



Madagascar's 2009 Political Crisis

Lauren Ploch

Analyst in African Affairs

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Summary

Political tensions on the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar between President Marc Ravalomanana and Andry Rajoelina, the former mayor of the capital city, escalated in early 2009, culminating in the President's forced removal from office. In preceding weeks, over 135 people had been killed in riots and demonstrations. Under intensifying pressure from mutinous soldiers and large crowds of protestors, Ravalomanana handed power to the military on March 17, 2009. The military then transferred authority to Rajoelina, who has declared a transitional government. Days prior to President Ravalomanana's resignation, the U.S. Ambassador to Madagascar had expressed concern that the country could face civil war; some believe the unrest may continue. The political uncertainty has strained relations between international donors and Madagascar, which was the first country to sign a U.S. Millennium Challenge Account compact, worth an estimated \$110 million. Following coups in Mauritania and Guinea in 2008, the African Union, the United States, and the European Union, among others, warned against an unconstitutional transfer of power on the island nation and have threatened possible sanctions and a suspension of foreign aid. The African Union has suspended Madagascar from the regional body until constitutional order is restored.

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Overview

Political tensions on the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar between President Marc Ravalomanana and Andry Rajoelina, the former mayor of the capital city, escalated in early 2009, culminating in the President's forced removal from office. In preceding weeks, over 135 people had been killed in riots and demonstrations. Under intensifying pressure from mutinous soldiers and large crowds of protestors, Ravalomanana handed power to the military on March 17, 2009. The military then transferred authority to Rajoelina, who has declared a transitional government. Days prior to President Ravalomanana's resignation, U.S. Ambassador to Madagascar Niels Maquardt had expressed concern that the country could face civil war; some believe the unrest may continue.¹ The political uncertainty has strained relations between international donors and Madagascar, which was the first country to sign a U.S. Millennium Challenge Account compact, worth an estimated \$110 million.² Following coups in Mauritania and Guinea in 2008, the African Union (AU), the United States, and the European Union, among others, warned against an unconstitutional transfer of power on the island nation and have threatened possible sanctions and a suspension of foreign aid. The AU has suspended Madagascar from the regional body until constitutional order is restored.

