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## MADAGASCAR: PREVENTING A NEW ELECTION-RELATED CRISIS

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Madagascar rarely makes the headlines of international media, except perhaps recently due to a plague epidemic which was unfortunately not the first in the country. However, one year ahead of a delicate general election, the Big Island deserves full attention from the international community which should play its role in preventing a new crisis which could have a devastating impact on an already impoverished population.

According to a recent study by the World Bank, Madagascar is the poorest country in the world among those with available comparable data and is one of the very few countries whose nominal GDP per capita is today lower than it was in 1960<sup>1</sup>. Socio-development indicators are also overall very low: around 90% of the population live below the \$2 poverty line, only 14% have access to electricity and one child in two under the age of five suffers from chronic mal-

nutrition. Unsurprisingly Madagascar did not achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015<sup>2</sup>.

In a country which has never suffered from an armed conflict and has significant development potential thanks to abundant natural resources, possibilities for tourism and extraordinary biodiversity, flawed governance is a key factor in explaining its poverty and weak development indicators. Indeed, real power rests with the executive and a small elite in the capital city Antananarivo. Institutions are weak and accountability bodies or mechanisms such as the Parliament, the judiciary, civil society and media do not play a significant role due to limited independence, politicisation, little capacity and lack of resources. Around 95% of the state budget is spent at national level. Moreover, corruption is widespread at all levels, with the country ranked 145<sup>th</sup> out of 176 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2016, and collusion between politics and business is common. Security forces

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, *Changements de fortune et persistance de la pauvreté à Madagascar: Récentes découvertes* (2017)

<sup>2</sup> Data of this paragraph is taken from World Bank, IMF, UNDP and CIA World Factbook websites

and particularly the army have a history of meddling in politics.

Perhaps the main reason explaining Madagascar's poverty and development deficit is chronic instability: following independence, the country experienced recurrent crises in 1972, 1991, 1996, 2002 and 2009. The latest, triggered by an unconstitutional change of power during the second mandate of President Marc Ravalomanana when a military intervention handed power to the then Mayor of Antananarivo Andry Rajoelina, resulted in the country's suspension from all international fora for five years. Amid difficult negotiations, a SADC-brokered roadmap<sup>3</sup> [3] was signed in 2011 and after President Rajoelina repeatedly postponed the date, presidential and parliamentary elections finally took place at the end of 2013 with support from the international community. As a consequence of international pressure, Ravalomanana and Rajoelina were not allowed to run, but Rajoelina's proxy, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, won the 2013 presidential elections.

President Hery swiftly distanced himself from Rajoelina but he has failed to ensure political stability (he barely survived impeachment by the National Assembly in 2015 and appointed 3 different Prime Ministers in 4 years) as well as to put the country back on the path to development, resulting in very low rates of popularity. Although democratically elected institutions are in place, weak governance at all levels remains a key challenge and the risk of relapse into a major political crisis remains high.

2018 elections: towards a new crisis?

While the root causes of the recurrent crises of the country are to be found in deep economic and power imbalances between regions and

segments of the population, such crises have often been triggered by elections, which are often seen by politicians as the main way to access financial resources and build wealth with a "winner takes all" approach. With presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for end 2018, there seem to be several elements which might potentially lead to a new major crisis:

- Temptation from President Rajaonarimampianina to exclude Ravalomanana and Rajoelina from running on juridical basis (for example Ravalomanana still has pending issues with Justice). The two political heavyweights were forced not to run in 2013 elections in the framework of the SADC-brokered roadmap but they are determined to return to power. Preventing them from running might trigger street demonstrations, reactions from the international community and hence push the country to a serious crisis.

- Postponement of the elections. A new election-related legal framework has been discussed for months but has not been approved yet and some in the government are pushing for a constitutional revision. Both options could make it impossible to organise elections at the end of 2018 as scheduled, which in turn could lead to vibrant protests.

- Popular dissatisfaction with poor government performance, corruption and lack of concrete results. Most ordinary Malagasy are unhappy with persistent poverty and often voice their frustration with perceived government's inaction or unwillingness to improve the country's economic situation. Against this backdrop, an increase in fuel prices (today petrol is subsidised), a new high-profile corruption scandal, a heavy-handed police operation or a social incident could spark widespread popular protests.

- An army intervention in politics. Having been involved in unconstitutional changes of power in

<sup>3</sup> [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MG\\_110013\\_Roadma..](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MG_110013_Roadma..)

the past, if the military leadership or a part of it perceives the social or political situation to be against their best interests, then the army or a group of high-level officials might decide to intervene, if not through a fully-fledged coup d'état, by pushing for regime change.

- A unified front of the opposition asking the President to resign or orchestrating an impeachment. Currently opposition is divided and weak, but a tactical and temporary alliance between Rajoelina, Ravalomanana and other political personalities with the sole objective of dismissing President Hery could be possible. In particular, the President does not have a stable majority at the National Assembly, since he founded his own HVM party only after being elected (and the party is itself weak), hence a hypothetical unified front of opposition parties and independent MPs would have good chances to impeach him.

- A dramatically worsening security situation. While this is very unlikely now, if "Dahalo" cattle rustlers<sup>4</sup> - currently mostly present in the South - were able to bring their criminal operations to Antananarivo and if there was a stream of attacks of unclear origin in the capital<sup>5</sup>, then such a deteriorated security situation could trigger a political crisis.

Anti-government involvement of some wealthy businessmen. In Madagascar there is a limited

number of extremely wealthy businessmen, some of whom of foreign origin, who are believed to fund political leaders<sup>6</sup>. Their attitude towards President Rajaonarimampianina has so far been benign but, should they decide to financially support the opposition, the political strength of the President would be challenged seriously.

While it is ultimately up to Malagasy people - including politicians, security forces, civil society and ordinary citizens - to prevent a new crisis, the international and donor community can also positively contribute to that. Two sets of actions are needed. On the political and diplomatic front, ambassadors and heads of international and regional organisations should put pressure on the government and the President himself to persuade them to ensure inclusive elections in 2019 and refrain from taking any measure that could harm the inclusiveness of the electoral process. On the more technical side, cooperation agencies should remain engaged and help Malagasy authorities prepare for elections, including contributing to the costly logistics of the elections, providing legal advice and support for awareness-raising campaigns encouraging ordinary citizens to register on the electoral list and vote.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "Dahalo" refers to an ancestral rite of passage involving young men stealing some zebus (local bovines) from a nearby village. Nowadays it is usually used to describe organised crime performing large-scale cattle rustling mostly in the South (traditionally the poorest and most marginalised area of the country), often with links to high-level politicians.

<sup>5</sup> Such as the attack in the Antananarivo stadium during a concert on 26th June 2017.

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<sup>6</sup> These claims are difficult to verify given the limited transparency of political party funding but are likely to be true.