

Madagascar and Participatory Democracy: Crisis of Representation and Prospects for Local Governance

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Abstract: *This article examines the structural limitations of representative democracy in Madagascar and evaluates participatory democracy as a complementary institutional response. Using documentary analysis grounded in political philosophy, constitutional governance, and decentralization studies, the article identifies executive dominance, civic disengagement, corruption, and weak accountability as major constraints within the current representative system. Drawing on the communal traditions of the fokonolona and fokontany, the study assesses the contextual feasibility of participatory governance mechanisms. It proposes the establishment of a local deliberative assembly composed of competent, locally accountable representatives to address the crisis of political representation and strengthen democratic legitimacy. This hybrid institutional model, combining Malagasy governance traditions with contemporary participatory principles, offers a practical pathway toward improved citizen trust, local governance effectiveness, and democratic renewal.*

Keywords: Participatory democracy; Democratic representation; Decentralization; Local governance; Political accountability; Madagascar; Fokonolona; Local deliberative assembly.

1. Introduction

Democracy, as a political system based on popular sovereignty, remains the goal of contemporary societies (Rancière 2005, 12). In Madagascar, this democratic aspiration has taken the form of a representative system, in which citizens delegate their power to elected officials who are supposed to act in their name and on their behalf (Glossary of Legal Terms 2016-2017, 45). However, while this form of democracy has undeniable advantages, it is now revealing its structural limitations in the Malagasy context. The growing dominance of the executive branch, civic disengagement, endemic corruption, and record-high voter abstention point to a profound crisis of political representation (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 8).

This crisis is not without consequences. It breeds a sense of widespread mistrust toward public institutions and fuels a democratic disenchantment that threatens the very foundations of the Republic. In this country, where the community tradition of fokonolona once embodied an authentic form of direct democracy (Imbiki 2011, 1), the question arises with urgency: how can we restore meaning to popular sovereignty and reconcile citizens with public affairs? This reality leads to the central question of our study: To what extent can participatory democracy correct the excesses of representative democracy in Madagascar and foster authentic local development?

This inquiry revolves around three complementary dimensions. First, how can we explain the relative failure of representative democracy in its mission to faithfully reflect the general will? Second, what are the prerequisites for establishing a viable participatory democracy in the Malagasy context? Finally, how might the establishment of a local deliberative assembly constitute an appropriate institutional response to this crisis of representation?

Despite the abundance of research on representative democracy and its limitations (Rosanvallon 2006, 15), few studies

have specifically examined participatory alternatives in the Malagasy context. The existing literature focuses primarily on the institutional aspects of decentralization (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 45-67) or on critical analyses of the electoral system (Andriamahery 2020, 78), without proposing concrete solutions rooted in the country's sociocultural reality.

This gap is even more concerning given that Madagascar possesses considerable historical and cultural capital in the realm of local governance. The tradition of the fokonolona and fokontany provides fertile ground for the establishment of an authentic participatory democracy (Imbiki 2011, 1). Our study thus fills an analytical gap by offering both theoretical and practical reflections on the modalities of such a democratic transition.

This article has three main objectives. First, to analyze the structural limitations of representative democracy in Madagascar, drawing on both classical philosophical critiques and contemporary empirical realities. Second, to explore the theoretical and practical foundations of participatory democracy, drawing on Pierre Rosanvallon's work on Counter-Democracy (Rosanvallon 2006, 15) and the teachings of the Malagasy tradition. Third, to propose the establishment of a local deliberative assembly as a concrete institutional solution, detailing its operating procedures and its expected benefits on the political, social, financial, and psychological levels.

The originality of our approach lies in its dual foundation, which is both philosophical and contextualized. Unlike purely normative approaches that ignore local specificities or empirical analyses that neglect theoretical foundations, our study maintains a constant dialogue between classical political thought (Montesquieu, Rousseau, Arendt) and contemporary Malagasy realities (Arendt 1961, 79; Montesquieu 1748, 255).

Furthermore, our proposal for a local deliberative assembly is not a simple transposition of foreign models. It is

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deliberately inspired by the Malagasy communal tradition while integrating the demands of administrative and technical modernity (Ratsiraka 1975, 36). This hybridization of cultural heritage and institutional innovation lends our approach greater relevance and feasibility.

