



From the Bush to the Office: Explaining Renamo's Sustained Support Base During and After the Mozambique Civil War

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Cover art: two children play amongst ruins of 500-year old building on Mozambique Island. Photo by Bitá Rodríguez. Source: US Agency for International Development. <https://flic.kr/p/9Ev9ia>.

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Abstract

The Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) is commonly understood as a Cold War-era puppet terrorist group that was intent on destabilizing the nascent socialist government in Mozambique. Since Mozambique ended one-party rule in 1994, this organization continues to serve as the leading democratic opposition to the majority government of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). This paper argues that, contrary to common understanding, external actors had a limited role in RENAMO's development and success relative to often neglected internal factors. Through an examination of RENAMO's external support base, its evolution, and its recruitment patterns, as well as popular discontent with FRELIMO, this paper will explain the party's successful transition to democratic politics.

Introduction

The Mozambique National Resistance, commonly referred to as Renamo, has been one of the most brutal non-state actors of the twentieth century. It dragged Mozambique into a vicious civil war barely two years after the country gained independence in 1975. Renamo has widely been depicted as a tool of destruction wielded by foreign powers: a terrorist organization with no ideology, popular support, or political platform whatsoever, created with the goal of destabilizing the socialist Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) government. This narrative, however, fails to explain Renamo's sustained support base and its evolution into a functioning political party after the civil war. Professor Stathis Kalyvas, an expert on civil war, points out that most of the literature written during the conflict is biased because it relied on research conducted almost exclusively in pro-government areas, and argues that this has contributed to the construction of a simplistic image of the organization (2001, 109-110).

The portrayal of Renamo as a foreign tool created with the sole purpose of destabilizing the Frelimo government is inadequate; it must be understood how the group survived through democratic transition and continued to garner enough public support to remain Frelimo's main political opponent. Despite leading a campaign of terror, through looting, raping and indiscriminate violence against the Mozambican population, Renamo gained enough legitimacy to be

incorporated into the newly democratic political system at the end of the war.

This paper will argue that, although external powers played an important role in Renamo's creation and evolution, their overall influence was limited. Internal factors such as ideological and regional alienation by the Frelimo government mainly encouraged participation in Renamo. First, I will examine the evolution of external support, from Rhodesia to South African, followed by that of the United Nations after the civil war. I will then discuss how Frelimo's ideology and restructuring of the state apparatus created grievances among the northern and central populations of Mozambique. I will relate this to Renamo's recruitment strategies to show that, though recruits may have been forced to join, the economic and social benefits derived from membership made staying in the group worthwhile. Finally, I will address the difficulties Renamo faced as it transitioned towards democratic politics, specifically in building a cohesive political platform and finding alternative funding. I will also explore how RENAMO overcame these challenges to undergo an arguably successful democratic transition.

The Shifting Role of External Powers

External support has undoubtedly been a major element of Renamo's political survival. During most of the civil war, Renamo had distinct, and often conflicted, internal and external wings. The Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) initially sought to empower a rebel movement within Mozambique, in response to Frelimo's hostile foreign policies, which included supporting the Zimbabwe independence group, ZANLA, and closing the borders between the two countries. The CIO enabled a platform for "disgruntled Portuguese settlers" to express their discontent through the rebel radio station, *Voz da Africa Livre*, with the goal of recruiting more native Mozambicans into the movement (Vines 1991, 16).

Renamo found its leader in former Frelimo commander Andre Matsangaissa, who joined Renamo after escaping a re-education camp in 1977. Until the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, Rhodesia financed the rebellion, paying for salaries, weapons, food, and clothing, so that Renamo was able to sustain operations despite Frelimo's counterinsurgency efforts (Weinstein 2007, 73).

South Africa had been opposed to providing Renamo with assistance under the Vorster presidency due to a period of 'détente' between the two countries. However, when P.W Botha assumed power in 1984, the South African regime shifted its foreign policy into a significantly more 'hawkish' direction as part of what is understood as the 'Total Onslaught' phase. This change in policy resulted in several proxy wars targeting the African National Congress and any country that supported them, including the Frelimo government in Mozambique (Vines 1991, 18). The Botha administration thus took over the role of financing Renamo

operations as a way of undermining an enemy state.

