President Ratsiraka is trying to reverse the gains that have been made during Madagascar’s democratization process. Campaigning on the slogan of freedom with development, he has successfully moved the country back toward the autocracy of the Second Republic. If the highest leadership is not seeking democracy, then who is?

Madagascar: Legitimizing Autocracy

RICHARD R. MARCUS

Madagascar is viewed as democratic by the international community because, as the United States Department of State has put it, this island nation off the eastern coast of Africa “completed its transition from 16 years of authoritarian Socialist rule with the free and fair election of Albert Zafy as president in 1993.” Indeed, in contrast to the political situation ten years ago, it would appear that democracy has flourished: not only have regular elections been held, but people also exercise their rights to free speech and assembly, practice the religion of their choice, and publish newspaper articles criticizing both the system and specific politicians.

But just what kind of democracy is taking shape in Madagascar? Although the country may hold elections and has begun to consolidate its democratic system, the kind of democracy it is consolidating obeys the rules but deviates from the essence. The elected presidents of the Third Republic, Albert Zafy and Didier Ratsiraka, have manipulated the political system to suit their own ends, making democracy in Madagascar a tool for the legitimization of self-seeking politicians through elections. The majority of Malagasy are politically marginalized—muted by the opaque system created by aggressive political actors. What is left in Madagascar is a carefully crafted shell of electoral democracy.

The Return to Democracy

In 1989 President Ratsiraka, Madagascar’s undisputed autocratic leader since the military took over in 1975, faced three major problems. The economy was in tatters, a debt crisis had erupted after foreign donors bailed out of Ratsiraka’s experiment in nationalization, and his patron state, the Soviet Union, was on the brink of collapse. Moreover, for the first time his opponents were publicly challenging his legitimacy through popular protest.

By 1991 Ratsiraka had become so weak that opposition leader Albert Zafy was able to lead an 80,000-strong civil-servant strike in Antananarivo, the capital city. Malagasy economic life came to a halt. With Ratsiraka unable to end the crisis, Zafy—a professor of medicine from the northern Antsiranana region who had founded the National Union of Democrats for Development (UNDD)—was able to set up a shadow government with himself as prime minister and the Haute Autorité—the 16 parties in the opposition coalition known as Hery Velona (Living Forces)—as parliament. The surprisingly rapid challenge posed by this parallel legislature forced President Ratsiraka to the bargaining table. On October 31, 1991 he signed the Panorama Convention, under which Ratsiraka remained president, but was stripped of the majority of his powers. The Haute Autorité effectively became the new legislature.

Multiparty presidential elections were held February 10, 1993. Albert Zafy won a resounding victory with 67 percent of the vote to Ratsiraka’s 33 percent. Voter turnout was a remarkably high 70 percent. Zafy was sworn in on March 27, 1993, cre-
Ratsiraka's previous tenure as president. Because they thought life had been better during Ratsiraka in the 1996–1997 presidential election themselves were immaterial; people voted for Rat-
democracy, and the platforms of the candidates socialism of the Second Republic, the expansion of informed voters meant that the debates over the informed on substantive issues. The lack of economic downturn. Second, voters were largely ill for two reasons. First, Zafy had presided over an runoff again came down to Zafy and Ratsiraka. This was permitted to run in those elections and the elections could be held in December. Albert Zafy Constitutional Court, became acting president until prime minister and former president of the High September 5, 1996. Norbert Ratsirahonana, the was ratified by the High Constitutional Court on National Assembly in July 1996; the impeachment accused of corruption and impeached by the secured to his Antananarivo power base. Zafy was elected by the National Assembly and was responsible for most executive duties in domestic affairs. The president maintained control of foreign relations, but clashed with Prime Minister Ravony over executive authority. On September 15, 1995 President Zafy held a constitutional referendum to shift the nexus of power back to the presidency. Rather than focusing on the issues of constitutional import, however, he ran a populist campaign focused on economic development and rooting out corruption. Voters approved the constitutional changes requested: the power of appointing the prime minister was given to the president, and the domestic authority of the president's office was restored. Prime Minister Ravony resigned and Zafy named Emmanuel Rakotovahiny, the head of the UNDO and Zafy's protégé, to the post. Madagascar's democracy is now one in which the president exerts a great deal of authority not only over executive matters but also legislative concerns. This constitutional shift was the first of many efforts by Zafy to centralize authority in the hands of the president and create a unitary government secured to his Antananarivo power base. Zafy was accused of corruption and impeached by the National Assembly in July 1996; the impeachment was ratified by the High Constitutional Court on September 5, 1996. Norbert Ratsirahonana, the prime minister and former president of the High Constitutional Court, became acting president until elections could be held in December. Albert Zafy was permitted to run in those elections and the runoff again came down to Zafy and Ratsiraka. This time Ratsiraka won.

