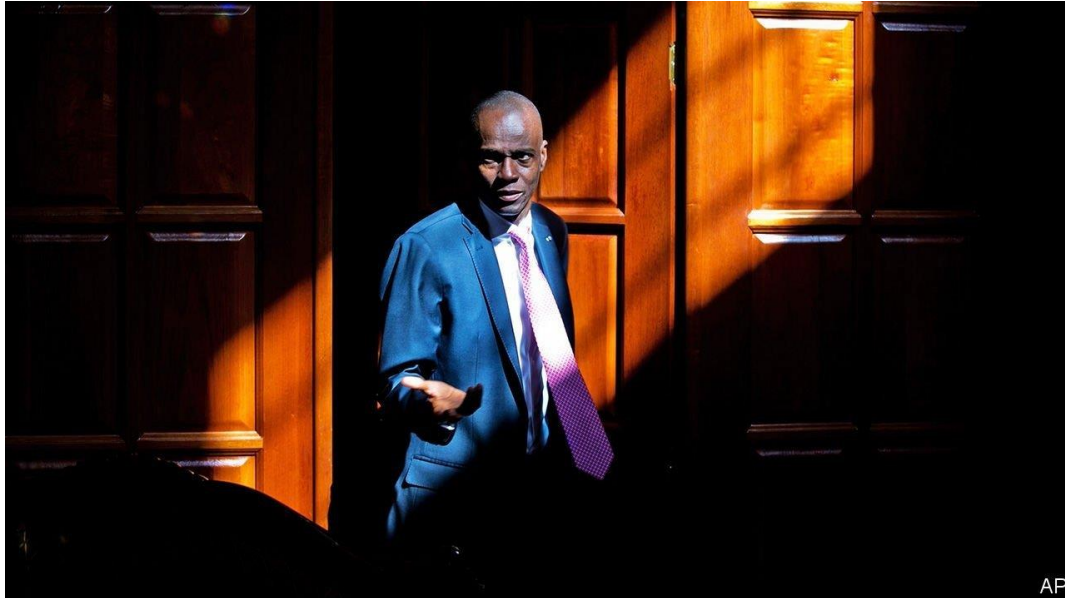


A presidential assassination

The murder of its president will worsen Haiti's chaos

Jovenel Moïse was unloved. But his death leaves the country with a power vacuum



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OPPONENTS of Jovenel Moïse, Haiti's president, have long been calling for him to leave office. Now he has—but not in the way they were expecting. A group of unknown attackers shot and killed Mr Moïse in the bedroom of his private residence in a gated community on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, the capital, in the early hours of July 7th. They also injured his wife. Claude Joseph, who is temporarily holding the post of prime minister, announced the killing in a statement and said he has taken charge of the Caribbean country. Haiti is already in turmoil—much of it connected to Mr Moïse's rule—and the assassination adds fuel to the fire.

On the morning after the assassination Port-au-Prince's streets were unusually quiet, without the usual roar of motorcycles and bustle of market stalls, as Haitians tried to guess what might happen next. The city's airport was shut, as was the land border with the Dominican Republic. The assassination has shocked a country which, for all its history of misrule and criminal violence, has seen relatively little political violence in recent years.

Rumours swirl about who was behind the killing. Mr Moïse's assassins were probably mercenaries. The question is: who hired them? "It was obviously somebody with a lot of money and a lot of power," says Monique Clesca, a former UN official. Many pointed the finger at opposition politicians or Haitian elites—perhaps the most likely culprits. Other Haitians, who given the country's history are suspicious of foreign interference, suspect the attack came from outside, possibly from Venezuela (Mr Moïse did not recognise the elections in 2018 which Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan despot, claimed to have won) or the United States. Mr Joseph said some of the attackers spoke Spanish (Haitians speak Creole and French). Another

