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Ibrahim Bangura

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# From the streets to the world: youth resistance and the reimagining of global futures in Madagascar

Ibrahim Bangura 

Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the socioeconomic factors shaping youth resistance; the influence of urban spaces and cultural expression on the development of youth political identity; the state's response to youth movements; and the implications of achieving political stability in Madagascar. Furthermore, the study interrogates the possibility of reimagining Madagascar's future on a global scale in the wake of youth-led mobilisation and protests. This research connects immediate material grievances to the formation of political identity and state authority, as well as the broader issue of how youth contestation alters national legitimacy and international standing. To enhance Madagascar's international prospects, young people must be recognised as important political actors, and governance frameworks that translate unrest into sustainable inclusion must be established. Moreover, the ongoing youth mobilisation in Madagascar suggests unresolved struggles affect the nation's internal political trajectory and, through digital media, its evolving global standing.

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Youth; Gen-Z; social movement; resistance; global future; Madagascar

## Introduction

In late September 2025, protests led by youth (Gen Z) in Antananarivo, Madagascar, escalated rapidly. By mid-October, the crisis culminated in a military takeover that removed President Andry Rajoelina from office. The sequence of events has particular significance: initially, mobilisation began in the streets and online, and later, an elite military faction formalised leadership changes. In general, 'Generation Z' or 'Zoomers' denotes the generation born between 1997 and 2012,<sup>1</sup> many of whom in Madagascar are politically socialised through public spaces they engineer with their peers. According to Bukhari, (2025), Generation Z has grown online, and their social media use influences political activism.

Although the protests originated from shortages of essential goods and services, economic difficulties, and unemployment, the main triggers were prolonged water shortages and power outages in Antananarivo. The crisis quickly spread nationwide, destabilising the government. The authorities reacted by imposing a curfew in the capital amid intensifying protests and looting. According to the United Nations (UN), at least 22 people were killed, and over 100 were injured during unrest in 2025. Following the escalation of violence, security forces intervened to restore order, and the president fled to France, citing safety concerns.

Following the coup, the CAPSAT-linked military leadership announced an interim arrangement, with Colonel Michaël Randrianirina as Head of State and Herintsalama Rajaonarivelo as Prime Minister. Youth activists criticised this move as non-transparent and insufficiently consultative (Mohamed, 2025). Activists emphasised the insufficiency of simply changing the government without implementing substantial structural reforms, stating that 'our revolution will not be hijacked. Malagasy youth are watching and mobilising' (Mohamed, 2025). This response indicates that their resistance will continue until they achieve meaningful change. Malagasy youth were inspired by similar Gen Z mobilisation in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where youth-led protests contributed to political transformation (Caramel, 2025; Dieterich et al., 2025).

**CONTACT** Ibrahim Bangura  [bangural@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bangural@yahoo.co.uk)

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Social media enables some Gen Z individuals to become aware of shared grievances and their capacity to self-mobilise. Such movements foster a collective global imaginary of generational resistance and political possibility. As described by Tommaso Durante ‘the “global imaginary” is understood as a set of ideas, values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people make sense of the world and imagine their daily life’ (Durante, 2020, p. 1). These imaginaries are being effectively modelled and used by youth, alongside social media, to enhance their agency and perspectives on socio-political issues in their own contexts.

The significance of the 2025 protests preceding the coup in Madagascar was that they not only facilitated political development but also contributed to young people’s growing awareness of their agency and collective influence. Apart from voicing dissatisfaction, youth increasingly came to perceive themselves as political actors entitled to demand accountability, dignity, and inclusion and to challenge those who claim to speak for ‘the people’. Malagasy youth became much more vocal after the protests than before, linking their struggles to other youth movements and framing their generation as part of the broader politics of refusal worldwide. This indicates a broader global shift in which young people mobilise against not only a specific regime but also structural exclusions embedded in political and economic systems (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2016; Honwana, 2019). Therefore, Malagasy youth mobilisation is aspirational because it challenges existing power structures and envisions alternative, improved forms of political participation and belonging.

Furthermore, the development of a shared global imaginary among Gen Z protesters worldwide indicates their common experiences of grievances, such as corruption, exclusion from decision-making, and socioeconomic mobility limitations, rather than ideological uniformity. The political importance of this imaginary lies in its role in helping young people interpret local struggles through global reference points, thereby legitimising these protests and making them achievable. Such imaginaries are often maintained through symbolic references and the circulation of success and failure narratives through digital media (Gerbaudo, 2017). In Madagascar, these circulating narratives have helped sustain mobilisation and shape expectations regarding meaningful change.

