

E-PAPER

Gen Z Against the State: Democracy in Crisis in Madagascar

Youth Resistance Amid Institutional and Regional Failures

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Executive summary

The Gen Z–led uprising in Madagascar in 2025 marks a significant moment for democratic governance in Africa and across Small Island Developing States (SIDs). Sparked by chronic electricity and water shortages, economic precarity, and a widely discredited electoral process, the mobilisation reflected a deeper collapse of domestic political legitimacy rather than a sudden political rupture. For young Malagasy, governance failures were experienced as matters of dignity, survival, and existential security, transforming everyday infrastructure into a catalyst for collective action. The 2025 uprising illustrates how Gen Z mobilisation, rooted in lived experience and sustained through digital, cultural, and emotional infrastructures, can rapidly dismantle entrenched power. Digital platforms enabled coordination, narrative control, and transnational solidarity, while cultural expression reframed protest as collective care and defiance rather than episodic confrontation. Climate vulnerability, geographic isolation, and dependence on external actors magnified governance failures and limited exit options for youth, making protest a strategy of necessity. Nevertheless, the uprising did not resolve structural questions surrounding civilian oversight, institutional accountability, or the role of the military in political transitions. Madagascar’s experience thus underscores a broader dilemma facing youth-led movements in fragile democratic contexts: political disruption does not automatically translate into durable democratic transformation.

1 From Frustration to Coordinated Political Action

Madagascar, a former French colony, is [one of the poorest countries](#) in the world, with decades of underinvestment in public infrastructure, energy systems, and social services. For many young Malagasy, particularly in urban centres such as Antananarivo, [daily life](#) is defined by rolling blackouts, water shortages, unemployment, and rising living costs. These conditions are not new, but by 2025 they reached a breaking point. Electricity and water shortages were more than [service delivery failures](#): they symbolised a state that had ceased to perform its most basic obligations. For Gen Z, a generation that has grown up amid climate shocks, political instability, and digital connectivity, these shortages have been experienced as existential threats rather than temporary inconveniences. Protest slogans and online discourse framed the crisis as one of dignity and survival, collapsing the boundary between socio-economic grievance and political demand. This material frustration intersected with a profound collapse in trust in political institutions. [President Rajoelina](#) returned to power through elections in 2018, but the 2023 [electoral cycle](#) was widely perceived as manipulated and exclusionary. Several opposition candidates [boycotted](#) the election, citing restrictions on rallies, legal disputes over Rajoelina's eligibility, and concerns about the Independent National Electoral Commission. Despite these controversies, Rajoelina was [declared the winner](#) of the November 2023 presidential election in the first round with just over 50% of the vote, securing another term in office. Controversy intensified when Rajoelina [stepped down](#) in September 2023, as required by the constitution, to run for re-election. Senate president Herimanana Razafimahefa initially refused to assume the interim presidency, citing [death threats](#) from individuals allegedly linked to Rajoelina's advisers. When Razafimahefa later reversed his decision, the Senate – dominated by Rajoelina's allies – impeached him for '[mental deficiency](#)'. The Constitutional Court upheld the decision, [prompting opposition](#) claims of an 'institutional coup'. Critics further argued that Rajoelina's naturalisation as a French citizen in 2014 should have disqualified him from running, but the Constitutional Court dismissed the challenge, reinforcing accusations that state institutions had been used to consolidate the incumbent's power.

[Gen Z Madagascar's mobilisation](#) (Gen Z Mada) must be understood against the backdrop of generational political memory and functions as a youth-driven mobilisation rather than a formal organisation. The mobilisation of Gen Z in Madagascar emerged largely online after the detention of several young protesters, which many interpreted as an attempt to silence legitimate dissent. The resulting public outrage was amplified by civil society actors and young activists, giving rise to a loosely coordinated digital movement commonly referred to as 'Gen Z Mada'. Many young protesters were children during the 2009 coup that first brought Rajoelina to power, yet they [inherited its unresolved consequences](#), namely institutional fragility, normalised military intervention, and a politics of exception. Unlike

older generations, Gen Z exhibited little attachment to the myth of democratic gradualism or reverence for political elites. Instead, their political consciousness was shaped by digital exposure to global protest movements, from [Sudan](#) and [Nigeria](#) to [Sri Lanka](#) and [Chile](#). These movements provided both tactical inspiration and emotional validation.

Online comparisons framed Madagascar's crisis as part of a broader global pattern of youth confronting corrupt and unresponsive regimes. This comparative imagination transformed local frustration into a sense of historical agency, whereby many young Malagasy citizens began to see themselves as part of a broader historical moment in which younger generations challenge entrenched political power and demand accountability. This recognition fostered a sense that their actions, whether through protest, digital activism, or public discourse, could contribute to altering Madagascar's political trajectory rather than simply reacting to it. Importantly, Gen Z Mada [rejected](#) traditional party politics and hierarchical leadership. The movement explicitly identified itself as leaderless, decentralised, and horizontal; this was not merely an organisational choice but a political statement. Established political actors were viewed as compromised, co-opted, or irrelevant. Coordination emerged through shared narratives rather than formal structures, allowing the movement to scale rapidly while remaining difficult to suppress.