Despite being a vital means of their financial support, Renamo's external wings remained very disconnected from the internal organization in terms of on-the-ground operations. Renamo's external branch consisted mainly of right-wing groups in Europe and the United States that established a network of loosely linked foreign offices (Manning 1998, 177), which can be seen as part of a broader anti-communist effort. Later on, the external wing helped Renamo develop a political platform centered on democratization and the free market (Manning 2002, 162). However, when it came to influencing Renamo's decision making, their power remained limited. For instance, in 1984, the external wing was pushing for Renamo to recruit more acceptable leadership to the party, and favoured Domingos Arouca, a less brutal candidate, to replace Matsangaissa as the leader of the party (Manning 2002, 77). However, little regard was given to the external wing's demands, and succession to party leadership was settled violently; Afonso Dhlakama, one of the cofounders of the movement, was victorious.

When the Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1991, Frelimo, suffering from chronic economic crises, had to give up on its one-party socialist rule, and the war lost its ideological significance (Vines 1991, 11). Frelimo and Renamo signed a peace agreement in 1992, which effectively ended the war. Renamo consequently became incorporated into the new democratic political system as a legitimate party. After this, sponsoring Renamo's transition to democratic politics became a way of promoting peace and ensuring that Renamo would not return to violent means of conflict resolution (Manning 2002, 162). Indeed, Renamo threatened on several occasions to paralyze all peace negotiations if funding was not provided by their foreign supporters (Waterhouse and Lauriciano 1993). Hence, the United Nations created a trust fund; not only could Renamo bear the costs of a functional administration, but they financially assisted all parties participating in the Mozambican elections. In addition, several international donors, most significantly the Italian government, contributed to assisting Renamo financially (Vines 1991, 63). As Manning posits, the multiplicity of actors involved in supporting Renamo throughout and following the civil war shows that "there was no continuous, united force, no single 'mastermind' behind Renamo" (Manning 1998, 77). Therefore, the external actors, despite being necessary to the financial survival of the party, had a limited role in shaping its course.

Alienation under Frelimo's Rule

Some of the major internal factors that contributed to the creation of a rebel movement stem from Frelimo's beginnings and ideology. Frelimo came to power in 1975 after ten of years of fighting for independence against the Portuguese. According to Professor Jeremy Weinstein, "Renamo's rise came as a surprise to

many outside observers, since Frelimo was thought to be widely popular and working hard on national unity" (Weinstein 2007, 73).

However, at the leadership level, internal dissent had existed since the inception of the movement. As Vines emphasizes, Frelimo was formed when Eduardo Mondlane merged three political parties: MANU, UDENAMO and UNAMI. According to Mondlane, some members felt excluded from the leadership regionally and ethnically, and started to claim that Southerners were favored by Frelimo, while Makonde people in particular were exploited (Vines 1991, 11). Weinstein instead emphasizes the ideological factor, according to which many founders of the party disagreed with Frelimo's sharp socialist turn. The Frelimo leadership reacted to these disputes by expelling party members, which paved the way for the creation of rival nationalist parties. When Frelimo secured Mozambique's independence and assumed leadership of the country, they proceeded to ban all political opposition, and sent hundreds of oppositionists to re-education camps. This prompted defections from Frelimo into Renamo's top ranks (Vines 1991, 11). Therefore, at the elite level, internal disputes allowed Renamo to acquire and benefit from a highly knowledgeable leadership base, which helped consolidate their movement.

The Frelimo government also created new grievances within the population. First, regional tensions, which were a legacy of Portuguese colonialism, were seemingly exacerbated by Frelimo's tendency to place leaders in regions different from their own: in particular, placing leaders from the wealthier and better educated South in the Center and North of the country (Manning 1998, 171). Second, the population suffered from the "disastrous social and economic consequences of the combination of instant decolonization and transformative socioeconomic policy" (Manning 1998, 171). Frelimo completely restructured the country's economic, political and social structures along Marxist-Leninist lines, which tended to upset the traditional leaders of the colonial era, the *regulos* (Weinstein 2007, 3). The effects were especially felt in the countryside, which in part explains why rural populations were the main source of Renamo's recruitment, and how the civil war exacerbated the urban-rural dichotomy over the years. By 1986, Renamo was operating in every province of the country and controlled most of the rural areas, while Frelimo leadership secured the cities (Weinstein 2007, table 2.2). However, Carrie Manning, Professor of Political Science, underlines that these are merely enabling factors: they allow for a greater mobilizable constituency for groups opposing Frelimo, but do not fully explain why people would stay loyal to and participate in violent rebellion with Renamo.