Didier Ratsiraka took the larger share of the vote for two reasons. First, Zafy had presided over an economic downturn. Second, voters were largely ill informed on substantive issues. The lack of informed voters meant that the debates over the socialism of the Second Republic, the expansion of democracy, and the platforms of the candidates themselves were immaterial; people voted for Ratsiraka in the 1996–1997 presidential election because they thought life had been better during Ratsiraka's previous tenure as president.

Following his victory in 1997, President Ratsiraka held his own constitutional referendum. Once again the constitutional issues took a backseat as Ratsiraka promoted the idea that a “yes” vote meant development and security. The March 1998 constitutional referendum passed by a narrow margin (51 percent to 49 percent), but was a significant victory for President Ratsiraka. The constitutional revisions returned much of the state structure if not the flavor of the Second Republic. Under the new provisions, increased autonomy and greater spending power were given to regional governments. However, the institutional vacuum left in Antananarivo has allowed President Ratsiraka to expand his political control. Regional government remains subservient to the national government since leaders owe their political fortunes to President Ratsiraka. Ratsiraka's form of decentralization thus provides few constitutional guarantees to protect regional governments from encroachment by his personalistic network; as a result, regional governors have little power to challenge the president's newly expanded authority.

On May 17, 1998 parliamentary elections gave President Ratsiraka's Vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution (AREMA) party 63 of the National Assembly's 150 seats. This left him short of an absolute majority, but independents, who tend to follow the president, took a record 32 seats, and the Torch (Leader/FANILO) party, which commonly votes with AREMA, won 17 seats. Although AREMA won 42 percent of the seats in parliament, it only won 23 percent of the popular vote nationwide. This demonstrates that while electoral procedures may have been largely followed, the population lines on which the districts are partitioned greatly favor President Ratsiraka's AREMA party.

Ratsiraka's success can be attributed at least in part to low voter turnout, which analysts generally ascribe to voter apathy. While largely true, two other factors were at work. One was bureaucratic bungling in the distribution of “election cards” required for voters and the corrupt behavior of local officials who erroneously told voters they had to purchase the cards at a relatively dear cost. Second, rural voters finally realized that, with the end of mandatory voting, they would not suffer repercussions by failing to vote.

**Elections devoid of meaning**

An important distinction can be drawn between the quality of elections and their meaning. Where quality is an exploration of the process, meaning is
an exploration of its outcomes. Legitimacy becomes a relative factor subject to the interpretation of (often self-seeking) leaders in a poorly institutionalized system. Thus, even where there is voter participation, some level of accountability and governance sufficient to manage the affairs of state, it is possible to hold elections that are devoid of meaning.

The majority of Malagasy who do vote claim that they cast ballots because the “government said to,” “it is the law,” or “it is their obligation.” Participating because it is a “personal right,” a “personal expression,” or to “create change” is rare; whom to vote for is therefore of little importance. One common way of choosing a candidate is at random: for example, selecting the most appealing ballot color or the top ballot in the pile. Also common is bought voter influence. Party representatives pass through villages handing out gifts, such as money, footballs, and foam cushions. They give a large cash gift to the local leader (often around $20), garnering a promise that he will influence other villagers to vote for the party's candidate. Although representatives of several parties generally pass, often the one who gives the most gifts wins the election. Actual “vote buying” seems less common, but the author did witness an increase in this activity at the village level in the days immediately preceding the 1998 National Assembly elections; payments seemed to average about 40 cents to 90 cents (a sizable amount for many people).

