

Peace in Mozambique: can Frelimo control the process?

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The Mozambican peace process took nearly two years to reach a partial and geographically limited cease-fire, agreed in Rome in December 1990, and which had already been violated several times by mid-January 1991. Two questions worry commentators: has the peace process been a defeat for progressive forces in Mozambique, and if so, why is the war continuing? Following from this, it is also necessary to ask what prospect is there of the war in Mozambique coming to an end?

To answer these questions it is necessary to examine the political process in Mozambique since early 1987, when a relatively wide range of tactical options were open to the ruling Frelimo Party.

Over the previous six or seven years, the country had been trapped in a descending spiral of war-related economic and political decline, as the MNR's systematic attacks on the economic infrastructure destroyed Mozambique's already fragile and limited productive capacity. After the end of the war against Rhodesia and the liberation of Zimbabwe, and while the MNR regrouped under South African auspices, this steady decline, which had been a continuous trend since before Independence in 1975, was briefly reversed with an all-too-brief boom in 1980-1981. This trend was again reversed and the decline exacerbated by the war of destabilisation which was launched by South Africa in the early 1980s.

THE MNR'S TACTICS

The revitalised MNR hit at factories and agro-industrial installations such as cotton ginneries and electricity generating stations. But they also tried to hold back agricultural production by the most productive sector in the Mozambican countryside, the peasant families. By attacking villages and terrorising the women in the fields, the MNR was able to limit both food and cash crop production, and to turn the rural populations from producers to expensively dependent refugees.

The bandits also managed in some parts of the country to undermine peasant support for Frelimo, the liberation movement turned vanguard party which had won the war against the Portuguese and led Mozambique to independence in 1975. It must be clearly understood that such a loss of support, did not necessarily mean a transference of allegiance to the vicious and brutal MNR. The bandits operated in a variety of ways which played both on the known weakness of Frelimo's political mobilisation in the central provinces of the country, and on the shortcomings of the government's rural policies. It is doubtful whether this was done consciously by the MNR, whose political agenda has always been so sketchy as to be almost invisible, but objectively speaking the result was the same.

The liberation war had been fought mainly in the northern provinces of Cabo Delgado, Niassa and Tete, with some clandestine activity in the capital, then called Lourenço Marques, in the far south. For the rest of the country at

independence, Frelimo was an attractive idea, not a lived political experience.

In the late 1970s, the new government's national rural policies were based on similar concepts to those tried out earlier in Tanzania, under the rubric of *ujamaa*. Peasants were to be moved into communal villages where they could take part in socialist production, and where they could have access to health posts, simple schools, and clean water. But, as in Tanzania, the policy made little allowance for specific local conditions: the production methods developed by peasants to take into account the soils and climate of their own home area. On top of this, Frelimo waged a systematic campaign against local religious and social customs which it regarded as backward or reactionary, labelling them with the evocative Portuguese term "obscurantismo".

Thus, at least to begin with, for many people in the rural areas, Frelimo rule meant a trade-off: limited access to modern health and educational systems, in exchange for an entirely involuntary loss of the freedom to practise their old customs. A recently published anthropological study has shown what the effect of this was in one small area of northern Nampula. The new power structures set up by Frelimo cut across old lines of kinship, destroyed the symbols which linked the people to their ancestors, and created a disenfranchised stratum of people at a stroke.

The arrival of the MNR gangs, who burned down the schools and health posts and murdered the local party workers, was seen by the disenfranchised as a blow against those who had failed to respect the traditions of the area. Frelimo's inability to defend or to rebuild the schools and health posts, to remove the corpses from the wells, or to protect the women in the fields, meant that even for party activists, conditions of life became much worse.

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF 1987

In October 1986, a serious regional crisis developed in southern Africa, when the Frontline States seized the initiative from South Africa, which had become increasingly aggressive in its destabilisation activities. The Frontline States began to exert pressure on Malawi, the only independent African state which has exchanged ambassadors with Pretoria, to refuse to allow the MNR to operate across its borders into Tete and Zambézia provinces of Mozambique. Vast numbers of bandits were trying to cut Mozambique in half from bases inside Malawi. A little later, the group began to try to persuade Zaire, a traditional ally of the U.S. and of UNITA, Angola's bandit movement, to fall into line as well.

South Africa reacted predictably. A series of actions in October by Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, were linked to allegations that South African freedom fighters were operating across the borders of neighbouring states, and the Pretoria regime began to issue unmistakable threats, some of them aimed directly at the person of the Mozambican president, Samora Machel.

