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Up-coming local elections in Mozambique: Context, meaning and relevance

Introduction

On 19 November 2003, Mozambique will hold the second local government elections in its history. While these elections need to be understood in the context of a country which, over the past 10 years and after two decades of civil strife, has achieved a spectacular economic growth rate, an adequate assessment of the context, meaning and relevance of the up-coming poll must relate to the current socio-economic and political environment in the country. Macro-economic conditions will inevitably play a role since the current economic growth has brought little benefit to the majority of a population stricken by unemployment, poverty and the beginning of the transition from an asymptomatic HIV pandemic to one of full-blown AIDS. In addition, the impact of recent political crises, largely connected to widespread corruption and reprehensible behaviour by the main political parties, cannot be ignored as factors influencing the election outcome.

As will be discussed below, the results of the up-coming local elections may suggest possible outcomes for the 2004 legislative and presidential elections, but only in a very limited manner, as the rural population, which represents the majority of Mozambicans, is currently excluded from the election of local government structures. More importantly, the electoral contest will show the levels of both horizontal and vertical democratisation achieved in the past 10 years in Mozambique, indicate the likely behavioural tendencies of political parties in next year's presidential and legislative polls, and therefore be a rough guide to the future.¹

Recent political history

Mozambique is predominantly a flat, coastal plain, rising in the centre and the north to a plateau of no more than 500 metres in height. Rainfall in the south is scarce, outside a narrow coastal strip and the interior is mainly dry. Rainfall is higher and less erratic in the central and the northern regions, where the population density is higher and agricultural surpluses are possible. The country is home to approximately 19 million people. After slow demographic growth during the 1980s, mainly because of the civil war, the population increased at a faster rate after 1992, as a result of the peace agreement and the subsequent return of 1,7 million refugees from neighbouring countries. Population growth seems stabilized now at 2,3 % per year.²

Mozambique has a large number of ethnic groups. The north is the most populated area, with 53 % of the country's population, but because of relative isolation and neglect by the government, development has been slower than in the south. Only about one-third of the population is urbanized.³

The country's current political situation represents the outcome of a complex historical process going back to the colonial period. The country became independent in 1975, without having been prepared for self-determination, as Portugal never accepted the possibility of independence for its East African territory until the Lisbon revolution of April 1974. The hasty decolonisation process that followed left a political vacuum which Frelimo (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*), as the sole front of Mozambican national liberation movements, seized to demand full independence. Frelimo went on to establish a one-party state and implement a radical programme of socialist policies. Mozambique's independence constitutional system provided for a structure of indirectly elected bodies, with lower assemblies electing higher tiers. The People's Assembly was theoretically the ultimate source of sovereignty, but candidates for this body were selected from above, under a system known as "democratic centralism".⁴

The beginnings of independent Mozambique were difficult. The massive withdrawal of settlers deprived the country of scarce skills and triggered an economic crisis which is still not totally overcome. A particularly serious situation developed in the early 1980s when the effects of drought and other natural disasters were aggravated by the beginning of a bush war waged by Renamo (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*), a movement created in the late 1970s by the Rhodesian intelligence service and adopted by South Africa after the fall of the Smith regime. The rebels lacked political organization but were nevertheless able to complete the devastation of an already crippled economy. Renamo lacked even rudimentary coherence or ideology beyond a fierce anti-communism and hostility to Frelimo. A senseless resort to violence and brutality prevented the conversion of considerable military success into mass political backing from a poverty-stricken population.⁵

Faced with the consequences of its failed Socialist experiment, Frelimo approached the West and lessened its dependence on the Soviet bloc, in a move intelligently steered by the American Under-Secretary of State Dr Chester Crocker. The first structural adjustment programme started in 1987. This led to one of the largest international relief programmes in history. Following protracted negotiations, the civil war formally ended in October 1992, paving the way for the first democratic elections, held in October 1994. The electoral process took place within the framework of a new constitution, adopted in November 1990 to replace the previous one-party system. The new dispensation separated the functions of the executive, legislative and judiciary. The executive remained powerful, with three "ministries in the presidency" created to deal with economic and social affairs, defence and security, and parliamentary affairs.⁶

