

Madagascar: division between contending rulers threatens increased conflict

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The political impasse in Madagascar continues, with two would-be presidents and two contending governments. Following the presidential elections in December 2001 the main opposition candidate, Marc Ravalomanana, disputed the official results that showed although he had won a majority vote it was less than the 50 percent required for an outright win. Declaring that a run-off election was unnecessary, Ravalomanana's supporters took to the streets with mass demonstrations and a general strike in the capital city of Antananarivo.

On February 23, Ravalomanana was inaugurated as self-styled president in a ceremony held in the city football stadium. He then appointed a cabinet of 17 ministers who, with the backing of thousands of supporters, were able to take control of the ministry buildings in Antananarivo.

The incumbent president, Didier Ratsiraka, responded by declaring a state of emergency and martial law. Ratsiraka has sought to set up an alternative power base in Toamasina, which is the country's main port and site of the oil refinery. He retains the support of five out of six of the island's provincial governors, and claims to have majority support outside the capital. His supporters have been able to maintain a stranglehold on Antananarivo by blockading the roads and denying the city of supplies, especially fuel. This blockade has been strengthened by blowing up three bridges connecting the capital to the surrounding area.

So far the conflict has been at a low level, although on March 26 at least two people were killed and up to 40 injured in a pro-Ravalomanana rally in Madagascar's third largest town of Fianarantoa, 600km south of Antananarivo. Police and paramilitaries broke up a rally of several thousand. The governor of Fianarantoa is loyal to Ratsiraka and shooting occurred

when a group of demonstrators marched towards his residence. A report earlier in March indicated four protestors shot dead by security forces in the port town of Tamatave.

There are increasing divisions reported within the armed forces. Although so far the military has refused to get involved, there are indications that a "neutral" stance will not continue if the two sides fail to come up with a solution. A number of top generals have pledged loyalty to Ravalomanana, but claims by his supporters that he has the support of 80 percent of the army are no doubt exaggerated. In a recent interview with Ravalomanana's prime minister on allafrica.com, he admitted that so far "the army is neutral and those who control the armouries support neither the one [side] nor the other."

An attempt on March 25 by sections of the military loyal to Ratsiraka to seize the parliament building in Antananarivo before dawn was thwarted when thousands of Ravalomanana's supporters surrounded the building. The military clearly did not want a confrontation with Ravalomanana's supporters and withdrew. The military governor of the capital, appointed by Ratsiraka to impose martial law, has since resigned.

There are also concerns that prolonged stalemate increases the possibility of ethnic tensions coming to the fore. The central highland area of Madagascar, including Antananarivo, is the stronghold of the Merina ethnic grouping from which the ruling elite was drawn under French colonial rule. Ratsiraka draws his support from other ethnic groupings in the island. A member of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) contact group for Madagascar, Abdoulaye Bathily, said in an interview, "The ethnic argument is beginning to be used increasingly, which is very grave because the hunt

for different ethnic groups is beginning to be organised along regional lines.”

Even though Ravalomanana has now called off the general strike, the blockade of Antananarivo means that the country, already one of the poorest in the world, is faced with economic disaster. The capital is responsible for 60 percent of economic activity and 70 percent of Gross Domestic Product. A report in *Le Monde* of March 23 states that several large firms have to relocate their operations to South Africa, Mozambique, Sri Lanka or Mauritius. International transactions remain frozen, with the central bank still closed.

The response from Western governments, whilst initially mildly rebuking Ravalomanana for his flagrant breach of the constitution—Madagascar’s High Court officially declared there was no outright winner and announced a run-off ballot—has since been uncritical of him. Both the United States and more recently France have accepted that, rather than hold run-off elections, they would accept holding a referendum, an option proposed by Ravalomanana’s supporters.

Ravalomanana is a multi-millionaire businessman and his “parliament” set out a programme that was clearly designed to win favour amongst the Western powers. It included a commitment to free trade, maintaining links with France, honouring the debts of Ratsiraka’s government and to impose International Monetary Fund strictures.

So far all diplomatic attempts to resolve the dispute have been unsuccessful. In a statement on March 27, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it supported the OAU’s attempt to resolve the situation and was providing financial assistance to the OAU contact group. The OAU has called for a “government of national reconciliation”, with a “new electoral consultation”, but has been unable to get any agreement between the contending factions.



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