

Twenty Years After Recolonization in Mozambique

BY JOHN S. SAUL

The following is a version, edited and abbreviated, of a talk given at a conference sponsored by the Canadian Research Consortium on Southern Africa (CRCSA) at Carleton University earlier this year. Our thanks to Linda Freeman who transcribed the original text for a forthcoming volume of the conference proceedings. John Saul, based in Toronto, is a member of the SAR editorial working group.

June 25th, 1995 marked the twentieth anniversary of Mozambican independence, the original moment, in 1975, having been the occasion for a joyous celebration that I was privileged to attend. To return to Mozambique this June – and to view the country in the light of the high hopes and expectations which so many of us held for the revolutionary process that Frelimo (the liberation movement in Mozambique) had set in train during its armed struggle against the Portuguese – was an extremely sobering experience, however. Certainly, quite visibly, the anniversary was not one that anybody felt very much like celebrating

This is not surprising. At the moment, by the World Bank's reckoning, Mozambique is the poorest country in the world with a gross domestic product per capita of approximately \$60 in 1990. It is also one of the most dependent on foreign assistance, which accounts for 2/3 of its measured GDP. Indeed, aid receipts per capita amounted to approximately \$60 in 1990, almost double the figure for Sub-Saharan Africa (see David Plank's exemplary article in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (31, #3 [1993]) entitled "Aid, Debt and the End of Sovereignty: Mozambique and Its



Jonathan Kaplan – Impact Visuals

Queue for water at a village pump, Manica province

Donors"). So Mozambique presents an extreme case, one where, among other things, the state has virtually been destroyed. Currently, it is true, the country is inching its way back towards some kind of political stability, one that, for the moment at least and for the first time in many years, provides the rudiments of peace for Mozambicans. But it is not providing much else for the vast majority of them.

What happened?

Explaining this denouement has become a controversial undertaking. Recently, reviewing some of my own work, Bill Freund has suggested that those of us close to the Frelimo project in the early years lost our "critical edge" in celebrating the movement's "socialist" efforts, and he argues, instead, that "the jury is still out on the structure and character of Frelimo." I don't know: perhaps you really did have to be there! I know of few who were who didn't think that indeed, something "truly stirring" was happening. But such first hand witness seems to count for little in the current sceptical climate.

Still, I think I'll stick with the opinion of Jorge Rebelo, one of the early Frelimo leaders. A close friend of two former Frelimo Presidents, Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel, Rebelo is one Mozambican leader who has managed to retain much of his own personal integrity in the current general climate of *saue qui peut*. He expressed his thoughts on this 20th anniversary in an interview that appeared in the Maputo daily *Noticias*:

We all agreed that we were going to gain independence, but his was not the ultimate object; that was in fact the creation of a progressive society which would bring an end to misery in our country. This was not merely a slogan. It was inside of us. It is for this reason that some of us remain very demoralized with the situation which has brought us to the point where we are today. On

the one side however, we think that perhaps it wasn't possible to have done things very differently. But we can't help but be shocked by the distance between that which was our objective and what is the reality today.

Rebelo went on to talk about how sad it was that young people in Mozambique are at the moment lost, without much sense of a future for their society. In response to a final question suggesting that "20 years after independence, and 30 years after joining FRELIMO this isn't the country which you dreamed of," Rebelo replied: "Clearly it's not."

Rebelo also recalled leaving a meeting at the Ponta Vermelha Palace just after independence and having President Machel say: "Now we have the power and we can finish with misery in Mozambique in two years." Someone said, "No, two years is too short a time." And Machel replied, "Okay, three years then." "We have to say now," Rebelo continued, "that this was a bit of voluntarism (*voluntarismo*) on our part. We were imagining things that in reality were not possible. But that's what we wanted to do."

Of course, Rebelo is signalling both the leadership's sincerity of intention *and* the fact that profound errors of judgement and mistakes in policy were made – springing, not least, from this kind of "voluntarism" and leading Frelimo to try to do too much, too fast. There was also an arrogance of purpose that encouraged the Frelimo leadership to do things much less democratically than they might, and should, have done ... as well as a vision of socialism far too exclusively cast in an eastern European mode. But, as we also know, there was the desperately difficult situation left by the Portuguese and, above all, there was South African destabilization: willfully attempting not only to assert control over Frelimo's actions, but even to break the back of Mozambican society.

