

# Barracks and bombast: is Renamo's rhetoric of militarization and partition a serious threat in Mozambique?

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Afonso Dhlakama, the leader of the the *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (Renamo), Mozambique's former rebel group and the leading opposition party, has seized the headlines in the country with the bombastic proclamations that Renamo will begin building barracks for the party's demobilized ex-combatants and threats to partition the country. It is tempting to dismiss Dhlakama's statements as inconsequential rhetoric, but Dhlakama also took advantage of the opportunity to seize control of domestic political discourse as President Armando Guebuza, leader of the ruling *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Frelimo), is currently out of the country on a state visit to China.

The political influence of Renamo has been waning for several years now. This decline appears to be particularly galling for Dhlakama, who has headed the group for over three decades now. Dhlakama has personally seen a decline in popularity both nationally and within his own party. Dhlakama's share of the vote in presidential elections fell from a peak of 47.7% in 1999 to only 16.4% in 2009, and Dhlakama in 2010 faced a rebellion within Renamo as the party's legislators disregarded Dhlakama's call for a boycott of parliament following alleged electoral irregularities.<sup>1</sup>

Dhlakama has chosen to escalate his criticism of Guebuza, accusing the President of being difficult to work with and of carrying out a vendetta against Renamo. Dhlakama said that relations between Renamo and Frelimo were much better under Guebuza's predecessor, President Joaquim Chissano, arguing that Chissano allowed Renamo to grow, while Guebuza "has always had the goal of eliminating Renamo".<sup>2</sup> Dhlakama has, however, refused to work within the system of state institutions, not taking a seat in the Council of State in protest over the 2009 elections and thus making it more difficult to have a dialogue between the parties and undercutting Renamo's effectiveness as an opposition party. Dhlakama stated that Renamo is now working to organize a peaceful revolution to "chase Frelimo from power", claiming that he does not wish for a return to war, and instead wants a popular revolution of the type seen in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

The talk of a 'peaceful revolution' was, however, contradicted by the statements of Renamo spokesman Fernando Mazanga. Speaking to Agence France-Presse, Mazanga announced that Renamo will begin building barracks for demobilized ex-combatants who fought

1 See Kai Thaler, "Mozambique: Dhlakama's despair is nation's gain" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 3, January 2010), pp. 4-5.

2 "Dhlakama admite melhor relacionamento com Chissano do que com Guebuza" (*Angop*, 5 August 2011).

3 "Dhlakama pede 'revolução'" (*Correio da Manhã*, 2 August 2011).



for Renamo during the civil war against the Frelimo government that ended in 1992. Mazanga said that the barracks, to be built in the former Renamo strongholds of Cabo Delgado, Niassa, Sofala, and Zambezia provinces, have been requested by the Renamo party organizations in the provinces to "defend democracy". The spokesman cited the killings of 14 people by security forces during last October's price increase riots as an example of Frelimo's authoritarian threat to the populace, stating that "if the government sends agents to attack people, Renamo will defend them".<sup>4</sup> Mazanga claimed that Frelimo has violated the Rome Peace Accord that ended the civil war by selectively and forcefully removing Renamo-allied military officers from command and demobilizing Renamo-allied soldiers, arguing that this has been a practice since Guebuza came to power in 2005. These allegations were denied by the military, and there has yet to be any independent confirmation of the claims.

In a separate interview in early August, Dhlakama himself struck a much more belligerent tone, making his proposed revolution sound much less peaceful. Attempting to present the killings during the riots as an attack on Renamo and its supporters, Dhlakama said that it would be legitimate for Renamo troops to militarize once again and live in the proposed barracks because "we have been killed [by the police], we can also take up arms and kill those in the police forces who are killing us".<sup>5</sup> Dhlakama demanded that Frelimo set up a transitional government (presumably including greater Renamo representation) that will remove partisanship from state institutions, and accused the current government of being worse than the Portuguese colonial regime "in terms of repression, lack of democracy, and discrimination". He further threatened that if reforms are not undertaken, the country may need to be partitioned, asking "hasn't Sudan just been divided?"

It remains unclear if anything will result from Renamo's bluster and escalation of rhetoric. In 2006, on the 14<sup>th</sup>

anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accord, Dhlakama threatened a "return to the bush" to fight another civil war, but nothing came of this. There are some factors in Renamo's favor, however. Frustration with the Frelimo government has been growing in recent years as the economic growth the Mozambican economy has enjoyed has failed to improve the standard of living of the majority of the population. Frelimo has also made development decisions that have benefited foreign corporations more so than the local population.<sup>6</sup> Dhlakama's talk of splitting up the country may have some action behind it, as the proposed barracks will be in the northern half of Mozambique, where Renamo has historically enjoyed greater support, and Dhlakama has now moved his base

of operations to Nampula, thousands of kilometers north of the capital in Maputo. Making these inflammatory pronouncements immediately before Guebuza left the country was also a shrewd move, as the lower levels of leadership in Frelimo do not have to clout of Guebuza, whose successor remains uncertain and who is likely to be the last Frelimo leader from the independence era. This may, however, turn out to be another episode of Dhlakama and Renamo trying to recapture attention and relevance that will ultimately result in inaction and defeat, as in the failed parliamentary boycott last year. Renamo is far less popular than during its post-civil war heyday in the late 1990s. The group has proven

largely ineffective as an opposition party, often taking polarized positions to Frelimo that preclude compromise. Now, Renamo faces its first serious competition among the opposition with the rise of Daviz Simango's *Movimento Democrático de Moçambique*, which is rapidly gaining popularity and seems likely to overtake Renamo as the largest opposition party in Parliament in the future. Frelimo may have committed some incidents of vote fraud in the 2009 elections and there may be increasing discontent with the party's rule, but Frelimo remains highly popular, and for much of the population, Renamo, still blamed for the destruction and destabilization of the country during the civil war, is a thoroughly unappealing alternative.

<sup>4</sup> "Former Mozambique rebel group to build barracks" (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 July 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Luis Andrade de Sá, "'Se Frelimo não ceder, Moçambique pode ser dividido'" (*Sol*, 5 August 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See Kai Thaler, "Mozambique in 2010: strength on the surface, but fissures emerging" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin 2010 Review*, March 2011), pp. 25-29.



As for Frelimo with the successor of Guebuza, Renamo's future beyond Dhlakama is also unclear. The escalation of confrontational statements (and, should the barracks be built, policy) by Dhlakama and Mazanga may be a calculated effort to try to solidify Renamo's standing in the face of slipping popularity and an aging leader. A party built out of war and disorder, Renamo thrives on conflict, and so in this instance it appears to be

manufacturing discord without offering any constructive alternatives to Frelimo policy. If Renamo truly wishes to 'defend democracy', the party would do best to leave its militant pretensions, and Dhlakama, behind, and focus on challenging Frelimo through political means.

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