

Hard times as Madagascar

The year-long crisis has isolated the island state and left its economy in a shambles, reports **Henrik Lomholt Rasmussen**

A few months ago Tefy Edmond (30) had a steady job and a regular income as an employee in Madagascar's then-thriving textile industry. But in November last year Edmond slumped back into the ranks of the poor that make up 70% of the island's 20-million inhabitants.

"I lost my job when the American buyer did not want to extend the contract with the factory where I worked, due to Madagascar's political crisis and economic instability," he says.

The turmoil Edmond is referring to began nearly a year ago, in early 2009, when then-president Marc Ravalomanana was ousted by a 35-year-old media tycoon and former DJ, Andry Rajoelina.

Since then the already fragile island state has been paralysed by a political deadlock over the formation of a transitional government.

After nearly 10 months of Rajoelina's rule, the situation has finally spiralled out of control. Just before Christmas United States President Barack Obama suspended the country's trade benefits, days after security forces fired tear gas at opposition leaders and their supporters near the National Assembly.

Last week the Southern African Development Community (SADC) said it would reject the rogue government's plans to hold legislative elections in March 2010, calling for a resumption of power-sharing talks.

Earlier this month a delegation in Addis Ababa representing the SADC, the African Union, the United Nations and the European Union again urged that the political parties accept a compromise solution.

But, so far, Rajoelina seems reluctant to give up his tenuous hold on the nation.

Next to nothing

The crisis has left the country isolated — no state or institution has recognised Rajoelina's self-proclaimed "high transitional authority", with the SADC suspending the country from its bloc and calling for the international community to do the same.



Going nowhere slowly: Since Andry Rajoelina took power in March last year, many of the island state's denizens — including fishermen like these working in the rain on the Ambohimambola River — have spiralled even further into poverty. Photo: Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko

That Madagascar is technically bankrupt, with an estimated financial sustainability that will run out as early as June this year, does not help.

"As long as the government can pay its civil servants, things will probably stay calm," says Lydie Boka, a political analyst. "But if a solution to the crisis is not found before the money runs out, there is a risk of civil unrest and maybe even war. The population is desperate and tired of waiting."

Boka says that apart from the humanitarian aid and donor support that made up about 70% of Madagascar's budget being cut off, foreign investors are also rapidly pulling out and an estimated 500 000 jobs in the tourism and textile industries have been lost. Among the many victims of this collapse is Edmond.

"At the textile factory I earned 250 000 ariary (R890) a month while my wife, who worked at the same place, pocketed 150 000 ariary," he says. "It gave us enough to secure us

and our two small children a decent life and food every day. Now we have next to nothing."

Edmond survives by selling souvenirs at Madagascar's largest craft market, La Digue, a few kilometres from the capital, Antananarivo.

"If I am lucky I earn 2 000 ariary a day," he says, juggling two wooden figures that he hopes to sell to a tourist.

It will be hard. Only a few *vazaha* (Malagasy for whites) are checking out the handicrafts at La Digue's stalls. Just like the foreign investors, tourists sought alternative destinations in 2009.

Compared with 2008, when tourism is estimated to have brought in \$400-million with 378 000 people visiting the former French colony, less than half that number came to Madagascar in 2009.

The absence of tourists is evident on the northern island of Nosy Be, one of the country's prime tour-

ist destinations, with direct flights from Paris and Milan. In December just a handful of tourists were scattered along the coast enjoying the 30°C weather and crystal-clear water of Ambatoloaka Beach. One of them was Monsieur Mamy, a businessman from Antananarivo who runs a bakery and a spare parts shop.

"I am not exaggerating by saying that the turnover has been more than halved during 2009. People have no money and everything has come to a halt. It is hard times," says Mamy, who returned to his native Madagascar from France in 2007. "Back then things looked prosperous, but the bright future was destroyed by the political crisis."

Despite the hardship, he has no plans of leaving, hoping for better times. "This is our homeland so we will stay."

Precious land

Land was one of the main reasons

Ravalomanana's seven-year rule came to an end. After two decades of socialism and a failed command economy, Ravalomanana beat then-president Didier Ratsiraka (who came to power in a coup in 1975) in a controversial election in 2001.

Ravalomanana subsequently turned Madagascar into a global financial player. Multinational foreign investments arrived, including a titanium dioxide mine developed by the Australian company Rio Tinto, estimated at more than \$800-million, and a tar sands project by French Total. Offshore, several oil companies began exploration.

Still, despite an annual growth of 7% under Ravalomanana, much of the progress was not felt by the majority of Malagasy — more than 70% of whom live on less than a \$1 (R7.30) a day.