Still, whatever balance sheet one strikes on this history, the fact remains that it has left a Mozambique dependent in its poverty on the behest of the World Bank, the IMF and the external aid community. And it leaves a leadership which has certainly lost touch with the aspirations of ordinary people. As Graça Machel, the widow of Samora Machel and an important political actor in Mozambique in her own right as a minister in the first Frelimo government and now active in the NGO sector, put it forcefully to me during my recent stay there: "Workers and peasants don't count for anything in this country any more."

True, in the 1980s, the Mozambican leadership tried to find ways of dealing with the external financial institutions in such a way as to protect achievements in social spheres like education and health, while keeping some kind of state involvement in the direction of the economy. Thus the country's first economic recovery program sought to finesse the World Bank and others into allowing space within which to give a more humane face to the compulsory restructuring that was going on.

Recolonization

This didn't last long, however – and soon privatization had become the alpha and omega of policy. The state is being forced back in every sphere, while many of those who staff the state are looking for their own ways into the private sector: the Minister of Finance announces the privatization of the two main state-controlled banks; the cotton industry is turned over to large cotton concessionary enterprises, driven by firms like Lonrho, who have established private fiefdoms along the lines of the *prazos* that existed in the 19th century; forests are stripped; and land is being granted, in the name of increased productivity, to South African farmers who are fleeing the

advent of black power in their own country.

Much recent writing on Mozambique – as, for example, Joseph Hanlon's eloquent *Who Calls The Shots?* or David Plank's important article, cited above – focusses on the extent to which policy is being dictated from outside. Moreover, Plank introduces the concept of "recolonization" quite self-consciously into the discussion as something more than a mere metaphor, suggesting on the basis of his findings in Mozambique, that there and elsewhere "the most likely successor to post-colonial sovereignty will be neo-colonial vassalage, in which Western powers assume direct and open-ended control over the administration, security and economic policies of 'deteriorated' states under the banner of the U.N. and various donors".[†]

He also compares this kind of "recolonization" suggestively with the earlier form of colonialism that Frelimo had first rebelled against; it seems worth quoting him at length on this subject for *SAR* readers.

Although the abject status of several African states is being characterized as a new form of colonialism, there are three fundamental differences between Mozambique's past and present situation.

First the relationship that is now emerging between the country and its donors is less overtly intrusive than direct administration by a colonial power, but its effects are more pervasive. The bonds of debt and dependence that tie Mozambique to its donors were entered into voluntarily by a nominally sovereign state and may in principle be repudiated at any time. The policy

[†] As Plank adds, "the interests of many Africans have been served in nation-states ruled by aid-sponsored despots, but there is little reason to suppose that they will be better served in a world governed by U.N. proconsuls, U.S. marines, and World Bank economists."

changes prescribed by the principal donors aimed to accelerate the integration of Mozambique into the global market and to transform the domestic economy to this end. Beyond this, however, the West's policy prescriptions implied dramatic social and political consequences, including the exacerbation of social inequalities, the aggrandizement of local and expatriate elites and the subversion of prevailing political arrangements. Attempts by the World Bank and other agencies to remake the Mozambican state in their own image, accompanied by their insistence on the reduction and redirection of public expenditure suggest

the extent of changes that are in prospect.

Second, the relationship now being constructed between Mozambique and its donors is potentially far more durable than traditional colonialism. The country's subordinate status is currently rooted not in discredited ideologies of racial superiority, imperial destiny or Christian mission, but in the precepts of modern economy orthodoxy. Dominion is exercised not by the agents of a colonial power, but by the technically sophisticated and politically disinterested economists of the IMF, the World Bank and of bilateral aid agencies, whose prescriptions are determined



Skinning a goat at an illegal Maputo market – to sell below butchers' prices

Ussene Mamudo – AIM/Impact Visuals

not by parochial national interests but by economic analysis. Resisting the power of the major donors is consequently difficult, because Mozambique's subordination is portrayed as a natural consequence of global economic trends rather than an imposition by a specific colonial power.

Finally, the new relationship has no place for the reciprocal obligations that in principle characterize colonialism The absence of formal political ties between Mozambique and its donors leave the Government powerless to refuse the policy prescriptions of the principal aid agencies, because the flow of funds must be maintained at virtually any cost The donors enjoy considerably more autonomy than they would if bound by the statutory obligations to traditional colonialism, while Mozambique is in some respects more dependent on them than it was on Portugal before 1975.