This article is organized into three main parts. The first part contextualizes the crisis of representative democracy in Madagascar, outlining its concrete manifestations and philosophical foundations. The second part develops the concept of participatory democracy, analyzing its conditions for success and its corrective potential. The third part proposes the concrete establishment of a local deliberative assembly, detailing its operating procedures and multidimensional benefits. A conclusion will summarize the main lessons and open up avenues for future research.

2. Context

2.1 Representative democracy in Madagascar: Foundations and practices

Representative democracy has been the institutional foundation of the Malagasy political system since independence. According to the *Lexique des termes juridiques*, it is a form of democracy in which citizens grant a mandate to some of their fellow citizens to exercise power on their behalf and in their stead (*Lexique des termes juridiques* 2016-2017, 45). In Madagascar, this representative role is carried out by members of the National Assembly, who are elected for a five-year term by direct universal suffrage.

However, this theory of representation clashes with a very different reality in Malagasy political practice. The executive branch's growing dominance over the legislative branch has gradually eroded the substance of representative democracy. Members of Parliament, who are supposed to be the voice of the people, often find themselves marginalized in the decision-making process, as their powers of oversight and legislative initiative are largely curtailed by presidential hegemony (Ratsiraka 1975, 36). This concentration of power in the hands of the executive constitutes a major deviation that undermines the balance of institutions and weakens democratic representativeness.

This situation is not without consequences for the quality of governance. When elected representatives lose their autonomy and capacity for action, the entire chain of democratic accountability breaks down. The bond of trust between citizens and their elected officials frays, fueling a sense of disillusionment and political powerlessness that undermines the foundations of the Republic (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 8).

2.2 Philosophical critiques of representation

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt offered one of the most incisive critiques of representative democracy. According to her, once the people elect their representative as a ruler, they find themselves once again displaced from the public realm (Mewes 2016, 83). Between elections, the people lack the time to gather and discuss public affairs. In this case, participation in government becomes the privilege of a

minority, while the majority of citizens are relegated to the role of mere spectators (Mewes 2016, 83).

This analysis resonates particularly with the reality in Madagascar, where the public sphere is largely monopolized by a professional political elite, cut off from the day-to-day concerns of ordinary citizens. Politics thus becomes an exclusive domain, inaccessible to the majority of the population, who feel excluded from the democratic debate.

Karl Marx, in his critical analysis of the modern state, denounced the bourgeoisie's domination of the political apparatus. According to him, in modern society, the domination of the bourgeoisie has emerged; the latter has seized exclusive political sovereignty in the modern representative state, thanks to the world economic order (Marx and Engels 1848, 21). The modern government thus becomes a committee that manages the common affairs of this ruling class (Marx and Engels 1848, 21).

This Marxist critique resonates in the Malagasy context, where access to political office is often contingent upon significant economic resources. Costly election campaigns, clientelism, and institutional corruption contribute to perpetuating a political oligarchy that defends its own interests above all else rather than those of the people.

In the face of these abuses, Pierre Mendès France, a French statesman and advocate of participatory democracy, forcefully asserted: Democracy does not consist of occasionally casting a ballot and delegating power to an elected official, only to remain silent for five or seven years. It is the citizen's continuous engagement, not only in matters of state, but also in those of the municipality, the association, the cooperative [...] If this vigilant presence is not ensured, governments, organized bodies, and civil servants, facing pressures of all kinds, are left to their own weaknesses and succumb to the temptations of arbitrariness. (Mendès France quoted by Gaudin 2007, 35)

This vision of democracy as a permanent commitment on the part of the citizen constitutes a relevant response to the limitations of episodic representation. It calls for a redefinition of the citizen's role, no longer as a mere intermittent voter but as an active and vigilant participant in public affairs.

2.3 Concrete manifestations of abuses in Madagascar

In Madagascar, representative democracy presents major socio-political challenges. Representatives, at least the majority of those elected, are members of a political party. Thus, once elected, they often distance themselves from the aspirations and needs of the people to prioritize the interests of their group (Imbiki 2011, 1). Elected officials are not entirely independent in their decisions, which profoundly distorts the representative democracy. Representatives no longer systematically defend the interests of the people who elected them but those of their political parties.

This practice has given rise to what might be called a "government of the elites," where a politically organized minority makes decisions for the majority. This disconnect

between elected officials and their constituents fuels a sense of widespread mistrust and contributes to the crisis of legitimacy plaguing Madagascar's democratic institutions (Andriamahery 2020, 78).

