

René Préval, President of Haiti in 2010 Quake, Dies at 74

By FRANCES ROBLES and JONATHAN M. KATZ MARCH 3, 2017



René Préval, a presidential candidate in 2006, in the town of Ennery, Haiti. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

René Préval, the former president of [Haiti](#) who led his nation out of turmoil after a coup but stumbled through the trauma of the deadliest natural disaster ever recorded in the Americas, the earthquake of 2010, died on Friday at his home in Port-au-Prince. He was 74.

The current president, Jovenel Moïse, confirmed the death in a Twitter message on Friday. The cause was not immediately known.

Mr. Préval was the first — and so far only — Haitian president to be elected, serve out his term and hand over power to an elected successor, an extraordinary accomplishment in a fragile democracy besieged by decades of turmoil.

And he did it twice, serving from 1996 to 2001 and again from 2006 until 2011.

A man of quiet demeanor in a country with a politically raucous history, he was best known for what did not happen to him: He was neither assassinated nor overthrown. Indeed, he was regarded as a pragmatic consensus builder.

But his reputation was severely bruised after the earthquake, which killed an estimated 100,000 to 316,000 people. He was roundly criticized for not reassuring his stunned nation that help was on the way, either from other nations or his own battered government.

“As a person, I was paralyzed,” Mr. Préval told The Los Angeles Times that year. “I was much criticized for not having spoken.”

But he added: “To say what? To the thousands of parents whose children were dead. To the hundreds of schoolchildren I was hearing scream, ‘Come help me!’ I couldn’t find the words to say to those people.”

René Garcia Préval was born on Jan. 17, 1943, in Port-au-Prince and raised in Marmelade, a town in a mountainous coffee and rice-growing region of north-central Haiti. His father, Claude Jules Préval, was an agronomist and a government official until the family was forced to scatter under the dictatorship of François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc.

Mr. Préval went to Belgium, where he followed in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps and studied agronomy at the Gembloux Agricultural University. He later studied [geothermal](#) science at the University of Pisa in Italy.

In 1970, Mr. Préval moved to Brooklyn, where he worked as a waiter and messenger. He returned to Haiti in 1975. By then it was under the less openly violent, though still authoritarian, rule of Mr. Duvalier’s son, Jean-Claude, known as Baby Doc. Mr. Préval worked in low-level government positions, including in the agency overseeing mining.

In 1988, two years after Baby Doc was ousted, Mr. Préval opened a bakery that provided bread to poor children in Port-au-Prince’s slums, including in an orphanage run by the charismatic Roman Catholic priest and political activist Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The bakery would change the direction of Mr. Préval’s life.

He and Father Aristide became friends, and Mr. Préval rose in prominence in Father Aristide’s Lavalas movement, which was popular with Haiti’s quickly growing urban poor and fiercely opposed by the country’s tiny ruling elite.



After Mr. Aristide became president in 1990, having left the priesthood, he appointed Mr. Préval as his prime minister, placing him in charge of the government’s operations.



But the Aristide government lasted only a few months before it was overthrown by the military. The two went into exile.

Mr. Préval later returned and was elected president, but he did not have the charisma of his political benefactor, and Mr. Aristide was considered the true power behind his presidency. When peasants asked how they could survive under United States trade policies and soaring fuel prices, he notoriously told them to “swim their way out.”

Mr. Préval organized new elections in 2000 that returned Mr. Aristide to power. The ensuing [inauguration](#) was a Haitian milestone: Mr. Préval became the first Haitian leader to be freely elected, serve a full constitutional term and then peacefully hand power to a successor. But Mr. Aristide’s term was cut short again in a bloody 2004 coup.

Mr. Préval was elected again two years later.

Mr. Préval, whose first two marriages ended in divorce, is survived by his wife, Elisabeth Delatour Préval, two daughters, Patricia and Dominique, and two stepsons.

It was in his second term that Mr. Préval escaped Mr. Aristide’s shadow and emerged as a force of his own. After breaking with Mr. Aristide, he used his quiet manner and diplomatic charm to encourage the soft support of the George W. Bush and Obama administrations.

Mr. Préval was never one to stir up the masses with oratory flair, or one to bother stumping on the campaign trail. When the earthquake — 7.0 magnitude — toppled the capital on Jan. 12, 2010, Mr. Préval did not emerge in public for hours.

Reporters later learned that he had spent the night anonymously touring the devastation on the back of a motorcycle. Close associates described him as falling into a state of shock from which he never fully recovered.

Jocelerme Privert, a former provisional president who was a member of Mr. Préval’s cabinet and a longtime friend, said Mr. Préval was known for daily 8 a.m. cabinet meetings that actually began on time. He patiently listened to each cabinet member and made decisions by consensus, Mr. Privert said.

“He is not a demagogue, I can say that,” Mr. Privert said by telephone on Friday from Port-au-Prince. “He always believed: If you have to build a bridge, build it. Don’t announce it.”

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