Secession threatened in Madagascar

Barry Mason
11 May 2002

Four out of the six provinces on the island of Madagascar have declared their intention to secede and form an independent entity. The threats were made by regions supporting incumbent President Ratsiraka and against the challenger to his rule, millionaire businessman Ravalomanana. Following the disputed presidential election in December 2001 Ravalomanana, mayor of the capital city of Antananarivo, declared himself president. The dispute between the rival factions has been escalating throughout this year.

Last month an attempt by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to broker a settlement took place in Dakar, Senegal. The deal between the rival contenders quickly fell apart and on Monday this week Ravalomanana was declared president for a second time, in a lavish swearing-in ceremony attended by thousands of supporters. This followed a recount of the December votes that supposedly found Ravalomanana to have been the outright winner.

Ratsiraka's supporters, having already declared their intention to secede, responded to Ravalomanana's attempt to consolidate his grip on power by blowing up a bridge connecting the capital city to the coast. Ravalomanana has control of the capital and the surrounding province of Antananarivo and Fianarantsoa province in the island's central region. Ratsiraka has set up his administration in the main port of Toasmasina and controls the coastal regions. Ratsiraka and his followers have been maintaining a blockade of the capital, starving it of food and fuel.

These developments increase the likelihood of a bloody conflict with the possibility, given the ethnic divisions between the regions, of it developing into communalist civil war. The army is reported to be divided, with many of the top brass supporting Ravalomanana, but so far has not become openly involved.

According to reports at least 60 people have died in various clashes since the crisis over the presidential election began. A recent statement from Amnesty International notes: "The turbulence which had characterized the political situation in Madagascar in the past months has unleashed a wave of human rights violations which the outside world has largely ignored."

The dispute has devastated the economy, in a country which is already one of the poorest in the world. A OneWorld.net report of April 29 spelt out the conditions facing the 16 million people on the island. Since the crisis began 150,000 jobs have been lost and the economy is losing $US15 million a day. According to the World Bank, three quarters of the population are malnourished. Speaking on Radio Madagascar, a UN official said that aid agencies estimate 7,500 children and 400 women have died as a result of starvation or the breakdown of health provision. The report also quotes a statement by ten NGOs: "If the crisis continues and means of communication remain blocked, thousands of mothers and children will continue to die in silence and we won't even know."

There are no fundamental differences of policy between the rival wealthy elites backing the two contenders. Both support free market economics and would accept International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands, offering a supply of cheap labour in order to win foreign investment. Ratsiraka, an ex-military strongman backed for many years by France, the former colonial power, faced growing opposition because the IMF policies he imposed resulted in widespread and worsening poverty. Ravalomanana has been able to whip up support on a populist basis, channeling the resentment against Ratsiraka by opposing vote rigging during the presidential elections.

The shallowness of Ravalomanana's democratic pretensions was revealed in the outcome of the Dakar accord. It is true that Ratsiraka immediately reneged on

© World Socialist Web Site

his pledge to the OAU negotiators to call off the economic blockade of the capital. His supporters moved to the proposal of secession soon afterwards. But the Dakar agreement had proposed that a recount of the December votes would take place on the assumption that neither candidate would get more than 50 percent of the vote. With no outright winner there would then be a transitional arrangement, under which Ratsiraka would remain president with Ravalomanana as his deputy. The transitional period would last for six months, after which a referendum would be held to decide which candidate—Ravalomanana or Ratsiraka—would be president. The United Nations, European Union and the OAU agreeing to help organise and finance the subsequent referendum.

When the recount of the votes was carried out under the auspices of the High Constitutional Court, however, Ravalomanana was declared the outright winner—with 51.46 percent of the vote compared to Ratsiraka's 35.9 percent. This was not the intended outcome of the Dakar negotiations. As Panafrican News Agency (PANA) reported on April 29 that, apart from the publicly announced clauses of the agreement announced in Dakar, there were also secret clauses agreed by both parties. These included an agreement that a proper recount of the votes was no longer possible. Both Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka admitted in the presence of mediators that most of the necessary paperwork was either burnt or lost by the two camps.

The PANA report explains that the terms of the settlement were designed to save face for both Ratsiraka and Ravalomanana. Ratsiraka would continue as president, but a "recount" would take place so that Ravalomanana could claim to his supporters that his two-month campaign which included mass demonstrations and strikes had been worthwhile. Ravalomanana broke the agreement, using his support among the Constitutional Court judges to issue the outright majority verdict. In a statement issued on his website, he dismissed any talk of secret clauses in the Dakar agreement.

It seems that the Western powers are refusing to recognise Ravalomanana's declared presidency. Although low ranking diplomats attended his swearing-in ceremony, French and US ambassadors did not take part. Both countries have issued statements calling for a referendum to resolve the situation. According to an AfricaOnline.com report of April 30, the US was "examining the court decision" and State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, explained that the US wanted to "understand the implications" of the decision to award the presidency to Ravalomanana.

Press commentators have pointed to the economic unviability of breaking the island of Madagascar—roughly the size of Texas—in two. Even if the upstart Ravalomanana took complete power over the island, the subordination of its economy to his own interests as well as its continued indebtedness to the IMF and Western finance offers no alternative to the destitution facing the people of the island.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site