To them, rumours about Ravalomanana wanting to lease almost a million hectares in the south of the country to the Korean firm, Daewoo, which planned to grow half of South Korea's corn requirements there, was the final straw. For the populace, letting go of so much land was treason.

Rajoelina, who had been elected mayor of Antananarivo in December 2007, taking 63.3% of the vote and thoroughly beating Ravalomanana's favoured candidate, accused Ravalomanana of selling Malagasy land to foreigners.

He called his 60-year-old rival a tyrant who misspent public money and ran Madagascar as if it were his own business.

Ravalomanana's purchase of a \$60-million private jet did nothing to counter such accusations. Neither did the suspension by Madagascar's major donors, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Union and the African Development Bank, of their direct support because of budget-

The Rajoelina express

Say "TGV" to a person from Madagascar and he or she will know immediately who you are talking about. Andry Rajoelina, the island state's controversial young president since March 2009, got his nickname from the French express train, Train de Grande Vitesse, because of his high-speed career and uncompromising style, as much as from his political movement TGV (Determined Malagasy Youth).

But not yet a year into his presidency, the pressure on Rajoelina is increasing. Besides being cut off from the international community, the country is on the edge of bankruptcy with enough economic stamina to take the government

only through to June.

"From an economic point, he has not achieved much," says political analyst Lydie Boka, who is releasing a book about the political crisis in Madagascar.

"To do this he must get the ban on the Agoa (African Growth and Opportunity Act) from December 15 lifted and show an ability to attract investors."

Boka says Rajoelina's only triumph is that he has started reconciling Madagascar's coastal people, who are mainly of African origin, with the highland Merinas.

"Often underestimated, this aspect is important for uniting the Malagasy people," says Boka.

But she doubts Rajoelina is right

for Madagascar, mostly because he is five years too young to be president, according to the country's Constitution. But that's not the only problem.

"He still shows immaturity and amateurism at times, coupling populist views with a worrying religious inclination showing that he is a Catholic."

These are bad signals on an island characterised by multi-ethnicity and religious beliefs in everything from animism to the Apocalypse.

Out of a relatively wealthy family in Antananarivo, Rajoelina became a DJ at night clubs in the capital at the age of 20.

Soon he established a radio sta-

tion, Viva, which attracted many listeners with its mix of foreign and Malagasy pop hits. Among his fans was one of the daughters of former president Marc Ravalomanana, with whom Rajoelina had a relationship. Inspired by the success of his station, Rajoelina set up a TV channel, also named Viva, and Injet, an advertising company.

His popularity soared — and he used the support to enter politics, becoming mayor of Antananarivo in 2007 and then president, following a coup d'etat, which ousted Ravalomanana in March 2009.

And although TGV seems determined to take his nation for a ride, it could all end up a train wreck.

— Henrik Lomholt Rasmussen

hangs in political limbo

ary misconduct in December 2008, which saw the president's business interests mixed with state interests.

While the president, a self-made dairy tycoon, earned a fortune during his rule, most Malagasy saw no improvement in their lives. At the same time, food and fuel became increasingly expensive because of Ravalomanana's politics and the emerging global downturn.

The final blow

Unrest in Antananarivo broke out on January 26 last year, after Ravalomanana's government banned Rajoelina's TV channel, Viva, for broadcasting an interview with the president's old rival, Ratsiraka. The interview was considered to be "disturbing the peace and security". The station's closure on December 17 was condemned by Reporters Without Borders.

Led by Rajoelina, who accused the government of opposing freedom of speech and threatening democracy, demonstrators set fire to the official broadcasting complex, shops were looted and several people were killed.

On February 3 Ravalomanana sacked Rajoelina as mayor of Antananarivo. Four days later Ravalomanana's presidential guard opened fire on demonstrators marching towards the presidential palace. An estimated 100 people were killed and many more wounded.

According to some analysts, the crowd had been agitated by Rajoelina — they claim he knew he was sending the demonstrators, poor urban people, to their deaths to oust Ravalomanana.

But the strategy worked. The army withdrew its support of Ravalomanana, who resigned and went into exile, first in Swaziland and then to Johannesburg, where he still lives. Rajoelina, almost unknown outside Antananarivo but now supported by the army, took power.

Despite being six years too young to stand in a presidential election, according to the existing Constitution, the then-34-year-old was sworn in on March 17 last year, becoming the youngest president in Africa.

The day after his inauguration he announced that the disputed land deal with Daewoo was off, telling reporters: "Madagascar's land is neither for sale nor for rent."

