

MADAGASCAR: STATE OF DENIAL

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[En illustration, une vidéo de 30 mn

>> <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/peopleandpower/2010/08/201081864237806607.html>

Elle illustre l'article et présente l'ensemble de la situation, sans cacher les difficultés auxquelles sont confrontées les populations.]

While Madagascar celebrates 50 years of independence from France this year, the country remains mired in economic crisis and political uncertainty over who is legitimately leading the nation of 20 million.

In March 2009, clashes between the regime of Marc Ravalomanana, the then president, and the opposition movement, led by the capital's former mayor, Andry Rajoelina, left more than 100 people dead and the nation in turmoil.

Many blamed the president's heavy-handed National Guard for the killings, and calls for his removal reached fever pitch. Following days of sporadic violence and increasing political pressure, Ravalomanana - in office since 2002 - finally surrendered his post to the country's military.

For a brief moment, the world's cameras were turned on this little-known country, the fourth-largest island in the world.

Shortly after, Rajoelina, a former radio DJ, was handed power by the army, appointing himself transitional president, dissolving parliament and replacing the state's high court judges. But at just 34 years old, he was too young to legally rule Madagascar.

The new high court agreed that he could alter the constitution, and shortly thereafter, Rajoelina became the youngest head of state in Africa.

But in the following months his pledge to hold elections within the next two years was challenged by thousands of Ravalomanana supporters and the international community, leaving many fearing that a civil war is still possible.

'Auto-putsch'

Hippolyte Rarison, a former general who played a leading role in the handover of power and who is now foreign minister, staunchly denies that it was a coup. He claims that controversial business dealings by the former president - who allegedly used his own company to monopolise the sale and manufacture of foodstuffs - enraged the general public and that as a consequence Ravalomanana was 'auto-putsched'.

"He did it to himself," Rarison explained. "He says he was forced to leave, but everyone knew that his corruption would lead to this. It was time."

International condemnation followed the events of March 2009 and has strained relations between international donors and Madagascar ever since.

Governments labelled Ravalomanana's removal a coup d'état, claiming it was an unconstitutional transfer of power.

The Obama administration suspended Madagascar from the Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) in December 2009, resulting in the suspension of the country's trade benefits. The consequence of this has been a loss of over 100,000 jobs in the textile industry, which has directly affected more than one million people.

Other foreign bodies soon followed. The African Union, the European Union and the South African Development Committee (SADC) leveraged punitive sanctions against the country, including the suspension of development aid, trade and air travel bands.

Following the installation of the new regime, Tomaz Augusto Salomao, the SADC executive general, said: "The [SADC] summit firmly rejects and condemns the unilateral decision of Madagascar's transitional president Andry Rajoelina [and] ... upholds its decision to suspend Madagascar ... until constitutional normality has returned to the country."

For over a year, successive efforts by international mediators to resolve the political deadlock have failed, including an attempt to arrange a power-sharing agreement between Madagascar's former president and Rajoelina.

Economic fallout

Andry Rajoelina became the youngest African head of state when he took power [EPA]

For the average Malagasy, the consequences of the political turmoil have been grave. The country is one of the poorest in Africa - it is in the bottom quarter of international development indices and more than 70 per cent of its population lives on less than \$1 a day.

In the last year, inflation has risen as a result of a 13 per cent devaluation of the Ariary, Madagascar's currency. GDP, which was growing by seven per cent a year before the crisis, has plummeted to almost zero resulting in mass unemployment.

The US embassy reported a 400 per cent increase in violent crime in the capital, Antananarivo.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have reported that child labour has increased by 25 per cent. There are now two million children under the age of 15 working instead of attending school - despite the practice being against international and Malagasy laws.

In the country's dry southern region, where the largest portion of Madagascar's impoverished population live, the effects of the crisis are particularly acute. Years of little or no rain, diminishing food harvests and rising malnutrition is placing an estimated half a million people at risk. UNICEF has warned that 150,000 more children could soon be affected by severe malnutrition unless urgent help is received.

Enrique Alias, the director of the World Food Programme in Ambovombe, the capital of Madagascar's Androy region, said: "It has always been dry here, but this is the third year of drought. I worry that the feeding programme we have for children, who are being hit the hardest by the crisis and the food shortage, won't be enough. A famine is very possible. This is an emergency."

Plundering protected forests

As a result of an economic and security vacuum left by last year's crisis, smuggling and other illegal despoliation of the environment is spiralling out of control.

According to reports by the Environmental Investigation Agency and Global Witness, unlicensed loggers daily plunder up to \$460,000-worth of precious woods from Madagascar's national parks in Sava, the country's northeast region.

The NGOs also covertly filmed the scale of illegal logging in UNESCO-protected sites in Madagascar's eastern rainforests.

Timber traders are taking advantage of the political crisis and high demand abroad to illegally extract large quantities of rosewood from Masoala and Marojejy National Parks as well as the Mananara Biosphere Reserve. But many accuse the new government of profiting off taxes levied on illegal loggers.

For a country known for being one of the richest nations in terms of ecological biodiversity and mineral wealth in the world, the daily pillaging of its future tourism revenue will have devastating long-term consequences.

A fragile future

The immediate economic future looks bleak for the people of Madagascar.

It is true that Rajoelina has promised to hold previously postponed parliamentary elections in September, but pledges for a wider constitutional referendum, which was due to be held this summer, have again been delayed indefinitely.

Many fear that unless some solution is found, the current stalemate could spark a new wave of civil unrest. Opposition parties have temporarily combined to condemn what they see as a military dictatorship in the making and with rallies becoming ever more vocal in the face of perceived government and army intimidation, tempers are fraying.

According to Monja Roindefo, Rajoelina's former prime minister, it is only a matter of time before change will happen, positive or otherwise.

"We have two options," he says.

"The one option that we cannot afford to miss is to come back to constitutional order, to have a referendum. But there is another option. It is what I call, how do you say it in English? A beneficial explosion."

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