

Ten years without Samora

It is now ten years since, on 19 October 1986, Mozambique's first president, Samora Machel, died in a plane crash on South African soil that was almost certainly engineered by the apartheid military.

It has become fashionable to claim that what the Mozambican government does today was foreshadowed by what Samora did, just as the policies of Samora Machel's government were foreshadowed by those of the first Frelimo President, Eduardo Mondlane.

Mondlane-Samora-Chissano: official discourse presents this as a linear succession without contradictions or ruptures. In so doing, it makes it impossible to understand Mozambican history, and unconsciously belittles all three leaders, who can no longer be viewed as individuals making their own decisions, mistakes, and triumphs.

We do not have to argue whether Samora Machel's government was better or worse than that of Joaquim Chissano. We certainly should not fall into the nostalgic trap of imagining that all problems would be solved if Samora were still alive. But we should have the basic intellectual honesty to admit that, for better or worse, there have been profound breaks with the past.

Samora never recognised Renamo as an opposition force, but as an instrument of foreign interests. The abortive attempt to talk to Renamo via South African intermediaries in September 1984 was within the context of maintaining Frelimo's monopoly on power, and so cannot be viewed as a prelude to the 1992 peace accord.

Samora certainly believed that the private sector had a role to play in the economy - "the state does not sell needles", as he put it - but he assumed that the state would remain the dominant player. The thought of denationalising the country's major banks never crossed his mind.

Would Samora have signed a peace accord with Renamo? Would he have agreed to abandon Marxism? Would he have accepted the pluralist constitution of 1990? Would he have gone along with the headlong privatisations of the mid-1990s? Such questions can never be answered: it is impossible to know whether the military shake-up Samora was planning when he died would have created an army capable of crushing Renamo. Or whether he would have been forced to react to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the same way that the current Frelimo leadership reacted.

One cannot, in all fairness, expect today's Mozambican government to emulate Samora's leadership style. Leaders of such charisma are rare indeed, and Joaquim Chissano is wise to develop his own style rather than imitate his predecessor.

But where one can expect emulation is on ethical issues. It was during Samora's leadership that Mozambique won praise as a country without corruption. In those days, when a Frelimo leader (Francisco Langa) was discovered with his hands in the till, the shame was so great that he committed suicide.

When there were problems in the defence and security forces, Samora did not wring his hands and complain of lack of resources. He tried to correct problems with whatever was available and had no fear of moving, or of sacking, ministers who were not performing well.

When the police, the army and the security service were accused of violating the rights of ordinary citizens, Samora made no attempt to justify abuses: instead he held a rally to berate (some would say humiliate) in public the ministers concerned.

Such forthright leadership does not guarantee success, but it does lessen the gap between leaders and led, and stimulate popular trust in the leadership.

Were Samora alive today, perhaps he would not be able to defeat organised crime, the criminal gangs who are taking over the streets of Maputo, the traffickers in guns, drugs and stolen cars. But of one thing we can be certain: he would try, and he would not tolerate police passivity or complicity.

The greatest tribute the government and Frelimo can pay to Samora is to act in the critical, selfless, and honest spirit that he embodied. Making Frelimo once again the conscience of society will be a better monument to Samora than anything the South African government may erect on the site of his death.