While this is an accurate picture of what has happened to Mozambique – inside from the outside, as it were – there are also Mozambicans who are buying into this process to their own advantage. Still, they are not all that many, given the overall state of the economy, and the advanced condition of collapse of most state-centred social provisioning. Take the health and education systems, for example, once the pride of the early post-independence years. Both systems are being privatized precipitously, where they are not just rotting away, and, self-evidently, this is happening at the expense of the interests of the poorest of the poor.

It is also difficult to be entirely sanguine about the rush to embrace “traditional authority” as one of the bases for local politics. True, Frelimo did often overlook, in a high handed manner, the claims to some kind of integrity of existing rural social and political structures. Let's remember, though, the flip-side, that this was done, at least in part, in the interests of certain kinds of social change –

including, amongst other things, the transformation of gender relations – that will now be much more difficult to realize if “tradition” is to become too central a touchstone of policy. And there is also a whole range of regional, ethnic and other identities that Frelimo also tended to override rather highhandedly, as threats to what it felt to be a necessary sense of national purpose. Perhaps, in so dealing with these identities, Frelimo actually heightened the possibility that they would eventually become politicized in divisive ways. But the fact remains that there are equally important, present-day reasons why such identities now threaten to surge forward uncontrollably into the political realm.

Globalization and “democracy”

For the souring of “identity politics” can be one of the most critical symptoms of the economic and social stagnation generated by the negative impact of “globalization.” Societies rot out from underneath when political options that evoke the existence of some shared sense of societal purpose are not available. It is then that people are tempted to fall back on the lowest common denominators of socio-political identity to give resonance to their lives. It is in such a world, in fact, that the Rwandas and Yugoslavias can become the face of many countries' future (see, on this subject, Bernard Barber's recent volume, *Jihad vs. McWorld*).

Yet what sense of collective purpose can arise in a Mozambique where, as one member of parliament described the situation, “the biggest moment of Mozambican politics this year was when the government went to Paris to meet with the donors. That was where parliament really was held in Mozambique this year, the donor meeting in Paris.” As another MP explained, unlike other countries and parliaments, “we accept that our budget is really set by donors at the annual Paris conference. We accept that our priority is to develop a donor

acceptable budget.” The claim he then advanced for elected politicians was correspondingly modest: “But the assembly must be part of that process, that is what democracy means in Mozambique.”

That, and an electoral process which – as I have argued in an earlier number of *SAR*, and elsewhere[†] – did at least as much to disempower Mozambicans as it did the reverse: what can be the substance of a “democratic” debate in which the crucial policy options are delivered on a plate from Paris to all parties! Not that we need then trivialize the importance of the breathing-space that peace and a certain kind of democratization have brought to Mozambique. The virtues of peace are self-evident. And there are also benefits to be found in consolidating even the most formal of democratic structures: as one erstwhile senior Frelimo politician – himself an architect of some of the most undemocratic features of Frelimo's strategy – admitted to me self-critically, if there had existed the present kind of democratic structures in the old days (including the far greater freedom of the press that now exists) obvious abuses of authority like the disastrous “Operation Production” of 1983 would not have been possible. Moreover, as Ken Wilson argued firmly in the most recent issue of *SAR* (November, 1995), the room for manoeuvre for local communities, for trade unions, for women's organizations, that is provided within a more open political system has permitted some revival of positive energies at the base of the system as well – even if the precise extent and impact of the revival he identifies remain to be seen.

[†] See “Mozambique: The ‘Peace Election’ ” in *SAR*, December, 1994, and the chapter entitled “ ‘For fear of being condemned as old fashioned’: Liberal Democracy vs. popular democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa” in a forthcoming book on democracy in Africa edited by Cyrille Daddieh and Kidane Mengisteb.

For the moment, however, it is a less edifying kind of politics that often prevails, notably the grinding on of the bleak polarization between Frelimo and Renamo, with hints of renewed violence always in the air. But there are also tensions, apparently, within Frelimo itself – focussing principally, it is suggested, on the struggle between one faction, centred around President Chissano and his cabinet, and another, centred around Frelimo leaders in the legislative assembly. It is acknowledged that such intra-Frelimo factionalism is probably linked, in part, to a jockeying for position over who shall be Frelimo presidential candidate “next time.” At the same time, there are those who argue that more substantive strategic issues are also, increasingly, at stake.