The rural voter rarely is an informed voter. The social cohesion so common in many parts of Africa is not found in much of Madagascar. Associational life is also very low. Thus few opportunities exist for people to learn from one another and discuss the issues. Contributing to this are the problems associated with the country's mass communication systems. Although, as on the rest of the African continent, radio remains the primary source of information (after discussions with friends and family members), Madagascar's national station is still largely state influenced. Moreover, the broadcasts are in the official but not universally understood dialect of Malagasy, geared toward the historically dominant Merina ethnic group, which constitutes a large proportion of the educated middle class and intellectual elite. In addition, a large amount of “disinformation” is broadcast by candidates or proponents of a ballot measure making promises unrelated to their platform or the measure. For example, in the September 1995 national referendum that shifted the power to appoint the prime minister from the National Assembly to the president, the “yes” vote campaign of President Zafy used the slogan “For Development, Peace, and Security.” Voters thus believed that approving the referendum question would lead to an increase in road rehabilitation and agricultural investment.

**Failing to connect**

Rural Malagasy voters may not be well informed, but they do know what they want and the challenges to obtaining it. If they are not instructed in the electoral process, or even encouraged to act on and communicate their needs to authorities, then the meaning of the electoral process is called into question.

Malagasy want economic development. According to research on political attitudes conducted by the author, a significant majority of people in rural areas believe that the government should provide for them and that the country's development is the national government's primary job. Yet they believe that the government acts primarily “to fill its own pockets.” As a result, people do not feel that participation through voting includes them in the political process. Indeed, people often speak of the national government as vazaha (foreign) and thus not an extension of their will at all. A woman interviewed in southern Madagascar captured this sense of separation: “We are like zebu [cattle]. We just go where we are told to go. If we are told to go this way, we go this way. And when we are told to go that way, we just go that way. Like the zebu. We don't know really what the government does. We just live like zebu . . . [but] that man who has the stick never comes here. We just hear about him. Yes, we just hear—like pay money, just pay money. But we have never seen that man.”

At the same time, most Malagasy believe that the government does represent them. Although people may not vote as a matter of personal expression, somehow their political representative is a by-product of their desires.

Yet if the Malagasy's leaders can be held accountable, then why do the people allow themselves to be pushed around?
ship to produce economic outcomes and the wish for the personal freedoms that restrict government intrusion into private life. The desire for a better quality of life takes precedence to everything else, including culture, religion, and especially politics.

Malagasy would like to see the government perform, and they want their leaders to act with strength—but with accountability. The state, however, fails to act. It fails to connect, especially with the Malagasy peasantry. People in rural areas thus want the government to provide development, but expect that it will not. A vote for a leader to bring development is not seen as linked to particular policy outcomes.

As a result, there is a lack of trust in the government. On the rare occasion that a villager says the word government (fanjakana), it is generally shouted as a warning that the gendarmes are coming. People run to hide their cattle and grain stores so that the payoff for avoiding “trouble” will be less. If a dispute or crime occurs in a village, people generally consult a local leader. Going to court is exceedingly rare since or crime occurs in a village, people generally consult a local leader. Going to court is exceedingly rare since it requires a personal payment for the gendarmes testimony and often a “contribution” to the judge if the case is to be won. The amount of the contribution is often a greater determinant in the outcome than any of the relevant facts.

**CONTINUING THE PATTERN**

Malagasy politicians have found a formula that works well for them. Voters turn out in small numbers to elect those who have made a minuscule, one-time contribution to the village. Villagers remain too far outside the system to question it and do not associate with each other enough to challenge it. Social action is therefore rare in Madagascar (outside the capital), and social upheaval challenging state practices rarer still.

Politicians thus find it to their advantage to further marginalize the peasantry rather than connect with it. When a challenge to the system does occur in the provinces (such as in the northern provincial capital of Antsiranana in 1996, when students took to the streets over grant cuts), the government can afford to ignore it since it has little chance of swaying or even influencing the status quo.

With 80 percent of the population rural and unlikely to challenge the government, politicians need only to please the urban electorate (the military has remained close to the government). But an increase in foreign investment and the growth of a new business class in the capital have led to the expansion of an urban civil society in Antananarivo and the regional capitals of Fianarantsoa and Mahajanga. Civic groups and pacts represent such diverse societal segments as landowners, mining concerns, and the tourism industry. The government has been working with civic leaders from these groups and international donors to learn to accommodate them. The international community has pointed to these efforts as an import step toward the consolidation of democracy in Madagascar. The belief is that increasing the participation of the urban middle class in the governing process is the means by which democracy will grow in the provinces.

