Correspondence on Madagascar

31 August 2002

Subject: “Madagascar: Ravalomanana takes control with US support”,
(9 July 2002)

Thanks for your article. I would suggest strongly though that you look closely at the situation in Madagascar before commenting about the recent disputed elections. Recounting the votes may be impossible but you have to know how most dictators and leaders in Africa help themselves maintaining power: either by force, or by cheating votes. That is what happened. If there was a way to properly recount the votes, I wouldn’t even be surprised that Ravalomanana won with over 60 percent.

By the way, maybe Ravalomanana handed out dollars (where did you get this info?), but Ratsiraka did worse by corrupting directly all the administration to encourage them to help him win but also by also giving out himself some money too...

MR

Dear MR,

Information about Ravalomanana using his wealth to buy votes came from different sources. *Africa Confidential* Vol. 42, No. 24 of December 7, 2001 commenting on his victory in the election for mayor of Antananarivo said: “he used more material means to facilitate his political breakthrough in 1999, when a lavish campaign with milk and other goods distributed to the poor helped him to a surprise victory”.

A BBC News Online article of December 17, 2001 comments on the presidential contest between Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka thus: “The elections have been dominated by how much money the candidates have to spend on t-shirts, caps and helicopter transport to the most remote parts of the island.”

I have no reason to doubt the information in the articles cited above or by the Pan African News Agency about the secret deal following the Dakar agreement, in which both sides agreed that a recount was impossible because of lost papers etc., and that it was merely a face saving exercise. In the end both sides abrogated the agreement and the ensuing low-level civil war led to violence, instability, increasing poverty and malnutrition for vulnerable sections of the population. However, if I accept your implication that Ravalomanana won the election with a clear majority, in what way does he represent a real alternative to meet the needs of the majority of the Malagasy people? Both Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka have made clear their subordination to the Western powers and dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under these circumstances there can be no true democracy for the mass of the population of Madagascar.

Ravalomanana, a dairy food millionaire, only entered politics in 1999, when he was elected mayor of the capital city Antananarivo, running on a populist ticket. He is a representative of a very narrow social layer of wealthy Madagascan business people. Madagascar is the world’s seventh poorest country with an average annual per capita income of $250. He courted American support and it was recognition by the United States that broke the stalemate and led to Ratsiraka going into exile.

Ratsiraka was a long-term politician initially brought into power by the military. He had close connections with France, the old colonial power, and had imposed IMF strictures.

Madagascar, like all developing countries in the world, faces domination by the major imperialist powers, which have, through agencies such as the IMF, imposed economic policies that make development and a decent standard of living for the majority an impossibility. The situation can only sharpen as the rivalries between the major powers driven by the crisis of capitalist production leads to more direct imperialist penetration of Africa and other areas of world. There can be no development along capitalist lines such as took place in the old capitalist countries. As we have explained, the reverse is taking place. According to the

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World Bank, between 1980 and 2000 sub-Saharan Africa's debt increased from $60 billion to $200 billion. Yet in that same period $229 billion of debt was paid off. The region paid more in debt servicing than on health and education combined.

Under IMF strictures the region has mainly exported primary commodities. The glut of such commodities on the world market has led to a fall in prices and the subsequent impoverishment of the sub-Saharan Africa and other underdeveloped areas of the world.

IMF structural adjustment programmes to "free up" markets means capital can flow more easily, but the net effect has been an outflow of capital including that of the African ruling elites. The more capital is exported the more countries have to borrow, leading to a vicious spiral.

The only way forward for working people is for political independence from the Ravalomananas and Ratsirakas of this world. To reverse the process of economic decline it is necessary to realise the potential political power of the African working class through its unification as part of the fight for a world socialist perspective.

Developments following Ravalomanana's confirmation as president show the impoverishment of the majority will continue, along with the enrichment of a tiny elite. One of the first acts of the government was to increase the salary of its ministers tenfold to $3,500 a month, around 170 times the average per capita income. This action was applauded by the World Bank as a hedge against corruption, arguing that it would reduce the temptation to seek other sources of income.

A July *Africanews* web site posted an article entitled, "Scramble for Madagascar: 'They will come!', Madagascar is now open for business". It waxed lyrical about the rewards for investors. The article states that for Ravalomanana and US ambassador Wanda Nesbitt, the priority is to attract foreign investment, particularly American investment. Textiles had been a growing aspect of the economy before the presidential crisis, offering cheap labour and huge profits to transnational companies that did nothing to reduce the poverty for the mass of the population on the island.

This was confirmed by Hafez Ghanem, the World Bank's country director speaking in an interview with the *BBC Newsweb* in July. He declared, that "the first priority is to get the private sector operating again," welcoming the prospect of textile firms returning. Ghanem explained: "For those companies ... looking at the cost-competitiveness of Madagascar, it is still a cheap place to produce. The government needs to ensure that foreign investors feel safe operating in Madagascar and ensure security in regards land, repatriating profits ...".

For further reading on the impossibility of genuine democracy in developing countries in a world dominated by Western finance and transnationals can I suggest you read the following articles on our website:

The struggle for democracy in Indonesia—What are the social and political tasks facing the masses?
[23 May 1998]
Which social classes support the struggle for democracy in Indonesia?—The lessons of history
[20 May 1998]
Africa and the perspective of international socialism
[18 February 2002]

Sincerely,
Barry Mason

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