For this parliamentary faction has also been seen as beginning, in however rudimentary a fashion, to exemplify the ambitions of a “national bourgeoisie,” one that might defend, against the presumed imperatives of globalization, the claims of a “national [read: “national bourgeois”] interest.” Indeed, the advocacy of this kind of economic nationalism can easily pass for progressive politics in Mozambican intellectual circles these days, the alternative language of socialism having been so profoundly discredited. I was struck, for example, by the vigour with which the well-known Mozambican journalist Carlos Cardoso argued the case, at the time of my visit, on behalf of domestic cashew processors defending their interests against the World Bank’s preferred strategy of opening up the trade in *unprocessed* cashews directly to India – even though this latter strategy would actually assure the peasant producers of higher prices.

Interestingly, one Canadian diplomat with whom I talked found danger precisely where Cardoso found hope: he feared that “the nationalists” might actually use parliament to disrupt the plans of

a newly ascendent cadre of efficient, technocratically-inclined Ministers within the Cabinet, a cadre on whom he (and, he suggested, other Western interests) have pinned their hopes. Not that he was terribly worried about such nationalists, it must be admitted. In the end, most observers agree that the promise/danger of some putative national bourgeoisie quarter-backing the emergence of a more independent and economically buoyant Mozambique under present circumstances is not a strong one – not least because those who might be thought of as possible candidates for such a role tend to behave more like pirates and/or racial demagogues than like potential captains of industry.

No, on the whole, Westerners in Maputo seem to feel pretty confident of the intellectual hegemony they have established over (and the community of interests they have established with) the present Frelimo leaders, only wishing, perhaps, that more of them were a bit more competent ... and some of them a bit less corrupt. Such Westerners seem to have little doubt of the leadership’s general acceptance of the wisdom of World Bank/IMF nostrums. And they have particular enthusiasm for the close and comfortable links of the most competent (and least corrupt) of this leadership group to their counterparts

in the international financial institutions (some of whom, it bears noting, are themselves Mozambicans, often of formerly left-wing provenance, who are now comfortably ensconced in the IFIs!) There is only one real problem, of course: as suggested earlier, there is little sign that the “market utopianism” of such Frelimo cadres – however ascendent – can and will produce positive economic outcomes for the country.

A celebration?

Twenty years after? This year, in Maputo, there seemed little enough ground for optimism, or, as suggested earlier, for celebration. Not that many in Mozambique would wish the country back to the period of authoritarian rule – however much some of that authoritarian structure may have been crafted, by Frelimo, in “a good cause.” Yet there was a sad irony in the observation of a Mozambican friend, a journalist and a firm supporter of freedom, not least of the press, in his country. Certainly, he wished for no return to the bad old days of government dictation of the “party-line” to his newspaper. Yet, he confessed, he couldn’t escape the feeling that the workers and peasants in Mozambique had actually had more power under the “old” Frelimo regime. Then, he said, the leadership took their interests seriously, their voices actually were heard more clearly than they are now, under liberal democracy: in the present system their votes are merely canvassed in a competitive manner that has little to do with advancing their life chances or helping them to clarify their socio-economic options.

In short, both periods – that of old “Frelimo state” and that of the new – have their down side. One could conclude, nonetheless, with the observation that what has been lost, most visibly, from the early period of post-independence Mozambican history, is something terribly important. It is, precisely, a strong sense of *public* purpose,