On 19 October, returning from a Frontline Meeting with President Mobuto of Zaire in Zambia, Samora Machel's aircraft crashed on South African soil in what are conventionally described as "unexplained circumstances", killing the President and over 30 of his delegation. While South African involvement in the crash has never been technically proven, all the political indicators point in that direction.

Mozambique's foreign minister, Joaquim Chissano, took over as president and initiated a series of political, economic and social reforms. In early 1987, for the first time, a vote in Mozambique's parliament, the People's Assembly, was not unanimous. Deputies began first to abstain, and then actually to vote against government motions. Also for the first time, a session was presided over by somebody other than the President of the Republic, when elder statesman Marcelino dos Santos was named speaker (or in Mozambican terms, President) of the Assembly. At the beginning of the year the Economic Recovery Programme, or PRE, after its Portuguese initials, was introduced, an austerity programme which went even further than IMF demands. Relations with the US and the UK were cultivated, on the implicit grounds that Mozambique already had enough enemies to deal with. Religious freedoms were guaranteed and implemented, and eventually the Pope visited the country. And most significantly of all, a group church leaders were given the go-ahead, on their own responsibility, to make contact with MNR leaders to discover whether there was any possible common ground for negotiating an end to the war.

THE PEACE PROCESS, 1988-1991

The actual peace process has been carried out from start to finish with the extreme caution and patience typical of the Frelimo leadership. For several years, the country's Catholic bishops issued periodic appeals for negotiations and an end to war. Frelimo's classic response was a calculated insult. They were already talking to the organ-grinder (South Africa); what need was there to speak to his monkey (the MNR)?

But as early as 1987, in a meeting with US President Ronald Reagan, Chissano stated that the Mozambican government was willing to accept a non-military solution to the war. The United States clearly wanted to play a role in this process, but the Mozambican government was unhappy at this. In the end, it was the church, which Frelimo had dealt with harshly in the years immediately after independence, which was brought on board and used for the initial contacts.

In 1988, just after the Pope's visit to the region, the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference met in Harare, and adopted a position strongly in favour of some kind of negotiated peace deal between the government and the MNR. By November 1988 reports were circulating that the Christian Council wanted to mediate between the MNR and the government, despite official denials that the group had any official mandate. But by December of that year, the cat was irredeemably out of the bag when

Marcelino dos Santos admitted to a Portuguese reporter that he had "nothing against these contacts, so long as they contribute to peace in Mozambique."

The story of the on-off talks about talks between the church mediators, the appointment of Presidents Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya as official mediators, and of the eventual face-to-face meeting between MNR chieftains and Mozambican government leaders has been told elsewhere.

However, serious problems remain. It is far from clear that the MNR is still the highly centralised military command structure described in the Minter Report of March 1989. Although it is too early to talk of warlords, there are strong indications that some southern groups may have been controlled directly from South Africa, rather than the Gorongosa area, in recent months. In the north too, there have been splinter groups. Whether any agreement with Dhlakama's men will hold for the whole country is therefore open to question.

The MNR faces other problems. Its political position, always shaky, is at an all-time low as the Mozambican government has outfoxed it on every demand. The Republic of Mozambique is now, at least on paper, a multi-party state with guaranteed constitutional freedoms and a market economy. As President Chissano has pointed out, to turn the paper freedoms into real ones will involve a struggle, but in this Mozambique is qualitatively no different from any other country.

The MNR also carries the burden of its historical record as the arm of two foreign powers, committed to brutal terrorism against civilian populations to gain political leverage. It is far from clear that it has succeeded, or indeed even begun, the process of attempting to turn itself into a genuinely Mozambican political force, if such a transformation is in fact possible. And of course, the question in every Mozambican's mind is, since all the demands have been met, why does the fighting carry on, and what is South Africa's role in the process?

THE CAMEL AND THE TENT

Samora Machel was fond of a folk story which tells of an Arab nomad, who succumbed to the pleas of his camel to be allowed to put just his head inside the tent. After a while the camel pleaded to be allowed to put his feet in as well, until eventually the animal had taken over the tent, and the Arab found himself outside. Sharing power with the MNR, he implied, was to allow the camel to put his head inside the tent.

But the legalisation of political parties in Mozambique, and the immediate appearance of several groups with a wide range of positions across the political spectrum, has had three immediate effects. First, it has denied the possibility of the MNR's achieving by violence its objective of an undemocratic power-sharing arrangement with Frelimo. Second, it has created political space for a wide range of legitimate opposition to Frelimo and its policies, opposition which in most cases had never taken up arms against the government or denied its legitimacy, but which equally had never before come out in favour of

the existing political order. Third, by ensuring that many small camels have access to the tent, Frelimo has made it highly unlikely that any one of them will grow sufficiently powerful to expel the others out into the cold desert night.

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