

Assassination, Feuds Leave

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TANANARIVE—In the next few weeks, the new military leaders of this troubled island republic will make several key decisions aimed at healing the deep wounds inflicted on the Malagasy body politic by the assassination in February of one chief of state and the forced resignation of another.

The wrong choices could easily plunge this still tense and divided country into a disastrous civil war, tearing apart its multiracial society and fragile national unity.

The fear of just such an eventuality appears to grip Madagascar's present military rulers and explains the extraordinary security precautions they have taken over the past three months, including closing the island's main airport for two months.

A military tribunal trying those accused of taking part in the Feb. 11 assassination of President Richard Ratsimandrava acquitted all but three minor figures this week. Those acquitted included the Malagasy Republic's "founding father," former President Philibert Tsiranana.

Three commandos of the assault group that attacked Ratsimandrava—the only survivors—were convicted, sentenced to five years at hard labor and fined \$48,000.

Now the 18-man military directory temporarily ruling this country of 8 million Afro-Asiatic people is expected to establish a new ruling body and name a single leader before independence day celebrations June 26.

It is widely believed here that these events will make

or break political peace on the island, and they are awaited with growing anxiety by the normally patient and easy going Malagasy people.

A Western correspondent visiting this isolated country, the world's fourth largest island, lying 200 miles off the East African coast in the Indian Ocean, is struck by the apparent power of the political myths that seem to haunt this superstitious people of Asiatic charm, intrigue and ancestry.

Many Malagasy seem all too ready to believe that all their troubles stem from a traditional ethnic rivalry between the socially dominant, high plateau Merina people of Malayo-Polynesian origin, concentrated in the capital, Tananarive, and the less favored coastal African tribes known collectively as Cotiers.

Others whisper to foreigners about a secretive "Club of the 43," supposedly the leading Merina families on the island, that is responsible behind the scenes for the current political crisis.

The belief in the Merina-Cotier rivalry is so strong, and thus so dangerous, that even the country's military rulers feel obliged to warn publicly of the danger of "civil war" and "tribal warfare," apparently hoping thereby to prevent them.

But the "Malagasy problem" now seems far more complicated than just an ethnic feud. Serious conflicts over policy issues and rivalries among men and units within the armed forces have become superimposed upon the Merina-Cotier rivalry and to some extent even cut across it.

The background to the present political crisis goes back to the relatively uneventful but stable 12-year rule of President Tsiranana, a Cotier, best known for his pro-French policy that kept Madagascar closely tied economically, politically and militarily to France until his ouster following a wave of student-sparked unrest in

Madagascar in

Turmoil

May 1972.

Tsiranana handed over power to the army's chief-of-staff and senior officer, Gen. Gabriel Ramanantsoa, an upper class Merina, thereby ending the Cotiers' decade-long rule of the island as well as the Malagasy government's pro-French and generally pro-Western foreign policy.



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Under the more collegial rule of Ramanantsoa, two other military men emerged as primarily responsible for forging new leftist-leaning policies for Madagascar—Navy Cmdr. Didier Ratsiraka, a Cotier from the east coast port of Tamatave, who became foreign minister, and Gendarmerie Col. Richard Ratsimandrava, a Merina who was named interior minister.

Ratsiraka completely reversed Madagascar's foreign alliances, renegotiating the independence cooperation accord with France to phase out French military presence on the island and establishing diplomatic ties with key Communist countries—the Soviet Union, China, North Korea and North Vietnam. He also ended his country's controversial relations with South Africa and built up a generally pro-Chinese and anti-French image that pleased many students and intellectuals.

At the same time, Col. Ratsimandrava launched a campaign to revive the country's traditional town councils, known as *fokonolona* and to convert them into Tanzanian-style communal villages.

Today, there are over 10,000 of these *fokonolona* throughout the island. The government is slowly giving them more responsibility and power and plans to eventually have them play a major role in running the entire economy.

At the national level, the Ramanantsoa government pressed its effort to bring the economy under Malagasy control. It bought a majority interest in two of the four French-controlled main banks, nationalized the Indian-dominated rice trade, and set up state import and export companies.

One major effect of all these new economic policies was to squeeze out not only Indian and Chinese traders but also the French, who previously dominated the economy. Their number has declined from 70,000 to 29,000 since 1972.

A less popular effect was to provoke economic dislocations and food shortages, which led to an overall production drop in 1972 and 1973 and forced the government to import 140,000 tons of rice last year at a cost of more than \$50 million in foreign exchange.

The result of this was a severe budgetary and foreign exchange crisis that still weighs heavily on the government and has caused widespread discontent, particularly in the capital where the rice shortages forced up prices considerably.

In the midst of this economic malaise, the government announced in January that it had blocked an attempted coup planned for New Year's Eve and arrested 40-odd military, police and civilians. Among them were many Cotiers, which raised fears and suspicions among the Merina highlanders of a Cotier coup.

Later in January, another Cotier, Army Col. Brechard Rejaonarison, headed a rebellion and took refuge from arrest in the camp of the special Mobile Police Force on the outskirts of the capital. He demanded a better deal for Cotiers in the military and the decentralization of government.

Unable to resolve the police rebellion led by Brechard, Ramanantsoa dissolved the government Jan. 25 in the midst of calls from the rightist opposition Malagasy Socialist Party for the general to call back the aging but still active former President Tsiranana.

On Feb. 5, after jockeying by the political parties and the colonels and generals of the police and military, Ramanantsoa handed over power to his popular interior minister, Col. Ratsimandrava. The colonel, a lower class Merina who had launched a rural revolution in favor of the Cotier peasantry, seemed a good compromise in terms of the island's tribal rivalries, but he was clearly bad for French and Merina business interests.

Six days after he came to power, Ratsimandrava was gunned to death as he was returning to his home on the heights of Tananarive.

There were questions about who killed the popular leftist colonel and why.

At first it was assumed that the five men killed or captured on the spot, all members of the Mobile Police force, were sent by Col. Brechard to assassinate him.

But the military tribunal, which began hearing evidence March 21 and reached its verdict this week, heard so much conflicting testi-

mony that this was thrown into question.

The coroner, a friend of the assassinated president, told the military court that he had died from a single bullet shot at short range into his heart.

Early in the trial, 275 of the original defendants were acquitted, leaving only 33. Besides Tsiranana, the 30 acquitted this week included Col. Brechard and former Vice President Andre Retsampy, who is secretary general of the Malagasy Socialist Party.

The way now appears clear for formation of a government of national recon-

ciliation under a council of a half dozen members.

The men considered by Western diplomats and Malagasy politicians as the likeliest candidates for leadership of Madagascar are Commander Ratsiraka, the Cotier who was once foreign minister; General Andriamahazo, the head of the military directory and considered a moderate; and Gendarmerie Major Soja, currently minister of rural development and a protégé of the assassinated president.

No matter which of the three military men comes to power, it seems unlikely there will be any major

changes in either Madagascar's present foreign or domestic policies. All three belong to the present ruling military directory, which on April 12 issued a 10-point policy statement reaffirming the country's commitment to the *Fokonolona* at home and "positive neutralism in all directions abroad.

The key issues in the current crisis are rather which military leader is best capable of avoiding civil war, maintaining unity and the cohesion of the armed forces. These are the three crucial questions hanging over Madagascar's political future.