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Defining Opposition: An Interview with Afonso Dhlakama of RENAMO

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Background

Mozambique has made remarkable progress since ending its civil war and having inaugural multiparty elections in 1994. Four presidential terms later, the eternal opposition leader Afonso Dhlakama sees himself as a principal figure in Mozambique's democratic success. Despite this, his losses to FRELIMO at the polls in 2009 have reduced his power to its lowest point. The future is unclear for RENAMO and Mozambican democracy. The 2009 elections saw the major defeat of RENAMO and the rise of a hybrid party, MDM, composed of former RENAMO members and previously nonaligned voters. This election was also the most one-sided in Mozambique's short democratic history.¹

We interviewed Mr. Dhlakama on 29 October 2009, just one day after a crushing electoral defeat. His responses were colorful, informative, and at times a bit disjointed. Despite this, Mr. Dhlakama sees himself as an important player in Mozambican politics, and indeed he has been. The interview was conducted in the RENAMO party headquarters in Maputo, Mozambique.²

¹FRELIMO stands for the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, MDM stands for the Movement for a Democratic Mozambique, and RENAMO stands for the National Mozambican resistance.

²The questions were written and asked in English by the authors of this transcript, with Portuguese translation assistance from Mr. Dhlakama. We also acknowledge the technical assistance of Juanita Anderson and Zenobia Jeffries.

Interview

*Mr. President [Dhlakama], thank you for taking the time to speak with us today, especially after the elections when you are so busy. What are your thoughts on the election?*³

The elections in Mozambique are the same as those that have happened in Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia and many other countries in Africa. Often there is fraud...many people did not go to vote. No, many people did not register. Yes, you must have a registration card. They were selected in the register as they have always been in Mozambique, since 1994. This, because of the machine that is controlling the registration, is different than other countries, although the national commission does not have power. It is the state party that controls the organization. They know how and where the opposition has a majority. During the registration, they calculate to say, "Okay, RENAMO here is the majority, FRELIMO here." They register the full number, and for us it is the beginning of fraud; this is what happened in Mozambique.

You touched on the area of voters' participation. The trend has been a decline in the number of people who are turning out to vote, at least before this election. Do you have any reflections on that trend over time?

So what happened is that there is a problem in registration. Mozambican people by their nature are willing to vote; they face problems when they go to register. And in some places where the people know that RENAMO is a majority, they find the process difficult and they cannot do it. Then what happened yesterday? Although some had cards, thousands and thousands, when they went to vote, did not see their name and the number. What happened yesterday was a danger, because for the first time in this country, something that we call [fraud], where for all names of people and their number, but what happened yesterday, when they went, they did not see the list of names, only some officers of government, they get some names just to call, "You come, you can vote." We have proved that in particular Nampula province, Zambezia, Cabo Delgado, even in Gaza, near

³ We called Mr. Dhlakama "Mr. President" as that is his title within RENAMO

[Maputo]. We are already writing to tell all participants that what happened yesterday is a danger. Since we started a multiparty system, like in 1994, even 1999, 2004, we have not seen what we had yesterday. Yesterday was too much. We called it a crime, not an election. This is the reason why no one will recognize, no one will accept the result. Because we have proof each place we already registered. And thousands and thousands of people that went to vote, they did not see their name, or even the number of their card. But we know that the government denied that because they knew they could lose the election. Even diplomats, everybody in Mozambique knows that the candidate from [RENAMO] could not win. Is this the reason why no Mozambican will accept it? Not because we need to win by force, no. Because we must complain. If the democrats, like what happened in America—if now our brother, Obama, he won because a system was fair. Who was losing, who won? But here, what happened here yesterday, millions and millions of people who were prepared to vote opposition did not have the opportunity. Now the ruling government, because they were controlling, they organized the election. We have two organizations. One organization we call the “National Electoral Commission” (CNE). This one is just political; they do not know what happened. And we have one organization that we call “STAE” (Secretariat Technique for Electoral Administration). That one is in a ring with the ruling party [FRELIMO]. It is that one that maneuvered and removed the names of millions and millions of people that were prepared to vote. It is what happened. That time was the first time, in terms of number, that did not vote yesterday.

You have commented on my next question, which is, “Was the election fair?” And I think you’ve made an assessment of that. Let me ask the question a little differently. Mr. President, do you think the election this time was less fair than the election four years ago?

