

Madagascar: Ravalomanana takes control with US support

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After six months of conflict, the millionaire businessman Marc Ravalomanana who set himself up as an alternative president to the incumbent Didier Ratsiraka has finally established control of the island of Madagascar. Dozens of people were killed in the conflict and the economy of the already impoverished country collapsed. But the immediate threat of full-scale civil war has been averted, as the majority of the army have sided with Ravalomanana.

The turning point occurred in late June, when the United States indicated that it would back Ravalomanana. On June 26 the US ambassador in Madagascar, Wanda Nesbitt, presented Ravalomanana with a letter from President George W. Bush, recognising him as president. On the same day diplomats from America, Japan, and most European countries, apart from France, attended independence day celebrations organised by Ravalomanana and soon moved to normalise relations with Madagascar. The US agreed to release the Madagascan foreign reserves, 80 percent of which it held.

Dual power had begun in February, after Ravalomanana contested election results. Following weeks of strikes and demonstrations, his supporters took over the capital city of Antananarivo. Ratsiraka was forced to leave the capital and set up an alternative power base in Toamasina, Madagascar's main port. Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka each called themselves president and set up their own governments. Both sides had the support of sections of the army and established militias, taking control of parts of the country.

Ratsiraka mobilised his supporters to blockade the capital, denying it food and fuel supplies. As well as blockading roads, his militia blew up many of the bridges linking Antananarivo, in the highland region, to the rest of the island. Four out of the six provinces of

Madagascar at one time declared their support for Ratsiraka, but by mid-June fighting between the two camps was intensifying and Ravalomanana's forces were gaining the upper hand. On June 14 his militia succeeded in lifting the blockade of Antananarivo.

It seems that the US move was intended to pre-empt Ratsiraka gaining support from the newly elected right-wing French government. For more than two decades, Ratsiraka ruled Madagascar with support from the French establishment, but his misfortune was to be challenged by Ravalomanana when France was much more concerned with its internal politics in the run-up to the elections.

Ratsiraka left for France on June 13, even before the parliamentary elections were over, attempting to gain support. Then on June 19 the BBC reported that Tanzanian authorities stopped a plane from France heading to Madagascar with 12 alleged mercenaries on board. The official French position was that it had requested the plane to be stopped and supported attempts by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to obtain a negotiated settlement between the two factions. A June 21 BBC report cited Ravalomanana's administration claiming that 36 mercenaries had been flown in from South Africa, funded jointly by Ratsiraka and an unnamed African head of state.

At the same time Ratsiraka attended a special OAU meeting in Addis Abba, Ethiopia to discuss the Madagascar crisis. Ravalomanana was not in attendance and the meeting refused to support him as president, repeating its previous call for a transitional government made up of an equal number of representatives from both camps to be established followed by new elections.

The leadership of the OAU is dominated by old-hand African politicians, many of them from the

Francophone countries. Moves by America to step up its influence in Africa, promoting figures such as Ravalomanana, are seen as a threat to their own interests and influence. The French Radio RIF Actualité website points out that many African leaders “fear that the case of Madagascar has created a precedent which could inspire their opponents.”

These moves were followed by US recognition of Ravalomanana. France at first announced that it was refusing recognition. It would “not take sides” in Madagascar and supported the OAU position. *Stratfor.com* commented, “The US move came as something of a surprise, and it could lead to a tiff between Paris and Washington... The timing though [referring to the mercenaries], may point to an attempt by Washington to undermine France’s influence over one of its former colonies and insert itself in Paris’s sphere of influence.”

Within days, the new administration of President Jacques Chirac decided it was too late to rescue Ratsiraka and that it had better make the most of a bad situation. France’s Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin flew into Madagascar to meet with Ravalomanana, the first Western minister to visit the island since the new government was established. De Villepin was photographed shaking hands with Ravalomanana and four separate aid agreements from France were signed. The French press have pointed out that 35 percent of Madagascar’s aid comes from France, much of the country’s exports go to France and French companies profited from Ratsiraka’s privatisation policies. Ratsiraka and his entourage have fled to the Seychelles, possibly on route to exile in France.

The recognition of Ravalomanana by the US and other Western powers has no justification in terms of the votes cast in last year’s presidential election. There can be no claim to democracy when both candidates had identical pro-IMF policies and Ravalomanana’s populist style campaign rallies included handing out dollars to win support. Nor can Ravalomanana prove his claim that he received more than 51 percent of the vote and that Ratsiraka had rigged the ballot. At the OAU talks held in Senegal in April, both sides admitted there could be no accurate recount because many voting papers had been destroyed or lost since the election. The OAU agreement contained a secret deal—since

denied by Ravalomanana—that a “recount” would take place and, as a face-saving gesture, it would be announced that there was no outright winner. A provisional government would rule until new elections were held, with Ratsiraka as president but with a leading role for Ravalomanana.

On returning to Madagascar, both sides abrogated the agreement. Ravalomanana was declared the outright winner under a recount organised by the Constitutional Court, which was dominated by his supporters. For his part, Ratsiraka continued the blockade of Antananarivo he had agreed to abandon.

The conflict between the rival elite’s has inflicted a heavy toll on Madagascar’s population. Aid workers have reported severe malnutrition developing in children. Madagascar ranked 135 out of 162 in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ratings before the present crisis. A UNDP report issued July 1 stated that whereas last year Madagascar’s projected poverty rate was 65 percent, it is now expected to be back to the 1997 rate of 73 percent.

Madagascar had become an important centre for textile production, exploiting the island’s pool of cheap labour. Ravalomanana will be attempting to win back foreign investment in the duty free zones, where production for export has fallen by 22 percent and 70,000 jobs are threatened. During the conflict many workers were laid off or left unpaid.



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