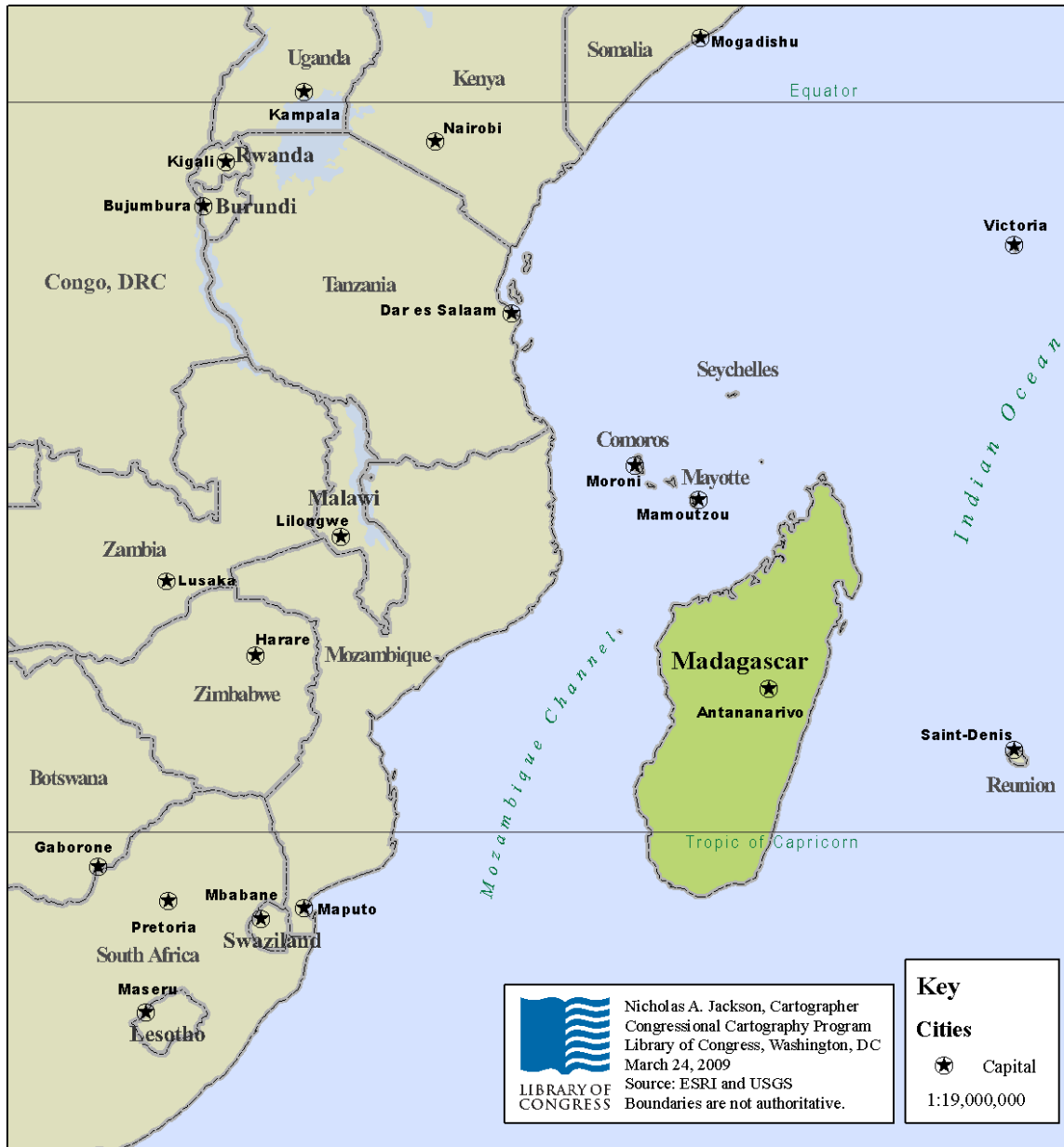
Recent Developments

In December 2008, the Ravalomanana government closed a television station owned by Antananarivo Mayor Andry Rajoelina after it aired a speech by former President Didier Ratsiraka, who lives in exile in France. When Rajoelina's radio station was closed a month later, he convened a public demonstration to demand the stations' reopening, accusing President Ravalomanana of corruption and authoritarianism. According to press reports, as many as 40,000 people may have attended the rally, which was followed by several days of rioting. The 34-year-old Rajoelina, a former disk jockey, has claimed that his stations were closed as part of a politically-motivated campaign against him by the President. Rajoelina, widely known as "Andry TGV," after the high-speed rail service in France, is a successful media entrepreneur. TGV also stands for the politician's movement, *Tanora malaGasy Vonona* (Young Malagasies Determined). Rajoelina defeated President Ravalomanana's candidate in the December 2007 mayoral elections with 63 percent of the vote.

¹ "Madagascar on the Verge of Civil War, U.S. Ambassador Warns," *The Guardian* (London), 12 March 2009.

² Established in 2002, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) is a major U.S. foreign assistance initiative managed by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). It provides assistance, through a competitive selection process, to developing nations that are pursuing political and economic reforms in three areas: ruling justly, investing in people, and fostering economic freedom.

Figure I. Map of Madagascar



Source: LOC

Ravalomanana removed Rajoelina from office on February 3, 2009, after the mayor declared that he was taking over the government and announced a parallel cabinet.³ His bid to impeach

³ Under Malagasy law, the President can dismiss elected officials who fail to fulfill their mandate.

Ravalomanana was rejected by the constitutional court.⁴ Rajoelina has proposed a transitional government to lead the country until the constitution can be rewritten and elections held, within two years. He reportedly took refuge at the French Embassy in February to avoid arrest but continued to call for the President's impeachment and arrest. In response, Ravalomanana, who was expected to run for re-election when his term expired in 2011, publicly acknowledged that his government had made mistakes during the crisis and proposed a nationwide referendum to determine whether he would stay in office. Rajoelina rejected the proposal.

The Military Takes Sides

Madagascar's military has historically maintained its neutrality during political confrontations. During the latest tensions, the armed forces repeatedly pledged to protect the civilian population and maintain the rule of law, but in recent weeks appeared to increasingly support Rajoelina. The military police have actively supported the former mayor and several army units mutinied in early March.⁵ On March 10, a group of soldiers reportedly forced the resignation of the defense minister, who had only been in office one month. His predecessor resigned in protest in February 2008 after security forces fired on demonstrators at an opposition rally. At least 28 people were reportedly killed in the incident, and as many as 200 were wounded. Rajoelina's supporters took to the streets at the end of the month in an effort to take control of government offices, throwing bricks and stones at security forces. On March 11, an army colonel, Andre Ndriarijaona, ousted the Army Chief of Staff after he allegedly warned that the army would intervene in the crisis if it were not resolved in 72 hours. Media reports of tanks deployed on March 13 in and around the capital city, allegedly to prevent the President from employing mercenaries to protect his regime, heightened concerns of a possible military coup d'état.⁶

