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Mozambique: How Big of a Threat is Renamo to the Frelimo-led Government?

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Since the end of Mozambique's civil war the political landscape in that nation has never been so uncertain and unstable. Renamo, the rebel group turned opposition party, made an assertive comeback in the October 2014 elections and is increasingly motivated to press the government towards satisfying its demands. In this context, the ruling party, Frelimo, faces a dilemma: Should they cede more ground to Renamo's leader, Afonso Dhlakama, to accommodate him, or refuse and risk new armed clashes?

Things get gloomier when considering Dhlakama's demand for the introduction of autonomous management over those provinces where he obtained more votes than his adversaries in the last elections.¹ Additionally, suspicions abound that the ruling party was involved in the assassination of Gilles Cistac, a constitutionalist who upheld the legality of provincial autonomy² and called for President Filipe Nyusi to free himself from Frelimo's tight grip on power.³

While there is a growing perception that the ruling party often abuses power, Renamo is increasingly recognized as a valid political alternative. Hence Armando Guebuza's resignation

as head of Frelimo, on March 29,⁴ which appears to have been motivated by the need to change the course of events. However, that may not be enough to stop Renamo's momentum.

Is the government going to concede to Dhlakama's demand for provincial autonomy? Whereas Renamo is surely motivated—due to prior concessions—Frelimo is highly unlikely to abdicate from the strategic provinces.⁵ Given this conjuncture, tensions will surely be on the rise.

Renamo has the game in its favor

It is often argued that Renamo does not meet the necessary conditions to launch a large-scale offensive against Maputo. However, one should not underestimate its ability to destabilize the country and inflict considerable damage to government forces. In the summer of 2013, Renamo's forces managed to face up to Mozambique's Armed Forces, virtually divided North from South by blocking the main EN-1 road, and threatened to suspend traffic along the Sena railway—vital to the coal industry.

1 "Afonso Dhlakama quer ser Presidente do centro e norte de Moçambique" (*Deutsche Welle*, 11 January 2015).

2 "Indignação e acusações em Maputo devido à morte de Gilles Cistac" (*Voice of America*, 5 March 2015).

3 "Gilles Cistac sugere que Filipe Nyusi se "desvincule" da Frelimo para ser soberano" (*Verdade*, 4 February 2015).

4 As head of Frelimo, Armando Guebuza held substantial powers over the country's presidency. "Nyusi Named Mozambique Ruling Party Leader as Guebuza Steps Down" (*Bloomberg*, 29 March 2015).

5 Strategic both to domestic finances and the interests of the party's elite. Namely Tete, due to the large coal reserves, and Nampula, for its precious stones and access to the resource-rich maritime territory.



Recent government concessions and the expected natural resources boom⁶ are strong motivational drivers. In fact, Dhlakama's return took place shortly after the discovery of large natural gas reserves. Furthermore, the poorest sectors of the population want to benefit from the natural resource wealth. To a large extent, it is from the mobilization of those sectors of the population that are hoping for change that Renamo has managed to come out rejuvenated.

Furthermore, the party's leadership enjoys vast experience in guerrilla operations and is familiar with the country's geography. In addition, Dhlakama's return and the establishment of a military base was accompanied by the provision of military training to war veterans.⁷ Moreover, Renamo has other factors in its favor: a Mozambican army comprised of 13,000 soldiers and deliberately weak;⁸ and the abundance of small arms across the country.

It is estimated that 3 million to 4 million arms were in circulation by the end of the civil war. In fact, there is still a high number of small arms available in Mozambican territory. Also relevant is the ignorance on the part of government authorities over the exact amount of weapons possessed and stocked by national security forces, something which raises questions regarding the ability of authorities to address the proliferation and illegal use of small arms in the country.⁹

Coupled with the proliferation of small arms, the sacking of weapons from governmental forces has boosted the group's offensive capabilities. In January 2014, Renamo's political advisor to Mozambique's southern region claimed that the party did not dispose of an inventory for the totality of the weapons from the civil war, adding that there are weapons spread across the country.¹⁰

Some reports have given indications that the illegal ivory trade is potentially one of the group's sources of financing. In fact, the majority of foreigners detained in South Africa under charges of poaching are Mozambican nationals. Adding to this, former military officials have been providing political protection to criminal groups involved in that illegal activity, while weapons and uniforms used by the Mozambican armed and security forces were found in poaching areas.¹¹

Although these allegations are mostly targeted at individuals associated with Frelimo, could that also apply to Renamo? Part of the ivory passing through Mozambique is extracted and

exported in and via the northern region, namely through the Pemba airport.¹² It is also known that Renamo used poaching as a finance source during the civil war. Moreover, Dhlakama's return coincided with a substantial increase in poaching.¹³

Foreign influence: a game-changer

The success of Renamo's 2013 insurgency showed that Mozambique's security forces do not have effective control over the country's northern and central regions. That strengthens Renamo's position and increases the risk associated with ceding to provincial autonomy.

