

Madagascar elections : 36 candidates, 4 (ex-)presidents, and a lot of money

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Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world, yet its elections rank among the most expensive.



Madagascar is set to hold presidential elections on 7 November, with a possible run-off on 19 December. Credit: Rod Waddington.

Back in 2013, when 33 candidates competed in [Madagascar's](#) presidential elections, it was something of a record for the country. In the run-up to that vote, much discussion centred on the sheer logistics of having so many nominees run for office. How would 33 names fit on the single ballot paper? (It ended up being A3.) Would electoral boards take up entire streets? (They did.) Would voters be able to familiarise themselves with the programmes of so many candidates? (They didn't.)

In the end, it worked out with Hery Rajaonarimampianina emerging victorious after the second-round. Nonetheless, it was still a slight surprise earlier this year when an even bigger pool of 36 candidates was approved to run in the upcoming 7 November elections, with a possible run-off on 19 December.

Other elements of the upcoming 2018 presidential elections have been more predictable. Among the three dozen candidates, for example, are several usual suspects. The incumbent President Rajaonarimampianina is seeking re-election, while three former presidents are also running: Didier Ratsiraka, Madagascar's autocratic ruler from 1975-1993 and 1997-2002; Marc Ravalomanana, the country's elected leader from 2002 until his overthrow in 2009; and Andry Rajoelina, the man that led that 2009 coup and stayed as transitional president until 2014.

They are joined on the ballot by an assortment of other politicians, military personnel, businesspeople and public figures. These include three former prime ministers – Jean Ravelonarivo (2015-16), Jean Omer Beriziky (2011-14) and Olivier Mahafaly (2016-18) – as well as the pop-star Dama and pastor André Mailhol. There are just five women on the list.

To an extent, the large number of candidates – though unprecedented in scale – is also generally in keeping with Madagascar's electoral culture. Lots of nominees run, with the defeated candidates from the first round offering their backing to the two finalists in return for their favour if elected.

"It's political calculations," says Marcus Schneider, director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Madagascar. "There is a lot of ethnic voting. In the second round, those [smaller] candidates will support the big two: this is where support gets bought. [They] might also get a job as a minister."

Schneider adds that for some business people, it can even be a financial decision. If they run themselves, he explains, they won't have to sponsor others, which may cost more, and can sell their 2-3% at the second round.

"A battle of means"

Madagascar's campaign season officially starts on 8 October, but many candidates have already been on the road for months promoting their visions. There is no legal provision regulating such pre-campaigning, which Ketakandriana Rafitson, director of Transparency International in Madagascar, sees as a real problem. She links it to the large discrepancies between different nominees' resources.

"Smaller candidates may have good ideas, but they're six months behind [compared to the richer candidates]," she says. "Also, they may not have the means to hire a helicopter to criss-cross the country."

Schneider agrees that money is one of the biggest issues. This may be the case in most countries' elections, but is particularly critical in Madagascar whose campaign finance laws are weak. There is no cap on spending and few obligations to disclose sources of funding, making the system ripe for abuse.

In fact, according to a 2016 [study](#), Rajaonarimampianina's campaign in 2013 was the most expensive worldwide ever. In that election, the now president spent an estimated \$21.50 for each vote won, surpassing even Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump's 2016 bids and outspending many European campaigns by a factor of ten.

"It will be a battle of means," says Schneider. "The big three candidates [Rajaonarimampianina, Rajoelina and Ravalomanana] have very substantial means."

Dernière élection de	Voix obtenues	Dépenses	Dépenses par voix obtenu	PIB par personne ²⁷
Hery Rajaonarimampianina	2,000,000 (environ)	\$43,000,000 ²⁸	\$21,50	\$411
Uhuru Kenyatta ²⁹	6,173,433	\$130,000,000	\$21.16 <small>(y compris les élections législatives et locales)</small>	\$1,376
Hilary Clinton ³⁰	66,000,000	\$1,300,000,000	\$19,92	\$55,836
Donald Trump	63,000,000	\$795,000,000	\$12.61	\$55,836
Angela Merkel, CDU	16,233,642	47,000,000 eur	2.69 eur <small>(système parlementaire)</small>	\$42,168
Jacob Zuma, ANC ³¹	11,436,921	\$30,000,000	\$2.62 <small>(système parlementaire)</small>	\$5,691
François Hollande ³²	18,000,668	21,800,000 eur	1.21 eur	\$35,248
Nicolas Sarkozy	16,860,685	21,300,000 eur	1.26 eur	\$35,248
Matteo Renzi	10,047,507	6,500,000 eur	0.64 eur <small>(système parlementaire)</small>	\$29,847
Béji caïd Essebsi	1,731,529	530,000 eur <small>(plafond 2 tours)</small>	0.30 eur	\$3,872