During the 2025 coup, more than half of Madagascar’s population was aged 20 years or younger (Savage & Rahenintsoa, 2025), whereas 68.9% was aged 30 years or younger (Covell et al., 2025). Based on demographic strength, the power and influence of the country’s mass youth protests can be partially explained by its population structure. However, the mere presence of numerous young people is not sufficient to effect change; they must be mobilised to harness power. With widespread access, digital technology can play a catalytic role in mobilising young people. This trend is similar to that observed in other parts of the world, especially South Asia, as stated by Khan et al. (2026, p. 169):

South Asia has entered a new political era in which youth-led mobilisations are directly reshaping state power. From Sri Lanka’s Aragalaya in July 2022 that forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee, to Pakistan where Imran Khan was removed on 10 April 2022 through a no-confidence motion that brought the PDM coalition to power, to Bangladesh where Sheikh Hasina resigned on 5 August 2024 after student-led uprisings, and most recently Nepal where Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli stepped down on 9 September 2025 following Gen Z-driven demonstrations, the region has witnessed successive upheavals but also a generational demand for more accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance.

This study addresses the following key questions: (1) What socioeconomic factors influence the resistance of Malagasy youth? (2) How do urban environments and cultural expression shape the formation of the political identities of youth in Madagascar? (3) How does the state respond to youth movements, and what are the implications for stability in Madagascar? (4) What are the prospects and implications of reimagining Madagascar’s global future after youth-led mobilisation? These questions connect immediate material grievances with political identity and the development of state power, as well as the broader issue of how youth contestation affects national legitimacy and international standing.

This study is rooted in social movement theory, specifically, political process theory. Political process theory highlights the significance of political opportunities, mobilising structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires. Additionally, it examines the interaction between movement attributes such as organisational structure and broader economic and political contexts (Caren, 2007).

## Methods

The study reported here adopted a small-scale ethnographic approach using semi-structured interviews with 63 individuals aged 19–70 years. Among them, 41 (28 men and 13 women) were 18–28 years old,

mostly students, whereas the remaining 22 (13 men and 9 women) included academics, policymakers, civil society activists, and international development experts working in Madagascar. Data collection was supported by four local researchers (two men and two women), aged 24–35 years, all of whom were experienced in conducting research on young people in their country. Face-to-face data collection was conducted in Antananarivo, the capital city of Madagascar. However, interviews with people in other parts of the country and international experts who have worked in Madagascar but are now outside the country were conducted virtually, through Microsoft Teams or by telephone. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit the participants. The respondents selected through purposive sampling were those with whom local researchers had previously collaborated during protests or on assignments in Madagascar. They also included those with whom the author had worked in Madagascar, as well as those identified for their relevant experience working with young people and governance in the country. These respondents also referred additional potential participants to the study, enabling further engagement by the author and local researchers. The author conducted interviews in English, whereas the local researchers conducted interviews in French and Malagasy.

Due to the country's sensitive political situation, the respondents' identities were not disclosed to ensure their safety. Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. Using this tool, the data were coded into thematic areas. This analysis helped frame the study's respective sections.

### ***Historical and political context of malagasy youth mobilisation***

As most respondents indicated, youth movements have consistently played a significant role in Madagascar's national politics since independence. Young people often shape the agenda of contention across multiple protests, acting as early mobilisers and visible public faces expressing numerous grievances. State responses to such protests tend to follow the familiar spectrum of repression, selective concession, and occasional negotiations; however, these responses rarely ensure the lasting institutional inclusion of protestors' wishes. These dynamics have resulted in political change through episodes of rupture, bargaining, and contestation rather than democratisation. Based on these dynamics, a review of Malagasy's political history highlights both the political importance of youth protests and their marginalisation from formal governance outcomes following crisis settlement. Political process theory is essential for understanding these dynamics and the context in which young people function in Madagascar.

Even before French colonisation, Madagascar's political landscape featured long-standing patterns of domination, extraction, and resistance. The island was organised into multiple polities, with the Merina Kingdom becoming prominent in the nineteenth century through its territorial expansion and consolidation of authority over other regions. This expansion was maintained through tribute systems, whereby labour obligations that imposed heavy demands were imposed on ordinary households, particularly adult men, who were expected to provide two months of unpaid work each year for state projects and elite interests. This frequently caused people to rebel against the royal authorities. Furthermore, the people resisted the kingdom's openness to French colonisation, resulting in intermittent, widespread revolts (Saitis, 2022).

