

LEADERSHIP
MOOD PIECE ON MAPUTO|MOZAMBIQUE

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To any white South African accustomed to Lourenco Marques in "the old days" - prawns and beer in the boulevard cafes; cosmopolitan night life; noisy morning markets and packed holiday beaches, Maputo, today, is depressing. Visible signs of neglect, even urban decay are everywhere. It is such an obvious dumping ground for all those tired "I told you so" post colonial clichés - a constant reminder that liberation is not a one night stand. There is an enigmatic symbolism to the fact that one of the spotless little enclaves of care and dedication happens to be a shrine dedicated to Louis Trichardt and his Voortrekkers complete with a marble scroll acknowledging contributions from the ACVV, VLV, FAK and Voortrekkerbeweging. All other signs of Portuguese colonial rule have been removed, but somehow the condition of the shrine seems to imply a problem of a different order.

Recently we were having breakfast at Kirkman's Camp in Mala-Mala. I asked the young Portuguese pilot who flew us there, where he came from. "I was born in Mozambique - Beira."

"When did you leave?"

"'82."

"Oh, so you were there for 8 years after liberation. Why did you leave?"

At first they told him they could pay half his salary in dollars and the rest in local currency. He was prepared to accept this. He loved Mozambique, but it was difficult. He and his wife and small baby lived in a tenement building with four other families. There was electricity because one of them worked at the power station and could bring home kerosene for the generator; the other worked at the abattoir and brought some meat. Everyday they had to queue for milk and bread. They hired a little black boy to queue for them.

Eventually the man behind the counter knew who every little black boy queued for and what to expect in the form of bribes.

Being a pilot and more mobile, he could get pecan nuts - highly valued. Eventually the whole Maputo economy depended on an informal barter system to keep it going. One day his plane barely managed to take off from an airstrip in the Tete province and when the cargo was weighed at Maputo, there was more than a ton of undeclared contrabrand smuggled on board for bartering in the capital. Finally, they told him they could not pay the half of his salary in dollars any more. For the sake of his wife and baby he left. "I was lucky; I am a pilot. But the people who suffer most are the blacks."

No doubt his story is coloured by his own prejudice and his own experience of the trauma that this kind of transition brings to society. However the date when he finally decided to leave is significant. From 1981 the Mozambique economy went into a serious decline. It also corresponded with the change from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe and the transfer of RENAMO to the assistance of the SADF. The extent to which Mozambique was abandoned by its colonial rulers is simply staggering. Farms were left deserted; a country with a 2,000 mile coast line and three natural harbours was left with no ships at all; even coffins were transported to Portugal from the family mausoleums in the Lourenco Marques cemetery. Despite this, the Maputo economy managed to painfully claw itself back to some kind of respectable growth between 1974 and 1980. Then destabilization began in all earnest.

It was a blistering hot day when P W Botha and Samora Machel signed the Nkomati Accord. I was sitting next to one of the few sensibly clad dignitaries present - the Swazi Minister of Foreign Affairs, wearing a skirt with a light Mahiya cloth covering his torso, a pair of leather sandals on his feet. The rest of us sweated and chafed in our colonial heritage. Even Machel looked ridiculously un-African in his white uniform. The two armies stood untwitching in the noon sun. At one stage, a General said to me : "We're ahead 4 to 3."
"What do you mean ?"
"Only three of ours have fainted so far."

It was all a pantomimed farce of course. The Vaz Diaries made that clear more than a year later. These were captured when a strategic RENAMO camp had been overrun and showed that before, during and after the signing of the Nkomati Accord, Mozambique had been subjected to deliberate and systematic destabilization by its more powerful neighbour. Even the South African government did not question the contents of those diaries. But why, for heaven's sake ?

It is a bit complicated, but somehow, I believe, historians will keep coming back to the 25 April 1974 to find the answer. On that day a coup in Lisbon precipitated the independance of Mozambique and Angola and put the liberation struggle in both countries on "fast forward". Even the departure of the Portuguese looked like a speeded up version of the "Keystone Cops" in retreat. But for the South African government, it heralded in an aggressive "thump and talk" regional policy towards its neighbours. The colonial "cordon sanitaire" from West to East had been broken; Rhodesia was fighting its terminal battle and once that was over, only African governments were on the borders with which to deal. And deal with them South Africa did. It took over RENAMO from the Rhodesian army; sent it back to Mozambique and supported and sustained it. It invaded Angola, raided Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland and made it clear to all and sundry that those surrounding it were part of a total onslaught against it. The liberation of Mozambique did two things : it emphasized the great degree of interdependance of the countries in the region, and that as long as South Africa's domestic conflict remained unresolved, liberation for its neighbouring countries did not mean freedom. Even if the Portuguese in Mozambique had not left in such large numbers; even if Machel had not initially been such a naive and dogmatic ideologue; even "if" many other things, Mozambique was not going to be left alone to work out the consequences of its own liberation. Not even by signing the Nkomati Accord.

"Why does Pretoria want war ?" It was 3 January 1986. We were in Machel's office in Maputo. Although it was a rhetorical question, he jumped out of his seat as he asked it and walked to and fro.

"Look at Hitler. He invaded everybody, even Russia. But you know where the war ended ? Where it began - in Berlin. So it will be with Pretoria. I cannot beat Botha, nor can Mugabe, Kaunda or anyone around here. Even if he conquers us all, he would not have solved anything. He is fighting his own people. The war will end in Pretoria.

I had gone to Maputo to establish first hand the status of the Vaz diaries. Colonel Sergio Viera, then Minister of Security, gave me a detailed briefing to be followed by the interview with Machel. There was not the slightest doubt in either's mind about the aggressive intent of Pretoria. When I quietly suggested that perhaps by now, the MNR (RENAMO), having exploited discontent and rural instability, could have built up some popular following, Machel exploded with : "There is NO RENAMO without the SADF, only bandits."

As we drove to the airport over pot-holed streets, past skeletons of colonial boulevard cafés, I thought to myself : "Is it as simple as that?" What about the ideological hyperbole; the hopelessly idealistic social engineering; the lack of skill and experience and the unwillingness to come to terms with it. Did not all of this play some role as well? I suppose it did.

Colonel Viera : "Of course we made mistakes, many. But we are prepared to learn from them." He stopped the car at Louis Trichardt's shrine and we got out. "Look", he said, "completely untouched." There was a touch of pride in the way he said it. He was trying to get something through to me, and I still am not quite sure what, except that it felt vaguely reassuring.

Machel died in a plane crash on the 19 October 1986. I was in Bonn when I was told and could not believe it. My first reaction was that Mozambique could not hold together without him. Whatever his shortcomings, he was an inspiring personality and one sensed the genuine affection and respect of all those around him. On the 12 December, I was again in Maputo and this time another friend met me and drove me into town.

As he talked, I began to sense a change in the atmosphere that was confirmed by subsequent discussions with other people I met. Without compromising anyone, I can best sum it up by saying that as much as Machel's death was a blow, and his memory is revered, his departure unleashed a new energy and sense of expectation in Mozambique. Machel's charisma was so overwhelming that very little took place without his approval or knowledge. This led to a highly individualized and centralized style of government. Chissano was busy re-arranging and rationalizing and the buzzwords were "delegation" and "pragmatic". There seemed to be a new confidence in dealing with the MNR (RENAMO) problem.

This has to be seen against a vastly changed regional and international climate concerning South and Southern Africa. The year of Machel's death saw the disintegration of the United State's constructive engagement policy towards South Africa; the failure of the EPG initiative; the onset of sanctions; a continuing and extending State of Emergency in South Africa; the broadening of foreign policy objectives by the West to focussing on Southern, rather than South Africa; (e.g. assistance to frontline states to enable them to become less dependant on and vulnerable to South Africa); the NAM Conference in Harare and a re-appraisal of the viability of the SADCC.

The spin-off of this for Mozambique has been greater international, and especially Western, interest. Britain, the USA and a number of European countries have increased involvement, either by developing the Beira corridor as an alternative trade route, or by stepped up aid domestically. The upshot of it all is that Chissano and his government feel less alone. They feel they are no longer going to be pushed around and messed about while the world looks the other way. Their domestic travail insofar as it relates to regional conflicts has become internationalized.

I think this is not simply a case of false optimism. Mozambique has been the stamping ground for most of the ideological battles and regional conflicts surrounding decolonialization and the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa.

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A significant and sustained change in its domestic and international position could very well provide an important clue of how the Southern African region is going to solve its problems of co-existence.

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