Three elections

1994: legislative and presidential elections

The 1994 legislative and presidential elections were characterized by an exceptionally high turn-out, some 87 % of the registered voters cast their ballots. President Joaquim Chissano won the presidential election, receiving 53.66 % of the valid votes, against 33.73 % in favour of Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama. There were many other candidates. All of them fared poorly, with Pademo leader Wehia Ripua getting third place, with a mere 2.87 % of the valid votes cast.⁷ Frelimo failed, however, to score an absolute popular majority in the legislative elections, winning only 44.33 % of the valid votes. Nevertheless, it was able to secure an absolute majority in parliament, with 129 seats out of a total of 250, since a clause in the constitution restricted representation to those parties receiving 5 % or more of the popular vote. Renamo effectively became the leading opposition party, its candidates securing 37.87 % of the vote. Of the minor parties, only the UD (*União Democrática*) qualified for representation in the legislature, having received 5.15 % of the vote.⁸

The electoral results produced a *de facto* bipolar legislature, with the lack of a vigorous intellectual opposition in parliament being probably the most negative effect of the failure of the smaller parties, as in most cases these represented an urban, relatively well-educated constituency. The UD, which drew all its seats from rural provinces, was unsuited to such a role.

In terms of regional distribution of votes, Frelimo won by considerable margins in two of the three northern provinces (Cabo Delgado and Niassa) and scored smashing victories in all the southern provinces (Gaza, Maputo, Maputo City and Inhambane). Renamo won comfortably in one northern province (Nampula) and in all four central provinces (Tete, Zambezia, Manica and Sofala). It fared particularly well in Sofala, with more than 80 % of the vote. The importance of this victory was enhanced by the fact that Sofala's capital, Beira, is the second city in the country. An analysis of the provincial distribution of the ethno-linguistic groups suggests that, in the north of the country, the Makua populations of the coastal areas backed Renamo, while the Yao group, including the Makonde, backed Frelimo. In the centre of Mozambique, where Sena, Nyanja, Tonga and Shona represent the bulk of the population, Renamo conquered the overwhelming majority. The Chopis and Tsongas of southern Mozambique voted for Frelimo. It is possible that the strong minority who backed Renamo in Cabo Delgado coincided with the Muslim community settled in its deeply Islamised coastal strip.⁹

1998: local elections

The first local elections were held in 1998. The local government reform enacted in 1994 intended to turn all 128 districts into municipalities, making a radical break with the past. However, in 1997, Frelimo's parliamentary majority made it possible to repeal a bill whose most relevant feature was the establishment of district municipalities linking urban and rural areas. This would have meant the dilution of an overly centralized political system, which practised a two-tiered administrative system: one for rural and peasant areas and one for urban citizens. The new law that was eventually promulgated promised to start with holding municipal elections in the already existing urban municipalities and 10 rural centres. Hence, the majority of the rural population was left out of an elected local government system, remaining subject to continued rule by officials appointed from Maputo.¹⁰

These first municipal elections were, nevertheless, a sobering experience for the Mozambican polity as a whole. On the eve of the poll, Renamo as well as 15 smaller opposition parties decided to abstain from participation, arguing that the government was bent on fraud. Only 14,48 % of the registered voters bothered to turn-up and the result was the inevitable: all elected mayors belonged to Frelimo. The ruling party achieved absolute control over the new municipal authorities, as the directly elected mayor is the president of the municipal council, with the power to nominate members of the council. This development marked the beginning of a political crisis in Mozambique which is still to be solved.¹¹

1999: presidential and legislative elections

The 1999 elections were characterized by a lower turn-out than in 1994 (69.5 % in the presidential and 68.1% in the legislative), probably reflecting apathy among a population whose majority remained in poverty in spite of spectacular economic growth. President Joaquim Chissano was re-elected with 52.3% of the votes, while the sole opposition candidate, Afonso Dhlakama, obtained 47.7 % of the ballots. Frelimo consolidated its parliamentary majority with 48.5 % of the votes, against 38.8 % given to Renamo. None of the smaller parties was able to get the 5 % necessary to enter the legislature. Hence, the bipolar situation was reinforced. From a geographical distribution point of view, besides variations in the number of deputies elected per province, a major alteration was registered: Renamo replaced Frelimo as the majority party in the province of Niassa, hence gaining supremacy in all three northern provinces or electoral circles.¹²

