Aristide from a humble, socially committed priest in Haiti's poorest parish to the presidential palace in the 1990s".

"Rossier then turns his attention to the details of the 1991 military coup that put a premature end to Aristide's first term. Having earned the enmity of Haiti's elite and foreign business interests, who depended on the country's poor for sweatshop labour, Aristide was forced out in a coup that few doubt was largely engineered by the CIA and executed by US-trained forces.

"Returned to office in 1994, Aristide was re-elected in 2000, only to once again face a strong, organised international opposition that would ultimately leave him in exile and the leading members of his party, Fanmi Lavalas, in prison."

The other arena in which Aristide is the main protagonist is a US district court in Miami, where he is being portrayed in a different light — as the betrayer of the Haitian people. The government of Haiti and its state-owned telecommunications company have launched a civil action against Aristide and eight others, claiming the loss of tens of millions of dollars.

The Haiti Herald reports on the 74-page civil lawsuit filed by several law firms hired by the government. The suit alleges that "Aristide abused his power and deceived and betrayed the Haitian people by directing and participating in ongoing and fraudulent schemes".

Complinet, a UK-based news service for compliance officers, describes the suit as the western hemisphere's biggest "politically exposed person" scandal since (Chile's one-time dictator Auguste) Pinochet. Along with charges of human rights abuses Pinochet has been accused of embezzling state funds and has allegedly hidden \$13m in 125 bank accounts around the world.

Aristide is charged with looting the public treasury and the national telephone company, then laundering the illicit proceeds, says Complinet. Other allegations include profiting from illegal drug trafficking in and through Haiti and using front companies to launder money in the US.

The suit follows an investigation by two Haitian panels probing allegations of corruption under Aristide. World-Check, which compiles data from public sources on politically exposed people worldwide, reports that “the panels have bank records confirming that millions of dollars were transferred from presidential accounts to Aristide’s wife, his former security chief, Oriel Jean, his private social welfare foundations, the Aristide Foundation, fictitious businesses and unnamed Aristide associates. Other government cheques were written to cash, without any explanation of the recipient or the reason for the payment”.

Haiti, which has been in disarray since Aristide was toppled, is scheduled to hold elections on December 27. An interim government has repeatedly changed the date.

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