

Africa has lost a shining son

John D'Oliveira

IT is hard to imagine southern Africa without smiling, ebullient Samora Machel.

Whether he was inspecting troops before signing the Nkomati Accord, greeting his close friend Robert Mugabe on arrival in Harare for the Non-Aligned Movement summit or whether he was embracing Botswana's Quett Masire to congratulate him on the 20th anniversary of Botswana's independence, President Machel radiated confidence and charm.

This despite the fact that Mozambique is, by far, the most troubled of the Frontline states. To many observers it is little more than a basket case economically, socially, politically and militarily.

Quick-witted, humorous and earthy, Samora Machel had a sharp tongue which he turned on friend and foe alike from the security of his dominant position in Mozambican politics.

In his troubled country he was known as the "Old Man". Despite their privations, most ordinary Mozambicans still believed at the time of his death this week that he was the only man who could still hold the country together and deliver at least some of the dreams of independence.

Despite Machel's early radicalism, Mozambican moderates came to believe that his commonsense would prevail over his more radical colleagues and temper their ideological excesses.

This was largely a product of the President's ability to go straight to the point, to admit his administration's shortcomings and mistakes and to laugh with his people at himself, his government and their mistakes.

Diplomats in Maputo still chuckle over the exchange between Machel and the Soviet Ambassador to Mozambique when he visited the Soviet pavilion at the Maputo industrial and agricultural fair some years ago.

Machel took a ride in a Russian limousine which was on display and the smiling ambassador asked him how he liked the car.

"Very nice," responded Machel, "a very comfortable car indeed. But I am afraid I have the same tastes as you and I prefer a Mercedes-Benz."

On another occasion, showing development projects to visiting diplomats, Machel explained that one project was being constructed by the Rumanians, another by the Russians and yet another by the East Germans.

"The only trouble," he quipped, "is that they all want to be paid in dollars."

He was opposed to racism and attacked it wherever it appeared in his country, explaining bluntly he had not fought the Portuguese in order to allow black racists to take over from the white racists.

However, for all Machel's endearing qualities, he cannot escape at least some responsibility for the mess into which his country has subsided.

The son of a poor peasant farmer whose land was expropriated by the Portuguese as part of a programme to make farmland available to white settlers from Portugal, Machel was born on September 29 in the village of Chibambeni in southern Mozambique.

After completing six years of primary education, he started working to pay for a nursing course which he took at night. Later, he worked as a nurse and as a medical assistant at a hospital in Maputo.

A growing political awareness took him into the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) and, in the early 60s, he left Mozambique for the Frelimo headquarters in Dar es Salaam.

After training in Algeria, Machel took charge of Frelimo's first military training camp in Tanzania and later became one of the Movement's main tactical planners.

No desk soldier, he led the first attack on the Portuguese in September, 1964.

By 1968, he was commander of Frelimo's armed forces and, as such, he accelerated the programme in terms of which Frelimo military units received political indoctrination.

Meanwhile, Frelimo was racked by a bitter and frequently bloody internecine war between the "revolutionaries" and the group that was then known as the "reactionaries and the new exploiters".

Essentially, the conflict was between Frelimo's most radical (Chinese-orientated) elements on the one hand and its nationalists, its pro-Western elements, moderates who sought a negotiated settlement with the Portuguese, pro-Russian groups who opposed the tilt towards the Chinese, ethnic and tribal factions, on the other.

Machel, representing Frelimo's military machine, played a major role in the confrontation which came to a head at Frelimo's second national congress in 1969 and which ended with undisputed victory for the radicals.

Although the radicals now dominated Frelimo, dissatisfaction was widespread and a wave of assassination and counter-assassination followed.

In February, 1969 Frelimo leader Eduardo Mondlane was killed when he opened a letter bomb.

Machel was one of the triumvirate appointed to lead Frelimo. The other members were Frelimo vice-president Uria Simango and the movement's foremost political

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theorist, Marcelino dos Santos, now one of the major contenders for the vacant presidency.

When Simango broke with the other two and was expelled from the party, Machel became the undisputed leader of Frelimo. He remained Frelimo and Mozambique's leader until his death.

After the Portuguese withdrawal, Machel made a triumphant entry into Maputo where he spoke at a gala independence ceremony, announcing the nationalisation of all land, economic enterprise, property and public services.

However, the jubilation in the streets masked an enormous set of problems.

Mozambique's infrastructure had always been grossly inadequate and the few skilled people the country could call on were white Portuguese who fled to the motherland for fear of what might happen under Marxist Machel.

In addition, the war in Rhodesia took its toll because of Machel's unstinted support for Robert Mugabe's guerillas.

The Rhodesians attacked key installations in Mozambique and they sowed what many people believed were the seeds of the Machel Government's destruction when they took a handful of Frelimo dissidents and created the Mozambique Resistance Movement.

At independence, the Machel government immediately started implementing its Marxist policies in the genuine belief that these would resolve Mozambique's problems.

However, many of these policies have clearly been misdirected. Much of what was not misdirected was ruined by bureaucratic incompetence.

And, always, there was the war.

Machel's government simply did not have the resources to administer his huge country effectively, to recover from mistaken policies, to satisfy even a small portion of his people's expectations and to wage war against a rebel movement which, at one stage, received substantial support from the South African Defence Force.

If nothing else, the situation he faced forced Machel into increasingly pragmatic actions.

It was largely because of increasing pressure from the MNR that Machel was forced into the Nkomati Accord, in terms of which he undertook not to allow the ANC facilities from which it could attack South Africa. For South Africa's part, it would cease aiding the MNR.

The fact that Machel could get away with a formal pact with South Africa was a tribute to the confidence he generated locally and to his impeccable reputation in Africa.

His biggest problem was the war — in part because it aggravated almost every other problem in his country.

However, following an initial (unsuccessful) attempt by South Africa to get the two sides to arrive at a negotiated settlement, Machel refused to have any dealings with the MNR "bandits".

And yet, for many observers, a negotiated settlement in Mozambique is the only rational option open to whoever succeeds Mozambique's first President. □ — *John D'Oliveira is Editor of The Star's Africa News Service.*