Madagascar’s political crisis: What options for the mediation process?

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President Marc Ravalomanana of Madagascar announced his resignation on 17 March 2009 and handed over power to a military directorate. However, very few believed that was the end of the power struggle between him and the then mayor of Antananarivo, Andry Rajoelina, who was promptly declared president. The subsequent political quagmire has become a serious challenge to regional and continental organisations battling to root out unconstitutional changes of regimes and consolidate their democratic doctrines. The situation has become even more complex with the successful auto-legitimation of coup leaders in Mauritania and Niger.

Mediation efforts at the beginning of the crisis were undermined by confusion and a blatant lack of coherent leadership. No fewer than six mediators were dispatched...
to Madagascar, with little success. The initial intervention of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) proved ineffective and its radical approach undermined any attempt at a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Speculation about a military intervention to reinstate Ravalomanana heightened tensions and resulted in a hasty judicial process. He was sentenced in absentia to four years imprisonment and a US$70 million fine for abusing office, which will make it difficult for him to return to Madagascar.

This was the first time SADC has been confronted with an ‘unconstitutional change of regime’ and Madagascar is a testing ground for the regional body’s mechanisms and protocols on democracy and good governance. The way SADC approaches the situation on the island will enhance or undermine its credibility in addressing similar political crises within the region. Although slightly after the event, SADC held an extraordinary summit in Sandton, South Africa, on 20 June to consider the political and security situation in Madagascar at which it produced a rescue package. Southern African heads of state and government appointed former Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, to lead the talks between Ravalomanana and Rajoelina, thus making political dialogue an essential element in addressing the problem.

The appointment of Chissano, a respected state elder, came barely a week after the African Union and the United Nations suspended their own mediation efforts, citing a lack of political will by the two parties as the reason. While the Chissano-led international contact group has drafted a so-called ‘charter for the transition’, highlighting the principles and the organs of the process, sharp disagreement persists on some sensitive issues, including an amnesty law for former presidents, positions in the government of national unity and other institutions such as those dealing with security and defence. A landmark consensus was reached in Maputo in August 2009 on the charter, but the mediation has remained vague on specific indications and directives to fill the various positions, leaving them to the desiderata of political actors. It is not surprising, then, that the mediation process has come to a standstill, and Rajoelina, as president of the High Authority of the Transition, refused to relinquish control over his position and that of the prime minister.

At least two major developments followed, with far-reaching implications for the mediation process. On the one hand, former arch enemies (Presidents Albert Zafy, Didier Ratsiraka and Ravalomanana) have joined forces against Rajoelina, even calling on the army to intervene. They all want Rajoelina to give up his position or his authority over the prime minister. On the other hand, concerns were raised within the Rajoelina camp about the motives of the opposition political forces, suggesting it was aimed at weakening him and even ousting him from power. Rajoelina also finds himself in a difficult position, for some of his supporters clearly oppose any decision to appoint a new prime minister. The decision by the army hierarchy not to intervene despite calls
for it from former President Albert Zafy could be interpreted as a move of tacit support for the current political dispensation. Furthermore, the complete lack of reaction to Didier Ratsiraka’s threat of protest highlights the weakness of his representation in the country’s political landscape. Malagasy people still remember his years in power and the abuses that compromised the democratisation process.

Indeed, Rajoelina runs the risk of losing the support of key political and military allies if he submits to the demands of the opposition. There is no doubt that his major support in the army comes from the Camp Capsat soldiers, who were responsible for the March mutiny that contributed to the downfall of Ravalomanana. Though some leaders of the movement are frequently accused of abuses and intimidation, they remain useful in terms of the young leader’s bargaining power. It is also clear that high-ranking military officers, including the defence minister, support the current prime minister, Monja Roindefo. Losing Roindefo would mean losing much-needed army support. Rajoelina’s political survival depends on the decision he has to make regarding his prime minister and other key appointments in the government of national unity, and it is therefore not surprising that he rejected the formula for the political transition suggested by the SADC mediators. On 8 September 2009 he reappointed Roindefo and members of a cabinet without Ravalomanana’s agreement, in sharp contradiction to the ‘Maputo spirit’.

One could argue that SADC’s mediation is losing its focus. While the major aim is to provide the leadership with a comprehensive formula for the return to constitutional order in Madagascar, it seems as if political actors are taking advantage of the process to promote partisan interests. There is little doubt that the strategy behind the opposition’s demand is to oust Rajoelina from power – a mini coup d’état in disguise. But if SADC mediators have an insight into the power dynamics among the key political actors, neither the position of head of the transition government nor that of prime minister should be contentious issues. Both wish to control the process, capturing the state in an act of political revenge. Ravalomanana has publicly declared that he would never legitimise Rajoelina’s regime.

The SADC mediation team needs to refocus the discussions on mechanisms for free and fair elections and consensual political arrangements that could end the cycle of political violence, as this is fast becoming one of the main avenues to power in Africa. The government of national unity should be seen as a short-term mechanism to restore democratic order and not a platform for a counter-coup. If viewed in this light, it becomes unnecessary for the three former presidents – Zafy, Ratsiraka and Ravalomanana – to insist on the top three positions within the government. Attention should be focused instead on preparing for elections and any other related initiatives that could pave the way for a legitimate political order. They could gain even better leverage by ensuring that elections are held and that they are free and fair, as a means of proving their popularity. This is the way to act, unless they want to use the power-sharing deal as a permanent
pact among the elites and one that ignores the voice of the citizens and their harsh living conditions. The power-sharing deal will not put an end to the crisis. It is not an act that will legitimise an unconstitutional regime. In the short term, potential sources of conflict remain, including constitutional reforms and the elections, and these are more important than positions within the transitional government, particularly since there is an agreement that all four protagonists will participate in the presidential race.

However, Madagascar’s problem goes beyond the electoral process. Although elections provide the opportunity for the country’s citizens to express or reconfirm their adherence to the democratic process, many challenges lie ahead, including the consolidation of economic development, a continued fight against corruption based on the separation of public and private business interests, the equitable distribution of resources and, above all, reinstating the confidence of the people in the state’s institutions and in its political leadership. If the political actors fail to reach consensus on these issues, Madagascar could remain unstable and deeply divided not only along political and ethnic lines, but also within the army. The continuation of the status quo could be a formidable source of instability for the region, too, and could perpetuate the cycle of political violence as a strategy for obtaining and maintaining power in Madagascar.

A successful negotiation could help pave the way for successful political transition, creating an opportunity for profound political reforms in Madagascar, based on democratic norms and institutions. This in itself is a powerful incentive for the lifting of sanctions and allowing foreign investments. But one should not exclude the possibility of a compromised transition, one that encourages constitutional amendments to allow Rajoelina to stand and most likely win the presidential elections in an attempt to ‘legitimise’ his rule. There are powerful geo-political forces and interests at play in his tough stance. Major foreign companies have streamed into the country in efforts to extract minerals such as oil, nickel, cobalt, coal, gold and uranium. This could make it even more difficult for external partners to keep up the pressure for substantial political and socio-economic transformation.