

Populist businessman takes power in Madagascar

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After several months of protests, opposition leader Andry Rajoelina has been sworn in president of the Indian Ocean Island of Madagascar. Former president Marc Ravalomanana stood down last week after attempting to transfer power to a military committee made up of top army and navy chiefs.

Powerful factions in the army lower ranks backed Rajoelina against Ravalomanana and the top brass and helped him seize power. Army commander Colonel Andre Ndjiriaraona stated, "We had already said we did not want this military authority, it's another ploy by Mr Ravalomanana. The people here don't want a military authority."

Rajoelina's takeover has been denounced by the African Union who suspended Madagascar's membership, protesting that his seizure of power was a "coup". The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has discussed applying sanctions against Madagascar. This stance is shared by western governments including the United States, who have cut off aid payments. It is estimated that up to 70 percent of the country's income comes from aid and support from charities, so Rajoelina is now desperately attempting to win back western support.

Rajoelina, a wealthy businessman, entered politics by becoming the elected mayor of Antananarivo, the capital, in December 2007. He roundly defeated Ravalomanana's party candidate, winning over 60 percent of the vote. He criticised Ravalomanana's increasingly authoritarian rule and garnered support from the masses wanting to see their conditions improve.

The conflict increased markedly in December 2008 when Ravalomanana shut down Rajoelina's television network after it had broadcast an interview with the

former president Ratsiraka, whom Ravalomanana displaced in a similar populist movement in 2002. Ratsiraka, who now lives in exile in France, is one of Rajoelina's backers.

In January Rajoelina organised opposition rallies and a general strike in the capital city. Dozens of opposition supporters were killed. On January 31 Rajoelina threw down the gauntlet to Ravalomanana, saying he was the real leader of Madagascar. Ravalomanana retaliated by sacking him as mayor.

Further demonstrations in February were suppressed by the military, with around 30 demonstrators killed. Rajoelina strengthened his bid for power by announcing an alternative administration.

Power began to ebb from Ravalomanana in March when troops in the main barracks in the capital refused his orders to use force against demonstrators. Rajoelina at one point sought and was given shelter in the French embassy. Attempted mediation by first the African Union and then the United Nations failed.

On March 16 around 100 soldiers broke into and took over the presidential palace, although Ravalomanana was elsewhere. A spokesman for the army faction said they would not take orders from Ravalomanana.

According to *Africa Confidential* the plan that Ravalomanana hand over power to a military committee was put forward by the US ambassador, R Niels Marquardt. However, lower ranking officers opposed the plan. *Africa Confidential* states:

"The military commanders earmarked for this role [i.e. taking power in a military junta] . . . were said to have refused it in the presence of a Kalashnikov-wielding junior officer. At one heated moment, he seemed be about to mow down the dignitaries gathered . . . Fortunately, the tension lifted."

Ravalomanana, a wealthy business man who made

his money in the dairy industry, became leader of Madagascar in June 2002. This followed a six month period of struggle against the incumbent president Didier Ratsiraka that, while narrowly avoiding a civil war, cost the lives of dozens of people. The dispute arose following contested elections. Ratsiraka held political power in Madagascar for more than 20 years and had close political ties with the former colonial power France. Ravalomanana was able to triumph after receiving political support from the US.

Ravalomanana was re-elected president in December 2006. During his time in office he sought to increase ties with Anglophone African countries, with Madagascar joining the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2005.

He has opened up the country to western investment, especially by mineral companies. Foreign Direct Investment in Madagascar tripled in 2006 and tripled again the following year. US and British oil companies have been exploring offshore and Canadian, Japanese and Korean companies are working together to develop a nickel and cobalt mine. Rio Tinto has begun production at their limonite mine. A proposed project headed by Korea's Daewoo Logistics to lease large areas of land to grow food for South Korea was under discussion—though apparently this has been opposed by Rajoelina.

Ravalomanana also courted the Chinese, and in November last year Wu Bangguo, chairman of China's National People's Congress's Standing Committee, made an official visit to Madagascar and met with him. In the same month the Chinese-based Wuhan Iron and Steel group signed a cooperation agreement to jointly develop mineral deposits in Madagascar.

Despite the investment in Madagascar it remains one of the poorest countries in the world, coming 143 out of 179 in the UN Human Development index. Around 70 percent of the population have an income of less than a US\$1 a day and lead a subsistence existence.

Rajoelina was sworn in as head of "transitional authority" on March 21. He has suspended parliament, but has promised elections within 24 months and is seeking constitutional changes. Under the current constitution Rajoelina, who is 34, would be too young to run for president, as 40 is the minimum age for presidential candidates. Despite winning popular support against Ravalomanana, his policies are not

fundamentally different except that he is supported by other factions of the ruling elite.

Whilst not explicitly endorsing Rajoelina—President Nicolas Sarkozy condemned the takeover as "a coup d'état" and called for elections as soon as possible—France has been quick to respond to current developments, after being caught off guard following the ousting of Ratsiraka by Ravalomanana in 2002.

At the end of February the French government announced that Jean-Marc Chataigner would be the new ambassador to Madagascar. This is after a seven month gap left by the departure of the former ambassador at the behest of Ravalomanana. Chataigner, a career diplomat, had been deputy director of development in the Ministry of Affairs and was chief of staff to the French Secretary of State for Cooperation and Francophonie.

He flew into Madagascar just two days after Ravalomanana stepped down. According to the news website Topmada.com, Rajoelina's wife was on the same flight as the French ambassador and Chataigner was received at the airport by Rajoelina.

On March 19 Chataigner paid an official visit to Rajoelina. Speaking to media the after the visit, Rajoelina stressed the importance of the relationship between France and Madagascar.

Whilst much still remains unclear about the forces and interests behind the imposition of Rajoelina, it is clear that it is in line with growing imperialist manoeuvres seeking to exploit Africa's resources. The workers and peasants of Madagascar will not benefit by the replacement of one wealthy businessman as head of state by another.



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