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REFERENDA IN SEYCHELLES AND MADAGASCAR: THE RUN UP TO PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

This Brief Report was prepared by Timothy Ecott, who is the 1992 Rotary Fellow at SAIIA. He recently visited Seychelles and Madagascar, where he covered the referenda for the BBC World Service.

By the end of 1992 the formerly non-aligned but socialist states of Madagascar and Seychelles will have new governments. The longstanding regimes of the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) and the former Vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution have undergone major changes since early 1991 and each state has had to accommodate a political opposition movement where in the past the ruling party had things very much their own way. Whether these moves towards democratisation will actually result in significant changes in these nations' placings in the world order is however debatable.

MULTI-PARTYISM

On July 25 the Republic of Seychelles carried out a referendum on a multi-party basis to elect members of a constitutional commission. The purpose of the commission is to draw up a new constitution to replace the one party system under which President France Albert Rene and his party the Seychelles People's Progressive Front have governed the nation since 1977.

On August 19 the Republic of Madagascar held a referendum which asked the electorate to vote yes or no to the proposition that the country adopts a "unitary" constitution to replace the Revolutionary Council form of government practised by President Didier Ratsiraka's AREMA party since 1975.

Both Indian Ocean Republics now have less than three months to prepare for Presidential elections which may or may not result in substantial transformation in the two nations' style of government and economic prospects. Whatever the results, the demise of old fashioned state socialism has long been signalled in both countries and the current electoral reforms are the legal legitimisation of that process.

REFERENDA RESULTS

SEYCHELLES:

The Seychelles Republic has a population of less than 80,000 people and an electorate officially calculated at around fifty thousand. In excess of 80% of this electorate turned out to vote for local district representatives on the constitutional commission. Of seven new

parties registered (excluding the governing SPPF) only the Democratic Party of former president Sir James Mancham garnered a significant following. The DP scored a 34% poll to the SPPF's 58% giving it 8 seats to the SPPF's 14 on the constitutional commission. The only other party to score even a marginally significant number of votes was the Parti Seselwa, led by an Anglican priest - the Reverend Wavel Ramkalawan. However Parti Seselwa's 4% poll did not earn it a seat on the constitutional commission.

Despite past differences President Rene and the official opposition agree substantially on the shape of the new constitution.

Outlook

With the removal of the one party system no longer an issue, the real struggle between the two ideologies concerns the nuts and bolts of future economic policy for the islands. The SPPF emerged victorious from the referendum due to popular support from a population which enjoys the highest standard of living in Africa (with a GNP of in excess of US\$4000 per annum). However, the country needs to diversify its foreign income sources if it is to counter a decline in the tourism sector earnings, still showing a downturn since the Gulf War disrupted the market worldwide.

Given that President Rene maintains that the SPPF will remain a "people's party" and given the DP's insistence that socialist policies have stifled the economy and drained foreign reserves the shape of Seychelles politics is likely to remain an ideological struggle between the two viewpoints.

State controlled enterprises such as the Seychelles Marketing Board, the earnings from fishing rights sold to foreign fleets and state controls on property ownership and businesses will now face scrutiny and debate from the official opposition.

But the stamina of the Democratic Party and its flamboyant leader James Mancham also has yet to be tested. Although the DP was remarkably successful in trouncing all other opposition parties their defeat by the SPPF took many Seychellois by surprise. This viewpoint ignored the SPPF's solid support base amongst ordinary Seychellois, educated and employed largely by the party's structures. The relaxation of government restrictions on free speech and politicking may have created a different social atmosphere in the islands but the party in government seems likely to remain the SPPF, if and until the DP shows its worth as a realistic alternative.

MADAGASCAR:

In spite of demonstrations by anti-unitary factions the Malagasy electorate of almost 6 million voters turned out in force to vote 'yes' for a new constitution. The transitional government under the High Authority of State - the post occupied by Zafy Albert - has until November to organise presidential elections.

Head of state, President Didier Ratsiraka has announced his intention to stand for re-election. Zafy Albert will also stand, having been one of the leaders of the coalition opposition movement Forces Vives which succeeded in persuading Ratsiraka to accept a

transitional government almost one year ago.

The new unitary constitution is an attempt by the Forces Vives to ensure a centralised government for the Republic, which since 1972 has seen rule by revolutionary council - nominally answerable to a House of Assembly which was in practice dominated by the AREMA party. The removal of AREMA domination and the concomitant neutralisation of the local district councils set up by Ratsiraka to give the rural masses a say in central government has been the Forces Vives' most significant success. However, what the Forces Vives see as a democratisation movement, their opponents see as a rekindling of old class divisions in Madagascar. For the rural masses any centralised government may be interpreted as a reassertion of Imerina intellectualist and aristocratic domination. It was the Imerina aristocracy who subjugated the coastal tribes and ruled them from the central plateau - the site of the capital Antananarivo.

Since the Marxist revolution of 1972, the socialist structures created by Ratsiraka have gained him support from the coastal peoples and rural peasants. As a native of the East coast port of Toamasina he has been seen as these people's natural ally. Anti-unitary supporters in coastal towns opposed the August referendum in an attempt to retain their regional autonomy.

In the upcoming election Ratsiraka's support base among the rural proletariat may stand him in good stead. Albert Zafy and the Forces Vives have support in the capital but the coalition of opposition parties showed signs of disunity throughout 1992.

With 64 parties now registered in Madagascar the choice for the electorate may be difficult. In reality only Ratsiraka, Zafy and perhaps the Reverend Richard Andriamanjato (formerly AKSM Renouveau, and still of the Malagasy Council of Christian Churches) have sufficient political profile to garner significant support.

The 1992 referendum and the awkward transition period which saw the island's formal economy paralysed by a seven month general strike have done nothing to solve Madagascar's dire economic situation. Foreign investors continue to withhold investment pending a new government. If Ratsiraka wins an election the Forces Vives are unlikely to accept a return to his pre 1992 style of government. If the Forces Vives win, then rural discontent seems set to resurface. In the event of a continuing stalemate many Malagasy are genuinely apprehensive that the stage could be set for a military coup.

Outlook

At best, it looks as if Madagascar will continue to be seen by external investors as an unstable economy for the foreseeable future. Whatever the complexion of the new government, its most urgent priority will be the dismantling of the country's cumbersome bureaucracy and the establishment of a viable economic infrastructure.

Jan Smuts House
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