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Two presidents, one divided nation

Mozambique remains in crisis after disputed elections exposed long-standing economic and political struggles. Where does the country go from here?

No illusions: Mozambique remains in crisis, despite the inauguration of Daniel Chapo as president and the establishment of a new parliament. While the widespread allegations of massive electoral fraud during the elections on 9 October 2024 were the immediate trigger for the unrest, the protests revealed deeply entrenched socio-economic and political grievances.

There is significant frustration over the escalating cost of living, rising inequality, persistent unemployment and lack of quality public services — challenges that have defined Mozambique's development path over the past decade. These socio-economic pressures have fuelled feelings of marginalisation and despair, particularly among the youth and the large group of people struggling to make ends meet.

Led by Venâncio Mondlane, the officially recognised runner-up in the presidential election, the protests quickly gained momentum, especially among young people. The protesters explicitly rejected the election results and expressed their dissatisfaction with FRELIMO's 49-year rule, calling for an end to what they describe as a failed governance model that has perpetuated economic stagnation and political exclusion.

More than three months of protests have now passed. The death toll surpasses 300, with over 600 injured and many still unaccounted for. Both public and private infrastructures have sustained extensive damage. Yet, the deadlock continues. Attempts at dialogue have failed, leaving the country engulfed in a state of uncertainty.

Two presidents, one divided nation

Mozambique now faces the unprecedented challenge of two claimants to the presidency: Chapo, the official head of state, and Mondlane, the self-declared 'president of the people'. Both inaugurations have been

overshadowed by violence, reflecting a wider trend in how dissent is managed in the country.

FRELIMO's long history of using state security forces to advance its own political agenda is evident in the police's consistent and brutal response to protests. Tear gas, live bullets and even home invasions have been deployed, resulting in the deaths and injuries of uninvolved civilians. This excessive use of force has gone largely unaddressed by Chapo, his predecessor Filipe Nyusi, and senior police officials, reinforcing perceptions of complicity or even direct orchestration in the suppression of opposition.

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But the violence is not one-sided. Protesters have engaged in sabotage and even launched attacks on police stations, resulting in the deaths of police officers. In some neighbourhoods, protesters went so far as to declare that they would completely replace the *Polícia da República de Moçambique (PRM)* and form their own police force, further eroding the authority of the official security apparatus. Adding fuel to the fire, Mondlane recently announced a controversial retaliation doctrine: for every protester killed by police, a police officer would be killed in return. It is 'an eye for an eye'.

In a defiant bid to undermine Chapo's authority, Mondlane has embraced a shadow governance model. Issuing what he calls 'presidential decrees', he has called for civil disobedience, including boycotts of toll fees and demands for price reductions on essential goods like water, energy and cement. His populist measures have struck a chord with many supporters, but their enforcement often spirals into protests and, at times, violence.

Meanwhile, Chapo's administration, still struggling to form his government, has yet to meaningfully address the unfolding crisis. In a recent development, Ana Rita Sithole, a senior figure within FRELIMO, dismissed the possibility of a political agreement with Mondlane, sending a clear signal that a faction within the party is unwilling to engage in dialogue, thereby prolonging the standoff and undermining any prospect of restoring peace. This hard-line position only deepens the political divide, casting a shadow over Mozambique's already fragile future.

Escalation and authoritarianism or stability and dialogue?

Mozambique's uncertain future is dominated by two possible scenarios — one of escalation, the other of reconciliation and a return to stability. The potential for dialogue stands as the decisive factor separating these two trajectories. However, progress in fostering such dialogue has so far been disappointingly limited.

In the first scenario, instability deepens as both sides entrench their positions. In this scenario, Mondlane continues to rally civil disobedience, protests and mass mobilisation, further eroding Chapo's ability to govern effectively. Faced with mounting pressure, Chapo might follow the repressive path of his predecessor Nyusi, increasingly depending on police crackdowns and state security forces to assert control. While these measures may be aimed at restoring order, they risk inflaming tensions further. Every act of repression could provoke stronger resistance from opposition supporters, potentially spiralling into a dangerous cycle of violence and escalating unrest.

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Political persecution might intensify, targeting prominent opposition figures, journalists and activists. In an extreme scenario, this could even result in the assassination or imprisonment of key opposition leaders such as Mondlane himself, sparking further outrage among his supporters and deepening societal divisions.

This trajectory is neither new nor unique. Other nations facing post-electoral crises have travelled similar roads of increased repression and authoritarianism. Zimbabwe after its 2008 elections, Ethiopia after 2005, Venezuela in 2018 and Russia in 2011 are stark examples. While such measures may offer short-term control, they ultimately prove unsustainable, leading to prolonged instability or deeper authoritarian rule. Mozambique now faces a similar risk, with police brutality against protesters reaching alarming and unacceptable levels. This intensification of repression underscores the urgent need for a new, more inclusive and less militaristic approach to address the crisis.

A second, more optimistic scenario hinges on a return to dialogue. Genuine engagement between Chapo, Mondlane and key societal stakeholders – including civil society, religious leaders and academics – could defuse tensions and restore trust in governance.

Unfortunately, efforts to initiate dialogue have so far encountered

substantial setbacks. Former President Nyusi made an early attempt by inviting Mondlane to the table, but the latter's preconditions – primarily related to his safety – were not addressed, leading to his absence from the talks. Subsequent discussions included Chapo and representatives from several opposition parties, such as Ossufo Momade (RENAMO), Lutero Simango (MDM), Albino Forquilha (*Podemos*) and Salomão Muchanga (*Nova Democracia*), but Mondlane's continued absence limited their scope and effectiveness.

The situation calls for authentic, inclusive engagement that amplifies the voices of all — including opposition leaders and civil society.

When Mondlane eventually returned to Mozambique at the beginning of this month, there was speculation about possible meetings with other opposition leaders, but these talks never materialised. In his inaugural speech, Chapo himself stressed the need for 'frank, honest and sincere' dialogue, calling it a priority for political and social stability. Yet, nearly two weeks after assuming office, there were no reports of any substantial dialogue initiatives, and Chapo publicly denied the existence of any ongoing negotiations.

For this scenario to succeed, Chapo, as the president of the Republic, must take decisive action and leverage his leadership position to build consensus for the good of the country. At the same time, Mondlane must demonstrate openness for a negotiated solution to the conflict and reconsider his list of demands, particularly since his fight for 'electoral truth' seems difficult to win after the constitutional court processed the complaints and officially determined the final results.

Although more serious now, Mozambique's current deadlock mirrors the tensions that followed the 2009 elections. As then, there is reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue. Sadly, that earlier impasse eventually gave way to armed confrontations between RENAMO, the largest opposition party at the time, and the FRELIMO government. To prevent history from repeating itself, leaders need to do more than make symbolic gestures; the situation calls for authentic, inclusive engagement that amplifies the voices of all — including opposition leaders and civil society. Only by replacing entrenched divisions with sincere dialogue can the country break free from its cycle of conflict and work toward a stable, democratic future.



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