During the colonial period, coercive labour regimes intensified their regressive actions to serve French administrative and economic priorities. As in many Francophone settings, young men and often adolescents were attracted to exploitative labour practices, military recruitment, and compulsory work on colonial infrastructure and extractive projects. Many Malagasy communities considered these practices a continuation of bondage-like control over labour and mobility, rather than merely taxation or civic duty. They were widely interpreted as disguised forms of slavery. Furthermore, these practices excluded youth, particularly educated secondary students, from nation-building efforts in Madagascar and largely confined them to a low-cost labour force (Gendreau, 2021; Ralaingita et al., 2022).

After Madagascar gained independence in 1960, its youth began to be seen not as a future workforce but rather as symbols of hope and dreams for a Malagasy future. They became active political participants who shaped Madagascar's independence (Rabanoro, 2024). In the second half of the 20th century, Malagasy youth played a significant role in shaping the political landscape by taking to the streets, resulting in the fall of two regimes, one in 1972 and the other in 1991 (Ramasy, 2018).

Historical continuities in youth resistance reveal the persistence of coercive labour regimes and extractive governance as primary drivers of mobilisation. From satisfying precolonial *corvée* obligations, or precolonial forced labour, through performing colonial forced labour, to post-independence economic marginalisation, young people have consistently held structurally vulnerable positions within the production and political authority systems. Scholars of Malagasy political history argue that this pattern has fostered a political culture in which resistance is considered a legitimate response to perceived injustice, particularly among younger generations with limited access to institutional power (Campbell, 2018).

However, over time, youth mobilisation in Madagascar has become fragmented, episodic, and unevenly organised, rendering it vulnerable to state surveillance and repression. Nonetheless, recurring mobilisation indicates that youth activism is a latent political force that emerges as structural pressure deepens. This perspective aligns with analyses of African youth politics, which highlight the oscillation between political marginalisation and occasional moments of collective assertion (Asante & Helbrecht, 2018; Van Gyampo & Anyidoho, 2019).

The first major event that highlighted active social independence movements in Madagascar was the Rotaka protests, which took place between 1971 and 1972. Initially, University of Antananarivo students led the protests; however, they were later joined by farmers and young urban residents, who protested against economic stagnation and the administration's colonial-era stance (Razafindrakoto et al., 2020). Security forces responded with violence by shooting student protesters, which enhanced public support. Finally, Tsiranana resigned, and a transitional government was established, marking an important instance in which youth mobilisation contributed to a regime's collapse (Razafindrakoto et al., 2020).

A second important episode occurred between 1990 and 1992, during the pro-democracy movement that protested President Didier Ratsiraka's authoritarian regime. Youth organisations and students spearheaded the movement by organising strikes and demonstrations, occupying key public spaces, and using campuses and urban sites to channel widespread frustration into collective political pressure. Although the state initially attempted to suppress the movement through repression and intimidation tactics, it was eventually forced to negotiate due to the scale and resilience of the movement. This led to the signing of a transitional agreement, constitutional amendments, and arrangements for democratic elections. This indicates a partial shift in the state's strategy from a repressive approach to a negotiated settlement and clarifies that bargaining processes are largely controlled by political elites rather than by youth social movements (Conduto & Sanches, 2019; Razafindrakoto et al., 2020).

In 2009, Malagasy youth became central participants in national contention, joining demonstrations, confronting security forces, establishing roadblocks. Consequently, they suffered from the reactions of the state security actors, who used violence against them (Ratsimbaharison, 2017). The 2009 political crisis highlighted the evolution of the relationship between youth mobilisation and elite contestation. Andry Rajoelina, then mayor of Antananarivo, capitalised on the widespread dissatisfaction among young people in particular and presented his policies as different from those in place. Although civil protests led to President Ravalomanana's removal from office, the conflict intensified. Finally, negotiations at the highest level, facilitated by subregional organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), led to the signing of agreements. These agreements, signed in Maputo and Addis Ababa, clarified power-sharing arrangements that did not address the social and economic issues that sparked youth protests (Alihodžić & Matatu, 2019; Kotzé, 2019). This indicates how youth-led unrest can be exploited in elite power struggles, often leading to the exclusion of youth from the negotiation process. Therefore, this case illustrates a durable pattern, whereby youth-led mobilisation can supply the energy and legitimacy of rupture. At the same time, political elites reassert control through negotiation processes that marginalise youth voices and narrow the scope of reforms to satisfy elite power balances.

