

Madagascar: Opposition leader declares himself president

Barry Mason
1 March 2002

On February 23, Madagascan presidential candidate Marc Ravalomanana declared himself winner of the disputed election held in December 2001. He mounted an unconstitutional inauguration ceremony in the national football stadium in the capital Antananarivo in front of tens of thousands of his supporters. Ravalomanana has since appointed a prime minister and has declared his intention to form a government to rule the island of 15 million people.

Madagascar's Constitutional High Court had decided that neither of the presidential candidates—Ravalomanana and the incumbent president Didier Ratsiraka—had won outright in the December poll, so that a run-off election should be held in March. A report by election monitors supported the claim of Ravalomanana's supporters that ballot rigging had taken place, but delegations from the United Nations, the African Union as well as politicians from France and Francophone African countries urged Ravalomanana to accept the run-off.

After initially appearing ready to accept a deal Ravalomanana changed tack, declaring himself president and a de-facto situation of dual power. He proposed the calling of a national referendum to decide who was president, though he has since apparently withdrawn the suggestion.

The initial response from Western governments to Ravalomanana's manoeuvres was highly critical. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "The United States objects to the action taken by the opposition presidential candidate Marc Ravalomanana to declare himself president. We urge Mr Ravalomanana and all parties to consider carefully the repercussions that extralegal or violent actions could have on Madagascar's future and its relationship with the international community." The French government also condemned his actions. "This attempt to take power by force in violation of the constitutional rules of the country and of the

principles of the UN and of the OAU cannot resolve the present crisis," said a French Foreign Ministry spokesman.

However, by February 25 Boucher was making more conciliatory noises. He stated that whilst the run-off election proposed by the Constitutional High Court was the preferred option, "should both sides agree, we would support a referendum set up to allow the people of Madagascar a chance to vote in a free, transparent and democratic election to determine their next president."

Whether this more favourable US response will assist Ravalomanana in taking control of the whole island is not yet clear. One aspect of US interest in Madagascar is the possibility of it becoming a strategic military base. According to *Africa Confidential* magazine there is speculation that it could become an alternative to the base at Diego Garcia, which the US leased from Britain until 2016.

Ravalomanana, a multi-millionaire businessman, has popular support in the capital but less backing in the rest of the country. On January 28 a general strike was called and with continuing street protests since January, the country has ground to a halt. Ravalomanana has made efforts to utilise popular opposition to French imperialism, by asserting that the former colonial power maintains its influence through Ratsiraka.

Ratsiraka's response was to declare a state of emergency, initially for a period of three months. This gives him power to rule by decree, ban demonstrations, requisition all public services and take direct control of the media and communications. The position that the army will take is still unclear and can play a decisive role in whether Ravalomanana's bid for power succeeds. Although there has been some conflict in provincial towns—with at least one Ravalomanana supporter killed—mass demonstrations have continued in the capital and there have so far been no moves by the army to take

back control. Ravalomanana is rumoured to have held talks with the generals and is quoted as saying, “much of the army is with the people.”

Ratsiraka, a former admiral, is regarded as having close ties to the military and the French political establishment. He is leader of the Arema party (Vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution) and has been in power since 1975, apart from a period from 1991 to 1996. Since the 1980s he has supported IMF policies to open up the economy to international capital.

Ravalomanana has no political party and was elected mayor of the capital in 1999, after a populist campaign that featured cash hand-outs to the poor. He is vice-president of the Protestant church in Madagascar and has won support from the main church groups.

The mass support he has received on the basis of his appeals to “peoples power” reflects the absence of any political alternative and the widespread anger at Ratsiraka who has presided over an economic disaster. Madagascar is the eighth poorest country in the world, with 70 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

Ravalomanana is Madagascar’s biggest local businessman, owning the Tiko food company, and there is no indication that his economic programme would differ from the present one of offering cheap labour to attract transnational investment. The creation of a “Zone Franche”, a duty free zone, has led to the creation of 100,000 jobs, mainly in textiles. The duty free status allows for raw materials to be imported and finished products exported without additional cost.

The US African Growth and Opportunities Act, lowering tariffs on selected imports from Africa, has also spurred international investment. The US clothing company GAP represents more than half of Madagascar’s textile production capacity. Reuters report that the continuing unrest in Madagascar could hit GAP with “shipment and production delays.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact