

From rigged elections to revolution?

# Spotlight on protest dynamics in Mozambique

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Bonn, 25 November 2024. For five weeks, large-scale protests have brought public and economic life in Mozambique to a standstill. They followed the official announcement that the incumbent party FRELIMO (which has ruled the country since 1975) has won the general elections on October 9th, a claim fiercely contested by the opposition. Two opposition figures have since been assassinated. The police tried to quell the ensuing protests using tear gas and live ammunition with almost 50 people reportedly killed. Only recently, a similar movement forced out the government of Bangladesh - can we expect the same outcome for Mozambique?

The protests are called for by opposition candidate Venâncio Mondlane who claims to have won the

presidential race. While this claim cannot easily be substantiated, election observers denounce massive fraud. This occurred amidst an environment in which the space for the opposition, already limited in the electoral autocracy, has been further diminishing in recent years. In addition, disappointment with the government's failure to improve living conditions is growing. Poverty, inequality, and unemployment, especially among the youth, are rising in a country that already counts among the poorest in the world.

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This lack of perspectives is also seen as a root cause of the Islamist insurgency in the northern province Cabo Delgado since 2017. There, huge international investments to exploit natural resources failed to yield the expected jobs or benefits. Addressing these issues was a cornerstone of Mondlane's agenda, who has since gained widespread popularity especially among young voters. With all these trends compounding, the election gave yet another clear signal that no change for the better can be expected. Meanwhile, the supermajority that FRELIMO now supposedly gained will allow them to unilaterally change the constitution and further entrench their rule, giving the protesters a sense of “now or never”.

### **The protests through the researcher's lens**

The protest movement has gathered a momentum that is unprecedented for Mozambique, which is an important element for the success of resistance campaigns. More generally, current conditions tick a lot of boxes that research associates with movement success: while Mondlane makes clear maximalist demands in his public announcements, calling for an overturn of the current government, he repeatedly reaffirmed his commitment to nonviolence, which may help to undermine the regime's pillars of support. The police follows a strategy of overt repression, framing the protesters as “urban

terrorists” and deterring participation through severe violence. However, if the movement is able to sustain its momentum, FRELIMO will eventually require either dialogue or a more widespread deployment of the military. At that point, a commitment to nonviolence can help the protesters to draw soldiers - and especially conscripted soldiers - onto their side. With defections by military elites seeming less likely, given the military's entrenchment in politics, all will come down to the decisions of rank-and-file soldiers who face off with the protesters in the streets.

At the current stage, the main question is, whether the opposition will be able to build sufficient pressure to force the government into action - or else, slowly fizzle out. This requires continued coordination across a diverse set of civil society organisations. Therefore, it is promising that, in addition to the seeming solidarity between the main opposition parties, other groups have started to call for an opening of the political space. The regime, however, takes numerous measures to hamper protest coordination and mobilisation, including less overt forms of repression such as arrests and internet shutdowns. If these measures succeed in keeping Mozambicans off the streets, they may cause the protests' momentum to falter.

In the meantime, the opposition has not made any systematic attempts at seizing international attention, and the international community has shown markedly little interest. This is in line with past patterns of turning a blind eye on instances of electoral fraud and human rights violations in Mozambique, a conflict-affected country that is home to vast fossil fuel reserves. However, overlooking democratic and human rights infringements for the sake of stability risks the opposite effect. If there is significant domestic momentum to drive change, international support - including diplomatic pressure - can make a difference and prevent a further escalation of violence.