Corruption and the embezzlement of public funds constitute an endemic scourge that undermines the foundations of the rule of law in Madagascar. These illicit practices, far from being marginal, have become structural in many sectors of public administration. They deprive citizens of the resources necessary for development and reinforce social inequalities (Transparency International 2023, 12).

Faced with the impunity that often surrounds these practices, citizens develop a sense of resignation and mistrust toward public authorities. This mistrust is all the more legitimate given that oversight and sanction mechanisms remain insufficient or ineffective in the fight against institutional corruption (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 45-67).

The record-high voter abstention observed in various elections in Madagascar reflects a deep disillusionment with the political system. This phenomenon reflects citizens' loss of trust in public authorities. They believe that elections will do little to improve the situation of their state or their community (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 13). In the eyes of many voters, elected officials are seen as manipulators and power-hungry individuals.

This electoral disaffection serves as a warning sign for Malagasy democracy. When citizens turn away from the polls en masse, the very legitimacy of the representative system is called into question. It has become urgent to restore trust and restore meaning to the act of voting by showing citizens that their voices truly matter (World Bank 2022, 24).

One of the most problematic aspects of representative democracy in Madagascar concerns the legal status of campaign promises. Before elections, the promises made by representatives during their campaigns do not legally bind them. No legal action can be taken to hold them accountable to citizens when they renege on their promises (Segur 1998, 74). The only risk they face is not being re-elected, which is often an insufficient penalty.

From a legal standpoint, even if promises have no legally binding force, they are above all what drives voters' political choices. Many political analysts are trying to find a way to establish political accountability through electoral sanctions (Segur 1998, 76). Election promises should therefore be considered binding to hold candidates accountable, lest political deception become commonplace and irresponsibility be established as a principle of governance.

This lack of legal accountability on the part of elected officials regarding their electoral commitments seriously undermines social justice and fuels political cynicism. It creates an intolerable disconnect between citizens' legitimate expectations and the reality of public action, thereby contributing to growing disaffection with politics (Dolifera 2010, 112).

3. Methodology

This research relies exclusively on a rigorous documentary analysis, structured around two complementary axes: a review of philosophical and political literature and a critical reading of Malagasy institutional texts. To ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility, the document selection was guided by specific inclusion criteria. The corpus comprises: (1) foundational and contemporary political philosophy texts (Arendt, Marx, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Rosanvallon, Mendès France) that interrogate representation and citizen participation; (2) primary legal documents, specifically the 2010 Constitution of the Fourth Republic, organic laws on decentralization, and texts governing the status of elected officials; and (3) recent institutional reports (2010-2023) from recognized bodies such as the World Bank, Transparency International, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which provide empirical context on governance realities in Madagascar.

Our analytical procedure employs a multidisciplinary framework, drawing on political philosophy, constitutional law, and sociology. We apply a thematic content analysis combined with a comparative legal approach. This framework is structured around three critical currents: Arendt's critique of the temporal exclusion of the people from the "public realm" (Mewes 2016, 83); the Marxist analysis of representative democracy as an instrument of bourgeois domination (Marx and Engels 1848, 21); and the constructive vision of Mendès France and Rosanvallon, for whom democracy must be a "continuous action of the citizen" (Mendès France cited by Gaudin 2007, 35), embodied in the mechanisms of counter-democracy (surveillance, obstruction, judgment) (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22). Legally, we utilize the principle of subsidiarity to highlight the gap between the constitutional recognition of decentralization (Constitution of the Republic of Madagascar 2010, 1) and its largely formal application (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 52).

The method combines detailed conceptual analysis with a historical-diachronic framework. Conceptual analysis clarifies overused notions such as "participatory democracy," defined here as a set of mechanisms aimed at directly involving citizens in public decision-making (Jegouzo 2006, 2314). The historical analysis links this proposal to the Malagasy heritage of the *fokonolona* and the *fokontany*, institutions of direct democracy where local decisions were made collectively (Imbiki 2011, 1). This dual approach avoids both naive traditionalism and rootless modernism by proposing a synthesis between local tradition and institutional innovation inspired by Montesquieu (Montesquieu 1748, 297). Crucially, our normative proposals are not derived from abstract preference but are inductively grounded in the recurring patterns of institutional failure and cultural feasibility identified through this documentary evidence, incorporating concrete conditions such as civic education (e.g., YLTP) and the necessity of material and technical resources for authentic participation (Ratsiraka 1975, 36).