The following table will help to understand the political preferences of the Mozambicans in the 1990s, giving some hints to forecasting of the 2003 and 2004 contest:

	1994	1994	1994	1999	1999	Difference in # of seats 1999
	FRELIMO	RENAMO-UE	UD	FRELIMO	RENAMO-UE	
Niassa	7	4	0	6	7	+2
Cabo Delgado	15	6	1	16	6	-
Nampula	20	32	2	24	26	-4
Zambezia	18	29	2	15	34	
Tete	5	9	1	8	10	+3
Manica	4	9	0	5	10	+2
Sofala	3	18	0	4	17	
Inhambane	13	3	2	13	4	-1
Gaza	15	0	1	16	0	
Maputo Prov.	12	1	0	12	1	
Maputo City	17	1	0	14	2	-2
Total	129	112	9	133	117	

A complex socio-political situation

It is difficult to understand the outcome of the second local elections without reference to a very complex system of political tendencies, which shapes the behaviour of the political actors and is deeply rooted in channels of informal influence. These tendencies place a strong wedge between the visible trappings of a multi-party parliamentary democracy and, in practice, they shape the behaviour of the political parties.

The Mozambican social scientist Brazão Mazula labels these tendencies as *democratisation*, *repatrimonialisation* and *destabilisation* which have prevailed one after the other. *Democratisation*, corresponded to a phase of 'real democratic cohabitation', during which a democratic culture was established. This was done by involving all parties in programmes of national reconstruction, with the objective of strengthening their ownership of the development process. In fact, democratic cohabitation created an expectation among Mozambican citizens of feeling entitled to debating topics of vital importance before decisions are effectively taken.

Mazula does not use the word *repatrimonialisation* to refer to what followed, but this word indeed expresses well the post-democratisation phase.¹³ There was a return to centralisation and concentration of power, with the government attempting to co-opt opposition forces. There was a revival of old, largely arbitrary, mechanisms of central government decision-making and an administrative bifurcation that placed a wedge between cities and rural areas, increasing the political exclusion of the rural population. The outcome was a strong reaction from Renamo, which rejected integration attempts from Frelimo, in its drive to assimilate and/or co-opt the opposition. This conflict led to a scenario of *destabilisation*, marked by 'a continuously unstable state, confused by inter- and intra-party struggles, without any benefit to society', with the various parties perceiving that there is nothing to negotiate about.¹⁴

Einar Braathen considers that the democratisation tendency prevailed between 1990 and 1994 and has remained present, to a larger or lesser extent, until now. Repatrimonialisation was the dominant force between 1994 and 1998 and destabilisation has been erupting from that year, triggered by conflicting perceptions regarding the elections held in 1998 and 1999. Mazula considers that this phase spells a *militarisation* of politics, but this is unlikely to lead to a civil war, given the inexistence of a social base prepared to accept a new armed conflict.¹⁵

Since the crisis triggered by the 1998 local elections, both Frelimo and Renamo have behaved in a most aggressive manner towards each other, reflecting the destabilising tendency identified by Mazula and Braathen. This was in spite of the fact that their ideological foundations are not, in themselves, conducive to violent politics. Frelimo, a party historically dominated by southerners—Eduardo Mondlane, Samora Machel, Joaquim Chissano were all Shangaan speakers from the Province of Gaza—assumed, after Mondlane’s death, a socialist orientation, which ignored native cultural practices, including village-level traditional authorities. However, in the early 1990s the party realized the disastrous consequences of its attempt to impose cultural and political change from above.

