2 Madagascar: The 1947–48 Rebellion

The 1947 Malgache uprising is often described as the first genuine nationalist insurgency in post-World War II African history. This characterization usually stems from an assumption that the Democratic Movement for the Malagasy Renovation (MDRM), was solely responsible for persuading its adherents to use force to gain the island’s independence. The MDRM was an organization whose structure resembled that of many modern political parties which were gradually emerging throughout sub-Saharan Africa in the 1940s. Many Malgaches who made the transition from party member to guerrilla in early 1947 did in fact proclaim their loyalty to the MDRM. Nonetheless, comprehensive studies of the uprising make it amply clear that two underground movements, which had been in existence for several years prior to the outbreak of the rebellion, played far more decisive roles in providing leadership to the insurgency and shaping its ideological dimensions. Moreover, the island’s pre-colonial religious and political traditions proved to be a powerful source of inspiration for a rebellion whose reliance on ‘sorcery’ was as surprising as its early military success.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE, RECALLING THE PAST

The MDRM was established on 22 February 1946 and several of its founding members and initial leaders were drawn from an intellectual, generally urban-based, elite. Within a year the party was reported to have as many as 300,000 members.¹ Many of the MDRM’s earliest and most ardent supporters, however, already had participated in two clandestine organizations – the Parti Nationaliste Malgache (Panama), secretly created in 1941, and the Jeunesse Nationaliste Malgache (Jina) established in 1943. Both organizations opposed the colonial regime which had chosen to ally itself with the Vichy government of Nazi-occupied France.²

In the aftermath of the British invasion and liberation of Madagascar in late 1942, the island’s administration was turned over to the Free French forces under General Charles de Gaulle. During the next two years, Jina successfully enlarged its membership in the southern reaches of the island.

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Panama likewise gained additional supporters in the north. Both movements sought to revive nationalist, pro-independence sentiments that had flourished briefly in the late 1920s. In 1946 the two parties merged, having already mobilized a sizeable number of Malgaches, many of whom subsequently joined the MDRM a year later.³

At its most fundamental level, the MDRM easily could be considered what one author has called a pan-Malagasy nationalist movement. The party’s primary goal was to end French colonial rule and obtain the island’s independence.⁴ However, the party also fostered the creation of a network of rural cooperatives, employment bureaus, and centers for technical and social assistance to its members. In some instances, businesses run by French settlers sought out local MDRM leaders to help them formulate labor contracts with farmers and mine workers.⁵

These progressive programs were supplemented by several equally important and emotionally held views which reflected the vibrant influence of traditional Malgache values and beliefs. Many of these principles ultimately motivated the MDRM’s rank and file members in a much more immediate sense than notions of a modern nation-state. The movement’s cause was widely regarded as a struggle to restore what had been lost in 1896 when France abolished the Malgache monarchy and added the island-nation to its colonial holdings.⁶ Unlike most African colonies, Madagascar already had a history of previous independence as a sovereign nation. The restoration of religious and cultural values, suppressed by the imposition of fifty years of French colonialism and an even longer presence of Christian missionaries, reappeared as a compelling motivation for those who had grown increasingly impatient to regain the island’s independence. Many MDRM members who anticipated Madagascar’s future as an independent country also yearned for the revival of a national past free of French culture and Western religious teachings.

RESTLESS REFORMERS, CONSPIRING RADICALS

While the MDRM temporarily combined progressive and traditional perspectives in its political platform, the organization’s leadership ultimately enjoyed much less success in creating a consensus regarding the proper strategy and tactics to pursue toward France. Joseph Raseta, Jacques Rabemanenjara and Joseph Ravoahangy, founding members of the MDRM, were also elected as Malgache representatives to the National Assembly of the Fourth French Republic. Shortly after their arrival in Paris in 1946, the three Malgache parliamentarians introduced a bill