4. Results

4.1 Structural Limits of Representative Democracy

The literature review reveals a deep and widespread disenfranchisement among citizens in Madagascar. This phenomenon is reflected in record-high voter abstention and growing distrust of public institutions (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 13). Citizens, weary of broken promises and clientelist practices, develop a sense of political powerlessness that leads them to gradually lose interest in public affairs (World Bank 2022, 24).

This disaffection is no accident. It stems directly from the way representative democracy is implemented in Madagascar. As Hannah Arendt points out, once the people elect their representative as a ruler, they find themselves once again displaced from the public realm (Mewes 2016, 83). Between elections, the people lack a temporal space that would allow them to gather and discuss public affairs. In this case, participation in government becomes the privilege of a minority, while the majority of citizens are relegated to the role of mere spectators (Mewes 2016, 83).

This temporal exclusion of the people from the public sphere leads to a breakdown in the bond of trust between citizens and their representatives. When elected officials act without consultation or effective accountability, citizens develop a legitimate sense of distrust. They believe that elections will do little to improve the situation of their state or community (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 13). In the eyes of many voters, elected officials embody the image of manipulators and power-hungry individuals.

One of the most troubling structural flaws in Madagascar's representative democracy concerns the legal status of campaign promises. Before elections, the promises made by representatives during their campaigns do not legally bind them (Segur 1998, 74). No legal action can be taken to hold them accountable to citizens when they renege on their promises. The only risk they face is not being re-elected, which is often an insufficient and uncertain penalty (Segur 1998, 76).

This lack of legal accountability for elected officials regarding their campaign pledges seriously undermines social justice and fuels political cynicism. From a legal standpoint, even if promises have no legally binding force, they are above all what drives voters' political choices (Segur 1998, 74). Many political analysts are trying to find a way to establish political accountability through electoral sanctions (Segur 1998, 76). Election promises should therefore be considered binding to hold candidates accountable, lest political deception become commonplace and irresponsibility be established as a principle of governance.

This situation creates an intolerable disconnect between citizens' legitimate expectations and the reality of public action. It contributes to growing disaffection with politics and undermines the very foundations of representative democracy (Dolifera 2010, 112).

The growing dominance of the executive branch over the legislative branch constitutes another major deviation from

representative democracy in Madagascar. Members of Parliament, who are supposed to be the voice of the people within the National Assembly, often find themselves marginalized in the decision-making process (Ratsiraka 1975, 36). Their powers of oversight and legislative initiative are largely curtailed by presidential hegemony, which renders the separation of powers enshrined in the 2010 Constitution meaningless (Constitution of the Republic of Madagascar 2010, 1).

This concentration of power in the hands of the executive undermines the institutional balance and weakens democratic representation. It allows the government to govern by ordinances or decrees, thereby bypassing parliamentary debate and citizen participation (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 52). The legislative branch is overwhelmed by the executive branch, leading to a lack of diversity of opinion within the parliamentary assemblies (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 8).

This situation is all the more detrimental given that Madagascar is a country with great regional diversity. Needs and priorities vary considerably from one locality to another. During plenary sessions, the major problem is that voting members of the assembly are not necessarily aware of these local needs (Montesquieu 1748, 297). This excessive centralization of political decisions contributes to the inefficiency of public action and the frustration of local populations.

4.2 Potential of Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy offers a relevant response to the structural limitations of representative democracy. It is defined as a set of approaches and political mechanisms aimed at informing and involving citizens in the political decision-making process (Jegouzo 2006, 2314). It is characterized by the direct involvement of citizens in public affairs and aims to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of public action.

Unlike representative democracy, which excludes the people from the public sphere between elections, participatory democracy allows for continuous citizen engagement. As Pierre Mendès France stated, "Democracy does not consist of occasionally casting a ballot and delegating power to an elected official, only to remain silent for five or seven years. It is the continuous action of the citizen, not only in matters of state, but also in those of the municipality, the association, and the cooperative" (Mendès France cited by Gaudin 2007, 35). This vision of democracy as a permanent commitment on the part of the citizen constitutes a relevant response to the limitations of episodic representation.

