

Mozambique

Mozambique stretches along the south-east coast of Africa from the border with Tanzania in the north, to Swaziland and South Africa in the south. In the west it borders Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mpumalanga province of South Africa. Two major rivers, the Zambezi and the Limpopo, cut across its lowland to empty into the Indian Ocean. It is primarily an agricultural country, with an underdeveloped industrial sector, but fast-growing tourism. The people represent a variety of African ethnic groups, as well as the descendants of Portuguese settlers and Arab coastal traders.

In the centuries before the Portuguese conquest, Arab and Persian traders established settlements along the entire coast of east Africa, as part of a network of trade across the Indian ocean and further east. From these settlements emerged the Swahili culture, which extended as far south as what is today southern Mozambique. This commercial enterprise was destroyed by the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century, but as the Arabs regained control further north, the Portuguese concentrated on the territory to the south. In the 18th century, Mozambique became an official colony of Portugal, under the name Portuguese East Africa. For a century and a half, the main activity in the colony was the slave trade, while slaves were raided and bought further inland, then brought to the coast for shipment mainly to the sugar-producing islands of Reunion and Mauritius and to Brazil.

Portugal's hold on Mozambique was recognised by other European countries at the Berlin Conference of 1885 and the boundaries with other colonies were settled a little later. An uprising in the south by the Gaza empire was ruthlessly put down, and although the Portuguese were very thin on the ground, they retained control. They began to exploit the territory by leasing out large tracts to trading companies who made use of forced labour to produce mainly cotton and sugar. The life of Mozambicans was extremely harsh, as they were required to work to pay tax, but earned practically nothing beyond that. Many were sent to work in the mines in South Africa. Virtually nothing was provided by way of health or education services. What was developed was for the Portuguese settlers and for those few Africans who could show that they were "assimilated" into Portuguese culture. The economy developed strong links with South Africa, for which Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) provided an important outlet to the sea.

Resistance to Portuguese rule began in the north, but immediately met with cruel repression. In 1960 more than 500 people participating in a peaceful demonstration were massacred at Mueda. Far from suppressing resistance, this fuelled it, but redirected it toward armed struggle. In 1962, FRELIMO was formed as a front organisation under the leadership of Eduardo Mondlane and based itself in the newly independent Tanzania. Preparations for a liberation war were made and fighting began in 1964. There was rapid success in liberating the northern provinces, but the Portuguese received support from NATO, from South Africa, and from Ian Smith's Rhodesia. In 1969 Mondlane was assassinated in Tanzania, and was replaced as leader by Samora Machel. Progress towards liberation in the central parts of the country was difficult and the fighting was bitter; the war never really reached the south. It was interrupted by a coup in Portugal, which overthrew the fascist dictatorship in April 1974. The new Portuguese government decided to withdraw from the colonies and granted independence in June 1975.

FRELIMO created a one-party state, and formed the new government with Samora Machel as president. An attempt by Portuguese settlers to stage a coup failed, and most fled the country, but not before they destroyed much of the productive capacity which they had owned and managed. Thus at independence the economy was in tatters and the skilled personnel had left.

FRELIMO embarked on a programme to rebuild the economy on a socialist model, nationalising land, housing, private services, industries, even banks. In 1977 the more radical wing of the party gained the ascendancy and declared adherence to a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Churches were banned, along with traditional healers and customary practices such as bride-price and polygamy. Such changes were deeply resented by much of the population, the vast majority of whom were illiterate and had no understanding of socialism. At the same time, the government had begun assisting the Zimbabwean liberation movement ZANU and the South African ANC, thus earning the hostility of two powerful neighbours.

While struggling to bring fundamental changes to the society, FRELIMO soon had to face an armed opposition known as RENAMO, created and backed by Rhodesian intelligence. It played on the people's resentments over socialist policies and the failure to bring effective development. Its mode of resistance consisted primarily of cruel atrocities perpetrated against civilians. Mozambicans soon also became victims of attacks and sabotage by South Africa. It was an impossible situation, which brought much devastation and suffering to the rural population through the 1980's. By 1983, the government faced the inevitable and began moving away from their socialist policies and ties with the communist bloc. Accommodation was reached with the South Africans and they approached the IMF and World Bank for assistance. After the death of Samora Machel, apparently as a result of South African sabotage, the new President, Joaquim Chissano led the party toward more pragmatic policies and in 1989 officially abandoned socialism.

By late 1990 Mozambique adopted a multi-party constitution and finally in 1992, with apartheid on its death-bed in South Africa, they were able to come to a peace settlement with RENAMO. Elections were held in 1994, and although FRELIMO won, RENAMO gained more than one third of the vote. The years since then have seen a gradual attempt to reconcile the opposing sides and rebuild an economy. Socialist principles have been completely set aside, private enterprise is now flourishing and foreign investment being encouraged. South African investors have spurred a striking development in tourism and in the construction industry. Two further elections have retained FRELIMO's grip on power amid rising accusations of corruption spreading through the society.

During the socialist experiment of the late 70's and early 80's people's courts were established in an attempt to bring the administration of justice to the level of the people. But with the return to a capitalist development path, Portuguese civil law is re-established alongside some aspects of customary law. A major problem, however, in ensuring that justice is made available through a functioning legal system, is the lack of trained personnel. The idea of providing paralegals who will be able to assist people with legal advice is gaining acceptance, so that even without professional lawyers, Mozambicans can enjoy their legal rights.