Democracy without People?  
Local Government Reform  
and 1998 Municipal Elections in Mozambique

After several postponements, municipal elections within a democratic multi-party Constitution were held for the first time in Mozambique on June 30, 1998. In this fresh account of the elections, we first present the political antecedents of the elections asking: Local Government Reform too late, too little? Second, we try to argue that the municipal elections were « elections without people ». Third, we try to contextualise, theorise and sum up the findings in terms of « politics reduced to a system of distrust ». Fourth, we attempt to start discussions on the lesson for local government reformers. Fifth, we present some conclusive remarks about the logics dominating the process.

Local Government Reform too late, too little?

In the peace process evolving from the General Peace Accord between Renamo (Mozambique National Resistance) and the Frelimo (Mozambican Liberation Front), government in October 1992, power sharing and pluralism was envisaged even at the local level.

On August 17, 1994, the old one-party Assembly of the Republic of Mozambique unanimously adopted the Municipalities Law. Municipal elections were decided to take place within one year after the October 1994 general elections. However, in November 1995, the new multi-party Assembly unexpectedly concluded that the 1994 Municipalities Law and the proposed election laws were unconstitutional. On October 29, 1996, the Assembly unanimously approved a constitutional amendment, which started the local electoral process moving again. The amendment defined two kinds of local units: Municipalities in the cities and towns, and villages around the seat of the administrative post in rural areas. Hence, the concept of the 1994 Municipalities Law of constructing unitary District Municipalities was abandoned. The majority of the rural population was to be excluded from

1. « New law on local government », Mozambiquefile, Maputo, September 1994: 14-15. The law was according to an ex-minister to « revolutionize our concept of governance ».
2. Constitutional amendment, article 190.2 and 190.3.
local democracy in the first place. On the other hand, the constitutional amendment emphasised civic participation for local development and deepened democracy³.

However, the sweet words and honeymoon of consensus were swept away when it came to how the municipal reform should be implemented. A new package of local government laws were approved by the Assembly in April 1997, but with the fierce opposition of Renamo. Renamo was mainly opposed to the absence of party representatives at the provincial and local levels of the technical-administrative secretariat of elections (STAE), and they were against limiting the municipal status in the forthcoming local elections to 33 cities and towns⁴.

The municipal elections were then scheduled for December 27, 1997, rescheduled for May 29, 1998, and then postponed once more, apparently in order to handle organizational problems and boycott threats from the Renamo opposition party.

Municipal elections without people?

The municipal elections were finally held on June 30, 1998. It happened to be « elections without people »⁵. The average turnout was 14.58 per cent⁶.

The local elections were marked by an abstention of almost 90% in the major cities and an alarming disorganization⁷. Frelimo was the single party running for elections in 27 of the 33 places to hold local elections⁸. However, in 11 places there was an independent mayor candidate contesting Frelimo’s candidate⁹.

All the opposition parties¹⁰ decided to boycott the elections. Known as « RENAMO + 15 »¹¹, they toured the country with an anti-election campaign trying to convince the people not to vote. Dhlakama and three to four party leaders rallied all the central provinces telling people, among other things, to go fishing instead of voting on election day.

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³. The constitution defines the tasks of the Local Power as follows (Article 188):

1. The purpose of local power is to organize the participation of the citizens for solving the specific problems of their communities and to stimulate local development and the deepening of democracy in the framework of unity of the Mozambican state.

2. Local power shall be supported by the initiative and the capacity of the population and shall act in close collaboration with the participative organizations of the citizens.» (Unofficial translation, Mozambique Peace Process Bulletin, Maputo, AWEPA, 17, November 1996).


⁶. AIM Reports, 139. The National Election Commission (CNE) on 17 July finally released the official results, two days past the legal deadline.

⁷. AIM Reports, 138.

⁸. At six places, independent lists of assembly candidates were running for elections: Cidade de Maputo, Matola, Manhiça, Beira, Nacala and Xai-Xai. (Satana, Maputo, 24 July 1998).

⁹. Cidade de Maputo, Matola, Manhiça, Beira, Nacala (not Xai-Xai); in addition Ancoche, Gurvè, Inhambane, Nampula, Pemba and Quelimane.

¹⁰. With two minor exceptions: The Labour Party (Partido do Trabalho, PT) and the coalition « Rumo » PT presented candidates in Maputo and Xai-Xai, in « Rumo » Maputo and Matola.