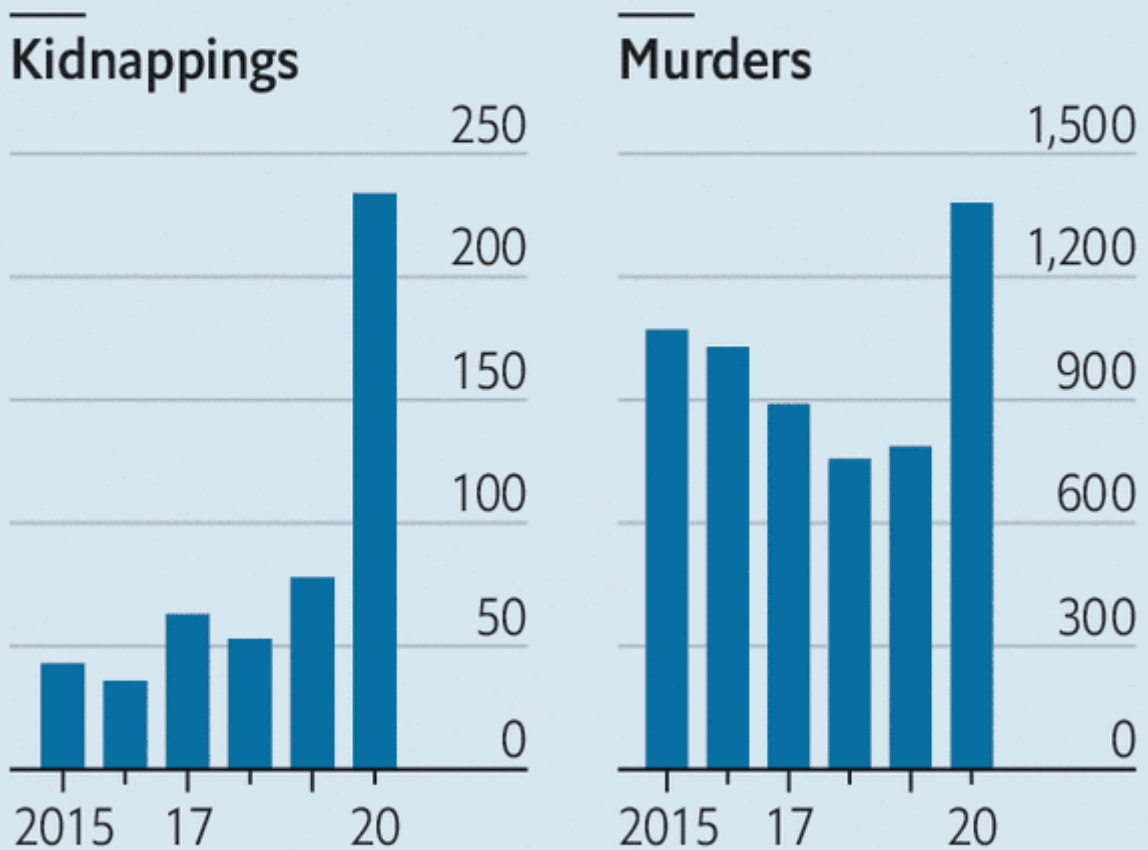
video suggested they spoke English and claimed to be agents of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. This is certainly not the case, but the rumours add to the volatile situation.

It was not the first attempt on Mr Moïse's life, at least, according to him. In February his government arrested at least 23 people, including a top judge and a senior police officer, who were accused of plotting an assassination and coup. Mr Moïse had no shortage of enemies. A former plantation manager who referred to himself as "Banana Man", he became president in 2017. From the outset, his rule was troubled. Protests erupted over the cost of living. Critics accused him of involvement in the pilfering of millions of dollars from PetroCaribe, an aid fund from Venezuela (a charge he denied). Protests against him intensified at the start of the year; opponents said his term ended on February 7th, which marked five years since his predecessor left office. He claimed his term started when he took power, a year later—a position backed by the United States, although Joe Biden's administration urged new elections this year.

As the political crisis deepened, Mr Moïse became more authoritarian. Since January 2020, when he dismissed all but ten senators in the two-chamber legislature on the same basis that others claimed his term had ended, the president had been ruling by decree. He used his powers to create an intelligence agency and broadened the definition of terrorism to include acts of dissent. Protesters were attacked by gangsters. Mr Moïse denied asking them to intimidate and kill his opponents.

Unhappy trends

Haiti



Sources: US State Department; UN

The Economist

Previous Haitian presidents have fostered violence and corruption, too. But under Mr Moïse the situation grew worse (see chart). Critics accuse him of using gangs to do his bidding to a greater extent, or having less control over them, than previous presidents (politicians of all parties and big business families work with gangs). In recent weeks fighting in Port-au-Prince has intensified; thousands of people had to flee their homes in June alone. By some estimates, kidnappings in Haiti tripled last year compared with 2019. The increased insecurity has caused the economy to shrink for the past two years.

Although Mr Moïse has been the focus of much discontent in the country, his death is unlikely to simplify things. "He was a complicated and flawed person, but the people who made him the single focus of all that is wrong in the system of Haiti miss the larger failures of that system," says Michael Deibert, an author of two books on Haiti who was due to interview Mr Moïse next week.

All this means there is now a power vacuum in the country. The designated official who would usually step in, the president of the court of cassation, died of covid-19 two weeks ago. Mr Joseph has little legitimacy. A new prime minister was already due to be sworn in on July 7th, before Mr Moïse was killed. Some parts of the opposition, which had been calling for Mr Moïse to step down to make way for a transitional government, may now intensify those calls. The killing could also make it harder to hold elections for a new president and legislature, which are due in September. "We had no hope for elections from the very beginning [with Mr Moïse]; there is even less hope now," says Pascale Solages, a member of We Will Not Sleep, a protest group.

In many ways Haiti already looks like a failed state. Men with guns have long terrorised its people. Only last month Jimmy Chérisier, alias Barbecue, a former police officer and leader of an alliance of gangs, announced a "revolution" against the status quo (though many think he meant the opposition). Now that lawlessness has reached the country's highest office, many Haitians fear the worst. The police are weaker than the gangs, who may now feel they have a free hand. Haitians are braced for an upsurge in violence.