

General strike in Madagascar

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The island of Madagascar has entered the second week of a general strike that began on January 28, with banks, shops, and businesses closed. Ever since last Monday over half a million people have demonstrated daily on the streets of the capital Antananarivo demanding the resignation of President Didier Ratsiraka.

The strikers accuse Ratsiraka of rigging the results of the December 16 presidential election and are demanding that opposition leader Marc Ravalomanana, the mayor of Antananarivo, be declared president.

The daily demonstrations began when the island's High Constitutional Court announced the result of a recount. It declared that Ravalomanana had received 46 percent of the vote, against 40 percent cast for President Ratsiraka, and that neither candidate had an overall majority. The court ordered a run off second round of voting to be held within 30 days. This only strengthened the opposition and led to what the *Financial Times* described as "daily public demonstrations over the past two weeks not seen since independence from France in 1960."

Madagascar is a large island in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa. It has a population of 14 million. It was a French colonial possession from 1896 until 1960. In 1947, up to 100,000 Malagasy people were killed by the French army when a national uprising was brutally suppressed.

When independence was granted in 1960 the new government, led by Philibert Tsiranana, still maintained close economic and political ties with France. In 1972 students called a general strike demanding an end to all relations with France and full independence. In a situation of economic stagnation and falling living standards, the strike was widely supported by workers, public servants, peasants and the unemployed. Tsiranana declared a state of emergency and turned power over to the army to restore law and order.

In 1975 the National Military Directorate selected naval Lieutenant Didier Ratsiraka as head of state and president of the new ruling body, the Supreme Revolutionary Council. A year later the Vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution (Arema) was founded. The party ruled, with Ratsiraka at its head, for the next 17 years. The government proclaimed a policy of "socialist revolution from above", which amounted to the state take-over of all the French-held sectors of the economy.

Within a few years, the highly bureaucratized economy began to founder and in 1977 the military was again used to stifle dissent. In 1978 the economic crisis deepened and the national bourgeois government was forced to accept the "free market reforms" demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for foreign aid to keep the economy afloat.

In May 1991 there was a general strike against the government. Three months later hundreds of demonstrators were killed and wounded when the presidential guard fired into a demonstration outside the presidential palace. The military did not support Ratsiraka and he was forced out of office. A transitional government was established and in 1993 a new president was elected. However, Ratsiraka was returned to power in the elections of 1996 and two years later introduced a new constitution that vastly increased his powers.

The widespread support for the present general strike demonstrates a confused desire for political and economic change that is being exploited by right-wing forces. The mass of the population suffers extreme hardship, in one of the poorest countries in the world, with 70 percent of the population living below the poverty line. As well as facing a severe economic crisis, over the past two years the island has been hit by serious flooding due to tropical storms and cyclones that have devastated agricultural production.

In reality, there is little to choose between the two main candidates. Both of them favour a programme of “economic liberalisation” and opening up the economy to foreign investment. Presidential candidate Ravalomanana is a local entrepreneur—the owner of the country’s largest food company. He rose to political prominence in the mayoral elections in 1999, when, according to *Africa Confidential* he won a surprise victory after a lavish campaign that included handing out food to the poor in the capital. In his populist election statements, he promised better living standards and justice for the people, declaring, “This should be the year of the Great Leap towards Madagascar’s rapid development.” He is described by the BBC as an “ultra-strict Protestant”—a member of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar—and is backed by the powerful Madagascar Council of Christian Churches.

The US has shown an interest in Madagascar in the recent period. They offered the island “the benefits of the African Growth Opportunity Act”, appointed a US defence attaché and 120 Peace Corps workers and donated six US Coast Guard boats. According to *Africa Confidential*, there is speculation that the US is preparing an alternative naval base there, in case Britain refuses to extend its lease on Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, which runs out in 2016.

Both the US and France will be concerned to have a friendly regime in power on the island. In the past few days France, the United Nations Security Council and the Organisation of African Unity have all appealed to Ravalomanana to stand for election in the second round. He has declared he will not take part in the run off.

On January 30, Ravalomanana threatened that the strike would continue until he was declared the outright winner. Twenty-four hours later he qualified his stance and said, “I’m not afraid to take part in a second round on the express condition that the results will also be scrupulously checked by great powers and international organisations.” He called on workers at Antananarivo’s airport to call off their strike action and allow foreign journalists into the country.



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