A more open attitude resulted from this realisation, coupled with a move away from the Marxist dogma. This inevitably led to divisions within the party, with a schism between a pragmatic, modernizing wing gradually taking shape and a conservative old guard. The modernizers (Chissano is one of them) dominate the Cabinet, but the old guard-radical left lobby continues to play a decisive role, most recently with the election of Armando Guebuza as Frelimo’s Secretary-General and candidate for the 2004 presidential elections. While by itself not sufficient to irreparably damage the party, this schism has in practice stifled the ability of Frelimo to admit that Renamo is a legitimate democratic opposition. In addition, public perception that the hardliners are in ascendancy, coupled with rising official corruption, are generating growing population dissatisfaction.¹⁶

On the other hand, Renamo has little sense of ideological purpose and only in 2001, during the party’s first congress, was there official acknowledgement of its transition from a counter-revolutionary movement to an ordinary political party. The congress defined Renamo as a “centre-right” party committed to peace, democracy and liberty. Donors have been backing modernisation and capacity-building but the party has made little progress towards behaving as a constructive opposition. For this reason, many observers doubt that Renamo is a viable government in waiting. The personality of its leader is largely to blame. Afonso Dhlakama is a man of little formal education, who is inclined to force talent out of the party’s ranks. Its parliamentary leader, Raul Domingos, perceived as a challenge to Dhlakama, was expelled in December 2000. During 2003 a number of its members of parliament were also expelled and now sit as independents.¹⁷

The possibility of a serious and protracted conflict between Renamo and the government became clear in 1998, when a new draft constitution was submitted to public debate. It satisfied a number of Renamo demands by making room for formal consultation with the opposition and by reducing the power of the executive. Renamo promised to support the new constitution but later reneged on the deal (by initiative of its own hardliners) and the new fundamental law was not ratified in time for the December 1999 elections.¹⁸

On 3 April 2002, Renamo plunged the Assembly of the Republic into crisis, when it refused to discuss the report from a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the riots of November 2000. The commission had, as a matter of fact, been established on Renamo’s request following the riots, which caused at least 41 deaths. These incidents assumed the form of clashes between Renamo demonstrators and the police across northern and central Mozambique and the subsequent death by asphyxiation of at least 83 detainees at an overcrowded police cell in Montepuez. The reasons for this anger are clear: the report blamed the clashes on the top leadership of Renamo, Dhlakama in particular. The report concluded that the Renamo demonstrations, which led to the street fighting, “were illegal, violated the constitution and did not respect the legal framework governing the right to demonstrate”. The report added: the demonstrations “were designed, prepared, organised and convened by the leadership of the Renamo–Electoral Union coalition, through its President Afonso Dhlakama”.

A new parliamentary ‘riot’ did occur in December 2002, with Renamo trying to provoke a complete breakdown in the country’s legislature using as pretext a demand to expel five deputies who were no longer members of Renamo.

On that date, the assembly was supposed to debate a report on the resettlement of the victims of the 2000 and 2001 floods. There was no legal basis for Renamo's demand as there are no provisions stipulating that deputies expelled from their parties should lose their seats. Renamo's bench behaved in so riotous a manner that police had to be called to clear enough room to allow the members of the parliamentary Standing Commission to take their seats.

This kind of behaviour is not the best way to allay Frelimo's suspicion that Renamo, instead of being an ordinary opposition party, is a violent movement prepared and willing to attain power by any means. In a clear reference to this problem, Manuel Tomé, Frelimo Chief Whip, warned the legislature on 16 October 2003, about the existence of "forces who are prepared to attain their goal at any price, even if this price is the sacrifice of peace and democracy themselves". Tomé warned that it would be 'suicidal naivety' to ignore the threat posed by Renamo and mentioned recent statements by Afonso Dhlakama that he would take power irrespective of the results of the 2004 general elections. Speaking in the central city of Chimoio, Dhlakama boasted that he would form a government "with or without fraud" and made it clear that for him "fraud" was a synonym to a Frelimo victory.¹⁹

The fact that both main contenders see the coming election as a naked struggle for power, in terms not compatible with genuine democratic principles, does not necessarily preclude it from being free and fair, as the legislation in force provides for a very detailed set of rules formulated to guarantee that the genuine choice of the people will prevail. Elections in Mozambique are conducted in terms of the Electoral Law of Mozambique (Law 4, 1993) which provides for the existence of a National Electoral Commission, (CNE) which functions as an independent body, on a continuous basis and controls the STAE ("Secretariado Técnico para Administração de Eleições/Technical Secretariat for the Administration of Elections). On a technical level, the security of ballot boxes is guaranteed by the police, as well as by election agents, who may spend the night at the polling stations as a way to ensure that ballot boxes are not tampered with. The STAE is responsible for ballot counting and liaises with local authorities. Counting takes place at the polling stations, under the observation of polling officers, agents and party observers. The electoral law also specifies and regulates political parties' electoral conduct, but it was never strictly enforced.²⁰