### ***Socioeconomic conditions affecting malagasy youth resistance***

Madagascar has long struggled with issues such as poverty, poor governance, and youth marginalisation, which have frequently created political instability in the country. More than 75% of Madagascar's population lives in poverty, with over 50% experiencing extreme deprivation (World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, young people are disproportionately affected, particularly in rural communities that rely on subsistence

farming (Andriariniaina, 2017). Therefore, poverty in these areas limits access to food sources during the preharvest period. Consequently, April and May are sometimes called the 'hungry season' (Andriariniaina, 2017). One teacher interviewed opined:

Malagasy people have persistently faced economic hardship, poverty, and destitution. There is little difference in the suffering of men and women, as governments have, over the years, failed us all. Rural areas mainly rely on subsistence farming, which is unsustainable and creates gaps in food security. Therefore, there are times during the year, such as the second quarter, when people struggle to survive. This often leads to tension between citizens and the state.<sup>2</sup>

As noted by most respondents, the high cost of education and widespread distrust of the system and society cause many young people to discontinue schooling before attaining a level of education that makes them employable. Those who continue their education in rural areas are increasingly drawn to cities because of the availability of higher education (Andriariniaina, 2017). This creates a double bind: despite investing in schooling, rural households may not see any local return. Simultaneously, young people who migrate to cities face fierce competition and limited opportunities in urban labour markets. Consequently, rural communities do not benefit notably from higher education; for them, education is not a guaranteed route to mobility but rather a risky investment with uncertain outcomes.

BTI Project (2025) indicated a significant decline in commitment to democratic institutions and freedom of expression in Madagascar over the past 20 years. Despite not showing a decreasing trend, economic indicators remained low for an extended period (Rabearisoa, 2025). This combination of political disillusionment and long-term economic stagnation created a sense of a blocked future, and citizens experience limitations in both their voice and opportunities. These deeply rooted issues not only intensify young people's grievances but also exacerbate more visible problems, such as power and water outages (Njiraini, 2025).

These socioeconomic issues have worsened owing to population growth and limited job opportunities. Currently, Madagascar's employment market cannot accommodate the increasing number of young people seeking employment, resulting in underemployment. For many youth, particularly those in major cities, reliance on family connections without a stable income often leads to a loss of dignity and social standing. Such circumstances contribute to a crisis of social reproduction, in which young people are unable to achieve socially expected life paths despite expending consistent effort (Honwana, 2019). All of the participants in this study found this situation frustrating and considered it a major concern. A youth activist said,

Most of us left university a few years ago but have never been able to find employment. We feel let down by the system, yet we also believe our families sometimes feel disappointed in us, even if they do not express it. Relying on someone else is frustrating and makes us feel less than human. Our dignity and quality of life are consistently undermined.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, a security expert working in Madagascar stated,

Madagascar has a young population that presents opportunities for the country; however, failing to empower and prepare them for national development poses challenges that should not be overlooked. The state has not sought to develop platforms to engage youth in how best to support them in shaping their future. The state is not involved in their lives, which is tragic.<sup>4</sup>

Most interviewees agreed that the state had not prioritised lifting youth out of poverty, but had instead left them to navigate a precarious socioeconomic landscape on their own, where they could not compete. Moreover, most respondents argued that the state's failure to address young people's needs and aspirations led them to disengage from the political process and seek alternatives, such as street protests or online activism, rather than voting. Furthermore, some respondents confirmed a decade-long trust deficit between political elites and young people. This trust deficit fostered increasing awareness of their agency and capacity to self-mobilise and challenge the state, culminating in the October 2025 protests.

The 2025 youth-led protests were the direct result of ongoing water and electricity shortages in Antananarivo. These protests quickly grew beyond addressing service-delivery problems to encompass deeper structural problems, including corruption, poverty, and political accountability; protestors demanded Rajoelina's resignation. These protests, which were predominantly organised through social media, focused on changing organisational methods and challenging dominant narratives (Reuters, 2025a).

Three key analytical features emerged from these episodes. First, although Malagasy youth movements often originate from socioeconomic grievances, they escalate into widespread political challenges. Second, state responses include coercion, concession, and co-optation; frequently, repression serves to legitimise rather than delegitimise protests. Third, negotiation processes generally occur among elites alone, perhaps with international mediation, whereas youth actors can sustain contestation only outside formal decision-making arenas. This two-arena dynamic explains many aspects of young people's revolutionary stance and Madagascar's political instability.

The exclusion of young people from the negotiation process raises questions regarding the sustainability of political solutions arising from the crisis. Although elite bargaining may provide short-term stability, it does not address the root causes of unrest. Comparative research on negotiated transitions indicates that non-inclusive agreements are highly likely to fail, because young people may consider them illegitimate.

In Madagascar, this persistent pattern has caused cyclical instability rather than ongoing reform. Despite being able to initiate political change, youth movements are largely excluded from formal decision-making. This exclusion sustains a political environment in which conflict, rather than participation, becomes the only effective means for younger generations to engage. Political process theory is critical to the analysis of youth agency and their ability to foster and be included in the change processes in their country.