The advantage of this concept is that citizens will feel more involved if the decisions to be made affect their community (Blondiaux 2004, 119-138). This will have a direct and more tangible impact on their daily lives. It also allows for the integration of participatory decision-making into political power. Indeed, this process will foster a close relationship between political power and the people, restore trust and strengthen the legitimacy of public decisions (Andrieu 2004, 156).

The concept of counter-democracy developed by Pierre Rosanvallon offers a particularly relevant theoretical framework for understanding the corrective potential of participatory democracy. According to Rosanvallon, there exists “another, democratic-style approach to distrust,” the aim of which would be “to ensure that the elected government remains faithful to its commitments, to find the means to uphold the initial requirement of serving the common good” (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22).

Three main modalities would express this and each constitute possibilities for citizen participation: the power of oversight, forms of obstruction, and the subjection of decisions to public scrutiny (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22). Thus, “in the shadow of representative electoral democracy,” these three counter-powers would outline what Pierre Rosanvallon proposes to call a “counter-democracy.” According to him, this is not “the opposite of democracy; rather, it is the form of democracy that counters the other, the democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout the social body, the democracy of organized defiance in the face of the democracy of electoral legitimacy” (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22).

This theory of counter-democracy helps us understand how citizen participation can play a corrective and supplementary role to representative democracy. It highlights the importance of citizens’ oversight of government actions and emphasizes the idea of implementing participatory democracy when the representative system malfunctions (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22). Arbitrariness paralyzes democracy, and it is precisely this arbitrariness that counter-democracy aims to combat.

The institutionalization of participatory democracy as a complement to representative democracy faces numerous difficulties. We must not deceive the people by telling them they have all the power if we do not give them the intellectual and material means to exercise it (Ratsiraka 1975, 36). Several prerequisites must be met for this form of democracy to succeed in Madagascar.

First, it is essential to have a participatory framework that empowers citizens. To achieve this, material and technical resources, as well as professionals, must be utilized (Ratsiraka 1975, 36). In other words, those who regulate participatory democracy must have a well-structured action plan. Furthermore, well-defined skills and resources are necessary to ensure that decisions are made in an informed and nuanced manner.

Second, there must be genuine inclusion of citizens. The purpose of this condition is to prevent the domination of a group of professional politicians who consider themselves superior to their peers in participating in political life (Blondiaux 2004, 125). The goal is to reduce the reluctance of groups of citizens who feel inferior in this process. This complex may stem from their background, lack of education, or financial situation. All voices must be heard, including those of the most marginalized.

Third, there must be genuine independence of the judiciary. For legal recourse on behalf of citizens to be effective, courts and judges must be independent (Montesquieu 1748, 144-

145). We must not forget that while they are independent, they must administer justice in accordance with the law. Political virtue must always be prioritized in a democracy. If the democracy is participatory, the judiciary will lean even more toward justice itself (Montesquieu 1748, 144-145).

Finally, there must be good communication between those who govern and those who are governed. This is the key to improving the balance of power between citizens and politicians (Andrieu 2004, 156). Participatory citizen decision-making must be linked to that of political power. These decisions must influence policy. The voice of the people must be taken into account. Furthermore, elected officials are required to justify their decisions if they run counter to those of the citizens.

4.3 Madagascar’s Historical and Cultural Roots

One of Madagascar’s major assets for establishing participatory democracy lies in its cultural and historical heritage. The tradition of the fokonolona and the fokontany provides fertile ground for citizen participation (Imbiki 2011, 1). In this clan-based era, power was shared within a specific territory (fokontany) and a specific community (fokonolona). It was an era of direct democracy (Imbiki 2011, 1).

The clans had an assembly whose role was to discuss community affairs. The decisions made applied only within the territory (Imbiki 2011, 1). Each fokonolona was obligated to follow the deliberations issued by the assemblies. This traditional political organization demonstrates that democracy and the existence of a local community are not new to Madagascar. It is simply modernization that has brought about related innovations (Imbiki 2011, 1).

Legislative power already had its place within the clans. This means that it holds particular importance (Imbiki 2011, 1). In light of all this, the establishment of good governance should involve the decentralization of parliament. Centuries ago, local communities held decision-making power. Therefore, the local deliberative assembly must also possess this authority to rule on community affairs without depending on the central government (Imbiki 2011, 1).