Nevertheless, Renamo has often disputed the CNE's independence. The present chairman of the CNE, elected in January 2003, is Rev. Arão Litsuri, a prominent Lutheran pastor. While he was the candidate favoured by Frelimo, Renamo's CNE members did participate in the vote, if under protest. In any event, Litsuri promised to carry out his tasks with "impartiality and responsibility".²¹ The legally compulsory updating of voters rolls took place between 26 June and 25 July. A CNE source claimed that the registration process was reasonably successful, in spite of logistical and other difficulties. The target was to cover 2.5 million potential voters. More than two million citizens were registered. According to a STAE source, 136 088 voters were registered in the Maputo province alone, out of 141 522 targeted registrations.²²

The registration of candidates was less successful, however. On 23 October 2003, the CNE had still not announced the list of candidates for mayor and municipal assemblies, which the law requires (the lists must be published 30 days before the polling date). Since the elections are scheduled for 19 November, the lists should have been published on 20 October. The CNE can partly be blamed for this situation. In fact, it has been blocked in meeting after meeting, as the minority CNE members appointed by Renamo refuse to accept that some of their candidates do not meet the legal requisites and, as such, cannot stand. A key problem remained: Renamo's candidate for Mayor of Maputo, Artur Vilanculos, did not submit the required number of signatures required by law. If Renamo carries on using this kind of trickery and Frelimo has not the courage to impose a vote, a postponement of the elections might become necessary.²³

Relevance of the up-coming local elections

Vilanculos' case is a mere example of a situation where a number of irregularities have been noted. Out of a total of 94 mayoral candidates, only the 33 candidates put forward by Frelimo submitted registration nominations free of any irregularities.²⁴ Renamo's performance in this regard has raised issues around transparency in the party. For example, many of the signatures supporting Vilanculos were fraudulent, with supporters signing more than once with different names but using the same voter card number. Others were names of people who had pledged their support to other candidates. While this type of fraud is easily detectable, representatives appointed by Renamo to the STAE continued to denounce the STAE and its computer equipment.²⁵

The enormous limitations imposed on the decentralization process by the 1997 law greatly reduces the potential direct impact of local elections on the lives and livelihoods of the majority of the population. In fact, responsibilities entrusted to the local authorities were never clearly defined, while according to central government, such duties should evolve according to the availability of revenues (local government budgets should be supplemented with transfers from the central government, amounting to between 1.5 % and 3 % of the State's fiscal revenues).

In spite of these limitations, the value of popularly elected local authorities in Mozambique cannot be dismissed. There are clear indications that the quality of local government improved since 1998. As such, the relevance of the November contest should not be limited to forecasting the 2004 presidential and legislative elections. The record of the past five years, as regards effectiveness, responsiveness and embeddedness, factors which determine performance, are evidence of the relevance of the up-coming local elections.

Effectiveness is defined as the quantity and quality of tangible outputs offered by public services. In each municipality there were a few improvements (for instance, in Beira, new buses came into operation). Nevertheless, in a survey of most municipalities, the population considered that there was not an "improvement in public services" during the phase immediately after 1998. In Chimoio dissatisfaction increased. On a positive note, there were limited gains in responsiveness, understood here as the manner in which local government policies match the needs (or the perceived needs) of their residents. In Maputo and Beira, for example, independent citizens hold seats at the municipal assemblies. This has and will continue to play a role in terms of local government transparency and accountability. In addition, the growth and consolidation of civil society will enhance those forms of behaviour.²⁶

In terms of embeddedness or community participation in governance, the situation appears to be worse however, as no increased levels of direct popular participation can be detected. In southern areas, as well as in Chimoio and Beira, Frelimo's grassroots' structures function as 'upwards transmission belts', as they used to do during the one-party period. However, the structures which might help to alter this situation do exist. All the assembly members have to participate in standing 'assembly commissions', which often function at neighbourhood /commune level.²⁷ If, after the upcoming elections, they become mixed as regards party composition, these commissions could help to embed governance more deeply into society.