2 Island Vulnerability and Democratic Rupture

Madagascar's status as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) profoundly [shaped](#) the dynamics of the uprising. SIDSs are characterised by geographic isolation, narrow economic bases, climate vulnerability, and heavy dependence on external actors. In Madagascar, these structural conditions magnified the consequences of governance failures. Electricity shortages, for example, had cascading effects on water access, healthcare, education, and livelihoods. Climate-induced disruptions including cyclones and droughts further strained already weak systems. For youth, the state's inability to manage these interconnected risks confirmed perceptions that existing governance arrangements were fundamentally unfit for purpose. Island vulnerability also intensified the symbolic stakes of protest. The [sense](#) that there was nowhere else to go heightened both desperation and resolve. Migration, often framed as an escape valve in continental contexts, is less accessible for many Malagasy youths. Protest thus emerged as a strategy of necessity rather than choice.

A defining feature of the 2025 uprising was the [stark contrast](#) between domestic rejection and regional endorsement of [President Rajoelina](#). Despite widespread protests and credible allegations of electoral malpractice, Rajoelina continued to enjoy recognition from regional bodies, most notably the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which

[appointed him as its Chair](#) in August 2025 at the 45th Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government, succeeding Zimbabwean President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. This disconnect reinforced perceptions among young people that regional and international institutions prioritise stability and incumbency over democratic substance. The SADC's silence during the 2023 electoral crisis, [despite direct appeals](#) from Madagascar's National Assembly president, was widely interpreted as complicity. When the SADC and later the [African Union](#) (AU) condemned the 2025 coup following Rajoelina's removal, [such statements](#) rang hollow for many Malagasy. Rather than deterring unrest, regional legitimisation of a domestically discredited leader contributed to radicalisation. Protest discourse increasingly framed the struggle as against not only Rajoelina but also a broader system of elite impunity sustained by regional and international actors. In this sense, the uprising represented a rejection of both national and transnational governance failures.

3 Digital, Cultural, and Emotional Strategies of Mobilisation

Gen Z Madagascar's organisational backbone was [digital](#). Private coordination occurred on encrypted platforms such as Signal and Discord, while public messaging unfolded on Instagram and Facebook. This dual structure allowed activists to balance security with visibility. [Digital platforms](#) enabled rapid dissemination of protest calls, real-time updates on security movements, and the circulation of visual evidence of repression. Importantly, they also [facilitated](#) collective decision-making without central leadership. Polls, open discussions, and consensus-building processes replaced hierarchical commands. This [digital-first approach](#) disrupted traditional state strategies of repression. Without identifiable leaders to arrest or co-opt, authorities struggled to dismantle the movement. [Attempts](#) to impose curfews and restrict assemblies only fuelled online mobilisation further, reinforcing narratives of authoritarian overreach.

Beyond logistics, culture also played a central role in sustaining mobilisation. Music, dance, memes, and street art [transformed protest spaces](#) into sites of collective joy and defiance, reframing resistance as life-affirming rather than solely confrontational. Humour and irony were deployed strategically to undermine presidential authority. References to Rajoelina's [own rise to power](#) through a coup [exposed](#) what activists described as the hypocrisy of labelling his removal an 'attempted coup d'état'. These narratives circulated widely online, shaping public opinion and international perception. The [decision](#) of the elite Army Corps of Personnel and Administrative and Technical Services (CAPSAT) unit to side with protesters marked a turning point. [Historically](#) associated with Rajoelina's ascent in 2009, CAPSAT's defection symbolised the complete erosion of elite cohesion. Once soldiers marched alongside protesters and refused orders to fire, the regime's collapse became inevitable. While many

activists celebrated the [military's intervention](#), ambivalence persisted. Findings from the [Afrobarometer public opinion survey](#) reflected both relief and caution, acknowledging the risks of military dominance in transitional periods. This tension underscores the unfinished nature of the Gen Z victory; while the uprising dismantled an illegitimate presidency, it did not resolve deeper questions of civilian control and democratic reconstruction.

4 Lessons for African and Global Small Island Developing States Youth Movements

The Madagascar case captures the ways in which youth-led mobilisation, digital activism, and governance crises intersect in contemporary African politics, and it presents several important lessons for understanding how political legitimacy is contested in fragile democratic contexts.

I. By politicising electricity, water, and everyday precarity, Gen Z Mada connected structural injustice to lived experience. This framing [resonates strongly in SIDS contexts](#), where climate change and infrastructural fragility make governance failures immediately tangible.

II. [Leaderless](#), decentralised organising proved both resilient and scalable. Rather than weakening the movement, the absence of formal leadership enhanced adaptability and collective ownership. Equally important was narrative control. By shaping how events were interpreted domestically and internationally, activists constrained elite efforts to delegitimise the uprising.

