

MOZAMBIQUE

Chissano heeds the lessons of Eastern Europe

SIX months after the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) dropped Marxism-Leninism from its party credo, President Joaquim Chissano proposed a radical new constitution on 9 January. The objective is direct elections for the presidency and the People's Assembly.

The draft constitution, which is to be circulated for public debate, proposes the most sweeping political change since independence from Portugal in 1975.

Chissano unveiled the package at a public rally after a wave of strikes in the capital — the first anywhere in the country since independence. He said the people would be given the opportunity to choose between a multi-party, and a one-party system.

The proposed changes would have to be ratified by parliament before elections scheduled for 1991. "We are proposing that the president of the Republic be elected by secret vote, and that any citizen can be a candidate for the presidency within certain criteria," Chissano said. The criteria are that a candidate be proposed by at least 5,000 people and have 200 backers from each of the 10 provinces. He or she should be between 40 and 65 years of age.

If adopted, the draft constitution would remove Frelimo's power to choose the president. Until now, the president of the party, chosen by the central committee, has automatically become national president for an unlimited period.

Under the new constitution, presidential elections would be direct and secret, and no one would serve more than three five-year terms. "Each president could exercise presidential functions for a maximum of 15 years," Chissano said.

The leader of Frelimo would no longer automatically become head of state; candidates for the presidency would no longer be proposed by Frelimo alone.

Chissano said the changes would curb the powers of the president, requiring bills to be referred to parliament for re-examination. Parliament would have the powers to override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority.

Parliament itself would be elected directly, instead of by electoral colleges, and deputies would represent constituencies. At present, representatives are chosen by members of provincial assemblies.

Chissano said the changes would require referendums on important issues. He also proposed that a wide range of human rights issues be enshrined in the constitution, including the right to strike, legal defence for the poor, land tenure for farmers, compensation for people who suffered illegal actions at the hand of the state and the abolition of capital punishment.

The issue of the right to strike comes at a time when the country has been hit by a series of strikes and other industrial troubles. Jose Catorze was dismissed as director of the national daily *Noticias* by the Minister of Information on 5 January because of the "anti-Marxist" tone of coverage of events in Eastern Europe.

Calana de Silva resigned the same day as chief editor of the television station, TVE, after accusing the government of censoring a news programme about strikes. The ministry denied this.

On 9 January nurses and support staff at Mozambique's largest hospital went on strike in support of a demand for more pay. Strike leaders told reporters

they wanted their monthly wage raised to MM 30,000 (\$36) from MM 21,500. They also wanted free medical treatment and extra pay for night work.

The hospital strike was the latest in a series in recent weeks. The first to go out were journalists at the leading weekly *Tempo* magazine. They demanded, and won, a year-end bonus after a two-day stoppage.

Dock workers and railway employees followed suit. Railworkers at the port of Maputo returned to work on 4 January after management accepted some of their demands. The Transport Ministry promised to pay wage arrears and to implement a new salary system. Dockers, who briefly joined the railworkers in downing tools, went back to work on the same day.

A large textile factory and the state housing authority were also hit. So far the strikes have been ended peacefully, with workers winning their claims for back pay.

Changes in Eastern Europe, the effects of a three-year austerity programme sponsored by the IMF and spreading allegations of corruption among senior officials are believed to have fuelled the more militant attitude.

The labour disputes come at a delicate moment for Chissano, who, observers say, is prepared to open direct talks with the rebel Mozambique National Resistance (MNR). The proposed new constitution is seen as a step towards direct talks and an end to the 14-year civil war.

Political analysts say the changes seem to meet some of the conditions set by the MNR for laying down their arms.