Rajoelina emerged from hiding to speak at a rally on March 14, again calling for President Ravalomanana's arrest. He was joined by National Assembly president Jacques Sylla, a former ally of Ravalomanana, who declared his support for the deposed mayor. On March 16, soldiers seized a presidential palace and the central bank. President Ravalomanana was not at the palace during the attack. Hundreds of supporters reportedly camped outside his residence, on the outskirts of the capital, to protect him. Rajoelina supporters began to take control of other government offices, including that of the Prime Minister, and Rajoelina reportedly installed himself in the presidential offices on March 17. President Ravalomanana announced that he was stepping down and transferring authority to a military directorate led by the military's most senior officer, navy admiral Hyppolite Ramaroson. Ramaroson later announced that the military was transferring authority to Rajoelina as president of a "high transitional authority."⁷ The country's highest court publicly proclaimed Rajoelina's legitimacy the following day, and he was inaugurated as "president of the traditional high authority" on March 21.⁸

Demonstrations by thousands of Ravalomanana supporters in the days following Rajoelina's inauguration suggest that the political tensions on the island may continue. Some reports also

⁴ The court ruled that the power to impeach the President lay with the legislature rather than the judiciary.

⁵ "Madagascar Officers Launch Mutiny," BBC, 8 March 2009.

⁶ Scott Bobb, "Mutinous Troops in Madagascar Say They Control Army Tanks," Voice of America, 13 March 2009.

⁷ "Madagascar President Forced Out," BBC, 17 March 2009.

⁸ The court announced in a radio address that Rajoelina "is serving as president of the republic," according to "Top Court Endorses Army-Supported Opposition Leader to Replace Toppled President," Associated Press, 18 March 2009.

suggest that elements of the military oppose the transitional authority and have demanded Rajoelina's resignation.⁹

Mediation Efforts and International Reactions

Envoys from the United Nations, the AU, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in concert with the influential Madagascar Council of Christian Churches, made numerous attempts to mediate between Ravalomanana and Rajoelina. The two rivals met in February, but Rajoelina later suggested that he would not participate in further talks until the President stepped down. Negotiations planned for March 12 and 13 were postponed. The AU condemned the events of March 16 as an attempted coup d'état, and AU Commission Chairman Jean Ping warned the military against handing power to Rajoelina.¹⁰ According to Madagascar's current constitution, in the event of a presidential vacancy, the President of the Senate should assume the office and hold new elections within two months, rather than the two years Rajoelina has proposed. Constitutionally, the President also must be at least 40 years of age; Rajoelina is only 34. On March 20, the AU Peace and Security Council, citing an unconstitutional change of government, announced its decision to suspend Madagascar from participation in AU activities. The U.S. State Department declared the power transfer "tantamount to a coup d'état."¹¹ SADC and EU officials have taken a similar stance. Foreign envoys did not attend Rajoelina's inauguration, and no government has recognized his administration. The United States has suspended all non-humanitarian assistance, as have several other international donors.

Background

Madagascar, a former French colony, is the world's fourth-largest island. Located in the Indian Ocean approximately 280 miles off eastern continental Africa, it is about 30 percent larger than California. Its 20 million people are a unique product of historical migrations from Africa, southeast Asia, Arab countries, and Polynesia. They speak a Malayo-Polynesian language, Malagasy, which functions as an official national language, along with French, and serves as the noun and adjective for Madagascar's people. The use of English is growing. Almost three-quarters of the population live in rural areas, making a living through small scale commercial and subsistence farming. Two-thirds of the Malagasy people live on less than \$2 a day.

Madagascar is extremely biologically diverse and is unique in many ways; over 85 percent of its species are estimated to be endemic. Its ecosystems include tropical forests, sandy coastal plains with vegetation, river ecosystems, mangroves, large marshes, and coral reefs. Along with some neighboring islands, it is famed as the exclusive home of lemurs, a unique and ancient suborder of primates. Madagascar is estimated to have as many as 150,000 species of flora and fauna that are unique to the island. In part due to a high population growth rate, Madagascar faces environmental pressures, and flora, fauna, and habitat loss from soil erosion associated with deforestation, agricultural production, and overgrazing; desertification; and water pollution. The country regularly suffers massive economic losses, physical destruction, and loss of life during the annual cyclone season, and from cycles of drought and floods.