Finally, youth movements in Madagascar clearly demonstrate how young people's protests can challenge the power structures that shape the country's politics. However, the State continues to rely on the principles of accommodation to govern its relationships and negotiations.

### ***Urban spaces, cultural expression, and the formation of youth political identity***

The 1972 student movement was the first political insurrection of Madagascar's post-independence period. Micheline Ravololonarisoa, one of the movement's leaders, stated in her interviews that as a child, she was not interested in politics, partly because she found it patriarchal. However, like many other students, she joined student federations to deepen her understanding of social justice and peace, and to connect with global networks. Accordingly, she and her colleagues began developing their political identity (ROAPE, 2024). Further, she explained that student representatives often determined the movement's direction, and that even in 1972, they drew inspiration from students in similar circumstances elsewhere in the world. Therefore, even before the spread of digital communication, youth movements retained their transnational nature, despite the limited technology available at the time.

During the 1972 protests, the influence of the organisation Unemployed Youth of Madagascar (ZOAM) exceeded the Malagasy government's expectations. The group was primarily comprised of residents of Antananarivo's poor districts, and its members were predominantly individuals who had moved to urban areas seeking work but had failed to find employment. ZOAM was active during the Malagasy protests, working to defend unarmed protesters (ROAPE, 2024). The group's protection enabled protesters to gather in designated urban spaces, a move that played a crucial role in shaping the political identity of the youth.

Cities such as Antananarivo serve not only as protest sites but also as places where diverse social groups can meet, exchange ideas, and form collective identities. Due to limited safe spaces and platforms for engagement, youth used public squares, university campuses, and other communal spaces to connect. These locations facilitated political engagement, particularly among young people who migrate from rural areas for education or employment. Respondents clarified that young people from rural areas bond with one another, establish relationships based on shared challenges, and create social spaces for engagement.

Research on urban youth movements indicates that such spaces facilitate the transformation of individual frustration into collective action by promoting shared cultural practices including music, language, and symbolic expression (McGarry et al., 2020; Simone & Pieterse, 2017). In Madagascar, songs, slogans, and symbols have both an offline and online presence during protests. This presence fosters social cohesion and enables individuals who are not members of any specific political organisation to feel a sense of belonging with other protesters.

However, even within these spaces, the main feature of youth movements in Madagascar is their ability to motivate young people to self-mobilise and shape their political language and identity. Young people's political awareness enabled the October 2025 protests to rapidly develop into a massive movement. According to most respondents, the use of graffiti, poetry, and music as sociopolitical forms of expression

not only captured their peers' imaginations but also resonated with the wider population. Although many protesters were killed, these expressions prompted security actors to switch sides and the president to flee the country.

### ***Digital activism and transnational connectivity among malagasy youth***

The motivation underlying Madagascar's recent coup was not military; military involvement began only after the youth-led Gen Z protests. The interviews clarified that social media played a key role in mobilising the youth and maintaining protests. Most of the interviewed youth opined that the decentralised nature of digital activism nullified the need for individuals to gather in a specific physical location to foster a sense of connection. Rather, they could quickly and widely spread messages to mobilise their peers through applications such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. As access to the Internet increases globally, young people are also evolving in the social media space, reengineering it to contest marginalisation and bad governance, as argued by Obisesan (2022, p. 108):

...youths, through the use of social media, have not only evolved from an identity of stable consumers of news and political narratives but have also become sources of newsfeeds, and trendy agenda framers concerning leadership, accountability and good governance within the polity. African youth have also embraced social media. This is in connection with their rich history of failed governance, which manifests in various forms of marginalisation.

Similar points were made by a youth activist interviewed during this study:

The availability of the Internet and social media has made it easier for us to connect with our peers, both in the country and in the diaspora. Even when the state began blocking Internet access, our peers in the diaspora helped spread our messages and videos. It was a revolution beyond boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

According to most respondents, young people in Madagascar used social media in various ways during protests, including posting photos and videos of violations by security actors, issuing calls for mobilisation, and raising awareness among Malagasy and non-Malagasy audiences on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. As most respondents indicated, these methods succeeded in capturing the public imagination and mobilising support for youth protests within and outside the country.

However, the State generally considers social media and digital activism threats to social norms. Hence, using such tools to influence political change requires significant effort (Tufekci, 2017). As Chitukutuku (2022, p. 52), 'the increased militarisation and securitisation of the state by the ruling elite in Africa has closed down space for criticising and engaging with the state for many actors, including the youth'. This trend is increasingly concerning as the continent experiences a third wave of military coups, with governments becoming more autocratic, securitised, and repressive (Akinola & Makombe, 2025).