III. At the same time, Madagascar's experience offers cautionary lessons. Youth-led mobilisation can dismantle illegitimate power, but sustaining democratic transformation requires institutional engagement beyond protest. The risk of military entrenchment, elite recycling, and external interference remains acute, particularly in small states with limited buffers.

IV. The Malagasy uprising exposes a critical fault line between domestic democratic legitimacy and regional political endorsement. Institutions such as the SADC and the AU are mandated to uphold constitutionalism and democratic governance, yet in practice they often function as clubs of incumbents. Rather than acting as buffers against authoritarian drift, such organisations inadvertently accelerated youth radicalisation by signalling that elections need not be credible to be internationally accepted. This legitimacy gap is not unique to Madagascar. Comparable dynamics

are visible across African and global SIDSs. For instance, [in Comoros](#), repeated electoral disputes and militarised governance have been normalised through external recognition, despite persistent domestic contestation. [In Mauritius](#) – often celebrated as a democratic success story – youth frustration over rising inequality, cost-of-living pressures, and shrinking civic space is increasingly visible, even if it has not yet crystallised into mass mobilisation. What unites these cases is the emergence of Gen Z as a political generation rather than a demographic category.

V. [Gen Z activists](#) across the continent are not merely younger participants in established political processes, they are redefining the terrain of politics itself. They reject delegated representation through parties they view as compromised; politicise infrastructure and service delivery as questions of dignity and rights; and mobilise through affect, humour, and collective care rather than rigid ideology. Digital nativity enables them to bypass traditional gatekeepers, while shared global protest imaginaries foster a sense of transnational solidarity.

VI. The lesson for regional organisations is stark: when domestic legitimacy is hollowed out, external endorsement cannot stabilise governance. For SIDS youth movements, the Malagasy case underscores both the power and the risk of generational mobilisation. While Gen Z can dismantle illegitimate authority with remarkable speed, the absence of responsive regional and continental institutions leaves post-uprising trajectories dangerously open-ended.

5 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Gen-Z-led uprising in Madagascar represents a pivotal moment for democratic governance in Africa and across SIDSs, exposing both the transformative potential of youth mobilisation and the persistent weaknesses of regional and continental governance frameworks. The events of 2025 highlight how movements grounded in lived realities and sustained through digital, cultural, and affective infrastructures can unsettle entrenched power, even when that power continues to enjoy external legitimacy. At the same time, the uprising reveals the precariousness of political transitions in contexts marked by institutional fragility, politicised security forces, and inconsistent regional responses to democratic backsliding. Regimes may retain international and regional recognition while losing domestic legitimacy entirely. For Gen Z protesters in Madagascar, this disjuncture was not abstract or procedural; it was shaped by everyday survival amid economic precarity, climate vulnerability, and chronic governance failure. In such conditions, discredited

elections and regional silence did not stabilise the political order but instead accelerated its rupture.

However, the 'Gen Z Victory' must be approached with caution. While the mobilisation succeeded in dislodging an illegitimate presidency, it left unresolved but fundamental questions concerning civilian oversight, institutional reform, and the role of the military in political transitions. The moment of celebration therefore coexists with deep uncertainty about the trajectory of democratic consolidation. This ambivalence is not unique to Madagascar but reflects a broader dilemma facing youth-led movements in fragile democratic settings, where political rupture does not automatically translate into structural transformation. The Gen Z uprising in Madagascar should therefore be understood not as an endpoint but as a warning and an invitation. It warns that governance systems divorced from lived realities and propped up by external legitimacy are increasingly vulnerable to collapse. It is within this tension between disruption and durability that the most urgent policy and governance lessons from Madagascar's uprising must be situated.

I. Regional organisations such as the SADC and the AU must confront the consequences of selectively applying democratic standards. Endorsing leaders whose domestic legitimacy is widely contested undermines public trust in regional governance and weakens the ability of these bodies to prevent unconstitutional changes of power. Consistent, principled engagement before electoral crises escalate is essential. This includes responding meaningfully to domestic warnings, supporting credible electoral processes, and recognising that stability without legitimacy is inherently unstable.

II. Donors and international partners should recalibrate democracy-support strategies in SIDSs. Youth mobilisation in Madagascar illustrates that investments focused exclusively on electoral cycles and elite institutions are insufficient. Greater support is needed for youth-led civic infrastructure, digital security, political education, and platforms that enable horizontal organising. Such support should respect the autonomy of youth movements rather than seeking to co-opt or formalise them prematurely.

III. Governments in SIDS contexts must recognise that everyday infrastructure is political. Access to electricity, water, housing, and transport is not merely a development issue but a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. Addressing these needs is central to restoring trust between citizens and the state, particularly among young people, for whom precarity defines political consciousness.

IV. Youth movements themselves face a strategic crossroads. The Malagasy experience demonstrates the power of decentralised, leaderless mobilisation and narrative control. However, sustaining democratic gains requires engagement beyond moments of rupture. Building alliances, articulating clear post-uprising demands, and guarding against military or elite capture are critical challenges that will shape whether moments of victory translate into lasting transformation.

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