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Mozambique's post-election paradox

President Filipe Nyusi won a decisive victory in Mozambique's recent elections. But this could put the country's peace at risk

In mid-October 2019, the ruling party Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) won a landslide victory in the parliamentary, provincial and presidential elections in Mozambique. Yet irregularities before and during the elections, a loss of trust in political institutions and a divided society have put peace in the country at risk.

President Filipe Nyusi will be pleased. Having been perceived as a political novice eclipsed by his mentor ex-president Armando Guebuza when he stood in the 2014 elections, the head of state now has a much stronger mandate for his second term of office with 73 per cent of the vote. His FRELIMO party achieved a two-thirds majority in parliament and holds all provincial governorships in the country.

The huge electoral victory surprised observers, as the country's leadership has been under intense pressure in recent months. The 'hidden debts' arising from illegally guaranteed government bonds for dubious semi-public companies left a USD 2bn hole in Mozambique's budget, prompting donors to suspend all budgetary aid. Consequently, the budget deficit is severely restricting the government's options.

In addition, the ongoing investigations into the debt scandal are closing in on leading figures. Former finance minister Manuel Chang is currently in custody in South Africa. He is awaiting a decision on his extradition to the US – at the request of the US secret service. Nyusi's name has already been mentioned in the case, as an ex-defence minister.

Violence on the rise

Apart from the political scandals, Mozambique is battling against destabilisation from violent groups. The structurally weak northern province of Cabo Delgado, which has extensive untapped gas deposits, has been beset by jihadist-inspired atrocities since 2017. Attacks on state

institutions, assaults on villages and civilian vehicles, kidnappings and beheadings are among the methods employed by the perpetrators, whose objectives and motives remain uncertain more than two years after the violence first broke out.

For its part, central Mozambique is subject to attacks from the 'Junta Militar' (military junta), an armed breakaway faction of the biggest opposition party Resistência Nacional de Moçambique (RENAMO), which refuses to recognise the recently signed peace agreement between RENAMO and the government and seeks to achieve a better deal by military means.

Despite substantial economic growth, Mozambique has achieved no real success in reducing poverty or distributing profits fairly in recent years.

Therefore, a fiercely contested election was anticipated. But the ruling party's emphatic victory took many by surprise – even allowing for the margin gained by a number of conspicuous irregularities and manipulations denounced by national and international electoral observer missions. They could amount to around 11 per cent according to the anti-corruption NGO *Centro de Integridade Pública*.

The opposition proved unprepared to exploit popular discontent for its own ends and too divided to present itself as an alternative. However, the election result could soon become a heavy burden for the president and his party. This is mainly due to the volatile peace process.

Weakened peace process

President Nyusi and RENAMO leader Ossufo Momade signed a new peace agreement on 6 August 2019. This came about because the General Peace Agreement, which was long hailed as a success story for international mediation and had ended the bloody 16-year civil war in the context of East–West confrontation, began to crumble in 2013.

Frustrated by its ongoing exclusion from positions of state and triggered by accusations of electoral fraud, the opposition turned to military means to make its message heard. Heavy fighting ensued between government troops and the RENAMO guerillas. Meanwhile, the battles brought passenger and freight transport on the main arterial road, the EN1, to a standstill – with major political and economic consequences for the country.

Only direct contact between Nyusi and the long-serving RENAMO leader Afonso Dhlakama was able to bring about a peace deal based on

reducing concentration of power through state decentralisation and demobilisation, plus integration of the RENAMO fighters into the security forces. After Dhlakama died unexpectedly in 2018, his successor Ossufo Momade continued to negotiate the peace process on behalf of RENAMO. However, he was unable to keep the various political strands and interests within the opposition party together in the same way.

As a result, RENAMO emerged divided from its party conference in January 2019. The 'Junta Militar' under Mariano Nhongo refuses to recognise the new leadership and the peace deal it negotiated, and is resorting to violence in its attempts to assert its claims for more concessions.

The irregularities in voter registration (in FRELIMO's home province of Gaza, observers put the number of additionally registered ghost voters at 300,000), the clear funding imbalances during the election campaign, the opposition's failure to win a single gubernatorial election in the 11 provinces and state-tolerated outbreaks of violence didn't really improve the situation.

These outbreaks particularly include the brutal murder of Anastácio Matavele, chairman of the civic electoral monitoring group in Gaza, by 'death squads', and of the President of the RENAMO Women's League in Tete, Babula Jeque, the day before polling. The impunity and culture of fear are stifling the societal reconciliation so often urged in public by the government, and are undermining the peace process.

Little pressure for redistribution

The resounding victory and the make-up of the parliament have further weakened existing checks and balances and are likely to adversely affect the political process and essential decisions on the direction of social and economic policy.

Despite substantial economic growth, Mozambique has achieved no real success in reducing poverty or distributing profits fairly in recent years. The National Institute of Statistics measures multidimensional poverty, which takes into account consumption as well as factors such as access to education, clean drinking water and electricity, at 53 per cent, with rural regions (70 per cent) being affected much more than urban ones (17 per cent). In Mozambique, the formal sector currently only covers around 30 per cent of the working population. Young people in particular suffer from unemployment and lack of prospects.

The new bouts of unrest reveal deep-seated social tensions and a disconnect between society and the elite.

The economic growth fuelled by foreign investment of multinational companies provides little basis for sustainable, sovereign and socially just development. For instance, Mozambique's economic model has hitherto been built on the profits from exploitation of natural resources. The country is rich in raw materials – coal, timber, mineral ores, heavy sands and gems. The discovery of natural gas deposits off the coast of the province of Cabo Delgado in 2012 promises to make Mozambique one of the biggest gas producers in the world.

But the Cabo Delgado region is a prime example of the pitfalls of the raw material economy. Huge expectations of development were stirred. Yet the jobs created in the oil and gas industry require a level of specialisation that only a few people in the structurally weak province and indeed in the country as a whole possess. Instead, the people are experiencing the sobering effects of raw material extraction.

The fact that concessions were awarded to companies has led to parts of the local population being turned off their land and cut them off from access to fishing and subsistence farming needed for survival. Tighter controls on mining activities by authorities and the sometimes brutal action by private security forces against small-scale informal extraction of raw materials is undermining local survival mechanisms.

Human rights organisations have made repeated accusations in public of massive infringements. Therefore, it is no coincidence that violent extremists with jihadist tendencies who promise a better, fairer future to frustrated young people have become established in this region in particular. The wave of extremist violence in Cabo Delgado has already claimed more than 300 lives since October 2017. The new bouts of unrest reveal deep-seated social tensions and a disconnect between society and the elite. This must be urgently addressed by politicians in the interest of the country's stability.

Filipe Nyusi has only won a short-distance victory in the elections. To fulfil his campaign slogan – ‘Moçambique tem tudo para dar certo’ (Mozambique has everything it takes to succeed) – he must make the peace deal tangible for the population, pursue decentralisation of power seriously and encourage economic growth that can finance the social policies that will heal the divisions in society rather than just lining the pockets of a few people. He still has to prove that he is up to this

marathon task.



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