

From the Two-Party to the Dominant - Party System in Mozambique, 1994 – 2012

Framing Frelimo Party Dominance in Context

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the abrupt end of Mozambique's vibrant two-party system, which, by the middle of the past decade, had developed into a dominant-party system, instead of institutionalizing, as was the case in other African third wave democracies. While, from the second election, in 1999, the former rebel movement, RENAMO, went head-to-head with the former liberation movement, the ruling Frelimo, from the third election, held in 2004, RENAMO experienced a significant loss of votes, a loss repeated in 2009. This paved the way for a Frelimo breakthrough to dominance despite the fact that its voter share remained almost the same in all four elections.

These developments are probed through a two-perspective theoretical framework consisting of the social conflict theory and the historical institutionalism. While social conflict theory views the political phenomenon at hand in terms of structural factors, for example, deep political changes and transformations in society, historical institutionalism views it in terms of path-dependence, implying that 'history matters'. The theorising generated an analytical framework consisting of four units of analysis, namely, the workings of the electoral institutions, the weakness of the opposition parties, the playing field for electoral competition and the economic instruments of party control of society. Following the single-case study research design with embedded cases, these units of analysis were researched as sub-cases.

The actual research found neither salient structural factors nor legacies of the past to account for the developments in the party system. The underlying mechanisms in each of the sub-cases unveiled strategic factors related to the political use by Frelimo of the state apparatus for partisan gain. As far as the sequence is concerned, the thesis shows that after retaining state control in a problematic election in 1999, the government embarked on administrative reforms, mainly at the local level, resulting in an uneven playing field for political competition.

This has resulted in shrinkage of the political space available for RENAMO, for example, its local structures for political and electoral mobilisation collapsed, which contributed significantly to its disastrous results in the 2004 and 2009 elections. While there are internal weaknesses within the opposition, the use of state power to enrich the Frelimo elites, strengthening the financial capacity of the Frelimo party and promoting intra-party unity while starving the opposition groups, has exacerbated the weakness of the opposition.

All things considered, the thesis argues that the failure to institutionalise the two-party system and the development in its place of a dominant-party system is embedded in the political use by Frelimo of the state apparatus to weaken the ability of opposition groups to challenge its grip on control of the state. So, although there are internal weaknesses within the opposition parties, the conclusions underscore the role of the state not as a neutral playing field but rather as playing role in protecting Frelimo's power.

Key words: Mozambique, Frelimo, RENAMO, two-party system; dominant-party system, election, state.