Inadvertently, Frelimo's counterinsurgency methods also led to aggravated alienation, and created a larger mobilizable base for Renamo by propelling the conflict into a cycle of violence. In order to undermine Renamo's ability to recruit

peasants, Frelimo created communal villages, guarded by government troops, into which peasants were often taken by force. Peasants were allowed to cultivate land during the day, however they lived under curfew and constant surveillance of the military by night (Weinstein 2007, 7). This alone caused much discontent. Many peasants had to give up their property to go live in the communal villages, where sanitary and health conditions were often dire. Moreover, Renamo managed to raid the communal villages, which gave peasants the sense that Frelimo could not protect them, and pushed some to live in rebel-controlled areas despite the threat of Renamo raids and brutalities (Weinstein 2007, 7).

Furthermore, Renamo took advantage of the government's inexperience and initial weakness through guerilla warfare. Professor Andrew Mack argues that prolonged, low-intensity guerilla warfare is difficult to combat, even for highly developed nations (1983). Additionally, the goals of the two belligerents are different. In order for the rebels to succeed, they must survive and disrupt the functioning of the state. For the government, success cannot be anything less than eliminating the rebels (Mack, 1983). Because the Frelimo government had to spend considerable resources on combatting the rebels so shortly after the end of a long liberation struggle, they lacked the opportunity to devote those resources on providing proper state security services. Thus, the Mozambican population's first and only experience of Frelimo's rule was administrative failure, which led to widespread distrust towards the government. Ultimately, this worked in Renamo's favour. The reform led by Frelimo had disastrous consequences, not only because large parts of the population disagreed with the underlying ideology, but also because of the lack of resources.

Evolution of Renamo's Recruitment Strategies

I have argued that conditions under the new Frelimo government created a number of grievances. Among the elite, these grievances aided Renamo's growth, while among the masses, they allowed for further recruitment into the rebel movement. I will now look more closely at how Renamo's membership was created and maintained. In this respect, Manning's research conducted among Renamo personnel is particularly insightful in understanding recruitment patterns. She finds that most members of Renamo had not joined by choice, but had been abducted from villages during raids and forced to join the insurgency. This corresponds to the image that Renamo was an "army of captives" (Manning 1998, 172). However, remaining in the movement and actively participating in guerilla activities reveals a certain dimension of choice. Manning mainly underlines that the choices of Renamo forces were interest-driven. In particular, people stayed when there was an opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. In some cases, members of Renamo enjoyed living conditions and social liberties that were superior to those they had known previously (Manning 1998, 172).

Within what Kalyvas qualifies as the greed versus grievance debate, the choice to stay in Renamo is due the possibility of looting falls into the greed aspect. That is, a possibility for combatants to better their situation and gain rewards from taking part in guerilla warfare. However, we have also seen that there were real grievances which caused civilians to prefer life under rebel control rather than government control. Additionally, young rural males frustrated with economic stagnation could be attracted to Renamo by the prospect of overturning societal norms such as arranged marriage (a grievance), as well as the possibility of exerting more power in society (greed) (Geffrey and Odete 1991). Weinstein's distinction between high-commitment individuals — those who act as investors in the cause — and low-commitment recruits — those who follow suit for their benefit and can be likened to consumers — highlights the fact that individual motivations for joining vary within one movement; they can encompass factors of both greed and grievance, or may bypass the dichotomy altogether (Weinstein 2007, 7).

What is suggested, but never explicitly expressed throughout both Weinstein and Manning's accounts of the civil war is that the majority of the population was forced to choose between two undesirable and risk-filled lifestyles. Peasants risked being harmed by Renamo attacks whether they lived in government- or rebel-controlled areas. Elisabeth Jean Wood's argument about pleasure in agency provides relevant insight into this scenario (Wood 2001, 267-81). Wood argues that, since the risks of losing one's life were high in both cases, individuals could gain more agency by joining the ranks of Renamo to fight their grievances with Frelimo, instead of living under the threat of being killed by Renamo and accepting Frelimo's inadequacies.

War is a fluid and evolving process, and the actors, motives and conditions involved may change drastically over its course. It appears that, even if Renamo did not have much support among the Mozambican population in the beginning, the self-reinforcing cycles of violence forced numerous citizens into the ranks of Renamo and, at times, have offered them a chance at socio-economic betterment.

Democratizing Renamo

Once Renamo had been admitted into the realm of democratic politics, their practices had to evolve drastically. As it underwent its political transition, Renamo faced two main challenges: building a cohesive political platform and finding alternative means of financing their new administrative and political needs.