Conclusion: hints for 2004?

The results of the upcoming elections will fail to express, regrettably, the political feelings and voting preferences of the rural population, a fact which limits their value as a possible predictor of next year's presidential and legislative elections. Nevertheless, the up-coming local elections will provide preliminary clues in terms of which regions will be dominated by Frelimo and Renamo, respectively. A regional distribution analysis following the poll will be of utmost importance, particularly if done in conjunction with an assessment of religious allegiances as well as of HIV/AIDS prevalence.

Mozambique is confronted with an epidemic of HIV/AIDS, irregularly distributed from a geographical point of view. Deputy Health Minister Aida Libombo, briefing the Assembly of the Republic in March 2001, stated that Mozambique recorded the seventh highest level of seropositivity prevalence in the world, with 1,4 million people infected, equivalent to a 16 percent of the adult population. A breakdown of the estimated infection rate per province shows that the central ones, Manica, Sofala, Tete and Zambezia are the worst affected, with seropositivity rates around 20 percent. In the three northern provinces (Nampula, Niassa and Cabo Delgado) seropositivity affects around 13% of the population; while in the southern provinces, Gaza and Inhambane register 18 % and Maputo 16 %.²⁸ Perhaps not immediately apparent, in the medium and long term this implies that demographic growth will follow a very different pattern from region to region, with a strong indication that it will slightly increase in the northern provinces, while in the south and, particularly in the centre, crossed by the Zambeze corridor, a demographic slowdown will in most likelihood occur. In addition, it should be noted that the Muslim faith dominates in the three northern provinces, a factor which has contributed to a reduced rate of infection in these areas. These demographic factors will be determinant in elections to come, particularly in terms of presidential and legislative elections (based upon a universal suffrage system) and to a large extent, the future will belong to the party which is able to secure support in those areas less affected by the disease.

In conclusion, the results of the up-coming local elections may sketch possible outcomes for the 2004 legislative and presidential elections, but only in a very limited manner, as the rural population, which represents the majority of the Mozambicans, is excluded, for the time being, from participating in the election of local government structures. More importantly, the electoral contest will show the level of both horizontal and vertical democratisation in Mozambique, indicate the likely behavioural tendencies of political parties in next year's presidential and legislative polls, and therefore be a reliable predictor of things to come.

¹ See in this regard Andrea Ostheimer, Mozambique: The permanent entrenchment of democratic minimalism?, *African Security Review*, 10 (1), Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2001.

² The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Mozambique – Country Profile 2003*, EIU, London, p 21, 24.

³ *Ibid*, p 23.

⁴ Eduardo Serpa, The Mozambican elections, *AI Bulletin*, 34 (5), 1994, p 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 1; The Economist Intelligence Unit, *op cit*, p 10.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 13.

⁷ Serpa, *op cit*, p 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, p 3.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 4.

¹⁰ Einar Braathen, Democratic Decentralization in Mozambique?, in Malyn Newitt with Patrick Chabal & Norrie Macqueen (eds), *Community & the State in Lusophone Africa*, London: King's College, 2003, p 99-126.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² National Democratic Institute, Mozambique Election Update 99 (4), Johannesburg, March 2000.

¹³ This word was introduced by Einar Braathen to classify what happened after the democratisation period in Mozambique.

¹⁴ Brazão Mazula, The Mozambican elections: a path of peace and democracy, as cited in Braathen, *op cit*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ Economist Intelligence Unit, *op cit*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 15, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 13.

¹⁹ All Africa.com

<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200310160445.html> (16.10.2003)

²⁰ The Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mozambique_elecotral_commission.htm

²¹ Mozambique File, February 2003, p 4, 5.

²² Mozambique News Agency, Report no. 259, 15.08.2003, p. 2.

²³ AllAfrica.com, 22.10.2003.

²⁴ Irinnews, 23.10.2003.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Braathen, *op cit*.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Mozambique*, EIU, London, April 2001, p 17.