

Briefing on Madagascar

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Tomorrow (21 November 2018) the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) will hold a briefing session on the situation in Madagascar. The African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson High Representative on Silencing the Gun, Ramtane Lamamra, who served as Head of the AU Election Monitoring Mission to Madagascar, is expected to deliver the briefing. The briefing will cover the political and security developments in the island state, focusing on the national elections.

The presidential elections are considered by the AU and the regional body Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) to be a major test for the consolidation of stability and peaceful transition of political power in a country that experienced turbulent political, security and economic conditions for the past decade.

The briefing will provide update on the conduct of the elections held on 7 November 2018, the run off elections expected to take place on 19 December 2018, and the progress, gaps and prospects for peaceful political transition in Madagascar.

The presidential election held on 7 November is significant in many ways. It is the first election since the 2013 elections that ended the constitutional and political crisis that rocked Madagascar following the coup d'état that took place in 2009. The PSC

suspended Madagascar for unconstitutional changes of government. The sanctions that followed the removal of then President Marc Ravalomanana included sanctioning the figure head of the coup Andry Rajoelina and 108 other senior government officials which included travel ban, asset and

financial freeze.

The election was convened after a period of turmoil and political tension that necessitated preventive diplomacy efforts undertaken through Lamamra to create the conditions for the holding of peaceful elections. An attempt by Rajaonarimampianina's to reform the electoral laws earlier this year was met with rejections and strong opposition followed by months of violent protests in Antananarivo, and the polls reflected his low popularity. His precedency was characterized by low state effectiveness, and political instability that saw an impeachment process targeting him by the National Assembly in 2015. His government was unstable and he appointed three Prime Ministers in 4 years.

While the 7 November election witnessed a high number of candidates at 36, the three leading contestants of the presidential elections were Hery Rajaonarimampianina, who came to power after the 2013 elections, Rajoelina, who ruled the country since the 2009 coup and his arch rival former President Ravalomanana.

Despite the stakes in the election due to the political context and the profile of the leading candidates, election observers from the AU, SADC and the EU all said the poll was conducted fairly and largely without incident. According to the preliminary statement that the AU mission issued the election was conducted following applicable rules and allowed the Malagasy people to freely cast their vote for electing their President of the Republic. Highlighting the precarious electoral environment, it was noted in the AU statement that there was an unsuccessful request from a group of candidates to reopen the electoral list, revoke the Constitutional High Court and replace it with a special electoral court. In terms of voter turn out, it was reported that only 54% of Madagascar's nearly 10 million registered voters actually cast their ballots, below the first round of the 2013 presidential election where the participation rate was 61%.

According to the results announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) the immediate past President Rajaonarimampianina received less than 10 percent of the vote. His campaign for a second term is now over leaving the race for two old rivals Rajoelina and Ravalomanana, whose previous political contest plunged the country into political, security and constitutional crisis in 2009. The results from the first round of polls gave Rajoelina a lead with almost 40 percent of the vote while Ravalomanana got 35.29 percent.

With none of the candidates receiving the 50 percent plus majority vote required for victory, bitter rivals Rajoelina and Ravalomanana will face each other in the run off election. This second round of the presidential election is scheduled for December 19.

Following the announcement of the elections, Rajoelina accused the CENI of manipulation of the election process. At a rally in Antananarivo, he reportedly told his supporters that 'everything had been done to prevent (him) from scoring more than 40 percent' in the November 7 first round. The CENI, inflated the number of registered voters and gave votes for (me) to other candidates.' Although all the three major candidates have alleged fraud and malpractice by election authorities, reacting to the announcement of the results Ravalomanana stated on his facebook page that the next step is preparation for the second round, '[d]espite the anomalies noted during the first round of the presidential election'.

Rejecting the accusations CENI stated that it had "ensured the transparency of the electoral system at all times". In its preliminary statement on the first round of elections, the AU election observation mission called on the candidates and the parties to continue the path of dialogue, scrupulously respect the rule of law and use the competent courts for the settlement of all electoral disputes.

Tomorrow's briefing will focus on the preparations for the

second-round polls and prevention of post- election violence and stalemate. Lamamra's briefing is in particular expected to highlight not only the next steps in the preparation for the run off election but also the issues that need to be addressed and the role that the AU should play for ensuring peaceful election.

The historic and deep rivalry between two political giants and past presidents Ravalomanana, 68 who ruled from 2002-2009 and Rajoelina, 44 who ruled from 2009-2014 is expected to make the stakes high in the run off. Both candidates were banned from running in the last election in the 2013.

Before the run off election, the High Constitutional Court has until November 26 to validate the results of the first round. The acceptance by the candidates of the verdict of the Court is the first test for creating the conditions for peaceful and credible run off.

The other and perhaps major test is the maintenance of an atmosphere of calm and stability prior to, during and after the elections. In this respect, the signs coming from the country are worrisome. It was reported that two explosions rocked supporters of Rajoelina according to police who ruled out an accident but could not immediately confirm the source of the blasts. The police have issued a warning, expressing concern on the growing tense environment, accusations and war of words between the two camps. It stated that 'the electoral process is at a delicate moment, sensitive to any tensions and rivalries, so all stakeholders are urged to protect the best interests of the nation and to guarantee order'.

The risk of relapse into a major political crisis and violence remains high. With history of involvement in politics, the role of the army in the election and subsequent transition will be another issue of concern in Madagascar. PSC members would be keen to hear from Lamamra on the risks of such military intervention in the context of the prevailing delicate environment.

The expected outcome of the briefing is a communiqué.