⁹ "Madagascar Navy Troops Order Rajoelina to Leave Power in Seven Days," Xinhua News Agency, 21 March 2009.

¹⁰ "Madagascar Opposition Calls for President's Arrest," Reuters, 16 March 2009.

¹¹ Statement by Acting State Department Spokesman Robert Wood, Daily Press Briefing, 20 March 2009.

Politics

Following independence in 1960, Madagascar was ruled by a succession of Soviet-leaning socialist regimes, and the country suffered periodic political instability. In the late 1980s, support from the collapsing Soviet Union waned and popular demands for democratization mounted. A democratic transition marked by considerable unrest began in 1989, leading to the approval of a new constitution after a 1992 referendum and presidential elections. The new government made little headway against Madagascar's extreme poverty, and faced strikes, student unrest, and diverse political problems, including the impeachment of President Albert Zafy in July 1996.

The Ratsiraka Government

Didier Ratsiraka, a former military ruler, won presidential elections in November 1996. While he generally maintained a public commitment to democracy, he also attempted to centralize control over political institutions, administrative organs, and electoral processes. In 1998, he backed constitutional reforms that weakened the legislature and gave him appointment powers over a third of Senate seats. Ratsiraka's actions gradually weakened the opposition parties, but also engendered opposition to his rule, as did widespread allegations of corruption within his administration.

The 2001 Election and the Post-Election Crisis of 2002

Many Ratsiraka opponents rallied to the reform message of the then-mayor of Antananarivo, businessman Marc Ravalomanana, and his *Tiako I Madagasikara* (TIM, or "I Love Madagascar") party. In December 2001, he faced Ratsiraka in a bitterly contested presidential election. The election led to a tense half year stand-off between the two candidates and their parties after Ravalomanana, citing electoral irregularities, refused to participate in a postponed runoff poll, and in February 2002 declared himself the winner of the election. His election was sanctioned by the Malagasy High Constitutional Court, which rejected the need for a run-off.¹² He was sworn into office in May, but Ratsiraka continued to reject his opponent's election. The two sides each marshaled their supporters and engaged in limited armed confrontations, which threatened at times to escalate into civil war. Communications, roads, and bridges were cut by Ratsiraka's followers, leaving the capital with no access to the sea or to basic supplies. Nationwide economic disruptions – which included widespread job loss and sharp rises in malnutrition rates, aggravated by a devastating cyclone – ensued. In June 2002, the United States formally recognized the Ravalomanana government. It was the first government to do so; France, China, the U.K. and five African governments soon followed suit. The African Union, however, declined to do likewise, and suspended Madagascar from the regional body. In early July, Ratsiraka fled to exile in France. His departure was preceded by rumors that he had been planning to sponsor a mercenary attack on Ravalomanana, but by that time allies of Ravalomanana had consolidated political control of much of the island.

¹² In the first vote count, Ravalomanana garnered less than the 50 percent needed to avoid a run-off, but African leaders facilitated a recount that gave the candidate 51.5 percent of the vote.

The Ravalomanana Government

Madagascar was re-admitted to the AU nearly seven months after Ravalomanana's TIM party won 102 of the 160 seats in the National Assembly during legislative elections in December 2002, a poll seen as a test of his administration's legitimacy. Ravalomanana faced significant economic challenges after the extended political crisis and related economic disruptions, but received pledges of substantial support from Western donors, a trend that continued throughout his tenure. His administration pursued an agenda that sought to reduce poverty; improve governance and adherence to the rule of law; and increase economic growth and market liberalization.

Many former officials in the Ratsiraka government have been tried and sentenced on charges of corruption or political abuses. The court cases were viewed by many as a signal that the Ravalomanana administration was serious about addressing past political abuses and had consolidated political power. However, the government also pursued efforts to bring about political reconciliation and to demonstrate moderation in dealings with its former foes. It provided amnesties for many alleged offenses associated with the Ratsiraka government and the 2002 crisis, and several former Ratsiraka supporters were made members of Ravalomanana's cabinet. Ravalomanana did not seek the extradition of Ratsiraka. These actions broadened the President's regional base of support during his first term, and alleviated concerns that he might promote his own ethnic and political bases at the expense of other constituencies.

