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# The Politics of Madagascar

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## Introduction

Madagascar, the world's fourth-largest island, is a nation of extraordinary ecological, cultural, and political diversity. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Madagascar's political evolution has been marked by dramatic changes—the rise and fall of republics, military interventions, constitutional crises, and persistent efforts at reconciliation and reform. The story of its politics is a compelling one: a narrative shaped by historical legacies, high-stakes power struggles, and the ongoing quest to build stable, representative institutions.

This book, "The Politics of Madagascar: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Madagascar," offers readers a comprehensive insight into the political dynamics of this unique Indian Ocean state. Tracing the nation's journey from colonial rule through successive constitutional regimes, it unravels the complex interplay of history, institutions, personalities, and societal forces that have defined the country's political landscape. Central to this story are the repeated transitions between authoritarian and democratic arrangements, an evolving constitution, and the ever-present challenge of securing legitimate governance.

Madagascar's political system today is formally a semi-presidential representative democratic republic, comprising executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Yet, the structures of government—though inspired by Western legal and constitutional models—have often been strained by elite competition, institutional weakness, and the persistence of informal power networks. Elections, political parties, and institutions designed to channel popular will have sometimes served as arenas for struggle, rather than vehicles for consensus and development. The legacy of centralization, the pressure for decentralization, and efforts to anchor the state in Madagascar's diverse regions and communities remain ongoing themes.

Crucial, too, are the challenges that have shaped the country's recent past and present: repeated political crises, endemic corruption, and recurring disputes over the legitimacy of leaders and laws. The judiciary, intended as a bulwark for the rule of law, must contend with political interference and resource limitations. Civil society and the media have both advanced reform and challenged excess, yet face constraints imposed by political actors and the realities of economic hardship. The military, meanwhile, has loomed as an arbiter during periods of contestation, intervening at critical junctures.

Madagascar's place in the global arena adds another layer of complexity. Its international partnerships—ranging from historical ties with France to newer relationships with China, India, and regional neighbors—influence both domestic policy

making and prospects for economic growth. At the same time, participation in international organizations such as the African Union and SADC reflects aspirations for stability, regional integration, and development.

In sum, the politics of Madagascar stand at the intersection of history, society, and institution building. While the nation's political journey has not always been smooth, each chapter of its history reflects the resilience, aspirations, and agency of its people. This book is designed to provide the foundational knowledge necessary to understand Madagascar's political system, the challenges it faces, and the prospects for more inclusive, stable, and accountable governance in the future.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Context of Malagasy Politics

To truly grasp the intricacies of Malagasy politics, we must first journey back in time, long before the neatly defined republics and constitutional amendments of the modern era. Madagascar's political DNA is deeply intertwined with its pre-colonial history, a tapestry woven with migrations, the rise and fall of kingdoms, and the enduring influence of tradition and social structures. The island, vast and diverse, was not a single political entity for much of its history. Instead, various groups established distinct societies, each with its own forms of governance and social organization.

The initial settlement of Madagascar is a fascinating tale in itself. Around 2,000 years ago, seafarers from Southeast Asia, likely from Borneo, arrived on the island, bringing with them their language, agricultural practices, and cultural norms. Later, Bantu migrants from East Africa crossed the Mozambique Channel, adding to the demographic and cultural mix. This fusion of Austronesian and African influences created the unique Malagasy identity and the Malagasy language, which retains strong links to its Austronesian roots while incorporating Bantu, Arabic, and later, French influences.

Before the emergence of centralized kingdoms, Malagasy society was largely organized into small, localized communities, often centered around the *fokonolona*, or village council. These councils were a traditional form of local self-rule, dealing with community affairs, settling disputes, and managing resources. While the *fokonolona* system has evolved over time and been impacted by various political regimes, the principle of community-level decision-making and local governance remains a historical undercurrent in Madagascar's political thought.

As centuries passed, more complex political structures began to emerge. By the 16th century, several powerful kingdoms had taken shape across the island. Along the western coast, the Sakalava people established formidable kingdoms like Menabé and Boina, which later unified into the Sakalava empire. These kingdoms grew wealthy through maritime trade, including the controversial but economically significant trade in enslaved people, exchanging them for firearms and other goods with European and Arab traders. The eastern coast saw the rise of the Betsimisaraka confederation, a union of coastal peoples. These early kingdoms, with their hierarchical structures and control over trade routes, laid some of the groundwork for larger political entities.

However, it was in the central highlands that a kingdom would rise to eventually dominate much of the island: the Kingdom of Imerina, often referred to as the Merina

Kingdom. Founded in the central plateau around the late 16th century, the Merina people, under rulers like Andriamanelo, began to consolidate power over smaller chiefdoms. The capital of this burgeoning kingdom was established at Antananarivo. The Merina developed sophisticated agricultural techniques, particularly wet-rice cultivation in the marshy areas of the highlands, which provided a stable food source and a valuable trade commodity. This economic base, combined with strategic fortifications, allowed the Merina Kingdom to grow in strength and influence.

A pivotal figure in the history of the Merina Kingdom, and indeed of Madagascar, was King Andrianampoinimerina, who reigned from 1787 to 1810. He is often credited with unifying the fragmented kingdoms of Imerina and laying the ambitious groundwork for the unification of the entire island under Merina rule. Andrianampoinimerina was a shrewd diplomat and a formidable military leader, using both negotiation and conquest to expand his territory. His famous motto, "The border of my rice fields is the sea," clearly articulated his vision of a unified Madagascar. He also implemented administrative and social reforms, including a legal code, land system reorganization, and the establishment of a more centralized administration with appointed governors. These reforms strengthened the kingdom's stability and cohesion.

Andrianampoinimerina's son and successor, Radama I, who ruled from 1810 to 1828, largely fulfilled his father's ambition of unifying the island. Radama I was a modernizer who recognized the growing influence of European powers. He forged alliances, particularly with the British, who were keen to establish trade links and saw the strategic importance of Madagascar. With British support, including military training and firearms, Radama I expanded Merina control over much of the island, though some areas, particularly in the south and west, maintained a degree of independence. During his reign, the Merina court adopted aspects of Western culture, welcomed missionaries who introduced Christianity and helped transcribe the Malagasy language into a written form using the Latin alphabet.

Radama I's reign, however, was followed by a period of reaction under his wife and successor, Queen Ranaivalona I, who ruled for over three decades (1828-1861). Ranaivalona I pursued a policy of isolationism, expelling foreigners and persecuting Malagasy Christians, viewing foreign influence as a threat to traditional Merina culture and sovereignty. Her reign was marked by a harsh autocratic style, with forced labor and political purges. While often portrayed negatively by European accounts, some modern historians view her as a fierce defender of Malagasy independence.

The mid-19th century saw a back-and-forth between isolationist and modernizing tendencies under subsequent Merina rulers, including Radama II, Rasoherina, and Ranaivalona II. A key figure during this period was Rainilaiarivony, a Hova (commoner) who became Prime Minister and effectively ruled by marrying three successive queens. He continued a program of modernization and centralized administration, establishing European-style ministries.

By the late 19th century, the Merina Kingdom had consolidated its control over most of Madagascar, creating a unified state with a centralized government in Antananarivo. However, this period of unification coincided with the peak of European colonial expansion in Africa. France, in particular, had long held ambitions in Madagascar, establishing early trading posts and gradually increasing its influence. The stage was set for a clash between the expanding Merina Kingdom and the encroaching European powers, a conflict that would fundamentally alter the course of Madagascar's political history.

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