

Frelimo casts off monopoly of power

Paul Fauvet in Maputo

THE central committee of Mozambique's ruling Frelimo party formally voted on Wednesday in favour of abandoning its monopoly of political power and adopting a multi-party system for the country.

This comes after months of national debate on a new draft of the Mozambican constitution and advice from the 12 member political bureau of Frelimo that the one-party state should be discarded.

The unanimous vote ended a meeting that lasted nine days, two days longer than scheduled.

The committee also advocated changing the country's name from "People's Republic" to "Republic".

The resolution proposed a market economy but rejected privatisation of land. Under current law all land is state property and the state provides titles, which may be inherited, for its use.

A vigorous campaign by Mozambican journalists persuaded the committee to insert in the constitution a formal commitment to freedom of the press and the right of citizens to information.

The resolution included a commitment to abolish the death penalty but rejected pressure from the Catholic Church to place a constitutional ban on abortion.

The committee adopted separate resolutions on the main outlines on a new electoral law and on a law on the formation and registration of political parties.

If, as is almost certain, the proposals are adopted by parliament later this year, political parties may be legally registered if they can show the support of 1,100 citizens of voting age — 100 in each of the country's 11 provinces. But parties "of a separatist, discriminatory, or anti-democratic nature" or formed along ethnic or religious lines, will be forbidden.

There will be a state subsidy for political parties, shared according to the percentage of popular support in elections.

All parties will be expected to obey a few basic norms, including an undertaking to respect the laws and the constitution and to refrain from violence.

The committee's decisions put the rebels of the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) in an awkward position. The adoption of pluralist politics and the declaration last month by President Joaquim Chissano that the MNR could take part in the 1991 General Election mean that the rebels have no plausible justification for continuing their war.

President Chissano has made it clear that next year's elections will go ahead even if the war is not ended. So if the MNR wants to play any role, other than a purely disruptive one, in the elections, it will have to put down its guns and register as a political party.

The Lisbon representative of the MNR, Manuel Frank, said the decision was "a positive and useful opening," but added: "The matter should be discussed in peace negotiations between Frelimo and [the MNR] and not decided unilaterally."

Other rightwing groups in exile which have never taken up arms are likely to return very soon to the country to begin organising as parties. Some of them made contributions to the constitutional debate which were cautiously welcomed by the government.

These groups may attract voters who reject Frelimo's socialist ideology but are repelled by the violence and carnage associated with the MNR.

Frelimo seems confident that it can win the 1991 elections. At the close of the committee meeting President Chissano declared that opting for multi-party politics was a sign of strength rather than weakness. He said that anyone who thought it would be easy to beat Frelimo under a pluralist system was seriously mistaken.

Opposition to Frelimo is in the main cities: the party believes that it retains mass support among the peasantry in the war-torn countryside.

Frelimo's announcement came the day after Mozambican government representatives ended their second meeting in two months with the MNR in Rome to discuss ending their 14-year-old war. A third round is expected shortly.

The war which has raged since shortly after Mozambique's independence from Portugal in 1975 has crippled the economy and killed hundreds of thousands of people.