¹¹. Mozambiquefile, May 1998. A meeting on April 17, 1998 between the main opposition force, the Renamo Party, and 15 minor parties agreed to unleash a boycott campaign. The call for boycott was eventually joined by the third party coalition represented in the National Assembly, the União Democrática (UD).
From June 15th to June 27th the election campaign, protected by law, took place. It was without significant popular support and only became intensive by the end. The campaign was marked by an excess of electoral promises and an absence of political debate. The state-owned press was biased toward Frelimo. However, the local election largely took place in an atmosphere of civility, calm and order, free of intimidation. The only place where there was an alleged fraud, was in Dondo in Sofala.

Our observations and interviews with families, electoral elite, opposition politicians, civil society political administrative elite and electoral observers, made before and after the elections, indicate that the electoral process and its main outcomes still leave a lot to be desired both from Mozambican people’s view and compared to international democratic standards.

Politics reduced to a system of distrust?

In Mozambique the interplay between political reform and socio-cultural forces, or between state and civil society, has been marked by mutual distrust. In the local government reform, this distrust has been expressed at three levels.

The relationship between the ruling party and the parties in opposition

All the opposition parties decided to boycott the elections. Their reasons were their lack of confidence in the impartiality and competence of the technical secretariat of the elections (STAE). This attitude was nurtured by reports, accepted by government representatives, of faults in the voter registration process and in other electoral preparations. The opposition chose to interpret these incidents as indications of systematic manipulation of the electoral process and as preparation of fraud.

The relationship between coordinators of candidates’ lists and the technical secretariat of elections (STAE)

The pattern of interaction turned out to be one of methodical distrust asserted by the secretariats in their procedures to approve and disapprove lists. The STAE officials interpreted the rules in the most rigorous way. This created great difficulties for, and in many cases effectively prevented, the lists/candidates of independent citizens and of smaller parties which lacked of administrative and financial resources. The calls for boycott were reinforced by reports on these experiences.

12. *Mozambique Peace Process Bulletin*, 21 July 1998. However, coverage by the national radio was « balanced », and the private press in Maputo was « largely against Frelimo » according to this bulletin with Joseph Hanlon as editor.

13. Guido Van Hecken from AWEPA reports in *Mozambique Peace Process Bulletin* (issue 21, 21 July 1998) that « the circumstantial evidence is very strong » that there was organized ballot box stuffing in Dondo. Renamo lodged a formal complaint to the District Attorney’s Office, alleging that there was fraud (Panafrican News Agency, 23 July 1998). Dondo recorded a turnout of 53.63 %, far higher than anywhere else. In the 1994 General Elections, Renamo won 73 % and Frelimo 18 % of the votes. The reason for ballot stuffing might have been confusion caused by a paragraph in the electoral law (Law nº 6/97, 28 May, 1997, Chapter III, Article 100), saying that the winner needed more than half of the votes. By many people this was interpreted as if more than fifty percent electoral turnout was necessary to validate the elections.

The relationship between the electorate and the very institution of local elections

The average turnout was 14.58 %. The higher the population density, the lower the turnout. In the major cities the turnout was about 10 % or less. In the 1994 General Elections the average turn out was 86 %.

We here elaborate on these three relationships :
  a) The people’s distrust of the political system.
  b) The institutional-legal set-up caused confusion and hindered popular mobilization.
  c) The opposition’s boycott and its influence on the election results.

The people’s distrust of the political system

« We voted in 1994 and our lives did not improve, so why vote this time ? » many people have asked. Most people are disillusioned with the politicians and their politics. No one believes the politicians will do anything to improve people’s lives. During the previous years the quality of public services has been deteriorating and living costs have increased constantly.

The civic education campaign only attracted people when it was to enjoy theater and dance. When it came to the informative part most people left.

The abstention was equally high in the southern provinces of Inhambane, Gaza and Maputo provinces where Renamo had nearly no support in the 1994 general elections. This might show that the abstention was not just a result of the opposition’s call for a boycott but a general popular discontent with the political system as well.

Our own observations in the centre region (Sofala and Manica provinces) indicate that a great part of the civil society has been marginalized during the election process. The main actors have been the local nucleus of OMM (Mozambique Woman Organization) and the cultural centres (casa da cultura), all linked to and dependent on the Frelimo. During the electoral campaign no public debate took place. No meetings were organized between the candidates to present and challenge each others political programmes. The people were not given the opportunity to ask questions to the candidates during the electoral campaign.