However, it does not serve the interest of both parties to provoke an escalation in tensions and initiate armed clashes, since the immediate outcome would be an interruption in the inflow of investment, in particular in the highly profitable extractive industries, as well as in international and regional isolation and condemnation.

Roughly half of SADC member-states are landlocked—such as Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe—making them dependent on other countries to export their produce. Also worth noting are South Africa's interests in Mozambique, which risk being seriously affected in a setting of instability. Additionally, these countries' border regions with Mozambique are also likely to be destabilized. Considering these threats, regional countries and SADC have expressed their concern. Thus, given that a stable Mozambique is of strategic interest to the region, it is highly likely that further insecurity in the country may mobilize SADC towards an intervention.

Furthermore, in recent years Mozambique has positioned itself at the centre of international attention largely due to the natural gas reserves. However, despite the unstable environment in the country, natural gas discoveries appear to be so promising that international investors and buyers are willing to sign long-term deals.¹⁴ It remains to be seen up to what point these entities are willing to tolerate a spiral of instability.

The resource-hungry Asian countries have shown particular interest in Mozambique's resources. China, in particular, "is fast emerging as the most important economic and diplomatic player in Mozambique, bringing billions of dollars in investments and asking no questions".¹⁵ In this setting, the instability generated by Renamo is an obstacle to Beijing's goals.

Given the obvious strategic shift in Beijing's policy towards Africa¹⁶—aimed at protecting its interests and boosting cooperation

6 "Mozambique to become one of biggest coal & gas producers" (*Mozambique Political Process Bulletin*, 15 February 2013).

7 Estimates point to a 1000-strong Renamo armed wing. "Armed Forces for the Defence of Mozambique" (*Defence Web*, 23 August 2013).

8 The 2014 national budget allocated a mere 2.2% of the GDP to the Armed Forces. This can be justified by the tight public finances and also by the potential threat to the regime.

9 "Avaliação do crime e violência em Moçambique" (*Open Society Foundation*, 2012).

10 "Assessor da Renamo garante que homens do partido têm armas em todo o país" (*Lusa*, 10 January 2014) e "Polícia descobre 39 armas de fogo enterradas em Cabo Delgado" (*Verdade*, 13 November 2014).

11 "Obama Urged to Sanction Mozambique over Elephant, Rhino Poaching" (*Inter Press Service*, 2 July 2014).

12 "Home-grown corruption is killing Africa's rhinos and elephants" (*Daily Maverick*, 28 November 2014).

13 "Poaching Peace and Security" (*Atlantic Council*, 28 October 2013).

14 In 2014, U.S. oil giant Anadarko announced the conclusion of long-term natural gas supply agreements with Asian buyers. See "Anadarko Signs Supply Contracts With Asian Buyers, Defining Clearer Investment Plans For Mozambique LNG" (*Forbes*, 31 March 2014).

15 "East Africa eyes the race for LNG exports" (Office of the Federal Coordinator for Alaska Natural Gas Transportation Projects, 27 May 2014).

16 The mediation efforts undertaken by China in South Sudan and the contribution to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali indicate a more active commitment in supporting peace and security in the continent.



with regional organizations—¹⁷ one should not exclude the possibility that Chinese authorities begin demanding more conditions from Maputo so as to safeguard investments. Additionally, one should also consider that Beijing may exert greater diplomatic pressure—in coordination with the AU and/or SADC—to push for a bipartisan understanding. It is highly unlikely that Beijing will stand idly by as Mozambique's power games threaten its interests in the largest natural gas reserves in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

The next few months promise to be exciting for fans of political thrillers. The investigation into the murder of Gilles Cistac is currently underway and the outcome may benefit Renamo's popularity. Meanwhile, the issue pertaining to the establishment of autonomous provinces is still uncertain. One can clearly note that the two historical rivals have entered a collision course. Only time will tell which side will eventually give in. In the unlikely case that no party concedes ground, the resulting collision will have repercussions reminiscent of the civil war.

Both clearly know that a spiral of armed conflict will most probably halt the wave of investments planned for the coming years, ultimately benefiting other countries in the region with natural gas reserves. To witness international markets shifting attentions to Mozambique's neighbors would be a harsh defeat for Frelimo and Renamo, as well for the general population. Conflict is not an inevitability. The dynamics between Beijing's strategic shift in Africa and the need to protect its interests may represent a key factor in guaranteeing stability. Moreover, regional countries have every interest in avoiding a new civil war. Awareness of the consequences deriving from a regional intervention should suffice to deter both parties.

In sum, Renamo does represent a real threat to Frelimo. However, the cards on the table show there is more at stake than their private ambitions. Pressure by international actors with immediate interests in Mozambique will certainly dictate up to what point the two sides can continue on a collision course. Until then both are likely to stand their ground and small-scale clashes are likely to occur. But in the end, someone has got to give.

¹⁷ One example is the African Union's admission as a full member in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the launching of the AU-China Strategic Dialogue for Peace and Security in Africa.

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