Credit: FES.

Prompted by concerns over financing abuses and Madagascar's poor record of smooth political transitions, a group of civil society organisations has set up a Charter of Good Behaviour for the election. The code calls on presidential candidates to declare their assets and interests to Madagascar's anti-corruption agency, publishing the amount, nature and origin of their campaign funds. It also urges them to refuse all financing that may compromise the national interest and commit to eschew all corruption, including the buying of votes and influence.

The Charter of Good Behaviour invokes the *Soatoavina Malagasy*, a set of moral values and principles that underpins Malagasy society. "*Fihavanana* [one of the pillars of *Soatoavina*] means solidarity and unity, but it's a double-edge sword because it's traditionally been used to justify impunity," says Rafitson. "We want to use the other edge: it must be a fraternal, dignified fight that is fair and representative. There must be a level playing field between all the candidates."

Although the project was initiated by civil society, it now includes a number of government agencies as its founding members. These include the electoral commission (CENI), the anti-corruption agency (BIANCO), the financial intelligence unit (Samifin), and the Council for National Reconciliation (CFM). Rafitson says that such buy-in from official bodies was essential to give the charter clout as civil society lacks authority in Madagascar.

The Charter committee contacted all candidates (who had a chance to provide feedback on the charter) and signatories will be announced at a ceremony on 3 October. A number of candidates have already refused to sign the charter, claiming their moral standards don't need a charter for validation. The committee will monitor signatories during the

campaign and communicate broadly with the public. “People must base their judgement on information and be indignant about what is happening: the amount spent in 2013 is outrageous”, says Rafitson.

How will the candidates fare?

In the absence of opinion polls, allowed but rarely used, making predictions is tough. FES recently tried to publish the results of a poll it had carried out but the authorities demanded it be mothballed for the “safeguard public order and state security”.

In the 7 November first round, however, it seems a good bet that Rajoelina’s immense wealth, cunning communication skills and popularity amongst young voters will get him through to the run-off. Schneider says that although the former president is aiming for 30% of the votes, 15-20% is more realistic.

The fates of the other two main frontrunners – Rajaonarimampianina and Ravalomanana – are harder to map. Former president Ravalomanana is undoubtedly more popular than the incumbent, but his financial resources pale in comparison to his rivals’ and he has never made much ground in coastal areas. Schneider points out, though, that the capital Antananarivo alone makes up a third of the electorate and that in 2013, Ravalomanana’s proxy candidate Jean-Louis Robinson got 40% there. “Ravalomanana himself could get 50%, which would give him 15-16% in the first round,” he says.

As for President Rajaonarimampianina, his status as incumbent is a mixed bag. On the one hand, his track record is generally viewed as disappointing, with corruption still rampant and structural reforms and economic growth only just materialising. On the other, many see his moves to have his close ally Rivo Rakotovoao installed as interim president – the president is constitutionally required to step down ahead of elections – as a way to ensure he will have the backing of the state. In recent interviews, Rakotovoao was keen to emphasise his neutrality, but many are not convinced.

Only time will tell how these factors will translate into votes at the ballot box. But whoever the victor is, he or she will face the Sisyphean task of lifting Madagascar out of poverty. 75% of Malagasy live on less than \$2 a day and the country is the poorest in the world not to have experienced conflict. Although economic growth is on the uptick, with 5% forecast for 2018, corruption remains rampant and the country has little resilience in the face of external shocks, be they commodity price fluctuations or natural disasters.

Source : <https://africanarguments.org/2018/10/02/madagascar-elections-36-candidates-4-ex-presidents-money/>