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MADAGASCAR: PARADISE LOST?

A French possession since 1896, the island of Madagascar, the fourth largest in the world, acceded to autonomous statehood within the French Community in October 1958, as the Malagasy Republic. In May 1959 Philibert Tsiranana, leader of the Parti Social Democrate (PSD), became President. The country achieved full independence in June 1960.

Universally famous for its oddities in the animal and plant kingdom – notably, the mouse lemurs, the smallest of all primates, and a dozen species of vanga shrikes – Madagascar has known conflict since its independence. Conflict between the coastal people (côtiers) and the traditional ruling group of the island, the Merina, underlies the island's recent political history.

ECONOMIC DECLINE

After 1967 the economy, based principally on agriculture, forestry, fishing and – more recently – mining, went into deep decline. Political opposition to the Government's alleged authoritarianism and subservience to the interests of metropolitan France, also mounted. The embattled President transferred power to the military, who initiated the "Malagasization" of industry and education, and strengthened ties with the more progressive mainland African states.

The crisis deepened, following an attempted military coup in December 1974, the assassination of the new Head of State and the imposition of martial law in February 1975. In June 1975, Lt-Commander Didier Ratsiraka, a côtier (a group long-favoured by the French) and a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, became the new Head of State and Chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC).

In a referendum in December 1975, a new constitution won overwhelming approval from the voters. Promising major agrarian and administrative reforms, Ratsiraka was appointed President of Madagascar for seven years. The island's name was also changed to the Democratic Republic of Madagascar. In March the following year, the *Avant-garde de la Révolution Malgache* (AREMA) was formed as the nucleus of the *Front National pour la Défense de la Révolution Socialiste Malgache* (FNDR), at the same time the only legal political movement.

AREMA as the political arm of the FNDR, won elections for the newly-established National People's Assembly (NPA) in June 1977. Despite President Ratsiraka's popularity, there were two attempted coups in 1980, riots and looting in 1981, as well as the rise of the opposition left-wing *Mouvement National pour l'indépendance de Madagascar* (MONIMA). In the presidential election of November 1982, President Ratsiraka was returned to office. His only opponent, Monja Jaona, of MONIMA, polled a surprising number of votes in the capital city of Antananarivo. Jaona's performance set a pattern that was repeated in elections for the National People's Assembly in August 1983.

POLITICAL TURMOIL

In the wake of the August 1983 elections, came outbursts of violence, food riots, food shortages and famine. In December 1986 popular discontent spread to Toamasina, the main Madagascan port, and to the National University in Antananarivo, which was subsequently closed. In the following year, wide-spread rioting broke out. Indian and Pakistani traders were attacked, their houses and shops were burnt and looted. Many subsequently left for the island of Réunion (a French overseas department), the island of Mayotte and for India and Pakistan. The Indo-Pakistani community on the island became a focus of resentment for its control over a large portion of the retail sector and for its comparative wealth amidst growing poverty and food shortages.

Since 1987 several new opposition parties to the left and the right – of President Ratsiraka's AREMA have emerged – among these, the *Élan Populaire pour l'Unité* (VONJY/VITM) and the *Alliance Démocratique de Madagascar* (ADM).

REFORM FROM ABOVE

In 1989 President Ratsiraka introduced limited reforms, notably the abolition of restrictions on the freedom of the press and acceptance of multi-partyism.

In the presidential elections of that year, Ratsiraka was re-elected for a further seven-year term of office, but with a greatly reduced majority. AREMA, however, increased its previously substantial majority in the National People's Assembly (NPA), winning 120 of the 137 seats. The opposition parties shared the other 17 seats.

In August 1989 President Ratsiraka introduced further reforms, when the Council of Ministers was reshuffled, and some technocrats brought in to the Government. The President also assented to opposition demands for talks on the future role and composition of the National Front for the Defence of the Revolution (FNDR).

In June this year, a draft bill for the recasting of the Madagascar constitution was introduced. It proposes to modify the present constitution's preamble, abrogate seventeen articles and modify 37 others. All references to "socialism" have also been removed. The Supreme Revolutionary Council will become the Supreme Republican Council and will play a consultative role in decisions taken by the President.

The logic behind these proposed constitutional amendments seems to be to enhance the presidential character of the regime, by reinforcing the President's power and patronage. However, it seems inevitable that the government's project will continue to encounter stiff opposition from various social formations on the island.

Since mid-June, President Didier Ratsiraka has been faced with the problem of how to defuse the most serious protest movement he has encountered since coming to power in 1975. In the capital 100,000 demonstrators marched on three consecutive days, calling for a national conference to recast the constitution, a new general election and the formation of a caretaker/interim government.

Anti-government actions have been organised by the Active Opposition, a coalition of political forces, trade unions and interest associations. The national television network which President Didier Ratsiraka established last year to help him hold on to power has worked against him. Viewers were able to watch the downfall of President Mengistu Haile Mariam's reign in Ethiopia, as well as the

progress of their own opposition movements, backed by the four main churches on the island. At the time of writing, church leaders are attempting to mediate in the conflict between the Government and a proliferation of opposition parties. It is clear that the island is undergoing considerable turbulence as it attempts to restructure its political and socio-economic life.

THE ECONOMIC REALM

During the 1980s, Madagascar's dominant agricultural sector was adversely affected by unusually severe cyclones and by fluctuations in the market prices of the country's principal exports - coffee, vanilla, cloves, sugar, coconuts, tropical fruit, cotton and sisal. Industrial development was impeded by low domestic demand, by lack of foreign exchange and by state controls on foreign investment.

Madagascar experienced severe balance-of-payment difficulties during the past decade, and, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and Western aid donors, implemented a programme of economic reforms. These included: trade liberalization, adjustments to the exchange rate of the Malagasy franc, reductions in public spending and in price subsidies, and improvement in the management of public enterprises. In 1988 and 1989 creditor governments agreed to reschedule or forgive a significant proportion of Madagascar's external debt.

The government in Antananarivo recently signed a further debt-swap agreement with a Dutch bank.

This island with a total population of 11,7 million and an area of 587,041 sq.km (226,658 sq.miles), has considerable economic potential, notably in mining (graphite, salt, mica, chromite and bauxite), tourism, agriculture, construction and energy (petroleum and natural gas).

Madagascar has established trade links with a number of countries, including: France, Germany, the USA, Japan and more recently since April this year, South Africa. Also, the island has diplomatic links with many countries, among these: the People's Republic of China, Cuba, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Africa, Switzerland, the U.S.S.R., the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Madagascar's geographic location, as well as its role in the Indian Ocean Commission and the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern Africa

(PTA), enhance its regional importance. This strategic island, however, is undergoing political and socio-economic change that produces considerable turbulence in its wake. While some of it dates from earlier French colonial rule, and from IMF and World Bank induced restructuring, the local political leadership should also accept their share in bringing it about. Only time will tell whether Madagascar is yet another case of paradise lost or regained...

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