MADAGASCAR’S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: TOWARD A RUN-OFF BETWEEN MARC RAVALOMANANA AND ANDRY RAJOELINA

The Malagasy people were called on Wednesday, November 7, 2018, to elect the next president of the country for the next five years. By and large, the election was carried out peacefully throughout the island, without major incident. It can be already described as “free and fair election,” and the results should be accepted by everyone, despite the attempts by some candidates to postpone the election for alleged irregularities regarding the voter registrations and “fake ballot boxes.”

While the official results would not be known until probably November 19, 2018, the early tendencies of the vote counts confirm the results of a survey conducted before the election, which publication was banned by the government. Indeed, according to these tendencies, Andry Rajoelina, followed closely by Marc Ravalomanana, are leading with more than 40% of the votes each, making the other candidates look a lot more like mere figurants in the duel between these two former presidents, who happen also to be among the wealthiest businessmen of the country. Thus, unless some surprises come from some precincts, there would be most likely a run-off between these two men.

It is worth noting that this year's presidential election is very important for different reasons. For one, it will decide who will be the most powerful man in the country for the next five years. In a country where the president is traditionally vested with a “quasi imperial power,” acquiring the presidential power is crucial not only for the president himself and his family, but also for his political and business allies. Particularly, it will determine who will make the crucial decisions regarding the distribution of seats in the government and the management of the country's natural resources (oil, different minerals, such as sapphire, gold, etc). For another reason, this election will also determine the future direction of the country’s foreign relations. Indeed, a victory of Rajoelina would certainly mean more friendly relations with France and to some extent China; while that of Ravalomanana would bring back closer relations with the United States, Germany and different English speaking countries in the region, particularly South Africa, Mauritius, etc. Finally, this election constitutes also the first real test for the emerging electoral democracy in the country. Indeed, according to political scientist Samuel Huntington, democracy tends to consolidate after two peaceful turnovers of power. In the case of Madagascar, this election would bring about the first peaceful turnover after the first presidential election in 2013, following the so-called coup in 2009. We will see if the electoral democracy of the country will be consolidated or not.

The high number of candidates (thirty-six) during this election was a surprise for many international observers. Nevertheless, this number is about the same as the number of candidates during the presidential election in 2013 (forty-one). Most importantly, it is a sign of the extreme fragmentation of the Malagasy society. Indeed, this society is traditionally divided into 18 or so ethnic groups, with a marked difference between the lifestyle of coastal people (Cotiers) and those of the center (of Merina and Betsileo ethnic groups). In addition, there is a huge disparity between the great majority of the people (more than 80%) who live in rural areas and tend to be poor, less-educated and traditionalist, and the small minority of rich and well-educated city dwellers who are in fact the most dominant social group. As a result, even the number of political parties is extremely high in the country. Currently, there are more than 100 political parties, but none of them can pretend to represent and aggregate the interests of the majority of the voters. So, each candidate of this year’s presidential election represents some groups and some interests, many of them almost run just to be famous, but some are running so that they can negotiate a government position with the eventual winner.

Another surprise of this election was also the huge disparity between the financial resources of each candidate. Since the beginning of the electoral campaign, the candidates were classified by most observers into two broad categories: the so-called “big candidates” who have the means to draw supporters and who have a real chance to win everything; and the so-called “small candidates” who have limited financial resources and do not stand any chance to win at all. On the one hand, the so-called "big candidates" include the three former presidents, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, Andry Rajoelina and Marc Ravalomanana. They have significant financial resources, travel by helicopters, and are able to cover all of the regions of the country, including the smallest towns. On the other hand, the other candidates, traveling by cars, are barely able to campaign in a few big cities. The three big candidates are also spending millions of dollars to buy airtime for television and radio advertisements, hire artists to entertain their supporters, hand out motorcycles, sewing machines, t-shirts, caps, rice, and even cooking oil, etc. Given these astronomical spending, many observers are suspecting that these three big candidates are receiving money from local and foreign “shady” actors, some of who may be involved in money laundering.