This community tradition provides a solid cultural foundation for the establishment of a modern participatory democracy. It helps avoid the pitfall of simply transplanting foreign models and promotes local ownership of participatory mechanisms. As Montesquieu points out, “one knows the needs of one’s own city much better than those of other cities” (Montesquieu 1748, 297). This maxim resonates particularly strongly in the Malagasy context, where local realities are often misunderstood by central decision-makers.

Decentralization is an essential lever for the effective implementation of participatory democracy in Madagascar. It is impossible to successfully implement this policy in a highly centralized unitary state such as Madagascar (Habermas 1997, 161-162). There must be reduced involvement by the central government in the policies of decentralized local authorities. The government’s non-interference in the management of the affairs of decentralized local authorities must be respected (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 52).

In modern society, according to Habermas, the subsystems of economy and state, operating through the steering media of money and administrative power, tend to colonize the public sphere, crowding out solidarity and communicative action (Habermas 1997). In a participatory system, citizens in each locality would recover a share of that colonized space through their own budget, the power of self-governance, and their solidarity. This threefold local autonomy is a sine qua non for citizen participation to be effective rather than merely formal.

Effective decentralization also helps reduce conflicts of interest between citizens and public authorities. If their interests are heard and protected, voters will be grateful to their representatives (Andrieu 2004, 156). Consequently, this satisfaction will restore trust and justice within society. Opposition parties will no longer be able to manipulate citizens to legitimize a potential coup d'état.

The theory of the small territory developed by Montesquieu is particularly relevant here. The author of *The Spirit of the Laws* emphasized that the Republic does not function in large states with vast territories (Montesquieu 1748, 293). Indeed, despite its vast land area, Madagascar is a unitary state (Constitution of the Republic of Madagascar 2010, 1). We must therefore work toward the establishment of small states in the case of this country. To achieve this, decentralization in Madagascar must be effective (Ravelonantoandro 2018, 52).

The advantage of having a small state is that it facilitates dialogue between rulers and the ruled at the local level (Montesquieu 1748, 297). The reality is clear. It would be easier to draft local regulations. It is from this point that one can consider the idea of general will. To this end, local citizens must have a periodic general assembly that meets for a set period of time (Montesquieu 1748, 298).

This approach to effective decentralization, rooted in Malagasy tradition and inspired by the thought of Montesquieu, offers a realistic path to overcoming the limitations of representative democracy and establishing an authentic participatory democracy in Madagascar.

5. Discussion

The literature review reveals a striking convergence between contemporary critiques of representative democracy in Madagascar and major classical political theories. Montesquieu's thought, in particular, offers valuable insight into current dysfunctions. The author of *The Spirit of the Laws* asserted that "the Republic does not function in large states with vast territories" (Montesquieu 1748, 293). This assertion resonates particularly strongly in the case of Madagascar, where the centralized unitary state struggles to translate local diversity into relevant public policies. Despite its vast size, Madagascar remains a highly centralized state (Constitution of the Republic of Madagascar 2010, 1), which hinders any form of governance adapted to territorial realities. The solution proposed by Montesquieu, the establishment of "small states", is therefore not a historical nostalgia but a concrete institutional path to restore meaning to popular sovereignty.

Arendt's critique of political representation, for its part, remains disconcertingly relevant. Hannah Arendt emphasized that, in representative democracy, "once the people elect their representative as a ruler, they find themselves once again ousted from the public realm" (Mewes 2016, 83). Between elections, the people have neither the space nor the time to actively participate in public affairs. This temporal exclusion largely explains the civic disengagement observed in Madagascar, where record-high voter abstention and mistrust of elected officials reflect a deep sense of political powerlessness (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021, 13). Representative democracy as it is practiced transforms the citizen into a mere intermittent spectator, which radically contradicts the very idea of popular sovereignty.

Finally, the theory of "counter-democracy" developed by Pierre Rosanvallon makes an essential contribution to our discussion. According to him, in the face of growing distrust of institutions, citizens develop forms of indirect participation: surveillance, obstruction, and judgment (Rosanvallon 2006, 15-22). These three modalities constitute counter-powers disseminated throughout society, capable of correcting the excesses of electoral democracy. In Madagascar, where corruption and impunity undermine the state's legitimacy, these mechanisms of counter-democracy are not only necessary but urgent. They make it possible to transform distrust into active vigilance and to turn every citizen into a responsible actor in public affairs.