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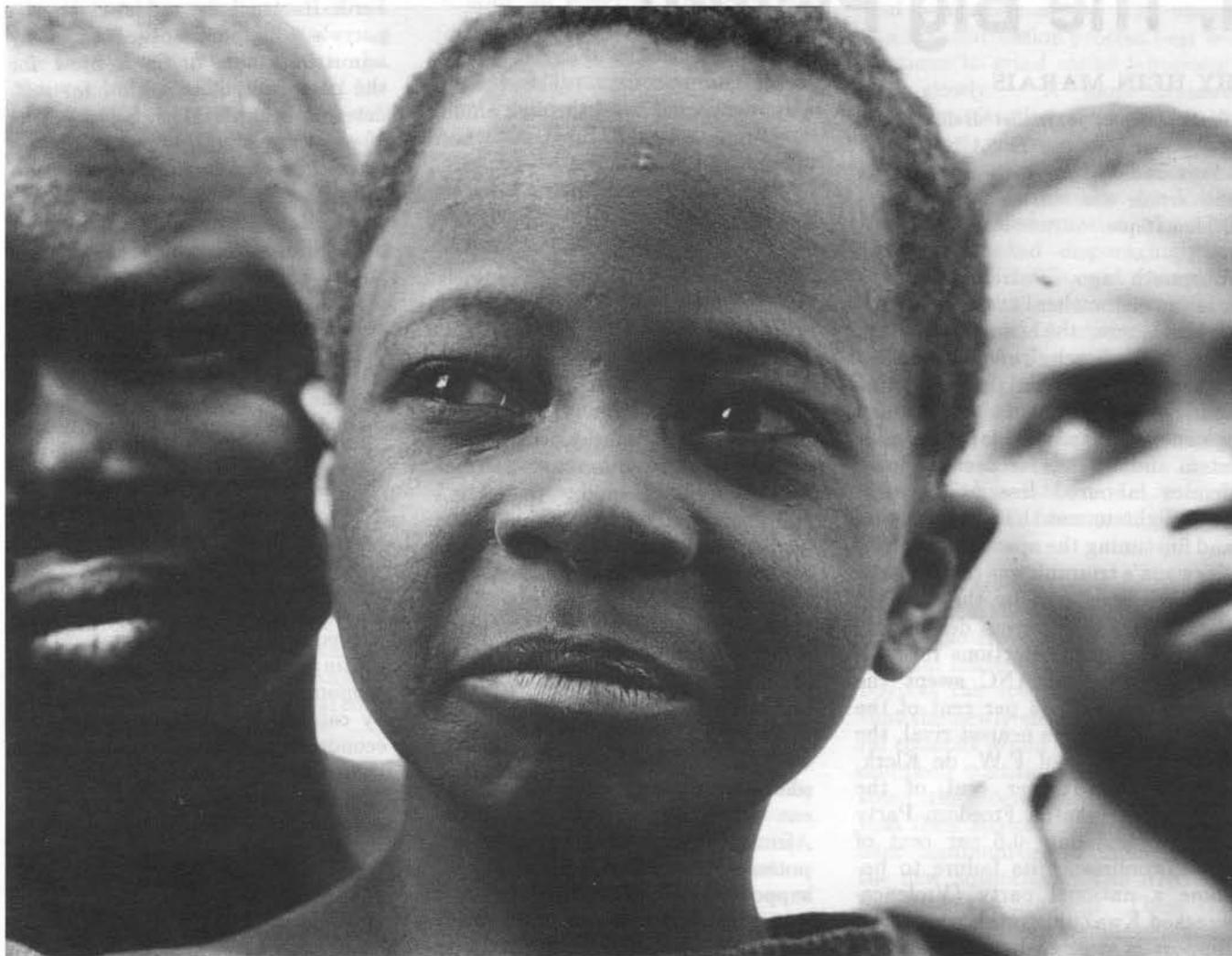
one premised on the envisaging of society-wide transformations that might actually change the lives of the vast majority of Mozambicans in positive ways.

Are such Mozambicans, like so many others around the world, now merely locked into the apparent iron logic of present-day capitalist-driven

irrational, socialism is unfeasible, in the real world, people starve – the conclusions we have reached are not encouraging.” Faced with this “logic,” can we ever hope, anywhere, to move beyond merely muttering an uneasy variant on an old slogan, “Dare to struggle, dare to whine”?

It is, of course, difficult to

against capitalism is strongest on the very plane where the reach of socialism is weakest – at the level of the world system as a whole”!) Perhaps the most that can be said is that the bleak realities we have identified will not disappear of their own accord. In fact, the one thing that was absolutely clear to the



Ernst Schade – Impact Visuals

globalization – with their leaders also left, as they claim, with no choice but to follow that logic? This is, of course, the apparent “common-sense” of the matter evoked so negatively by Colin Leys (as cited in the editorial that frames the present issue of *SAR*). It is also the ethos that can move a theorist like Adam Przeworski to observe grimly, of the current epoch, that “capitalism is

imagine that so bleak a prospect as Mozambique currently offers up can last forever – though it is equally difficult to see any ready way forward, either nationally or globally. (The picture at the national level is discouraging enough, as the situation so visible on the ground in Mozambique attests, but add to that the fact that, as Perry Anderson argues, “the case

visitor to Mozambique in 1995 was that it will now be necessary for Mozambicans to revive, slowly but surely, the kind of positive energies and sense of mission – resisting (re)colonization, (re)imagining the future, (re)asserting the claims of the *social* – that brought them independence twenty years ago. But that is true not merely for Mozambique.