Renamo is not considered to have had any kind of political platform before 1985. Their outlook changed with the 1984 Nkomati accord of non-aggression between South Africa and Mozambique, which threatened to leave Renamo without financial support from South Africa (Manning 1998, 78). In addition,

it was around this time that Renamo leadership changed from Matsangaissa to Dhlakama, and headquarters were moved from Phalaborwa in South Africa to Gorongosa in Mozambique. Thereafter, their recruitment strategy evolved, and they started targeting a more educated public in order to fill political positions and to gain credibility. They tried to lose their reputation of being a foreign created, “loosely organized group of armed bandits bent on total destruction, [...] without political legitimacy or support of any kind” (Manning 1998, 105). Indeed, this depiction of Renamo was also a factor in the prolongation of the war, because Frelimo refused to negotiate with a group it deemed illegitimate.

As part of the need to find qualified rank-and-file members for the party’s administration, Renamo recruited a number of high school and university professors and students under the promise of foreign scholarships. This allowed them to establish a secret educated membership within cities. Despite these efforts, Renamo lacked an experienced membership to fill the new positions created by the peace commissions (Manning 1998, 105).

Renamo never mobilized around one strong, cohesive ideology. Other guerilla movements, such as the second Chimurenga guerilla movement in former Rhodesia, made a point of educating their soldiers about the cause they were fighting for (Lyons 1999); the only shared ideology within Renamo was its strict opposition to Frelimo. Manning’s research illustrates the ideological disconnect that existed between the elite and the rank-and-file within Renamo.

While the leadership claimed to represent the newly defined ideology of the party with the help of appointed political commissars, most members of the group were taught only a very basic conception of the movement’s purpose. In an interview, a Renamo battalion commander told Manning “there was no lack of politics, otherwise the soldiers would run away” (Manning 2002, 178). However, when asked what these politics were, he merely pointed to factors such as the impossibility of running away, and that everyone was promised employment and money once the war was won (Manning 2002, 178). This interview suggests that Renamo indeed had a very limited political platform. Further, the shortage of shared incentives based on ideology or group identity meant that Renamo members were mostly drawn in by promises of financial gains. This, in turn, explains the leadership’s urgent desire for financial aid after reconciliation, as money was integral in creating and maintaining loyalty among party members.

Renamo’s leader, Afonso Dhlakama, stressed the issue of finding alternate means of subsistence for the party: “This transition is a hard task because the means we need have changed. During the war we could attack an enemy position and capture enough material. In this work of transition things have changed; we need offices, fax machines, financing. And the means we have are not sufficient” (Waterhouse and Lauriciano, 1993). According to Manning, this remained a struggle, as resources were scarce, and senior members often failed

to redistribute them adequately (1998, 114). Instead, they acted in their own interests rather than towards the goal of consolidating the party’s support base. The financial constraints on the party and their inability to remunerate former soldiers as promised proved challenging to the successful demobilization of troops and reintegration of war veterans into society. As explained by Professor Jessica Schafer, there were concerns that, even after demobilization, veterans who had been dissocialized in Renamo ranks would continue to resort to banditry and crime as a means of livelihood (Schafer 2007, 96). It turned out that so many soldiers were in favor of demobilization that there were not enough soldiers left to form the state’s new army (Vines 1991, 121).

Renamo’s transition to democratic politics can be seen as mostly successful, largely due to the financial support created by the UN trust fund and other international donors. Renamo’s external wing also had a role to play in helping the party develop a political platform centered on democratization and the free market, even if these efforts had limited results (Manning 2002, 162). The continued political support for Renamo after democratization can also partly be explained by changing public perceptions of the party. As it transitioned and changed its image to a formal and legitimate party, citizens began to realize that affiliating with Renamo was no longer a source of contention and in turn, political participation increased. (Vines 1991, 121). Indeed, the funding allowed them to partake in elections, and while the party has never won a majority in government, they remain the primary opposition (Harrison 1995; Freedom House 2018).

Conclusion

Renamo’s political survival throughout the civil war and after the democratization process was in part due to foreign financial support. Despite this, external support was not a definitive factor in the party’s development. The party did grow in numbers and strength because of its brutal recruitment strategies; however, sustained support for Renamo could not have been possible without pre-existing grievances from the population with the Frelimo government. Fighters may have remained loyal to Renamo because of individual material incentives, or because of the possibility of acting on their grievances against Frelimo rather than being a victim of Frelimo’s policies. Ultimately, Renamo has struggled to build a political platform and a credible administration, but it did make attempts by shifting its recruitment targets to a pool of more educated citizens. The case of Mozambique’s post-civil war democratization is one of the most successful in Sub-Saharan Africa. Analyzing Renamo’s support base helps us untangle the perplexing realities of participation in mass violence, thus expanding our understanding of the endemic problems of civil war.

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Fishery Depletion and the Militarization of the South China Sea

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