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Madagascar's pop star president

Thanks to a slick, polished campaign, former DJ Andry Rajoelina scored a remarkable victory in Madagascar's elections

With 56 per cent of the vote share, DJ turned entrepreneur turned politician Andry Rajoelina appears to have the strongest democratic mandate of any president of Madagascar in the past 25 years. On 19 January 2019, he was inaugurated as Madagascar's next president.

While the elections saw the lowest turnout in the island's history, the process was surprisingly smooth. Rajoelina's main rival and long-time nemesis, former president Marc Ravalomanana, disputed the results, alleging large-scale fraud. Following a ruling by the High Constitutional Court, however, he conceded defeat, congratulated Rajoelina and wished him well.

The president-elect ran on a dream. His slick, professional campaign, which seemed to know no budget constraints, was in a different league to those of his rather amateurish competitors. His appearances on stage – descending from a helicopter like a pop star to the beats of techno music – seemed wildly out of place and out of time in a country that has no highways and no electricity outside the bigger cities, and where 90 per cent of the population live on less than 3 dollars a day.

But it was precisely this contrast that helped him get elected. He promised to transform Toamasina – the island's main port, but something of a backwater by international standards – into a second Miami. He vowed to use drones to combat the country's plague of cattle theft. And he declared he would build an entire new capital, named Antananarivo-the-Sun, next to the overcrowded existing capital with its eternal traffic gridlock.

'This time things are different'

The island's young and desperate were persuaded to vote for the one candidate who sold them a dream. Rajoelina is youthful, energetic,

successful, with a beautiful wife and children. He has no ideology; his selling point was himself. So, can he deliver? With his main rival retiring and no other strongman around to take his place, his concern won't be checks and balances in the political system but rather the expectations of those two-and-a-half million people who voted for him. Malagasy history has shown that even strong election winners can quickly fall out of favour once the people lose patience.

A recent study outlined the 'Malagasy paradox': despite having suffered no wars, genocide or foreign interventions after its independence from France in 1960, Madagascar's economy and living standards have declined. GDP per capita today stands at just 60 per cent compared to 1960 – which is exceptional even in poorly performing Africa. At the time of independence, Madagascar was on a par with Brazil and Malaysia; today it is one the five poorest nations on earth.

Scepticism about whether Rajoelina can break this long decline seems reasonable. After all, this is not his first stint in power. The last time he governed, after ousting Ravalomanana in a military coup in 2009, Madagascar tumbled into an abyss of poverty and bad governance. It's surprising to see how quick the electorate has been to forgive – or forget.

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But things are different this time, he claims. Not only does he have democratic legitimacy, he's also older and supposedly wiser. Apart from the eye-catching Miami fantasies, his Initiative for the Emergence of Madagascar plan is detailed, thought-out and not entirely unrealistic. While it's not particularly innovative, it more or less follows the neoliberal consensus that is still strongly anchored in most African countries.

Bettering the business climate will supposedly drive a private sector take-off, while financing will mostly come through foreign donors and foreign direct investment. Its most revolutionary element is that it calls for the integration of Madagascar into Asean, a regional economic organisation regrouping South East Asia's tiger economies. This would defy geographic logic.

It also lists Britain's Tony Blair and Germany's Gerhard Schröder as its greatest inspirations. This Euro-centric perspective is perhaps unsurprising, given that it was written with the help of French experts, Rajoelina having lived four of the past five years in the land of Madagascar's former colonial rulers.

Criminalisation of the state

One might think Madagascar would need a more tailored approach, and Ethiopia, one of the continent's few economic success stories, could serve as an example. Implementing targeted industrial policies, using its own development banks and not shying away from sector-specific protectionism, the country has significantly deviated from conventional liberal wisdom and achieved growth rates above 10 per cent for more than a decade.

A more Keynesian-oriented strategy geared towards structural transformation instead of mere growth might also be better for Madagascar. However, the country seems to lack both the imagination and the courage to carry this out.

The question is thus whether Rajoelina, much of whose vote came from the downtrodden masses, will be answerable to those who put their faith in him.

Whether a sustained economic take-off would still work might not be a merely technical question. Madagascar's main issue is its political and economic set-up. That transformation into Miami will only work if Rajoelina is able to break the power of those old economic elites that have held Madagascar hostage for so long. Crony capitalist rentiers thrive on the under-development that comes with the perpetuation of a colonial economy: exploiting natural and mineral resources and monetising them on the international markets. Madagascar today is a pre-industrial economy where almost no production and transformation take place.

Funding a lavish campaign

The Paris-based research institute Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI) recently spoke of the 'criminalisation of the state' in relation to the resource economy. Organised crime – which most often engages in the illegal exploitation and exportation of resources – and political power are increasingly intertwined. With an economic class that amasses most of its riches by pillaging the country's resources, development remains a dream. Rajoelina doesn't need technical solutions to the country's problems so much as he needs the political courage to break the grip that ruthless rent-seekers have on the state and the economy.

Whether he can muster that also depends on the willingness to go ahead even when confronted with obstacles. Some would argue that knowing

the identity of the financiers might be the best way of guessing where a politician will go – raising the issue of who has backed the president-elect.

With the actual numbers still not known, one can only conclude that Rajoelina's campaign spending is best described by one word: lavish. The sources are officially unknown. In 2013, Rajoelina's then proxy candidate supposedly commanded some USD 43 million, which would make Madagascar's the most expensive electoral campaign in the world. Most observers would agree that five years later, the process was again hardly done on the cheap.

The question is thus whether Rajoelina, much of whose vote came from the downtrodden masses, will be answerable to those who put their faith in him. Will he be, as he said he would, the first president to shake the country out of its decline – or just another defender of the old class of crony capitalists that bears responsibility for the island's state? While hope might be popular right now in many parts of the country – and it has certainly been in short supply for the past 10 years – this should not cloud judgment. Until further notice, Miami is still a city in Florida.



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