The fact that nearly 90 % of the registered voters abstained from voting is a « slam in the face » for the political system, and must be interpreted as a warning to the government. This distrust confirms the tendency found in the survey made by the Prigolo project in ten selected cities and towns from October 1997 to January 1998. However, this survey stated that the problem in Mozambique is not a lack of social capital, but the missing structural linkages between existing social capital and the politico-administrative system. There is reason to believe that the local electoral process has widened the gap between local societies and the politico-administrative system.

applied to UD, the only small party in the national assembly, who wanted to have lists in all 35 cities and towns.
The institutional-legal set-up caused confusion and hindered popular mobilization

The election law turned out to be too complex and bureaucratic. At least two requirements proved difficult. One requirement was that lists for assembly must contain one-and-a-half times as many names as there are seats in the assembly15. For most parties this proved impossible, and resulted in the rejection of several parties unable to mobilize the sufficient number of candidates. The other problem was the requirement that every candidate submit seven documents16 difficult to obtain, get photocopied and authenticated for most people.

The result was people witnessing an excessive centralized bureaucracy, confusion about the rules, and a lack of information, giving the impression of incompetence and leading to organizational failure by the CNE (National Commission of Elections) and the STAE.

The civic education effort was and is in general too weak. The civic education campaign started too late, lasted only one month, and the resources were too scarce. The majority of the population does not know what local government is or how it is supposed to work. Many people expressed the opinion that it was not necessary to vote because the single Frelimo candidate had already won the elections. Most of the people did not know that there were two types of ballots, one for « presidente do conselho municipal » and another for the municipal assembly. Even among the local political elites there were gross misinterpretations and lack of understanding17.

From an organizational point of view the local elections were a fiasco18. Errors were made all throughout the electoral process: from the voter-registration to the counting and publishing of the results. Voter-registration books had been lost. Almost all polling stations opened with delay. Missing material was one of the main problems. Electoral (STAE) functionaries were without identification. Many people were not registered in the place they went to vote. The results were only published seventeen days after the elections, and not the fifteen days prescribed by the law. This delay in the results meant that the CNE did not meet the deadlines laid down by the election law. A representative of the UD coalition in the National Assembly commented that CNE « is violating the same rules that pushed us out of the process »19.

The institutional-legal set-up did not rest on any convincing political consensus and as a consequence had a clear demobilizing effect on popular participation and civil society involvement.

17. See the earlier fn 13 on Dondo where it said that many people thought that more than fifty percent electoral turnout was necessary to validate the elections.
The opposition's boycott influenced the election result

Claiming fraud during the voter-registration, and being denied representation in the technical-administrative secretariat of elections (STAE), Renamo decided to boycott the election process.

Renamo promoted itself as representing the people and as a defender of the poorest part of the population. Most people seemed to agree when the opposition said that Frelimo has not done anything for the poor during its time as the ruling party. Hence encouraged by the recommendation of an election boycott some people chose to stay at home.

Others got scared by the intensive anti-election campaign performed by the opposition. A lot of rumors and unconfirmed threats were heard. For instance that on election day potential voters would be stopped, controlled and hindered to vote, even the word massacre was heard. Since most people still remembered the war and feared another outbreak of violence, on election day many of them chose to stay at home.

However by recommending abstention and not a blank vote the opposition missed a unique opportunity of knowing exactly the size of its popular support. The opposition’s recommendation of a popular boycott of the elections is clearly not the only reason for the huge voter abstention, which was almost as high as in areas known as Frelimo strongholds.20

Besides the fact that the local boycott organizers have used anti-civic means – spreading fear and threatening to use force against voters –, they have contributed to fuel people’s general distrust in politics. Moreover, many observers think that this general distrust will bounce back on Renamo and the other opposition parties in the next round.21

Independent candidates may vitalize the political system

Good election results for the independents show that many people are looking for an alternative to the existing political parties. Independent candidates for the municipal elections won 41% of the votes in Beira, 41% in Manhica (Maputo province), 35% all together in Maputo, 34% in Inhambane, 25% in Nacala-Porto, 25% in Angoche, 20% in Nampula, 16% in Quelimane, 14% in Matola.22 At six places independent or oppositional candidates won seats in the municipal assembly: Maputo (17 seats), Beira (17), Nacala (11), Matola (7), Manhica (5), Xai-Xai (3 seats).