Considering these observations, the establishment of a local deliberative assembly stands out as a response that is both realistic and rooted in Malagasy history. This framework rests on two complementary foundations: historical and philosophical.

Historically, Madagascar has a rich tradition of community governance. The *fokonolona* and the *fokontany* once embodied an authentic form of direct democracy, where decisions were made collectively within local assemblies (Imbiki 2011, 1). Each community had its own deliberative space and the rules adopted applied only to the territory in question. This political organization demonstrates that citizen participation is not a foreign import but a cultural heritage to be revitalized.

Philosophically, this proposal follows in the tradition of Montesquieu's thought, for whom "one knows the needs of one's own city much better than those of other cities" (Montesquieu 1748, 297). The local deliberative assembly would thus be composed of competent, locally accountable representatives - chosen not for their party affiliation but for their domain expertise (education, health, urban planning, fiscal management) and their direct accountability to the local community.

These assemblies would meet periodically to address strictly local issues: urban planning, education, health, municipal taxation, and natural resource management. Major national policies (national budget, foreign policy, defense) would remain the purview of the central parliament, thereby guarantee the unity of the state while respecting local diversity.

This operating model avoids the pitfalls of partisan representation: it reduces the influence of national political interests on local affairs, curbs corruption through greater transparency, and strengthens decision-makers' accountability to their fellow citizens.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the implementation of this institutional reform faces real constraints. Limited administrative capacity at the local level, potential political resistance from central government actors whose authority would be redistributed, and the fiscal costs of establishing and sustaining deliberative assemblies across Madagascar's diverse regions represent significant challenges. These feasibility risks do not invalidate the proposal but underscore the necessity of a phased approach, supported by civic education programmes and adequate resource transfer, before any nationwide deployment.

The establishment of a local deliberative assembly would yield multifaceted benefits. Politically, it would help citizens become more familiar with public affairs. By regularly participating in local debates, residents would develop a concrete democratic culture that goes beyond simply voting. This would establish a genuine sharing of responsibility between elected officials and citizens, breaking with the logic of the political "savior." On the social front, the local deliberative assembly would strengthen community cohesion. Periodic assemblies would become spaces for dialogue, exchange, and solidarity, where differences would be resolved collectively. This institutional proximity would ease social tensions and restore a sense of shared belonging. On the financial front, local budgetary autonomy would allow for better resource allocation. Each community could define its priorities and collect its own tax revenue. As Habermas points out, "money, power, and solidarity" govern every modern community (Habermas 1997, 161-162). Yet when citizens see the concrete impact of their taxes on their daily lives, their reluctance to pay taxes diminishes and their commitment increases.

Finally, on a psychological level, the local deliberative assembly would address a fundamental need: that of being heard and protected. In a context marked by mistrust and powerlessness, this institution would restore citizens' sense of having a say in their collective destiny. As Montesquieu reminds us, it is political virtue, love of the law, of equality, and of the homeland, that forms the foundation of any viable democracy (Montesquieu 1748, 111). By making politics tangible and accessible, the local deliberative assembly provides the best breeding ground for cultivating this virtue.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that representative democracy in Madagascar faces persistent structural constraints, characterized by executive dominance, weak accountability, civic disengagement, and largely formal decentralization. These constraints undermine democratic legitimacy and erode public trust in institutions. In the face of these shortcomings, participatory democracy offers a credible complementary framework, particularly when rooted in Malagasy traditions of collective local governance, embodied by the fokonolona and the fokontany.

The proposed local deliberative assembly represents an institutional innovation tailored to the context, capable of strengthening citizen participation, improving decision-makers' responsiveness, and reconnecting governance to local realities. However, the implementation of this reform faces real feasibility constraints, such as limited administrative capacity at the local level, potential political resistance from central actors, and the fiscal challenges inherent in any effective decentralization. These risks do not invalidate the proposal, but underscore the need for a gradual approach, supported by civic education programs and an adequate transfer of resources.

Future research should therefore assess the legal, fiscal, and administrative viability of such reforms through comparative analyses and pilot experiments. Only then can this hybrid model, combining cultural heritage with contemporary participatory principles, move from a theoretical concept to a concrete lever for democratic renewal in Madagascar.

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