

A Look at World Leaders Who Fled Amid Uprisings

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History has seen countless powerful leaders forced to flee their nations — toppled by popular uprisings, military coups, or mass protests. Once considered untouchable, many have sought exile abroad to escape imprisonment, assassination, or political retribution.

The latest to join this long list is **Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina**, ousted this week following a military coup that came after weeks of youth-led demonstrations over economic hardship, unemployment, and power shortages, according to international reports.

Below is a look at other leaders who were similarly driven from power and into exile.

Bashar al-Assad — Syria

In 2024, former Syrian president **Bashar al-Assad** fled to Russia as rebel forces closed in on Damascus, bringing an end to his family's 51-year rule. Backed for years by Moscow and Tehran during Syria's devastating civil war, Assad eventually sought refuge in Russia. President Vladimir Putin granted asylum to Assad and his family, rejecting all requests for extradition.

Sheikh Hasina — Bangladesh

Bangladesh's longest-serving prime minister, **Sheikh Hasina**, was forced to resign and flee to India in August 2024 following weeks of massive, student-led protests that brought down her government. According to the UN human rights office, around 1,400 people were killed during the crackdown on demonstrators. Hasina, who first assumed office in 1996 and returned to power in 2008, is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founding leader assassinated in 1975.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa — Sri Lanka

In July 2022, **Gotabaya Rajapaksa**, then-president of Sri Lanka, fled to the Maldives after months of protests over the country's severe economic crisis. Shortages of fuel, food, and foreign reserves sparked public outrage against the Rajapaksa family dynasty. Gotabaya soon resigned, followed by his brother and former prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and other relatives who held senior positions in the government.

Viktor Yanukovich — Ukraine

Following deadly clashes in Kyiv in February 2014, **Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich** fled to Russia. The protests erupted after his decision to abandon a landmark trade deal with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Moscow. Lawmakers later impeached him and issued an arrest warrant, while Russian forces reportedly assisted his escape through Crimea.

Moammar Gadhafi — Libya

Libya's longtime ruler **Moammar Gadhafi** was overthrown during the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. After rebels seized Tripoli, he retreated to his hometown of Sirte and went into hiding. On October 20, 2011, Gadhafi was captured and killed as NATO airstrikes targeted his convoy. His death ended more than four

decades of authoritarian rule.

Marc Ravalomanana — Madagascar

Marc Ravalomanana, Madagascar's sixth president, was ousted in 2009 by then–Antananarivo mayor **Andry Rajoelina** — the same leader now deposed. Ravalomanana fled to South Africa amid international condemnation of the coup. Tried in absentia and sentenced to life imprisonment, he returned home after five years in exile and was released from house arrest in 2015.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide — Haiti

Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically elected president, fled his country twice. His first exile came in 1991, only six months after taking office, when the military forced him out. With US backing, Aristide returned in 1994 and was re-elected in 2000. He was overthrown again in 2004 amid an armed rebellion and flown out of Haiti on a US-chartered plane to the Central African Republic before settling in South Africa. He finally returned to Haiti in 2011.