Disappointment sets in

After the excitement had subsided, and Rajoelina's promises about



People's president? Andry Rajoelina, Madagascar's controversial young president, is quickly losing the popularity he gained after overthrowing the island state's president, Marc Ravalomanana, last year.

Photo: Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko

improving the lives of the poor and the creation of jobs did not materialise, disappointment set in.

"Rajoelina is no good," says Monsieur Evariste, a tour guide in Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia, a three-hour drive east of Antananarivo. "He has not done anything for the country. Marc (Ravalomanana) was far from perfect but, on the contrary to many other African leaders, he actually did do a lot of good: roads and schools were built, children got educated, he opened up our economy to foreign investments just as he also took steps to protect our national parks and improve tourism. Now we have only a few visitors."

Despite the disappointment, Rajoelina is still firmly at the helm. In December he boycotted a meeting with three former Malagasy presidents in Mozambique. A few days later he sacked the prime minister, chosen by consensus by political leaders, and replaced him with a military officer. And shortly before Christmas, he called for parliamentary elections to be held on March 20, announcing that the new Parliament would also draw up a new Constitution.

The French political analyst, Boka, expects the elections will take place as Rajoelina has planned. She predicts that the elections will pave the

way for him to become the "elected" president of Madagascar.

"Whoever is in power in an African state will win an election. Madagascar is no exception. Aided by the military, [they] will see that elections will be 'properly organised', Rajoelina will use the elections to consolidate his power, have the Constitution changed and take legal power," she says, adding that this "new stability" is likely to bring donors and investors back to the country.

"Then Rajoelina can show off by saying: 'I took you, the Malagasy people, through hardships, but we fought our way through them. Now we are ready for a prosperous future.'"

But elections or not, Mamy, the holidaying businessman, is pessimistic about the future.

"This will not stop before our population becomes better educated and knows how to choose the right leader," he says. "Until then we will continue to have power struggles between unscrupulous politicians who are interested only in filling their own pockets."

"To me, it is irrelevant whether our president is Rajoelina or Ravalomanana."

"They are both equally corrupt and the outlook of Madagascar having big oil reserves will just make all politicians more eager to fill their pockets."

The paper trail

Death threats and other forms of intimidation are today's harsh realities for journalists who criticise Madagascar's government. Which hasn't made things easy for Volana Rasoanirainy, the editor-in-chief of the *Madagascar Tribune*, which is based in the capital, Antananarivo.

"The idea of the press as the fourth state power does not exist in Madagascar, because freedom of speech is not respected," says the 51-year-old editor. "To prevent all sorts of retaliation, such as death threats, journalists at the *Tribune* do not show clearly through their writing that they are against [Andry] Rajoelina," says Rasoanirainy.

So far her journalists have escaped arrest, but some of their colleagues haven't been so lucky. In May last year a reporter from Radio Mada was arrested and forced to disclose the location from which his station was secretly broadcasting before he was released after 15 days in detention. A journalist working for the website *madagate.com* received several telephonic death threats after posting an article with photos of supporters of former president Marc Ravalomanana, who was ousted by Rajoelina in March last year. The manager of the radio station Fahazavana was arrested on June 27, accused of "funding demonstrations"; he was interrogated for three days before being released because of lack of evidence, according to Reporters Without Borders. The French-based journalist organisation ranks Madagascar as number 134 on its Press Freedom Index for 2009; 40 places down from where it ranked in 2008.

Rasoanirainy says violence and threats are not the only means used to strangle freedom of speech. More discreet methods are available, such as hitting the media in the pocketbook. "No ministry sends ads to our newspaper," says Rasoanirainy. "So from an economical point of view you can say that the *Tribune* has been boycotted." — Henrik Lomholt Rasmussen

Madagascar facts

Capital: Antananarivo

Independence: June 26 1960 after 64 years as a French colony

Population: 20 653 556 (July 2009)

Life expectancy: 63 years

HIV/Aids rate: 1.7% (2008)

Ethnic groups: 18 tribal groups of Malayo-Indonesian (Merina), mixed African, Malayo-Indonesian and Arab ancestry; French; Indian; Creole; Comoran

Official languages: Malagasy

(Malayo-Polynesian origin), French

Religion: Indigenous beliefs 52%, Christian 41%, Muslim 7%

Currency: Ariary (1 Rand = 268 Ar); Inflation: 8.1% (2008)

Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita: 2009: \$981 (-1.5% growth); 2008: \$996 (6.5% growth); 2007: \$935 (6.4% growth); 2006: \$879 (5.5% growth)

Sources: World Bank, CIA World Fact Book, Congressional Research Service

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