In Madagascar, this became evident when the government censored the media, rendering resistance impossible without a change in strategy. By then, social media had already heightened public awareness and helped people realise that an increasing number of Malagasy youth were experiencing similar grievances (Bukhari, 2025). Through digital outreach by influencers and dissenting voices, Malagasy people's use of online media sparked a series of small-scale protests in Antananarivo. Social media amplified protesters' aims and visibility, initiating a nationwide movement (Rabearisoa, 2025). Accordingly, although achieving political change through digital activism alone is complex, digital tools, when used broadly, can effectively build resistance. In this case, no direct link existed between the digital and physical spaces; rather, ongoing interaction fuelled the growth of resistance.

As protests intensified, Malagasy youth used the Internet to overcome geographical barriers. They fostered a transnational sense of unity among Malagasy youth, particularly among individuals in the diaspora, even when they were not physically together. As most respondents stated, Madagascar had already implemented social media controls before the 2025 coup, because the Rajoelina government considered social media a political threat.

According to Shi (2025), three digital strategies played crucial roles in the 2025 Gen Z protests: leaderless coordination, hybrid mobilisation with transnational amplification, and a challenge to information control. The use of new communication platforms, such as Discord and the Bluetooth-based offline messenger

BitChat, enabled Gen Z to coordinate among themselves without Internet access, thereby undermining traditional tactics for preventing communication. These methods hindered coordination by targeting small, difficult-to-identify groups driven by only a few individuals.

Social media inspired Malagasy youth by presenting examples from other countries. Malagasy youth not only drew inspiration from abroad but also actively engaged with the youth of Nepal, Indonesia, and Morocco, receiving tactical advice on making ground resistance more effective (Shi, 2025). Furthermore, although migrants in the Malagasy diaspora cannot vote in Madagascar, even with Madagascar nationality, they can participate in Malagasy politics through digital means such as blogging or mobilising people via posts (Andrianimanana & Roca-Cuberes, 2021). Andrianimanana and Roca-Cuberes (2021) analysed over 1,000 blog posts on Malagasy politics, finding that most focused on political situations, informed audiences, and/or started conversations. Moreover, Malagasy youth living abroad expressed solidarity through blogs and other digital channels to bolster local resistance.

Authoritarian regimes often control the content and flow of information, particularly during periods of political unrest, and Madagascar is no exception. However, according to respondents, protesters challenged such control over information flow early on. The young interviewees stated that they outsmarted the regime's information control strategies by spreading rumours of a possible revolution before initiating protests. Furthermore, they took photographs and videos of events and sought the names of the officers who were shooting and killing protesters. These tactics significantly helped neutralise the brute force applied by officials against protesters. As explained by the interviewees, the naming of security actors involved in the violence caused some actors to resign from their posts or flee the country.

Accordingly, protesters succeeded in shaping narratives about protests and counteracting the dominance of the state's propaganda machinery in social spaces. Moreover, protestors' access to real-time information from other movements enabled Malagasy activists to anticipate government responses. This idea of knowledge sharing or protest diffusion not only improves protest effectiveness but also enhances the government's concern regarding external influences (Huang et al., 2019; Ruijgrok, 2017). During the Malagasy protests, the idea of an external struggle within a generational attack on political regimes was reinforced through knowledge exchange. According to a journalist who monitored the protests:

I had never seen such determination among Malagasy youth. They were meticulous and ensured they countered every piece of government propaganda. Beyond this, they monitored the movements of government officials, including the president. They ensured that every tactic the state employed failed. The state eventually realised that no form of intimidation would quiet the youth, which prompted the president to flee the country.<sup>6</sup>

The use of decentralised and encrypted communication tools reflects a broad shift in protest strategies during digital surveillance and repression. Scholars have highlighted a growing emphasis on resilience over visibility in today's movements and have clarified that adaptable networks prefer to respond quickly to state-level measures (Treré, 2018). By utilising multiple communication channels, Malagasy protesters could maintain continuous links among themselves despite censorship; therefore, digital innovation reduced the state's capacity to repress citizen mobilisation.

### ***State's reaction to youth protests in Madagascar***

According to most respondents, the state's response consistently followed a familiar pattern over time. A Malagasy aid worker stated:

The Malagasy political elites have never succeeded in understanding how best to engage their youth. They quickly resort to violence even when they can choose to engage their youth constructively. The violence hardens the position of youth, with them resorting to pushing the government out of power.<sup>7</sup>

Most interviewees found it surprising that despite the president being young, from the grassroots, and a beneficiary of youth support, all of which helped him attain his office, he failed by marginalising youth, as his predecessors had. At the beginning of the 2025 protests, the government imposed curfews, deployed security forces, and sought to reassert control by initiating dialogue and promising reforms (Reuters, 2025b). However, state-afflicted violence soon resulted in 22 deaths and the injury of more than 100 people. The violence was

widely condemned, with Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East and Southern Africa, stating the following in a press release issued on 2 October 2025:

Protest is not a crime; it is a right. Instead of respecting, facilitating, and protecting the protesters, the authorities have resorted to an outdated 75-year-old repressive law to justify the use of unlawful force in response to protests. This law gives security forces sweeping powers to crack down on protests and criminalise participation, in blatant violation of Madagascar's human rights obligations under international law (Amnesty International, 2025: 1).