Ravalomanana was reelected in December 2006 with almost 55 percent of the vote, and legislative, provincial, and regional elections were held in late 2007 and early 2008.¹³ In an April 2007 referendum, President Ravalomanana received 70 percent approval for a series of constitutional changes, including a controversial proposal to give the President greater power during a state of emergency and a proposal to abolish the provinces and allow municipal and local governments more authority.¹⁴ The U.S.-based Freedom House has ranked Madagascar "partially free" in its *Freedom in the World 2008* index, noting that the referendum increased the President's power. The referendum also approved English as a third official language. According to the State Department, elections under the Ravalomanana government were generally free and fair. The ruling party's overwhelming victory at the polls in 2006-2008, despite growing public dissatisfaction with slow improvements in living standards, significantly eroded the opposition parties' credibility. Voter turnout for March 2008 regional elections was low, and many analysts suggest that the lack of a credible opposition engendered public disenchantment with politics.

Tensions between Ravalomanana and Rajoelina Build

President Ravalomanana's popularity, while considerable, failed to help his party's candidate win the 2007 mayoral election in his former stronghold, Antananarivo. Tension between the central government and Mayor Rajoelina's administration subsequently mounted. In 2008, the Ravalomanana government allegedly delayed the disbursal of government funds for various local

¹³ TIM candidates won 105 of 127 seats in the National Assembly, and victories in most of the provincial elections. The party won all seats in the 2008 regional and senatorial elections.

¹⁴ Following the 2002 crisis, Ravalomanana fired the country's provincial governors and replaced them with presidential appointees. Improving the effectiveness of local administration was a key goal of his administration.

government infrastructure projects in the capital and diverted investment away from the capital. Rajoelina's supporters claim these efforts were intended to undermine the mayor.¹⁵

Some observers have drawn comparisons between the current political stand-off and the events of 2001-2002, when Ravalomanana used his mayoral office to rally public support for the ouster of the incumbent president. The marked difference between the two conflicts lies in Ravalomanana's electoral mandate. In 2002, the country's judiciary determined that Ravalomanana had defeated Ratsiraka, who had ruled Madagascar intermittently for over two decades, in nationwide elections, but the latter refused to relinquish power. Andry Rajoelina, on the other hand, has never faced Ravalomanana in an electoral contest, and he lacks the constitutional mandate that Ravalomanana was able to claim in 2002. The capital city has traditionally been an opposition stronghold, although Rajoelina's level of support outside the capital is untested. The nephew of former President Ratsiraka has allied himself with Rajoelina, but the public influence of the country's opposition parties has been questioned.¹⁶

The Economy

Madagascar's economy, which was significantly damaged by the 2002 crisis, recovered quickly after Ravalomanana came to power and was seen as a sign of public and foreign investor confidence in his government. Growth was spurred, in part, by economic liberalization policies. Madagascar reached the completion point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) in 2004 and received cancellation of almost \$2 billion in sovereign debt. The Ravalomanana administration sought to diversify the country's bilateral ties, and reduce its reliance on traditional business partners, such as France, which remains its largest trading partner.

Under Ravalomanana, Madagascar attracted several high-profile foreign investment projects, including a titanium dioxide mine developed by Australia's Rio Tinto estimated at over \$800 million and a tar sands project by France's Total. Several oil companies have begun offshore exploration. A major investment proposal by South Korea's Daewoo Logistics became a rallying point for Rajoelina in late 2008. Ravalomanana critics like Rajoelina questioned the government's offer to Daewoo of a 99-year lease for 3.2 million acres of land for large corn and palm oil plantations. The Ravalomanana government claimed that the projects would bring infrastructure investments and create hundreds of jobs for Malagasy farm workers, but Rajoelina argued that the plantations would displace too many farmers from their land. The proposed deal also raised ethical concerns about allocating almost half of the country's arable land for export crops while the country continues to import rice, a basic staple of the Malagasy diet.¹⁷

Despite its economic growth in the last decade, the majority of Madagascar's people remain poor. The percentage of those living in extreme poverty has declined, from 74 percent in 2003 to 66 percent in 2007, but the rate of decline has not met government expectations. The World Bank estimates that per capita income is only approximately \$300 per year. Food prices have increased significantly since 2007, while purchasing power has decreased. Chronic food insecurity affects approximately 65 percent of the population. The recent collapse of the world market for

¹⁵ "Madagascar Politics: High-Speed TGV," The Economist Intelligence Unit, 30 January 2009.