Madagascar’s middle class is more of a new business elite comprised predominantly of well-educated Merina. Once its interests are served (most often receiving guarantees that the investment environment will be enhanced), it has little incentive to encourage civic growth in the countryside. The goals of these civics groups are too far removed from the rural populace to include them. Furthermore, the new urban civil society, like the state, benefits most from a quiet, uninformed, unmobilized rural peasantry that does not challenge investment practices, economic expansion costs, and state-sponsored urban infrastructure investments at the expense of rural infrastructure development.

Indeed, there is significant reason to believe that the interest of these two groups will continue to grow together: politicians can keep asserting their personal agendas, and civil society will continue to reflect the attitude of the appeased center. With political leaders having little incentive to reach out to the rural population, whose avenues of dissent have been closed off, government transparency and accountability will not likely increase. This formula, while maintaining political stability, is one in which power-seeking leaders subvert a meaningful democratic process for political expediency.

**LOOKING TOWARD THIRD ELECTIONS**

The constitutional referendum of March 15, 1998 not only revised the constitution but also laid the groundwork for the reelection campaign of President Ratsiraka. On April 9, 1998, Ordinance 98-001 enacted the constitutional changes approved by the referendum. It restored many of the central presidential prerogatives of the Second Republic, including the right to dissolve the National Assembly, and making it more difficult to carry out impeachment. The president was also given the power to appoint the cabinet without parliament’s approval, and he can appoint a prime minister from any party (including a minority party or an independent).
Under Ordinance 98-001 the High Constitutional Court remains comprised of nine members appointed for seven years. Three of the justices are named by the president, two by the National Assembly, two by the Senate, and two are elected by the Supreme Council of Magistrates. The president of the High Constitutional Court is appointed by the president, who reserves the right to designate other justices by executive decree.

Perhaps most critical to the political future of Didier Ratsiraka is the election of the Senate. According to the 1992 constitution, Madagascar has a bicameral legislature. Yet a Senate was not created during the birth of the Third Republic and was only finally elected on March 18, 2001.

The Senate is comprised of 90 members, with the president of the Senate to succeed the president of the country in the case of incapacitation. The Senate also can change the constitution with a two-thirds vote. Following the 1992 constitution, 30 senators were appointed by the president and 60 were elected by provincial leaders. In all 1,720 electors composed of mayors, counselors, and governors cast a ballot. Electors who failed to cast a ballot without justification faced a fine of 77 (about 2 months' pay for a civil servant).

Since the majority of the Senate is elected by provincial governors, whom those governors are is critical to the composition of the Senate. Madagascar held its first provincial elections on December 3, 2000. Although this was a general election, voter turnout is estimated to have been only 10 percent of registered voters. With the president so clearly in charge, and since a provincial election had never before been held, most Malagasy did not see this as consequential enough to warrant the costs associated with travel expenses and the time away from the fields to go to the polls.

President Ratsiraka’s AREMA party won approximately 95 percent of the provincial vote. Of the 6 gubernatorial elections, AREMA won all but Antananarivo province. A number of the president’s family members and close associates were among the victors, including Sophie Ranaivo, Ratsiraka’s daughter, and Kolo Roland, an AREMA member of parliament and close associate of the president. The president also hedged his bets by running independent candidates who were members of his extended family or family friends against his own AREMA party.

With the results of these provincial elections, along with the changes brought about by the 1998 constitutional referendum, the president’s power in the provinces is unquestionable. The provincial leadership is dominated not only by his party but by his family members and close associates. There was no question that this provincial powerhold would win President Ratsiraka a significant victory in the senatorial elections.

In an outcome that distorts electoral conditions, AREMA won 49 of the 60 Senate seats at large. LEADER/FANILIO, which won 5 seats, joined with other opposition parties in immediately noting the discrepancy between political power and the electoral results. Even while it was presumed that the president would have significant influence over the senatorial agenda, his degree of influence appears staggering; many of the senators elected are long-standing members of Ratsiraka’s coterie. With the president’s existing influence in the National Assembly, his legislative agenda is assured even if he chooses not to use the power of executive decree granted him by Ordinance 98-001. More important, Ratsiraka will be able to influence the Senate to change the constitution if he so desires. But will he use this power to aid his flagging reelection bid?