Similarly, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, expressed shock at the violent response of security forces and stated the following in a press release on 29 September 2025:

I urge the security forces to desist from the use of unnecessary and disproportionate force and to immediately release all arbitrarily detained protesters. International human rights law is particularly strict on the use of firearms; they can only be used by law enforcement officers when strictly necessary to protect life or prevent serious injury from an imminent threat (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).

Upon realising that the use of violence did not yield the results the president had envisaged, Türk replaced some government officials and promised to implement reforms. The leaders of the protesters generally disregarded these promises, labelling them superficial measures to sustain elite control. According to most respondents, the president would have suppressed protests if he had more time.

The military, which protected the government, eventually supported protesters. Further, factional divisions within the military once again proved crucial to shifts in power and the use of protests as leverage for a coup. Most interviewees argued that the army was opportunistic and changed sides on realising its ability to replace the president.

Most of the interviewed individuals were uncertain about the military regime and preferred a swift return to civilian rule centred on young people. Further, the respondents' trust in the military was very limited because they felt that the army generally acted against civilians when prompted by political elites.

### ***Reimagining Madagascar's global future: implications and possibilities***

Youth movements should be understood not only as catalysts for internal political change but also as agents that increasingly engage, directly or indirectly, with global integration, development pathways, and issues of political legitimacy. At the international level, Madagascar has long occupied a structurally marginal position, characterised by high dependence on external aid, vulnerability to global economic and climate shocks, and heightened international attention, particularly during political crises. Youth-led mobilisations challenge this pattern in at least two ways. First, youth movements question development trajectories by contesting governance arrangements involving corruption, elite capture, and service delivery failures (Razafindrakoto et al., 2020). Second, recent waves of mobilisation have highlighted an increasing awareness of similar protests worldwide, particularly in Africa, including the strategic use of digital platforms. This reflects an emerging political consciousness that situates Malagasy struggles within broader global debates on inequality, governance, and generational justice (Rabearisoa, 2025).

However, translating youth mobilisation into a reimagined global future has limitations. As shown earlier, post-crisis negotiation processes in Madagascar consistently prioritise elite stability over structural change, treating youth mobilisation as a destabilising force to be contained rather than as a legitimate constituency for institutional inclusion. Power-sharing agreements and transition strategies, which regional and global organisations typically facilitate, have resulted in narrow reform efforts and diminished youth demands, particularly after the subsidence of the unprecedented crisis in the regimes (Kotzé, 2019). Since this pattern undermines the institutionalisation of youth demands, Madagascar's global standing continues to be determined more by crisis management approach by the state than by a clear, long-term vision. This trend weakens the formal recognition of youth claims and perpetuates a situation in which protest is the primary route to acknowledgement, while governance reforms remain superficial. Consequently, Madagascar's international positioning is driven more by episodic crisis management and 'stability-first' diplomacy than by a coherent long-term strategy that addresses the root causes of youth unrest (International Crisis Group, 2010; Kotzé, 2019).

Simultaneously, youth mobilisation offers significant opportunities to develop innovative approaches to political participation and strengthen state legitimacy. The movement's focus on everyday governance issues, such as access to water, electricity, employment, and dignity, shifts political debate away from elite competition towards citizens' lived experiences. This change affects how Madagascar engages with international partners, including donors, multilateral organisations, and regional bodies. A political system that emphasises inclusive participation and accountability is well-positioned to negotiate fair terms (BTI Project, 2025). Apart from being a national phenomenon, youth mobilisation is a response to demographic pressures, the economic marginalisation of youth, and global inequalities. Further, the case of Madagascar indicates that peripheral states are no longer passively subject to global forces (Razafindrakoto et al., 2020).

