

Coup attempt in Madagascar must be resisted

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Madagascar's President Marc Ravalomanana has agreed to hand power to the military according to international news agencies. Simon Hardy reports on events that led to the military coup

Attacks by state forces on activists protesting against the Madagascar government over the last few months eventually spiralled into a power struggle between competing factions in the islands ruling class. The government of Marc Ravalomanana was eventually overthrown by opposition forces that won the backing of the army, supported by increasing sections of Madagascar society.

The beginning of the current crisis was massive protests in January against rising food prices. The grinding poverty endemic to Madagascar has grown to unbearable proportions in recent years ? a factor which made people turn against Ravalomanana when it was reported that he had purchased a \$60 million plane for his own use. The final straw was the news that a large tract of land in the south of the country was being rented to Daewoo for intensive farming, with the local people getting nothing. This led to an explosion of rage, which the government responded to with savage repression.

Security forces gunned down opposition activists, leaving around 100 people dead. Protest multiplied. The mayor of Antananarivo the capital, Andry Rajoelina, put himself at the head of these protests and called on the president to resign after the killings. The president refused and responded by sacking Rajoelina. Demonstrators poured out into the street to protest against the undemocratic actions of Ravalomanana. On Monday 16th March the army broke and Opposition forces broke into the presidential offices and proclaimed a new president, Monja Roindefo Zafitsimivalo. They have promised to hold elections within two years.

Ravalomanana had complained that the opposition has no democratic mandate from elections, but his own presidency started with a far from unambiguous victory in the elections of 2001. Not winning by a clear majority he called his supporters onto the streets and a general strike helped to install him in power. The incumbent president, Didier Ratsiraka attempted to establish an opposition government on another part of the island.

So, this coup follows a similar pattern, Rajoelina even occupies the same position as Ravalomanana did in 2001, as mayor of Antananarivo, creating a power base before making a bid for the presidency. This time the process repeats itself, only with Ravalomanana as the target.

It is quite clear that despite the popularity of Rajoelina in the current crisis, he regularly speaks to crowds in excess of tens of thousands, he offers no serious way out of the current economic crisis in Madagascar. His popularity, modelled in a sense on the Obama campaign, is awash with buzz words about ?change? and ?youth?, backed up by a slick multimedia blitz, using his skills as a former DJ and money gained from his own career in advertising.

Why is politics so unstable in Madagascar? Like many third world countries Madagascar is deeply impoverished. Around 70 per cent live on less than \$2 a day, multi-national corporations have been invited

into Madagascar by Ravalomanana, seeing millions of dollars going to the government and rich elites but very little for ordinary people.

Despite Ravalomanana's neoliberalism and brutal repression the workers movement should not support the coup or even an 'interim government' based on the military. The next two years will be critical ones for the urban and rural workers of the country. They need their democratic rights in full, the right to strike and demonstrate, the right to organise. None of these are safe in the hands of a military backed regime. Workers must establish their political and trade union independence of both Rajoelina and Ravalomanana

Instead youth and worker militants should mobilise the growing mass discontent with the system that condemns the island to poverty, and with every regime which enforces it. They need to develop a programme of action, which offers a real way out of the crisis, which gets to the roots of the country's problems, and establishes its independence from the multinationals and the imperialist powers which dominate the country. As organs of this struggle councils of recallable delegates need to be built in town and country and in the barracks too. Ordinary people must be armed and formed into a militia that can both keep order and prevent the army high command from consolidating a military regime. Such organisation of struggle can at the decisive moment and with the right leadership become organs of power.

For this to happen, workers, peasants and the urban poor need to organise themselves independently of populist capitalists like Rajoelina. They need a revolutionary working class political party to fight the growing power of the multi nationals, ensure the resources and wealth of Madagascar go to the people who need it most. Instead of the headlong rush into greater neoliberalisation which has marked the Ravalomanana presidency and will probably mark the presidency of the next, a rational planning of the economy and a massive investment in the public sector, alongside nationalised industries run under workers control, would see millions lifted out of poverty and offered a real future on the island, a future of genuine socialism.

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