For his entire political career, President Ratsiraka has sought to establish a federal system in Madagascar even as he has argued that decentralization brings government closer to the people. But Ratsiraka’s power base is in the coastal provinces. In a manifestation of Madagascar’s largest political divide, Ratsiraka has been a côteur fighting against the centralized power of the long-dominant Merina ethnic group of the Antananarivo region. Federalism, Ratsiraka has found, has given him a structural guise to realign political power in his favor.

President Ratsiraka clearly saw the 1998 referendum as an opportunity to codify his form of federalism in Madagascar. However, in September 2000 the leading organization of Malagasy federalists came out strongly against the president’s plans for provincial autonomy. The Roman Catholic Church and the Association of Parliamentarians for the Development of the South (APDS) also said they were opposed. They joined a chorus of every leading opposition party, including the UNDD, the Movement for the Progress of Madagascar (MFM), and the People Are Judged by the Work They Do (AVI) party, in criticizing the president’s plan. While these opposition parties are proponents of a unitary government with firm support in the capital, the federalists and APDS are côtiers and have long been considered supporters of the president. Added to these threats is a challenge from two retired generals who have formed an opposition group, Groupe d’Andrianaarivo, to back Patrick Rajaonary, a former AREMA
faithful, as an opposition candidate. There is also a lack of support from the powerful National Council of Christian Churches (FFKM), and it seems unlikely that President Ratsiraka can count on his traditional support for a victory in Madagascar's third elections, now scheduled for November 2001.

With his traditional base of support in question, whether Ratsiraka can hold on to the presidency will depend on his ability to manipulate the system. The most likely scenario is that Ratsiraka will use his power over the Senate to extend the presidential term to seven years from the current five. Although Ratsiraka is as unlikely to win a popular election in 2003 as he is in 2001, this would buy him two years to establish a line of succession. Given his poor health at the age of 64, he will probably be unable to retain power longer than that without succumbing to illness or a coup attempt. The only reason he would not alter the constitution to allow a longer term is the associated risk of significant international fallout or a coup attempt. Should he decide not to alter the constitution, it seems unlikely he will step down as AREMA's candidate in the November 2001 election. But he will face an uphill battle.

The potential for such constitutional manipulation for personal gain, while not illegal, is a clear violation of the spirit of democracy. It does nothing to compromise the quality of democracy, but the very possibility that it can happen devalues its meaning.

There are other indications that the quality of democracy in Madagascar is in peril heading into third elections. The MFM and the UNDD boycotted the senatorial elections in March. Although these parties clearly were incensed that they had no chance of winning, the scope and nature of the president's involvement in the provincial elections leave little doubt that the rules of the democracy are failing to promote broad-based competition. There is also little doubt that Ordinance 98-001, which established these rules, would have been voted down by the opposition and even the AREMA-led National Assembly. The public voted for the ordinance not out of admiration for Ratsiraka's systemic intent, or even out of a belief in autonomous provinces, but because it believed Ratsiraka when he said it would bring development.

**BACK TOWARD AUTOCRACY**

President Ratsiraka is trying to reverse the gains that have been made during Madagascar's democratization process. Campaigning on the slogan of freedom with development, he has successfully moved the country back toward the autocracy of the Second Republic. If the highest leadership is not seeking democracy, then who is?

The AREMA party members who are most likely to succeed Ratsiraka do not come with un tarnished democratic vita. The opposition leaders at the forefront, Albert Zafy and Norbert Ratsirahonana, have used their time in office to increase political patronage rather than reach out to the masses. The National Assembly has demonstrated that it prefers to marginalize the rural masses to educating or serving them. The judiciary has proved that it is willing to intervene in the political process if it stands to benefit from it. Even the growing urban elite is finding that serving its own ends is far more profitable than reaching out to countryside.

The 80 percent of the population who live outside the cities are left to their own devices to broaden and deepen the democratic process. Yet they are ill prepared for this job. In Madagascar no viable rural middle class can catalyze such a movement. Voting is not viewed as important, association life is weak, civic associations are nascent at best, and even revolutionary fervor is muted. Without the appropriate mechanisms in place at the local level, the roar of the vociferous political beasts is left unhindered. As a result, Madagascar's third elections will likely serve to legitimize autocracy and consolidate a democracy of limited quality, void of meaning.

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