Therefore, reimagining Madagascar's global future involves focusing not only on governance reforms but also on international engagement. Development partnerships that prioritise stability over inclusion risk reinforce the dynamics that generate youth mobilisation. Conversely, approaches that support young people's political participation, transparency, and social investment may foster sustainable political solutions. Youth inclusion is not merely a social policy concern, but rather a key aspect of political stability and legitimacy, particularly in young societies (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Ultimately, the Malagasy example demonstrates how youth movements mirror and catalyse political change. Structural inequalities that shape daily life, such as poverty, failures in service delivery, and exclusion from decision-making, also foster new political aspirations and notions of legitimacy. Whether these visions lead to lasting change depends on the ability of domestic and international actors to move beyond crisis management and elite-focused approaches and instead establish credible inclusion pathways. This involves reforms that safeguard civic space, expand participation in transition processes, and target the material causes of grievances rather than merely stabilising leadership outcomes. However, to further strengthen youth's capacity and agency, the state and its development partners need to invest in civic education. This would help enhance moral consciousness among young people and build their ability to self-mobilise and defend their rights.

Youth movements in Madagascar can mirror and influence the state's core tensions and its role in the global community. These movements repeatedly highlight their ability to challenge entrenched power structures and drive political change. However, exclusive negotiation processes and limited institutional engagement hinder their capacity to effect real transformation. Therefore, rethinking Madagascar's international prospects requires recognising young people's vital role in politics and establishing governance and negotiation frameworks that can transform unrest into permanent inclusion. Ongoing youth mobilisation emphasises the unresolved nature of this struggle, affecting Madagascar's internal political trajectory and its evolving global standing through digital media.

## Conclusions

The 2025 protests in Madagascar indicated a pivotal moment in the island's history, in which youth once again played a decisive role in affecting regime change. The protest was different from previous ones because it linked immediate grievances, particularly service delivery failures, economic hardships, and exclusion, with broader questions of democratic legitimacy. Accordingly, the protests were not merely a reaction to governance failure but an effort to redefine democracy for a generation experiencing the state's absence, repression, and indifference to social expectations.

Using political process theory, this study contends that youth have consistently been marginalised over the years by forced labour, economic marginalisation, inequalities in access to education, and elite-led politics. However, this contention is contradictory; even when youth protests lead to a regime's downfall or a new political transition, young people are systematically suppressed once negotiations begin.

The 2025 instance highlights how physical spaces and culture shape politics. The city, public spaces, campuses, squares, and neighbourhoods are central to the transformation of private frustration into collective action. Simultaneously, culture offers a shared language of belonging that extends beyond the immediate moment of a protest. The 2025 protests clarified how the available digital technologies enhanced the significance of these spaces. Instead of merely using social networks to voice discontent, the Malagasy youth movement utilised a resilient communication system that could resist Internet censorship and challenge the state's control over information. In this context, social media movements strengthen street politics rather than replace them.

Transnational connections are particularly important because they influence Malagasy youth's interpretation of their political landscape. The global image of Gen Z mobilisation does not suggest rallying for a uniform ideology; rather, it indicates a growing belief that corruption can be challenged, exclusion need not be permanent, and politics can be shaped, even when institutions are sealed off. By observing how other movements gain concessions, face repression, or co-opt, young protesters become better equipped to anticipate similar trajectories at home, adapt tactics to suit the circumstances, and resist elite capture of protest outcomes.

Therefore, there is no doubt that Malagasy youth can influence the regime under which they live. However, the question of whether disruption can be institutionalised as inclusion requires further examination. If postcrisis settlements maintain their current focus on elite stability at the expense of broad participation, the likely outcome would be a return to instability. This instability manifests as protests, the primary form of political expression, followed by negotiated solutions that lack a solid foundation for restoring lost legitimacy, particularly in a political system in which the numerical strength of excluded generations directly influences the political future. The absence of any shift towards greater inclusivity in Malagasy politics will perpetuate political disruption.

Finally, Madagascar's international future depends not only on Malagasy politics but also on its global engagement. International actors who focus solely on crisis management in Madagascar risk further damaging the nation's politics, which is characterised by the systematic exclusion of youth from governance. However, strategic international alliances centred on transparency, accountability, and sectoral equity could facilitate a shift in Malagasy politics from ruptures to a more negotiated and legitimate political process. Therefore, youth resistance in Malagasy politics is more than merely a domestic political event; rather, it clarifies how youth majorities in peripheral politics challenge governance on their own terms and use digital networks to connect their local politics to international concerns. Additionally, global political movements should help shape a sustainable political future in Madagascar, rather than merely stabilising the current situation.

## Endnotes

1. See: BBC bitesize (n.d). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zf8kfdm>.
2. Interview conducted in Antananarivo on 1 December 2025.
3. Interview conducted in Antananarivo on 3 December 2025.
4. Interview conducted virtually on 23 November 2025.
5. Interview conducted in Antananarivo on 12 November 2025.
6. Interview conducted virtually on 16 November 2025.
7. Interview conducted on 12 December 2025.

## ORCID

Ibrahim Bangura  0000-0002-9070-5391

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