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Madagascar's dangerous democratic backsliding

President Rajoelina promised stability and development. But years later, violence is dominating the election campaign

What a time it has been — in January 2019, Andry Rajoelina was sworn in as Madagascar's president following an election that was recognised as democratic. He promised the country that he would break out of the eternal cycle of crises and revolts. The stability and development of Rwanda was to be the new role model. The presence of three of his predecessors at the inauguration – an unprecedented act – was a sign of dialogue and unity between former political opponents and set the tone for a new political culture in Madagascar.

Four and a half years later, in the 67-hectare district of Antananarivo: the presidential candidate's rally is held up by a rampaging mob. Furniture and punches hit Marc Ravalomanana's black G-Class. Rajoelina's supporters, dressed in orange, seek a confrontation with the white-clad fans of the former president, who have been attending the rallies of the opposition 'Candidates' Collective' in ever-increasing numbers in recent weeks. Days later, tear gas bullets from the gendarmerie hit his vehicle directly, rows of demonstrators are dragged into vehicles by masked security forces, and opposition members are being arrested. With the green, white and red national flag, elderly women wipe blood from their foreheads. In the meantime, the United Nations and the international community on the ground are also expressing increasing concern about the escalating developments of the past few weeks, taking place in the context of the war in Gaza, and thus remaining unnoticed by the rest of the world.

What drives the protests?

Madagascar's government is currently pushing through an election round with all its might. Back in February 2023, when the National Election Commission announced the dates for the presidential election at the end of the year, everything seemed to point to an easy victory for the

incumbent Rajoelina. The opposition was weak and divided, state institutions and the majority of the media are in the hands of the president. Powerful businessmen from the underground publicly expressed their support for Rajoelina, thereby reassuring the security apparatus comprising the army, gendarmerie and police.

Meanwhile, the international community was too distracted by the crises in the Sahel and Ukraine to take a closer look and could only note that the recommendations of the EU Election Observation Mission to improve the preparation and organisation of the election were barely implemented. But there were hardly any consequences for the Madagascan government. In spring, there was no doubt as to which of the 13 officially authorised candidates would dominate the ballot. Eight months later, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that Madagascar will elect a new president in a calm and universally recognised ballot.

In recent years, Madagascar has become poorer and more dependent.

Rajoelina may be a master of propaganda, but objectively speaking, his government's record is mixed. Food supply, energy security, education policy, the protection of citizens from violence of all kinds — there are hardly any substantially positive results from his first mandate in government. School buildings and police stations may now shine in party colours as a sign of political coherence, but there has been no investment in the people who work there. In recent years, Madagascar has become poorer and more dependent. Millions are being invested in prestige projects such as a cable car in Antananarivo, the operational benefits of which can certainly be questioned.

With so many issues, the conditions for political opposition should be ideal. However, it is not the country's serious grievances that are driving people onto the streets but the feeling of structural disadvantage in an only seemingly democratic electoral process. The concerning issues are the abuse of the constitution, the manipulation of the electoral roll, millions of fictitious votes and polling stations, the targeted issuing of identity documents to government supporters, the all-too-obvious instrumentalisation of independent institutions, concrete harassment against the political activities of the opposition and the acquisition of a €14 million predator software for espionage operations against the opposition.

The government is playing for time

The opposition was slow to mobilise against the conditions of this presidential election. For the first time ever, its leading representatives put themselves in the front row of the demonstrators and thus also in the line of fire of the gendarmerie. And the people are increasingly following them, emotionalised in particular by Rajoelina's dual citizenship, which he had concealed since 2014. According to the Malagasy constitution, he should have lost his Malagasy citizenship, but the Supreme Constitutional Court nevertheless authorised Rajoelina's candidacy. The court and the National Electoral Commission in particular are suspected of doing a great deal to ensure Rajoelina's election victory.

Against this backdrop, the opposition has clearly positioned itself against the elections planned for 16 November. However, the government is immuring itself, and there is no dialogue with important national actors. With a mixture of political manoeuvring and the disproportionate deployment of security forces, the government is pushing through the ballot. And this time-game is paying off; the political mood for change is gaining momentum too timidly to influence the process, and the international community can currently only stand by and watch. After months of blockade by the government, election observers from the African Union and the Southern African Development Community were allowed to enter the country a few days before the election. But in view of the remaining time window, there no longer seem to be any real instruments for them to work towards a democratic election.

The situation is unlikely to calm down even after the election.

If the opposition boycotts the presidential election, as announced on Monday, and the vote nevertheless takes place, it will come down to a sort of duel between Rajoelina and Siteny Randrianasoloniaiko, who is running for the Social Democratic Party. The latter has always been suspected of acting as Rajoelina's front man to create the appearance of a democratic process. In this scenario, a relatively small difference in results is enough for an absolute majority in the first round of voting to be elected president on 16 November. This would be the logical end of a script written long ago by Rajoelina's advisors and would mean a continuation of the status quo for the country without any real prospects for development.

However, the situation is unlikely to calm down even after the election.

Student associations and trade unions are beginning to call for a general strike, while the army and judiciary are increasingly showing solidarity with the demonstrators. As the scope for democracy in Madagascar has recently been reduced to an absolute minimum, this does not bode well for the country's immediate future.



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