

Madagascar Soldiers Shoot Protesters, Some Dead

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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Soldiers opened fire on anti-government protesters Saturday near the presidential palace in Madagascar's capital, and radio stations reported some 30 people were killed in a dramatic escalation of a confrontation between the established order and a young politician determined to shake up this Indian Ocean island.

An AP reporter witnessed the shootings in Antananarivo and saw protesters falling, but it was unclear whether they were wounded or dead.

The president, Marc Ravalomanana, appeared on state television afterward to say the loss of life was "difficult," and to place the blame on his rival, Andry Rajoelina. He did not say how many had been killed or wounded. There has been no official confirmation of the deaths, which were reported by both state-run and independent radio.

"Last week (Rajoelina) claimed he had taken power. Today, he directed a huge crowd to take the palace," the president said, calling on his citizens help him restore order and to cooperate with the forces trying to establish peace and security.

The protest was one in a series called by Rajoelina, whose campaign sparked deadly violence last month. Unrest has been a hallmark of politics in Madagascar, an Indian Ocean island off Africa's southeast coast.

Rajoelina, whose background is in advertising and broadcasting, has shown a genius for articulating grievances in this largely poor country. But questions about whether he is offering real solutions have emerged since the violence in late January, and the crowds he has been drawing since then have shrunk. Ravalomanana has indicated he sees the 34-year-old Rajoelina as a front man for more established figures in a country known for infighting among a small political elite.

"(The army should) defend the people and stop these soldiers who are firing on people," Rajoelina declared Saturday on his radio Viva.

Madagascar, an island nation of 20 million people off Africa's southeast coast, is known for its rare wildlife and eco-tourism. It is also one of Africa's poorest nations with more than half the population living on less than \$1 per day.

The stakes here have risen since oil was discovered three years ago.

Western and African leaders have pressed Rajoelina, the former mayor of Antananarivo, and Ravalomanana, who won re-election in 2006 in elections generally deemed fair, to resolve their differences.

Saturday's protest started at a central square where Rajoelina regularly addresses supporters. Thousands of demonstrators then headed toward the presidential palace.

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Rajoelina had declared that presidential palace belonged to the city, but left the square before the march set off. He was ousted as mayor Tuesday by an official appointed by the police minister.

As mayor, Rajoelina had used rallies and broadcast stations he owns to urge Ravalomanana to resign - and offered himself as an alternative.

He has accused the president of misspending public money and threatening the nation's young democracy.

The president temporarily shut down the mayor's TV station in late January, sparking mass protests that turned into riots and looting sprees that left dozens of people dead.

Power struggles are not new to Madagascar. Ravalomanana clashed with former President Didier Ratsiraka when both claimed the presidency after a disputed December 2001 election. After low-level fighting split the country between two governments, two capitals and two presidents, Ratsiraka fled to France in June 2002.

Ravalomanana won re-election in 2006, though two opposition candidates tried to challenge the validity of the vote.

The country was once socialist, but since the mid-1990s it has followed policies of privatization and economic liberalization.

Ravalomanana, 59, a former mayor of Antananarivo, became president in 2002.

Rajoelina is a former professional DJ and an entrepreneur who heads two communications firms. He defeated Ravalomanana's party in municipal elections in December 2007. People call him TGV - the name for both his party and France's high speed trains - for his hard-charging personality. But he would not be eligible to run for presidency in the next scheduled elections in 2011, because he will not yet be 40, as is required.

Source : Sapa-AP /yj

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