Yes, I clearly do. I know that, because last night I did not sleep. I know Mozambique. I know the districts, the regions. For me, it was not an election. It was something dangerous to destroy the multiparty system in this country. And also, anybody who saw during the campaign for the opposition and the ruling party, we were three candidates: the president of the country, Armando Guebuza; a young man from Beira, Daviz Simango; and myself. Anybody who was watching on the

television could see how people would come, in particular for me. Because you know, the head of state during the campaign, he was using his influence as the head of state. When he went to any village, he was stopping all activity, making it like a holiday, and public service, and he forced all the teachers to bring all the students. And he stopped each hospital, school, and all activities. And all business people were forced to bring in rolls to call to carry in children from 100 km just to put a majority in the meeting for him. Everybody knows. But myself, I was using a car. I am sure you can go now to television, to ask for a copy. We have no comparison, no comparison. Everybody understood that Dhlakama won the election. This is the reason why they denied that. But the problem is not that Dhlakama lost. The problem for me is that democracy has lost. Because it does not make sense that the majority of people in the country [can be prevented] from voting just to maintain a one-party state. I think that you brothers, Americans, you know you are helping Mozambique with financing and the corporations... I am sure that you need to see improvement in multiparty system development. But no chance. No difference from Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean people speak much about Mugabe, but here it is more than Mugabe, it is worse.

Mr. President, could you give us your reflections on the emergence of MDM as a factor in the multiparty system here in Mozambique, as well as what might be a factor for the future in terms of politics and democracy here in Mozambique.

Yes, no, it is not serious, as always. Personally, I don't feel any jealousy. We fought for democracy. Democracy means three, four, five parties competing. It is the reason why what happened in Mozambique, you know, in the past, it was just a one-party state. After independence in 1975, I was a member of FRELIMO. We ran away to the bush in 1977. We started to struggle, forcing a one-party state to accept a multiparty [system]. It means that for me, it is an honor to see more men practice democracy. But even now in Mozambique, we still have just two parties. These are the two parties: the ruling party, FRELIMO, and the RENAMO party, of which I am the leader. But in addition to that, we have more than forty-five, forty-nine parties. Forty-nine! Four-nine parties! But they do not have a chance. They do not do anything. They are just here in Maputo, and they speak well in newspapers,

walls, writing, academics, engineers, doctors, that are presidents of parties. But the real concrete, on the ground, it is not there, it is nothing. Since 1994 there are many of them. Now, your question about the MDM: it was the party that was created by people who were members of RENAMO. Daviz Simango, his history is my creation. I like to say that it is my child. I took him in 2003. I put him in Beira, and also his family. He comes from the same ethnic group as me, Ndaou. We went from Beira, in Sofala [province]. Now, I took him in front of RENAMO, and presented him to the people of Beira in 2003 to nominate him to be president, or mayor of Beira. I asked the majority of Beira to vote for him. I said, "Vote for this young man. I have confidence in him; he is mine," and I gave him a program. He joined with us for five years, 2003 to 2008. But this stopped because during his governance in Beira, there was a feeling that he was robbing money. Even now, he has many cases in court because he used money to build housing, like corruption. From that, we said, "Okay, you've done well for five years; now you cannot run again." It is the reason why he went out to be independent, even during the campaign in 2008, because I did not go there to speak with the people to say that this is nothing? I said okay. And also, he was asking for votes for people from Beira in my name. During the campaign he said, "Viva, viva my father, Dhlakama." And all the people from Beira thought that this was okay, this man Dhlakama still had confidence [in him]. This is the reason why he won't still be president, or what is called mayor of Beira. But from that, he, because he is young, he was thinking that could create his party. No, he created a party, the party that we call MDM. But it's nothing. It will fail. It's nothing. No chance to do something. And if this election, even this election, was free and fair. I assure you, brother, he could not put in the parliament even three or four MPs. Sometimes even two or one. To say that it is nothing, it is not just one. There are many parties, many, many, many, many. But because people will speak too much about MDM, because he cannot respond. It is not Mozambican, in terms of democracy. Mozambique, from now even for thirty years, I am sure, will still be RENAMO and FRELIMO. It is like the United States with the Republicans and the Democrats.

We would like to know how you see the priorities for the nation of Mozambique. What are the priorities, what are the major issues facing Mozambique today? And how does RENAMO's platform reflect those

issues?

Yeah, thanks. And not to do propoganda against this I am sure, because all that I can tell you, you can go ask anybody and they will confirm. Even to ask people from anywhere. Because I do not win something by trying to cheat you. Now the priorities for us are to change Mozambique. First, we must have a state of rights in Mozambique. We don't have a state of rights. It means that the ruling party is mixed with the state. No state in Mozambique is just a party. If you are a teacher, to be a teacher, just to be a teacher in primary school, you are forced to receive the card of the ruling party. To be the director of a hospital, I am sure you have the ruling party forcing you to have the party's card. To be a general in the army, to be promoted, you must accept the card of the ruling party. To be a commander, not to be a big commander, in a district and local of the police, you must accept the party. Even for you to have sources to do small business, I am sure you must cooperate with this party. Although, you know we have some freedom; even you Americans or Europeans think that Mozambique is better because since war has ended, I personally am preventing us from doing another war. Because I don't do war. It is the reason why the image of Mozambique... [is that] things are better than in other countries in Africa. No! Here I can say it is more dangerous than Mugabe. Mugabe is known more just because he is sending people to destroy farmers. But there is no difference here, there is no democracy. During the campaign for me to rent one room for sleeping was difficult. The ruling party was forcing people at the hotel to say, never accept the Dhlakama to sleep. With my money to stay, people said, Mr. Dhlakama you cannot sleep here, because if you do, the government will give us a problem. That is to say, the priority for us is to create a state of rights for any Mozambican to feel fully comfortable that someone is defending his rights.

