

## **Madagascar 4: an untold story**

(Danamona Andrianarimanana)

Have you ever heard of Madagascar? Not the movie. The country. The island nation of twenty million people located off the southeastern coast of Africa. Today, I want to tell you an untold story about that Madagascar, my country.

I left Madagascar for the first time in 2007, when I was seventeen. I had won the only scholarship offered to Madagascar to attend the United World College, an elite international school, in Norway. In 2007, the economy was growing at almost 7%, under the leadership of President Ravalomanana. So, despite the pain of leaving home, I felt hopeful and optimistic: Madagascar was finally getting out of poverty.

I've always wanted to help my country. Winning that unique scholarship gave me a sense of power and responsibility. It also presented me with challenges. In addition to a much colder climate, a different culture and a different academic curriculum, I also had to get used to a new language of instruction

I barely spoke English then.

The steep learning curve did not divert me from my goals. I convinced my classmates in Norway to help me fundraise money for Madagascar. Throughout the school year we worked long days in farms and stayed up late organizing cafes and shows. By the summer 2008, I went home with the money we raised and we built a primary school on the outskirts of Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. I didn't expect to be able to give back so much so soon and more than ever before, I felt confident about Madagascar's future.

Until one day: January 26<sup>th</sup> 2009.

It was my last semester in Norway. I had just applied to college. As I routinely logged on to Malagasy news websites, I saw the ghostly images of forty-four blackened dead bodies, poor souls who had been caught in three large fires during a political protest in Antananarivo. Politicians, unwilling to comply with the stricter corruption regulations, duped the rioters into their so-called "fight for democracy". That day, the rioters burnt down the headquarters of the national television and radio stations, along with department stores and businesses owned by the President.

I panicked. "Are my parents and siblings OK?" "What will happen next?" "Is this just the beginning of long-term chaos?" After I confirmed the safety of my family, waves of emotion washed over me. First, relief, then heartbreak, then anger, then disappointment and finally, a lingering sense of betrayal.

How could these heartless people burn down the archives of our entire history? How could they so readily destroy public property when we had so little? How could they do this when I had sacrificed my home and exiled myself away in this cold land so that I

would eventually turn the little that we had into a little more, and that into a little more until maybe we'd have enough?

But the rioters were mere pawns. They also wanted a better life for Madagascar. They couldn't have known that the dairy factories that they burnt down would never be replaced, depriving our island's children of milk. They couldn't have known that their "fight for democracy" would lead to a coup d'etat and that, to a four-year oppressive transitional government.

Two months later, President Ravalomanana was ousted and exiled to Johannesburg.

Four years later, 2013, the political crisis persists. Politicians shamelessly delay the presidential elections while exploiting the islands' already depleting natural resources. Inflation and crime rates are higher. Unsurprisingly, the ethics of honesty, hard work, and patriotism are gradually fading away.

Meanwhile, in 2009, I became the first Malagasy ever to pursue an undergraduate degree at Harvard. Once again, I felt that same sense of empowerment and responsibility. But so many things had changed. Instead of developing, Madagascar was falling deeper into poverty. I had also changed. I was not as naïve as I was in 2007. I realized that I was still just one of twenty million people.

It is easy to destroy. Rebuilding is much harder. Whether it be relationships, projects and dreams or an entire country. Every failure is also an opportunity to test our passions, to start over and to build better things. Things have become worse at home but I still have my share of power and responsibility. Last year, I led a student group and we built a health clinic in the same outskirts of Antananarivo where the school was. The road to recovery is long, strenuous and risky but not impossible. Even though the better future that I am working for could be knocked down in a flash, again, I will not stop trying. The people we remember for leading revolutions, discovering, inventing, or contributing to humankind were certainly not the first people trying. I will continue their tradition.