¹⁶ Ratsiraka's nephew, Roland Ratsiraka, was convicted on corruption charges in 2007. He received a suspended sentence.

¹⁷ Vivienne Walt, "The Breadbasket of South Korea: Madagascar," *Time*, 23 November 2008.

Madagascar's primary export crop, vanilla, has adversely affected Malagasy farmers.¹⁸ The government has distributed coffee, clove, and pepper plants in an effort to diversify cash crops. The country's shellfish industry suffers from declining fish stocks. Madagascar's economy is also heavily reliant on the tourism industry, which draws an estimated \$390 million annually. The global economic downturn, combined with months of political unrest, has damaged the industry considerably.

Ravalomanana, 59, owns Madagascar's largest indigenous corporation, Tiko Group, a food and retail conglomerate. His business background is thought to have contributed significantly to his liberal economic policies and ability to attract foreign investment, but his business interests have also drawn allegations of corruption and favoritism in government deals. These allegations, combined with rising popular discontent, appear to have gradually undermined his domestic and international legitimacy. International donors suspended over \$20 million in aid disbursements in December 2008, citing concerns over budget transparency and possible conflicts of interest in the President's business investments. In particular, some donors have reportedly urged greater scrutiny of the mining and energy sectors.

U.S. Relations with Madagascar

The United States maintained good diplomatic relations with the Ravalomanana government. The State Department warned in March 2009 that the political situation in the country had entered a "dangerous phase" and that an "extra-legal assumption of power by civilians or the military is unacceptable."¹⁹ Following Rajoelina's assumption of power on March 17, a State Department spokesman reiterated that "any extra-constitutional resolution" of the crisis would result in a suspension of non-humanitarian U.S. assistance.²⁰ The United States has supported the efforts of the United Nations to facilitate a national conference to discuss a peaceful resolution of the crisis, and has issued a warning against all non-essential travel to the country. The U.S. Embassy has ordered the evacuation of all non-essential personnel and the Peace Corps announced on March 16 that it was suspending operations and pulling its 112 volunteers out.

U.S. bilateral assistance to Madagascar has supported democratic governance; economic growth and socio-economic development efforts; and environmental protection. Assistance provided by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development totaled \$47.7 million in FY2007 and an estimated \$58.2 million in FY2008. Much of these funds have been directed toward health programs. Madagascar is a target country for the President's Malaria Initiative, which aims to cut malaria deaths by 50 percent. It received \$16.9 million in prevention and treatment assistance in FY2008. U.S. assistance has also supported the Ravalomanana government's environmental preservation efforts to increase the amount of protected land from 1.7 million to 6 million hectares from 2003 to 2008.

Madagascar has reportedly helped support U.S. counter-terrorism goals through law enforcement and financial tracking cooperation, and the country has received limited U.S. security assistance focused on border and maritime security through the International Military Education and

¹⁸ The country accounts for two-thirds of the world's vanilla exports.

¹⁹ Statement by State Department Deputy Spokesman Gordon Duguid, "Madagascar's Political Crisis," 13 March 2009.

²⁰ Statement by Acting State Department Spokesman Robert Wood, Daily Press Briefing, 17 March 2009.

Training (IMET) program. The Bush Administration's FY2009 budget request included \$1.5 million for democracy programs, an increase from the requests for previous years.

Madagascar is African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)-eligible, including for special AGOA apparel benefits. Its 2007 exports under AGOA were valued at \$284 million. AGOA has reportedly helped Madagascar to increase job growth and attract foreign investment, and the country's nascent textile industry has expanded dramatically in the last decade.

Madagascar signed the first Millennium Challenge Account compact, worth almost \$110 million over four years, in April 2005. The award roughly doubled U.S. assistance to the country. The program, developed by the Malagasy government in consultation with the public, aims to raise incomes nationwide by assisting the transition from subsistence agriculture to a market economy. It complements Madagascar's poverty reduction strategy, which also focuses on agricultural development. MCC assistance has focused on securing property rights for land (\$36 million), improving citizens access to credit through financial sector reform (\$36 million), and improving agricultural production technologies and market capacity in rural areas (\$17 million). MCC operations in Madagascar were suspended on March 20, 2009.²¹

Author Contact Information

Lauren Ploch
Analyst in African Affairs
lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640

²¹ MCC has suspended compact programs in countries including Nicaragua, after flawed elections in 2008. As of January 2009, MCC had made just over \$80 million in contract commitments and disbursed \$56.3 million.