Number two is to create jobs for young people. There are no jobs for young people. Many people, they get degrees of higher education. They go to South Africa trying to get a job and even to work as farmers, I assure you. Some go to Europe. But the technical people that we educate, they do not stay in Mozambique. They run away because there is no chance for a job in Mozambique. Mozambique is a country that

is rich. We have resources, good land for agriculture, timber, even this coast that is rich for fishing. But Mozambique is still one of the poorest [countries] because this government does not have good policies for development, you know? For development. This could be a period for those in power— if we won this election, we could concentrate our strategy for development on becoming a center of agriculture. To produce food for people to eat, to prevent death, so that no one would die of hunger. We could produce this to have money in Mozambique, and to create jobs. But agriculture, we will think about using machines to do that and for health too. Many people dying is sad; many people are dying in Mozambique. All the people, children, women. Because all nurses and all workers for hospitals, they don't have condition. They don't have condition. You can go now to hospital even here in Maputo. Sometimes you will not see medicine, you will not see beds, you will not see food for people who are sick. In particular, people with that disease [HIV], they don't have food. They can have injections, but they don't have food. Thousands and thousands are dying daily, every day. Even here in Maputo, the capital. But our president said, "No money for that." But he, every time, he is using six helicopters to South Africa. One helicopter per hour is \$1,500. If you can multiply five helicopters by \$1,500, and eight hours per day, and forty-five days, you will see millions and millions. The president of the country is using money from our taxes. A country that we said is the poorest. We opposed all of that, and advocated for reform—how can we use money from taxes for hospitals, for schools? And even to facilitate roads?

We have bad roads. It is not easy to bring a product from rural areas to the city to do commercialization. Bad roads. No infrastructures. Those priorities and others in particular, not just in Mozambique. Many ministers, they are robbing, many national directors, they are taken to court, but no judge that can try them. Because if you are a judge, and you go ahead trying to investigate one minister, they take a gun and they will kill you in your car or in your house. It is always [like that] in this country. No due process for people higher up in the ruling party. That is the reason why it is not just. The family of the presidents, the family of the ministers, they can take a gun and can kill and rob. They do not go to jail. If they go to jail, they will be in the jail just twenty-four hours and then leave. The majority of Mozambicans, all the prisons are full of people, but with no real case against them.

When they go to court, because they are the poorest, they do not have money to contact an attorney to defend them. The judge is from the ruling party. If the ruling party needs for you to go to jail, you can go today. If they need to kill you, they can kill you. The people of Mozambique know all these things. Our priority is to change this. Economic development, human rights, justice, jobs, and to build more hospitals, even schools. Teachers from primary school, and even higher schools, it is not easy to you to pass the class. If you are a student and your father is from the opposition, the teacher receives an order from the ruling party that says, "You cannot pass. If you are to pass into the next class, you must accept this [card]." I am not doing propaganda, brother, it is a real situation in this country. It is the reason why people support my party and me; they know that I call for changes that favor the majority of this country.

Mr. President, how do you bring about that change? This is your fourth run for the presidency. You have renounced violence and war, and opposition based on armed conflict. What next?

Yes, yes, yes, yes. All these changes, we are already trying to advise the ruling party, because although we are the minority in the parliament, in a multiparty system, if you have a seat in the parliament you can influence even the majority. But now they reject it all. They reject it all! All this is to say, brother, you are in power, why can't you have urgency? What we call national urgency. There are some things that are not even political, but things that are technical for all the country. But what happened in Mozambique, all the decisions, even low to passing low in the parliament, they are pushing just the political. They do not understand the national interest for the country. Just for me to proceed to change, if I am sure one day I could be president of this country. I can change. It is the reason why, even during the campaign, I was telling people it is the reason why all intellectuals were on my side—teachers, nurses, people of all economic backgrounds. It is the reason why no one will accept the result of the election. Because they know that the ruling party, dictators, were continuing to cause people to suffer in Mozambique. Any leader can bring change if he is in power. It is like now, Obama. Some things that he did for America, but Bush, he was in another administration. Now I am in the opposition. I can speak my view in public, but there is no chance to force that man who

is in power to try to run the country with my philosophies.

Mr. President, we thank you for your time.

Yes, yes, thank you.

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Both authors observed the 2009 Mozambican elections.