

More than an acronym has changed in Mozambique, writes Ken Vernon

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Secret police under surveillance

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NOTHING represented the autocratic nature of the Mozambican one-party dictatorship more than the activities of the feared and hated secret police operating under the slightly ridiculous acronym of SNASP.

And nothing represents the newly found and still fragile freedom in Mozambique more than SNASP's dismemberment.

It is to be replaced with a State Information and Security Service with the equally Bondish acronym of SISE.

As the death of SNASP was being debated in parliament recently, the unlikely and rather bizarre situation arose of the former Minister of Security, Sergio Vieira, arguing that the problem with SNASP was a lack of control over its multi-faceted activities.

SNASP was answerable only to one man — President Joaquim Chissano.

The mere fact that the former Security Minister could stand up in parliament and point a finger, admittedly obliquely, at the once inviolate President for allowing his private police to get out of control, more than anything else,



Hardliner . . . even Marcelino dos Santos objected to the secrecy surrounding the security service.

represents the reality of the new Mozambique.

It was also an indication that the still largely servile parliament is beginning to stretch its newly acquired democratic muscle.

At its peak, SNASP's tentacles reached through every strata of Mozambican society as well as allegedly being responsible for assassinations inside South Africa and Portugal.

Initially SISE was also to fall under the sole control of the president, and Mr Vieira had harsh words to say about this proposal, suggesting that security bodies

should not be dependent on one man — even if he is head of state.

He criticised the excessive secrecy of SNASP, as well as the fact that this secrecy was to be carried over to SISE, saying that "the imperatives of democracy demand transparency".

Following these criticisms, presidential control of the new body, SISE, will be augmented by the "assistance" of a consultative body termed the National Defence and Security Council.

In its initial form the Bill dealing with the security service continued to enshrine secrecy. It proposed that the director-general of SISE and its senior officers be appointed only by the President and that such appointments be hidden from the public.

Even Assembly Chairman Marcelino dos Santos — still a reputed hardline communist — queried this secrecy, saying it was against the tenets of the new constitution.

"This Bill is a made-to-measure suit for one man, but the suit must fit not only President Chissano but all those who succeed him," said Mr Vieira.

Again the President compro-

mised and now the names of the director of SISE and his deputy will be published in the Government Gazette, while other "officials" will remain unknown.

It would be churlish to ask why these men didn't expound these worthy sentiments in the past. Times and men change.

Last week the same government that seeks to ensure SISE stays in the shadows, refused to accept amendments to other security legislation that would have made it illegal to spread rumours.

It also amended its own definition of espionage that sought to make it illegal to attempt to obtain secret information because it was deemed to be a threat to journalists trying to perform their watchdog role on the activities of the state.

Such action might appear contradictory for a government that until very recently controlled every word written in the country and which still controls — and intends to continue to control — the electronic media.

But in the new Mozambique, contradictions abound. — Star Africa Service □