In Beira, the second largest city and the provincial capital of Sofala, the independent candidate even had to confront two well organized contenders: Frelimo and Renamo. Known as the « capital of Renamo » the opposition’s boycott is assumed to have had an influence.

If the independents get to know how to influence political decisions and work as a constructive opposition in the municipal assemblies, they may be able to prove to the people that it is still possible to affect policy. Hence they

21. Dr Brazão Mazula, the president of CNE during the 1994 general elections and now rector of Universidade de Eduardo Mondlane, is cited to say that absenteeism should be seen as a strong criticism of all political parties, without exception, because of the way they conduct the political process. (See: Mozambique News Roundup, Afrika News Network, 24 July 1998).
can help vitalizing the democratic political system and increase its legitimacy.

**A lesson for local government reformers?**

As we claimed earlier, the problem in Mozambique is not a lack of social capital, but the missing linkages between existing social capital and the politico-administrative system.

This makes crucial both the design for political reform and the way in which it is formulated and implemented. This is particularly pertinent when the reform is about combined decentralization and democratization. A study of the policy process shows that the reform lacked the necessary political consensus, especially on the questions of how it should be implemented. When the state bureaucracy lacks legitimacy in the society, exclusion of political representatives of the parties at the local and provincial level of the electoral-administrative organization, as seen in Mozambique, leads to the undermining of its « technical » effectiveness. When, in addition, the decisions to approve candidates and lists are slow and extremely centralized, the legitimacy of the state apparatus as agents for a decentralization process is lowered correspondingly. In the Mozambican discourse on decentralization there has been no productive dialogue between protagonists of either « professionalization » or « politicization », respectively, of the implementation bodies of public policy (like the electoral secretariat). As a result, the dominating logic of bureaucratic centralization has been strengthened, supplemented by judicialization. The Supreme Court is the last, and maybe, the only resort of disputes about irregularities in the electoral-administrative process.

The main donor of these municipal elections costing about 10 million USD, has been the European Union. It seems that its representatives have stuck to a very formal-judicial approach to African politics, by accepting the legitimacy of the electoral process as long as the opposition could not provide « evidence to back up its claims of fraud ». The British High Commissioner, Mr. Bernard Everett representing the EU in Maputo, stated that he preferred consulting with EU and UN advisers to STAE rather than listening to large segments of the Mozambican society. In this way, a local government reform is misconceived as a universal-technical phenomenon rather than a particular-political process. Local government reforms need people, and people need democratic organizational instruments such as « parties ». Donors and experts tend to forget this, as they forget that political reforms cannot be dissociated from so-called « politics of the belly »: People – preferably, as many as possible – must benefit materially from the political process.

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24. The civic education campaign was clearly underfunded, and unlike the 1994 general elections there were no trust funds to finance activities of the various political parties and candidates.
The institutional and legal set-up for Mozambique’s municipal elections did not rest on any convincing political consensus, and it did not base itself on active involvement and cooption of opposition parties at the national, provincial and local levels. It had a clearly demobilizing effect on popular participation and civil society involvement, and gave birth to a very restricted and, in most places, deformed type of local democracy. Local societies are increasingly being alienated from the political administrative system.

It is too early to predict how the new municipalities will develop and how they will perform. However impressions from the fieldwork around the local elections do not allow great expectations of an increase in popular participation. To a certain extent people seem estranged by the political system. This was proved by the great electoral abstention. By recommending a local election boycott, Renamo happened to take some advantage of an already fertile ground for an extensive voter abstention, but the general distrust in the political system might bounce back on the opposition parties at the general elections scheduled for 1999. Independent candidates might be an alternative to the bipolarised political system.

The “winners” of the municipal reform process are so far the political-administrative elites of the old Frelimo state, who seem to have used the local elections to reintroduce or strengthen certain patron-client relationships. The “losers” are those who want real democratization expressed through increased popular participation in public policy and management. There have been elements of technocratic, patronial and democratic logics in the local government reform process initiated after 1990. However, the dominating logic of the reform process, for the last year and a half running up to the local elections, has been patrimonial-bureaucratic.

Democracy has still a long and difficult road ahead in Mozambique. Elections are obviously not enough to make the necessary changes to improve the lives of the Mozambicans. Democracy, and in this case municipal democracy, will have to prove that it is useful and that it solves problems relevant to people’s lives.

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