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HOW GEN Z ARE UPPING THE ANTE ON AFRICAN LEADERS

Watching live images on social media of the Gen Z protests in Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo, alongside President Andry Rajoelina fleeing the country, underscores a critical point: African leaders who ignore the socio-economic issues facing young people will provoke anger that could ultimately lead to their removal from office. The significant Malagasy youth population called for change similar to that seen in other parts of Africa and Asia. The protests have also revealed how Gen Z is challenging traditional power structures, questioning political elites, confronting corruption and poor governance. Furthermore, this generation has lost trust in ruling political parties and is not shy in expressing frustration over the lack of opportunities. This growing discontent has ignited a wave of local grassroots activism and has reshaped the political landscape in some countries.

Over the past few months, we have witnessed young people challenging dominant political powers across various regions, from Kenya to Nepal, Morocco to Indonesia, and now in Madagascar. They have effectively utilised social media as a tool for mass mobilisation, confronting traditional media and political elite power structures.

In Madagascar, where the median age is just 19, protests have erupted, primarily led by Generation Z. Initially focused on the pressing issue of electricity and water shortages, the demonstrations then broadened to encompass a range of critical concerns. These included unemployment, corruption, poor governance, and inadequate basic services for millions of people.

A Little Late—Rajoelina Promises Reform

In a bid to appease the protesters, Rajoelina responded with some promises and reform. He fired his cabinet and appointed a new prime minister, Ruphin Fortunat Dimbisoa Zafisambo. At the time, Rajoelina said the new premier must be "capable of restoring order and regaining the people's trust, with a focus on improving living conditions and advancing key national priorities." Raejoelina also made a set of promises that would bring change but it seemed it was a little too late for people.

Lack of Opportunities

High unemployment and growing inequality have been some of the major drivers of change in countries across the global south. Madagascar is one of the world's poorest countries. The World Bank estimates that three-quarters of the population live below the $2.15-a-day poverty line, and that the average annual income is about $600. It also ranks in the bottom 20 of the U.N. Human Development Index. These stark statistics indicate a pressing need for economic reforms and development initiatives.

From DJ To Head of State: The Rise of Andry Rajoelina...

Rajoelina miscalculated the support of the army, who later joined the mass protests; ironically, they are the ones who helped the former DJ and mayor of the capital come to power. During his DJ days, Rajoelina was once nicknamed "TGV" after the French fast train, for his energy and enthusiasm. He took power in a 2009 coup, making him the youngest head of state in history at the age of 34.

At the time his ascent was an important turning point in the country's political landscape, as Rajoelina promised to bring change and development. However, his tenure was also marred by controversy, with critics questioning his governance and the sustainability of his reforms and now years later it's come back to haunt him.

Continental and Regional Reactions

In a statement, the African Union called on all Malagasy parties to act with "responsibility and patriotism' to safeguard unity, stability, and peace, in full respect of the constitution and established institutional frameworks."

Peter Mutharika, the newly elected Malawian president and chair of SADC's Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, said SADC stands in "solidarity with the government and people of Madagascar during this challenging time."

> THIS GENERATION HAS LOST TRUST IN RULING POLITICAL PARTIES AND IS NOT SHY IN EXPRESSING FRUSTRATION OVER THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

He called on all stakeholders in Madagascar to "exercise maximum calm and restraint, safeguard the rights, freedoms, and dignity of all citizens, respect the rule of law, and uphold constitutional governance." The statement added that it's ready to assist the country; however, with Mutharika still settling into his new role as head of State, I do wonder what else SADC will do for the country.

Opposition Leads the Change

The opposition in parliament told media outlets that Rajoelina had fled the country on Sunday (12th October) after soldiers defected and joined the protesters. It's been reported that a French aircraft escorted Rajoelina out of the country and up until now, his exact whereabouts are unknown. Rajoelina later took to social media platform Facebook, where he said he had to "move to a safe location to protect his life" and that he would not "allow Madagascar to be destroyed."

Time to Address the Youth Bulge in Africa?

Africa has a massive youth population, which has implications for health, education, and employment. African leaders seem to be out of touch with this generation.

The UN says there are more than 1.22 billion young people in the world. Africa is home to nearly 400 million young people between the ages of 15-35 and 60% of the continent's population is under the age of 25. According to the UN population fund, young people (10-24) make up 32% or 208 million, of the population in East and Southern Africa.

Gen Z protests are bringing to the fore a deep anger over the lack of opportunities for young people and forcing governments and older generations to rethink how they are governed. They are also challenging the political elites that have been responsible for the deep structural issues in the economy. The protests are driven by anger and political exclusion. African leaders, heed this warning: neglect the suffering of the youth, the jobless, and the marginalized, and you will bear the consequences. Gen Z is making political and social changes without asking for permission. This generation's voice is louder than ever, demanding accountability and transparency from those in power.

What Now?

Following Rajoelina's flight from the country, parliament voted to impeach him. In response, Rajoelina expressed his view that the move was a clear attempt at a coup d'état.

"The president of the republic remains fully in office and ensures the maintenance of constitutional order and national stability," the presidency said in a statement.

This, however, did not deter the army from moving in to take power with celebrations in the country. The head of the army, Michael Randrianirina, said the armed forces are now taking power in the country and they will be in charge for the next “18 months to two years.”
“The renovation period will last a maximum of two years. During this time, a referendum will be held to establish a new constitution, followed by elections to gradually set up the new institutions,” Randrianirina told reporters.

He added that “several institutions are suspended, which include the Senate, the High Constitutional Court, the Independent National Electoral Commission, the High Court of Justice, and the High Council for the Defense of Human Rights and the Rule of Law.”

This is, however, a worrying trend where the military takes over and then promises some level of reform. Will the military be able to quell the protests and address the concerns of Gen Z regarding their demands for change? Questions remain about the military's ability to implement genuine reforms, leaving the situation precarious. Many are sceptical if the same structures that sparked discontent can now effectively deliver for Madagascar’s Gen Z.

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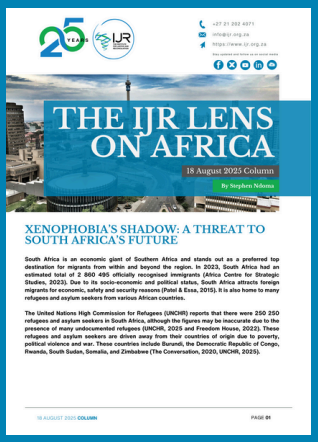

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